Since its first publication, *Action Research: Principles and practice* has become a key text in its field. This new updated edition clearly describes and explains the practices of action research and its underlying values, and introduces important new ideas, including that:

- all professionals should be reflective practitioners;
- they should produce their personal theories of practice to show how they are holding themselves accountable for their educational influences in learning;
- the stories they produce should become a new people’s history of action research, with potential for influencing new futures.

This new edition has expanded in scope, to contribute to diverse fields including professional development across the sectors and the disciplines. It considers the current field, including its problems as well as its considerable hopes and prospects for new thinking and practices. Now fully updated, this book contains:

- a wealth of case study material;
- new chapters on the educational significance of action research;
- an overview of methodological and ethical discussion.

The book is a valuable addition to the literature on research methods in education, nursing and healthcare, and professional education, and contributes to contemporary debates about the generation and dissemination of knowledge and its potential influence for wider social and environmental contexts.

Practitioners across the professions who are planning action research in their own work settings will find this book a helpful introduction to the subject while those studying on higher degree courses will find it an indispensable resource.

**Jean McNiff** is Professor of Educational Research at York St John University, UK. She also holds visiting professorial positions at Beijing Normal University and Ningxia Teachers University, People’s Republic of China; the University of Tromso, Norway; and the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, South Africa. She has written widely on action research in education.
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List of contributors

I wish to thank the following people for contributing case study material to the book.

**Mark Aldrich** lives and works in Newtown, Connecticut, US. He is the librarian at a maximum security prison and is enrolled at City University of New York in the School of Professional Studies, Applied Theatre Department. He writes plays and poetry, and illustrates his own book series (see http://www.marcusartproductions.com).

**Alison Joy Barton** is from Liverpool, England. She works at the University of Central Lancashire. She is especially interested in traditional baking and bread-making.

**Pip Bruce Ferguson** lives in Hamilton, New Zealand. She works part-time at the University of Waikato and part-time in consultancy. She enjoys her involvement with family, church, reading and music.

**Ingunn Skjesol Bulling** is from Namdalseid, Norway. She works at the Nord-Trøndelag University College. She loves good food, music and being out in the open countryside with her family.

**Vicci Carroll** is from Durham, UK. She teaches Beauty Therapy at New College Durham while also studying for her Foundation Degree in Training and Work Based Learning at Sunderland University. Her main interest is having fun with her two sons. She hopes to draw on her own experiences in compulsory and post-compulsory education to help her promote education for all.

**Linda Clifford**, a New Zealander, works as the Secondary School Deputy Principal at Deira International School, Dubai. She particularly enjoys travel, meeting new people and educational research.

**Linda Darbey** has a Master’s in Education from Trinity College Dublin, and is currently working as a Guidance Programme Coordinator in the National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE), Ireland. Her role...
in the NCGE is to coordinate the development, implementation and review of the NCGE guidance programme for guidance counsellors working in second-level schools.

**Eric Deakins** is an associate professor of value chain management at the University of Waikato Management School, who happens to be passionate about mentoring practitioner researchers. When not motorcycling through the beautiful New Zealand countryside, he designs organisations to be more enjoyable, professional and personally fulfilling.

**Odd Edvardsen** is an associate professor and a nursing educator at the University of Tromso, Norway. His main interest has been the practical training of nursing students both in the practical field and in the Faculty of Health Sciences. He has also been engaged in international trauma care education and anti-imperialistic solidarity activities for many years.

**Timothy Golden** is originally from Edina, Minnesota, US. He earned a BA in Communication Studies and an MA in Counseling, both from the University of San Diego. Timothy is now a National Certified Counsellor in the United States, and his specialisation is school counselling.

**Geraldine Hayes** is from Dublin, Ireland and is a lecturer at St Patrick’s College Drumcondra (a college of Dublin City University). She has extensive teaching experience in both Ireland and the US. She currently teaches in the area of special educational needs (SEN), where her main area is autism spectrum disorders (ASD). Her research interests include literacy for children with SEN, educational provision for children with ASD, and the delivery of online distance learning.

**Peter Hyde** is from Cork, Ireland. He worked as a guidance counsellor for a number of years and is currently Deputy Principal in Deerpark Christian Brothers School, Cork. He is married and has three teenage children. He is interested in, among other things, theology, spirituality, music and what it means to be a leader in a Catholic school in modern-day Ireland.

**Maria James** is a senior lecturer in Religious Education and Masters at St Mary’s University College, Twickenham, UK. She was the first to be awarded the status of Teaching Fellow within the School of Education. She is passionate about all teachers realising their great potential for transformational learning.

**Rita Jentoft** is an Associate Professor and teacher of occupational therapists at the University of Tromso, an Arctic city in the north of Norway. She is interested in how technology can enhance learning and practical knowledge in both clinical practice and education. Her leisure interests are yoga, winter sports and machine-knitting.
Contributors

Jonathan Libag is from Binalonan, Pangasinan, the Philippines. He is a Research Scholar at the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies (OCMS), UK, and works with Asia Seed Project Inc. and Tribes and Nations Outreach. He is also currently associated with the organisation called Turning Point Development Programs working among the Kankana-ey and Ibaloi Tribes. He is especially interested in diving, beach-surfing and island-hopping, and loves trekking to the Himalayas and cruising on the Ganges.

Thérèse McPhillips is from Dublin, Ireland and is a lecturer at St Patrick’s College Drumcondra (a college of Dublin City University), where she specialises in literacy education. She is particularly interested in teaching approaches and methodologies to support reading among children who have reading difficulties, and in collaborative research in the areas of literacy and inclusive classrooms.

Ana Naidoo is a Professor at the University of Pretoria, South Africa, where she was involved in teaching and teacher education from 1977 to the beginning of 2012. She then moved into the position of Deputy Director in the Department of Education Innovation, where she began to focus on the academic development of students, especially in their first year of study. Her passion is to ensure that students overcome their challenges and succeed.

Bente Norbye is an Associate Professor at the University of Tromsø, Norway. Since 1990 she has been responsible for decentralised nursing studies for nursing students living and studying in rural surroundings. She is leader of a research group in education in the Department of Health and Care Sciences. She hopes to develop health-care education involving health-care professionals as practice-based research.

Julia O’Brien’s peripatetic life encompassed careers as a copy-editor, juggler and woodcarver before she settled in Lewes (UK) and began writing poetry. She has an MA in Creative Writing & Personal Development from the University of Sussex.

Alex Pandolfo is from Manchester, UK, and is an educational consultant. He is especially interested in continually developing practices to support social and economic inclusion.

Julie Pearson lives and works in London, UK. She is a Senior Lecturer at St Mary’s University College, where she enjoys learning alongside those she teaches on the primary undergraduate, postgraduate and Master’s courses. While she continues to work on her doctoral studies, Julie enjoys her important ‘relaxing time’ with her family and friends.
Martyn Rawson is a Scot living in Germany, working for the University of Plymouth International Masters Programme, and is a teacher in a Steiner Waldorf school. He is currently completing a professional doctorate in education on the theme of salutogenic education and teacher reflection.

Jane Renowden is a senior lecturer at St Mary’s University College in Twickenham, UK. She teaches undergraduate, postgraduate and Master’s-level teaching students as a member of the professional studies team. Jane has developed an interest in teacher accountability since undertaking her Master’s and doctoral studies, and she hopes to use this as a platform for working with teachers in schools.

Margaret Riel teaches action research in an online programme in learning technologies at Pepperdine University, Malibu, California, US. She also organises learning circles (http://www.onlinelearningcircles.org), a structure for collaboration that connects children and adults in global projects. Innovative collaborative tech-tools on the web are her favourite toys.

Ruth Seabright lives in New Zealand with her wonderful husband Keith, her two beautiful sons, Darby and Bailey, and far too many pets to mention. She is passionate about her family, the environment, psychology and platforms that inspire resilient, inclusive, sustainable ways of living such as TimeBanking, Permaculture and the Virtues Project.

Alex Sinclair is from Hampton, UK. He works at St Mary’s University College, Twickenham. He notes his interests as growing vegetables at his allotment, baking bread and exercising — and stresses that the latter is not just something for his CV.

Iris Stokes is from Seattle, Washington, US, and is Academic Coordinator at La Casa de los Niños de Yucatán, in Mexico. She enjoys dance, cycling and costume design.

Anne-Lise Thoresen is a midwife educator at the University of Tromsø, Norway. She works with midwifery students on their theoretical studies, and also with midwives who mentor the students in clinical practice settings. She works collaboratively on international projects, and sees action research as a means of creating learning strategies built on dialogue and teamwork.

Hjördís Thorgeirsdóttir is from Iceland. She is acting headteacher in Sund College in Reykjavik. She likes travelling and learning about different cultures.
Gabriella van Breda is originally from South Africa and now resides in the US. She is the executive director of World Impact Network and also a licensed minister with the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel. She is currently completing her research thesis at the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies.

Anne Marie Villumsen is a lecturer at VIA University College, Department of Social Work, Denmark, and also a doctoral candidate at Aarhus University, Department of Psychology, Business and Social Sciences.

Jill Wickham is a Senior Lecturer in Physiotherapy at York St John University, England. She is passionate about physiotherapy education and about how she can continually evaluate and improve her own practice to enhance students’ learning journeys.

Lesley Wood is a Research Professor in the Faculty of Education Sciences at North West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa. She is particularly interested in researching the transformative potential of action research to enhance social justice and improve the quality of life of all stakeholders in education.

Eric Yuan is from Zunyi, China. He is currently doing his PhD at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. His research interests include language teachers’ professional learning and identity construction.

Sólveig Zophoníasdóttir is from Akureyri, Iceland, and works at the University of Akureyri. She is especially interested in outdoor activities, photography, information technology and having fun with her family.
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The eyes of the Lord keep watch over knowledge
Proverbs 22.12
A good deal has happened since the publication of the first edition of this book in 1988 and the second edition in 2002. The world of action research has changed, and so has my thinking.

In 1988, when the book was first published, action research was still struggling for legitimacy. This remained the case until about the late 1990s. Many people still positioned action research as a powerful form of learning, especially professional learning, but would not accept it as a methodology for knowledge creation and theory generation. Some, especially in higher education, refused to think of practice-based learning and its outcomes as ‘real’ research, or to entertain the idea that practitioner-researchers could generate theory.

Since those days, however, because of the hard work, determination and collaborative work of many people, action research has become fully recognised, and today countless people everywhere speak about doing action research, or something like it. In 2009 Susan Noffke commented in The Sage Handbook of Educational Action Research on the ‘remarkable growth in the acceptance of action research’ during the last decade (Noffke and Somekh 2009: 12). The acceptance today takes many forms, for example: the inclusion of action research on work-based professional development courses and higher education accredited degree courses; its international take-up; its spread across the professions and sectors; the beginnings of interdisciplinary dialogues; publications in textbooks and scholarly journals; and many other areas. This remarkable spread and range of action research are also demonstrated in the stories and case studies in this book. Reading the work of action researchers from around the world is like being part of a global conversation, where people ask questions about what they are doing, why they are doing it and what they hope to achieve. It is just wonderful.

Yet not everything is wonderful, and the field is not without its difficulties. If action research has arrived, questions arise about how long it will last, for all movements and initiatives change their shapes and patterns in some way (Kuhn 1996). The question for action research is whether this will happen sooner rather than later, for dangers threaten from within the field as well as
from without; so perhaps the action research community needs to research itself critically, and check whether this is not just another Celtic Tiger boom that may end up as a bust.

In this Introduction, therefore, I would like to explore the following:

• what I see as changes in the external world in the last decade that have influenced the field, the gains that action research has made, and possible hopes and prospects;
• some of the changes in my own thinking, and some thoughts about potential dangers and threats to action research;
• how these issues might be addressed.

The chapter is organised under the following headings:

• Gains, hopes and prospects
• Dangers and threats
• Back to first principles
• Action research and a third cognitive revolution
• Organisation of the ideas in the book

Gains, hopes and prospects

Here are what I see as some of the most important gains, hopes and prospects.

Global epistemological shifts

Because of the social and scholarly activism of millions of people, including action researchers, a global epistemological shift has been taking place in recent decades in relation to what counts as knowledge, how it is produced, where, and who by. Key ideas have appeared in the literatures, including these.

Gibbons et al. (1994) identify what they call ‘Mode 1’ and ‘Mode 2’ kinds of knowledge. ‘Mode 1’ refers to dominant conceptual, abstract forms of knowing, and ‘Mode 2’ to practical knowledge. Like Schön (1983, 1995), they make the case that practice-based practical knowledge is relevant to everyday lives and should be awarded status equal to that of Mode 1 forms, contrary to the dominant view that positions Mode 1 forms as superior to Mode 2.

The shift has also happened because of the recognition that knowledge is socially developed. Brown and Duguid (2000), for example, speak about the social nature of knowledge creation, recognising, like Lave and Wenger (1991), that knowledge is always situated within the groups of people who create it, although its uses for wider influence are potentially infinite; and Wenger speaks about communities of practice (1999), emphasising that knowledge is a collective endeavour among individuals who share a practice.
This recognition of the value of Mode 2 forms of knowledge has inspired its take-up by continuing and higher education in terms of new forms of courses for a range of professions and disciplines, including professional doctorates linking professional development and practice-based knowledge production. Action research has become a preferred methodology for many of these courses, on the understanding that practitioners need to build an evidence base to show the validity of what they are doing as competent researchers.

**The new scholarship**

Similarly, and symptomatic of the epistemological shift, Boyer (1990) proposed a new focus for continuing and higher education faculty because, given the high status and prioritising of Mode 1 conceptual forms of research and theory, practical attention to teaching and learning matters was being overlooked. He proposed four separate but integrated forms of enquiry:

- The scholarship of discovery, similar to traditional forms of research, with the aim of advancing propositional knowledge.
- The scholarship of integration that brings together knowledge from across disciplines.
- The scholarship of application that involves community service.
- The scholarship of teaching that involves the systematic study of teaching practices.

These ideas have had wide take-up internationally, across the sectors although mainly by continuing and higher education. However, different perspectives are evident. Some people study teaching as a topic, while others like to study their own teaching. In addition, the field has been confined mainly to the profession of teaching, usually mainstream, and needs to be extended to a broader view that sees teaching as what we all do when working with learners, including nurses, physiotherapists, bankers and shopkeepers.

Schön had laid the groundwork for the new scholarship in his (1983) *The Reflective Practitioner*, and in 1995 he developed the idea of a new epistemology for the new scholarship, i.e. new ways of knowing and coming to know. A favourite analogy is his story about the topology of professional landscapes – but things are changing here too.

**Levelling out of the topology of professional landscapes**

In 1983 and 1995 Schön presented a caricature of the topology of professional landscapes and their characteristic epistemologies. There was, he said, a hard high ground that favoured technical rationality, and a swampy lowlands that valued intuitive, practical forms. The high ground tended to be the home of institutions, and was peopled mainly by elitist intelligentsia from
the corporate and formal education worlds; Chomsky often refers to these as a ‘high priesthood’. These intelligentsias are much occupied with generating abstract theories about issues that, while valuable in themselves, often have little to do with everyday living. Because of the prestigious social positioning of the theorists, their abstract forms of theory would become seen as dominant. Practitioners, on the other hand, said Schön, dealt with issues of everyday significance, yet, because practitioners were not seen as legitimate knowers, either by the high priesthood or by themselves (because ‘ordinary’ people are systematically taught through the formal education system to devalue their own contributions), their form of theorising tended to be regarded as practical problem-solving rather than proper research.

The situation was topsy-turvy to the realities of everyday living. Precisely those issues of everyday living that occupy practitioners were trivialised, along with the status of the practitioners as knowledge workers and theory generators, while abstract theorising continued to maintain institutional legitimacy through the creation of the grand theories that the institution favours. Furthermore, the situation would become one where the grand theorising turns into grand narratives, and the voices of everyday people and their local narratives become distorted and made silent.

Schön, along with Boyer and others, calls for a reappraisal of what counts as legitimate scholarship, research and theorising. Research that celebrates important issues of everyday living should be given as much priority as traditional forms – often more perhaps, for practical, practice-based research is a key means of contributing to holistic and relational forms of cultural, social and intellectual progress. The practical theories of practitioners are the most powerful and appropriate forms for dealing with contemporary social issues; and these are located in and generated from everyday practices, inspired by tacit intuitive forms of knowledge as much as by cognitive forms. This, says Schön, all comes down to action research, a way of researching one’s practice and generating personal theories of practice that shows the processes of self-monitoring, evaluation of practice, purposeful action to improve the practice for social benefit, and a commitment to making the process public for moral and social accountability.

However, the situation remains problematic, because, while the topology of professional landscapes may be levelling out, and while many continuing and higher education practitioners would position themselves as workplace-based practitioners, the topology of epistemological landscapes still needs attention. Many people still automatically position academics as qualified researchers who generate theory out of their expert knowledge, but also still tend to perceive practitioners as not clever enough to generate theory. The situation in many instances is still that practitioners are largely expected to implement academics’ theories, and that professional researchers will observe practitioners as they do so and generate theory about them. It is not so much a matter of who does the research in terms of gathering and interpreting data as
of who is seen as competent and authorised to generate the theory, and who makes decisions about these things. Anyone can call themselves a researcher, but not everyone can call themselves a theorist. Somehow, ‘theory’ and ‘evidence’ are seen as more prestigious than ‘practice’ and ‘data’.

**Academics do action research**

However, the levelling-out that is going on can be seen by the fact that many people working in formal academic settings also do action research. Whereas 20 years ago it would have been unusual for academics to study their practices, these days it is becoming normal and, in some cases, expected. A range of dissertations and theses from academic staffs may be seen on websites such as those by Diana Ayling (http://tlcommunityunitc.ning.com/), Pip Bruce Ferguson (http://tlcommunityunitc.ning.com/) and Bob Dick (www.aral.com.au/). There are many more. My own website (www.jeanmcniff.com/) contains some of the dissertations and theses of people whose master’s and doctoral studies I have supported (see examples later), some of whom have gone on to work in continuing and higher education or hold senior positions in schools, colleges, hospitals and businesses.

As well as such websites, accounts from academics are also available in documentary, book and journal article form: such accounts from higher education people I support include those from colleagues in St Mary’s University College, UK; York St John University, UK; the University of Tromso, Norway; the University of Limerick, Ireland; the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, South Africa; and elsewhere. Stories from these and other colleagues also appear in this book. Significant features are that the academics in question regard their practice not as simply communicating subject matters, but also as accepting pedagogical and epistemic responsibility for their work; and not only about teaching, but more about inspiring a mindset towards life and lifelong learning by practitioners across the professions.

*Note:* following common practice, I use the term ‘academics’ to refer to people officially in the Academy, i.e. in continuing and higher education settings. I use the term ‘practitioners’ to refer to people working in workplace settings such as offices and shops. I use the terms only to denote their different work settings and different roles and responsibilities in relation to learning and supporting learning. I do not, however, see any difference between ‘academics’ as workplace practitioners and ‘practitioners’ as academics when they are doing academic work, or between their capacity for knowledge creation or critical engagement. I do see all as intellectuals who are able to think for themselves and make their contribution to the wider field of knowledge and personal and social wellbeing through realising their humanity in relation with others.
Dangers and threats

There are, however, considerable dangers around, and these constitute potential threats to the integrity and even the continuation of action research. First I present some of the dangers as I see them, and then I outline how these could constitute threats.

Dangers

Loose words

The term ‘action research’ is now everywhere, as is ‘reflective practice’. You hear it in mainstream literatures and international educational research association meetings. Special departments are set up in universities for practitioner research and/or action research, and accredited courses arranged. However, when something becomes popular, it tends to be taken for granted, or used so much that it gets misused and loses meaning. Therefore, instead of maintaining that research must generate theory of some kind, ‘action research’ is often domesticated into ‘telling stories’. More than one book on the market accepts only practitioners’ descriptions of their work as legitimate research, and this becomes a teenager form of action research, rather than showing the need for mature and thoughtful explanations and an articulation of the significance of explanatory frameworks.

Fragmentation of the field through tribalism

There is an increasing tendency to compartmentalise action research, sometimes as idiosyncratic movements, with the perhaps inevitable consequences of territorialism. Researchers declare their allegiance to this or that brand of research only, and refuse to talk with others. Sometimes it becomes more about themselves and what they identify as their grand theories, and practitioners become the means for promoting the self-interests of the grand theorists. So you can find movements called variously ‘Participative Action Research’, ‘Practitioner Action Research’, ‘Organisational Action Research’, ‘Living Theory Action Research’, ‘Collaborative Action Research’, ‘Contextual Action Research’, ‘Radical Action Research’ ‘Self Study’, ‘Autoethnography’ – and so on and so forth; and they all come with capital letters, and become common nouns, things in themselves, and sometimes lose touch with the voices of people in the streets and workplaces, which is what action research should be all about.

A desire for narrow linguistic definitions and lock-step approaches

I am concerned about some trends that appear to be turning action research into a set of techniques, or require the execution of a specific set of steps or
actions. This turns it into an oppressive technology that denies the humanitarian and egalitarian ideologies that inspired the action research movement in the first place. Such practices, I think, are part of a wider tendency to box in ideas and define concepts so that they can become manageable and may be spoken about without necessarily showing how the ideas are generated from existing action and inform further action. I recall having a lively debate with a colleague who insisted that we were born thinking in terms of boxes. The aims of my work are to (1) deconstruct the idea of boxes, and (2) deconstruct the idea that we should think in boxes. I love ideas such as those communicated by Mitroff and Linstone (1995), about unbounded thinking; but this means that we need to see thinking as free, emergent and unfolding, rather than boxed in and tidy.

The continuing search for certain knowledge

Many people working in the field still seem to expect to get answers by doing action research. Often still using the methods of the social sciences, themselves derived from the methods of the physical sciences, people ask, ‘If I do x, what will happen?’, expecting the answer to be, ‘y will.’ Any answer from real-life experiences should be something of the kind, ‘Who knows? Anything could happen.’ Experience teaches that it is important to let go of the need for certainty, for there is no such thing; no one has any idea what will happen in the next moment. The only thing anyone can be certain of is life itself, which is unpredictable, surprising, creative and self-transforming. An implicate order underpins everything (Bohm 1983), and this order is generative and transformational. This also is the nature of practice, as part of life (McNiff 2000). Life and practice are evolutionary and move towards life-affirming and life-renewing forms.

This way of thinking (logic) goes beyond the propositional Aristotelian logic beloved of many theorists of education, such as Pring (2000). Propositional logic attempts to eliminate contradiction from human enquiry, whereas transformational logics embrace the idea that human living is full of contradictions that need to be understood and lived with rather than resolved, and that experience can provide the grounds for new beginnings.

This capacity for confidence in uncertainty needs to become part of learning and professional development contexts. Personally, I have learned that I cannot be certain of anything; that I do not know best; that I am not responsible for how people think or what they learn. My work instead is to encourage people to have confidence in their own capacity for independent thinking, to play with ideas, to challenge me and to resist all efforts to bring their thinking to closure. My job is to support them in becoming aware of how they learn and use their knowledge to contribute to improving their work with others.
Introduction

Manufacturing identity or creating it?

These concerns travel to ideas about how identity may be manufactured by others. In *Orientalism* (1995), Edward Said explains how ‘Orientalism’ is a concept created by Western intellectuals, and how social categories are themselves fabricated. The same practice of colonisation is today visible in the world of action research. Dominant theories of education are still manufactured mainly by intellectuals in higher education settings. And some of these use their positioning in a careless and frequently self-serving manner (see Lilla 2001). The responsibility of intellectuals, in my view, is to support others in creating their own identities with critical discernment, and to have the confidence and capacity to do so.

An ego-centred, researcher-centred focus on the ‘I’

A good deal of work exists that focuses on the ‘I’ as the centre of the enquiry, from an ego-centred, researcher-centred perspective (this links with resisting the idea of action research as a problem-based approach, outlined on page 35). I have contributed to these literatures. However, my thinking has changed over time, and I no longer see the ‘I’ in isolation, nor as the centre, as used to be the case, and not necessarily as a ‘we’. Although I thought and wrote about ‘we’, the image was of a collective of ‘I’s working together.

I do not see things like this now. I see the ‘I’ always as in relation; ‘I’ am always already in relation with others, with the environment and with my God. The ‘I’ of the research is concerned about contributing to the wellbeing of others in the relationship and developing the kinds of dialogical relationship that will let this happen. Collaborative working therefore becomes more than a ‘we’; it is ‘I in dialogical relation with others, and others in dialogical relation with me and others’, the development of dialogical community, as John Macmurray (1957, 1961) says (see also McIntosh 2011). We are speaking about relationships among individuals who recognise themselves as always already in relation, and not about individualities. Julia Kristeva also develops ideas of this kind:

Each person has the right to become as singular as possible and to develop the maximum creativity for him or herself. And at the same time, without stopping this creativity, we should try to build bridges and interfaces – that is, to foster sharing. … It is not a question of creating a community in the image of the past; it is a question of creating a new community on the basis of sharing singularity.

Kristeva 2002: 162; from an interview with John Lechte

I also like what Said says, in his conversations with the musician Daniel Barenboim (Barenboim and Said 2004). He says (p. 11):
One of the striking things about the kind of work you [Barenboim] do is that you act as interpreter, as a performer – an artist concerned not so much with the articulation of the self, but rather with the articulation of other selves. … There is more of a concentration today [on oneself], on the affirmation of identity, on the need for roots, on the values of one’s culture and one’s sense of belonging. It’s become quite rare to project one’s self outward, to have a broader perspective.

He also (p. 5) speaks about:

the sense that identity is a set of currents, flowing currents, rather than a fixed place or a stable set of objects …

This has been a mind-changing understanding about how I think about myself, and has had consequences for what I do and how I do it.

**Potential threats**

The kinds of dangers I am speaking about may actually be perceived as threats, as follows.

As noted, action research is now accepted by universities, governments and policy-makers because of social and academic activism. But this is where there is a danger of the potential abuse of the original philosophy. The ideas of personal involvement and commitment to practice fit well with shifts in international government policies about the need for highly skilled and knowledgeable workforces, and for schools and colleges to ‘turn out’ people with employable skills and knowledge.

This in turn fits with a new emphasis on work-based learning for a new knowledge-creating society (Hargreaves 2003; Nonaka and Takeuchi 1995), and it has potential implications for current drives towards the internationalisation of business and education that sees knowledge as a purchasable commodity. This focus on productivity factors out the original emancipatory and collaborative intent of action research (Carr and Kemmis 2005), and plays right into the hands of those same agencies whose interests it serves to have practitioners doing action research, provided it is of the right kind, where action research is perceived as implementing interventions to be used to change situations and societies, with anticipated outcomes.

It could be seen, therefore, that official agencies permit action research because it suits their agendas of command and control and achieving outcomes. This understanding began to dawn from experience in the 1990s. An example was when I was working in Northern Ireland while introducing action research for teachers in the then new curriculum initiative Education for Mutual Understanding, as part of the peace process. One of the teachers in a group I was working with was furious with me, and said, ‘This is the
implementation of government policy through the back door.’ She was not right, but I could see her point. Isaiah Berlin would also have seen her point, because he speaks about the enemies of peace as those who wish to impose it (Berlin 2002).

I also recall how I was a member of a panel at an international research association meeting, and was asked whether I thought that action research should have specific outcomes. My response was ‘No, other than learning.’ The response of various others was yes: there should be an identifiable outcome otherwise you could not say that the action research had been successful. This kind of thinking later influenced a high-profile UK initiative, in which teachers could receive funding to do action research in their classrooms on condition that learners achieved designated outcomes. I do not think we should be thinking about ‘success’ in such terms. I think action research should be a process of helping other people to think for themselves and to realise their humanity in doing so. This, if there is any success, is it; for the world turns because it thinks for itself, as part of the natural order, and not because people tell it to.

So this is where it all gets tricky. Action research is now open to the same core challenge that has consistently bedevilled the social sciences, which is their assumption that one person may do research on another and speak on their behalf. One person gathers data, generates evidence and provides explanations for what another person is doing and saying. This assumption is rooted in a deeper assumption that runs right through history and the history of ideas: that it is permissible for one person to do things to another, and that everyone will agree to it. It can be seen in some forms of health care (not all), for example, as a technical rational medical model where patients are ‘done to’ by doctors and nurses; but don’t get the opportunity, don’t even get invited, to do things for themselves. The assumption is, ‘I’m a doctor (or an expert of some kind); trust me. I know what is best for you.’ This assumption travels to a range of settings, including the politics of nation states, where one group assumes that it is permissible to invade another’s land for their own purposes; and higher education expansionism, where it is assumed that one group may export their knowledge to another, without due regard for local customs or indigenous epistemologies (see McNiff 2011).

The same assumption is everywhere visible in action research, and raises questions about its sustainability; for invasion never did anything to win over the hearts and minds of those whose country has been invaded, but usually succeeds rather in inspiring them to find ways of getting rid of the invader, while availing of the most appropriate goods that the invader has to offer. Many people working in these forms of action research seem to have lost sight of a key guiding principle, that social change happens when people think for themselves and mobilise themselves for action (the impulse that inspired Kurt Lewin’s work: see page 56). Many books on action research (including my own earlier ones) use the language of ‘we implement change’,
and some speak of ‘we change people’ (I hope I never said this). There is an overwhelming assumption that it is permissible to do action research on other people (Reason and Rowan 1981), to regard action research as a ‘tool’ to be used to achieve desired outcomes, and to observe others doing action research and theorise and report on what they are doing.

I think this is awful. Perhaps it is because of working in problematic contexts over the years, especially with people who have been done to all their lives, that I have come to see the potential disaster in this view. No one can, or has the right to, change another person. No one can, or has the right to, do things to that person without invitation. People think for themselves; we all have rights. It is the responsibility of one to act with respect for the rights of the other; this means all of us, so rights and responsibilities become mutually reciprocal. Unless we think seriously about these things we will continue killing one another, and in an accelerated fashion, given the advanced state of our knowledge and technology.

Action research, if it is anything, is about finding ways to encourage change, but the word ‘change’ must be said from the premise that ‘I change me’ not ‘I change you’: sustainable change happens from within. The telos of action research must be to honour the other, and to find ways of encouraging the other to think and speak for themselves. For this there must be certain conditions, the primary one of which is freedom, as Sen (1999) says, for people are always in community, so each person needs to be in free and equal relation to the other. Freedom becomes both means and ends of the process.

So how do I justify these ideas? To do so, I go back to first principles, to the idea of human nature and the conditions for its realisation, and how action research can enable us to realise this human nature that constitutes our humanity. I also relate human nature to the implicate natural order (Chapter 12).

**Back to first principles**

My starting point is to try to clarify my understanding of what it means to be human. The ideas expressed here are my present best thinking. No doubt they will develop over time and through conversation.

**On human nature**

I draw first on the thinking of many authors, including Chomsky, and the debate on human nature between him and Foucault (Chomsky and Foucault 2006). Working with empirical evidence, he concludes that a major dilemma for linguistic theory is to account for:

> the gap between the really quite small quantity of data [in the form of speech acts] … that’s presented to the child, and the very highly
articulated, highly systematic, profoundly organized resulting knowl-
edge that he [sic] somehow derives from these data.

Elsewhere, in his (1986) *Knowledge of Language*, he has identified this as
‘Plato’s problem’, i.e. how to account for the amazingly rich capacity for
language that even a young child develops in spite of a relatively small stim-
ulus of the language they hear. Chomsky concludes that ‘the individual
himself contributes a good deal, an overwhelming part in fact’ (Chomsky
and Foucault 2006: 3); in other words, they exercise their innate capacity for
an unlimited number of original creative acts. Chomsky says, ‘this collec-
tion, this mass of schematisms, innate organizing principles, which guides
our social and intellectual and individual behaviour, that’s what I mean to
refer to by the concept of human nature’ (pp. 4–5). He assumes also that
‘something of the same sort’ may be relevant in ‘other domains of human
cognition and behaviour’ (p. 4).

I agree, and I am interested in these other domains. I agree that people,
pathology aside, have certain innate capacities, including for an unlimited
number of creative acts in any area of their lives (although their individual
physical or mental make-up may prevent the realisation of those capacities).
It is part of our genetic inheritance to be curious, to make choices, to be
creative, to think for ourselves; and a key distinguishing feature is that we
also have language, which we can adapt for any situation, and use to reflect
on our thinking. This contributes to the capacity for meta-cognition, which
we use to help us make moral choices according to our chosen values system.

Yet we are born of another, and live and die in relation with others, and
so must understand ourselves as in relation with others. The capacity for
relationships is also innate, and links with needs (Maslow 1998). I would
argue that a profound need and part of our human make-up is the need to be
with others, for attachment, spiritual relationship and a sense of belonging
(Gray 1995b). There is plenty of empirical evidence to show this: Piaget’s
(1932) ideas about theory of mind (more precisely, theories of other people’s
minds), when children come to appreciate that others are in the relation-
ship and have their own perceptions; and in other areas of the animal world
(Ridley 1997) and the natural world (Abrams 2011). Human nature is about
loving and being loved, about realising our creative capacity for engagement
in life through productive work and loving relationships (Fromm 1995),
through spiritual connectedness with humans and non-humans and with
the living planet.

These and other ideas are significant for action research. Hannah Arendt
speaks of the individual’s ‘natality’, the idea that one’s birth holds the promise
of a new beginning, so we are thereby ‘prompted into action’ (Arendt 1958:
177). The idea of new beginnings is also explored by authors such as Vico
(1999), Bergson (1998) and Said (1997), that there are no endings in life
because each ending constitutes a new beginning, relating to Habermas’s idea (1975) that it is our nature to learn, and in processes of social evolution we cannot not learn (see Chapter 4 in this book). It is therefore our responsibility to use our place on earth well, as well as our capacity for learning anew, and to explain how and why we do so (Chapter 11).

Other key theorists have influenced my thinking about human nature, and why this must be a main starting point for action research. Speaking about the social and moral world, Berlin says that there is no one overarching guiding principle or value that helps people make choices between competing values and courses of action (Berlin 1997; see also Gray 1995a; Ignatieff 1998). His standpoint is that it is part of our human condition, perhaps our nature, to recognise that we have to embrace contradictory values, given that we live in situations of great diversity. This idea would have been helpful to people like Al Capone, who maintained throughout his life that he was a regular businessman, providing a service for people by selling them what they needed, and also providing a stable social structure through his control of the gangs of Chicago (MacDonald 1999). Eliot Ness may not have agreed with him, and they obviously had different values about the worth of other people, but both had strong values around the need for order.

However, realising Berlin’s ideas about the contested basis of individual and social living carries obvious personal and political consequences. Enabling human capacities to flourish means providing the conditions of freedom in which it may flourish, as well as dialogical spaces that are always kept open for new thinking (Friedman 2002; Rorty 2006). At a personal level it means exercising one’s choice for freedom and critical thinking, and not opting for a life of quietude; at a political level it means not allowing oneself to be persuaded not to think. This is not always allowed, either by oneself or by others. The idea of human nature as an unstoppable original creative act with evolutionary potential has considerable significance for wider political science, in respect of the potentials for individual and collective agency in deciding what kind of social order should be established, and how a social order may help or hinder the development of the natural order. The significance is intensified when linked with the idea that we are in a constant process of development, always learning, always curious and creative, and always exercising our originality of mind in making choices about what we learn and what we do with this knowledge. The idea that in processes of learning and development ‘the individual himself contributes a good deal, an overwhelming part in fact’, may lead some rulers to review the state of their war chests (Chomsky and Foucault 2006: 3).

I have tried to communicate these ideas visually on several occasions – see page 66 of this book – and can now articulate their significance in light of engaging with authors who have been consistent influences, including: Von Bertalanffy’s (1968) ideas about living systems theory; Bateson’s (1972) ideas about ecological approaches to learning and systems of influence; chaos
and complexity theory (Lewin 1993; Waldrop 1992), which are premised on specific principles, including spontaneity, emergence, self-organisation, unpredictability and self-renewal; Capra’s (1996) and Wheatley’s (1992) ideas about the interconnected nature of relationships, and Argyris and Schön’s (1995) ideas about the dynamic nature of organisational learning. This may be seen as an ecological approach, and I have called it this occasionally. However, I am conscious how the words ‘ecological’ and ‘environmental’ tend quickly to become linked only with issues of planetary wellbeing and sustainability, so I tend to use the language of relationships. These relationships are between thinking and practice, individuals and groups, people and the planet, and all in a process of generative transformational relation.

Furthermore, practices may be seen as both topic and process, and, most importantly, relationships become the topics. This becomes a key new feature for this book; for the emphasis throughout is on the nature of relationships, between knowledge and practice, and between people and the living world. For if practice communicates what we know, then research enables us to say that we know what we know, to articulate its significance for future knowing, and to explain the relationship between knowing and action. The focus on an ecological approach to living systems is especially important, because a breakdown or lack of growth in one part of the system will have implications for the entire system, which is especially relevant when speaking about the cognitive and affective aspects of mind that go towards the constitution of human nature, and its realisation as a means of showing the transformation of values into virtues.

This links directly with action research, for if action research is about personal and social change in the interests of social equality, recognition of diversity, and appreciation of the problematics of social living (James et al. 2012; Zuber-Skeritt 2012), with implications for contributing to the natural order, then the change must be undertaken by the individual themselves, always already in relation with others, and the process begins first in their own thinking and then transforms into their involvement in their social, political, cultural and environmental worlds.

If these are the conditions, then, for the realisation of our humanity, what do those processes for their realisation look like?

On processes of development and the natural order

Since a very young age, I have been fascinated by (but until the 1980s lacked the language to describe) ideas about immanence and generative transformational processes, the idea that every phenomenon or thing has within itself its own latent potential for self-renewal and self-organisation (two of the vital indicators of life). Even rocks have this potential, as part of a living planet. I came to this intuitive understanding when, as a child of four or five, I watched a snowflake settle on the outside windowpane. It was perfect in
its symmetry, each part holding the other parts within itself and the whole containing all its parts, so it became more than the sum of its parts.

I later learned the language of fractals and complexity theory. In undergraduate German studies I learned from Spinoza how these patterns are representative of both the natural order and the ethical nature of the natural order; and from Goethe (who was also deeply influenced by Spinoza: see Bertolff 1996) about how the relationships of life may be understood in these terms. From postgraduate studies in linguistics I learned from Chomsky (1965) about the relationships between conceptualisations of language and its manifestations in speech; and later still from Krashen (1981) and others that language and its uses need also to be located within social interactions. This strengthened the idea of generative transformational systems (Chomsky 1965), the idea that each level of a system is embedded within, and transforms into, higher levels: thus concepts may transform into practices, acorns may transform into oak trees, and individuals may transform into communities, given the right conditions. I have always found thrilling the images of the patterns that connect (Bateson 1972), although I see them, like Capra (1996) as dynamic and multidimensional, changing through time and space, offering universal theoretical structures for the fluid and chaotic processes of life itself.

Furthermore, these images of physical and spiritual connectedness and transformation have developed into ideas about the generative transformational dynamics of influence. One person’s ideas may influence the entire world, a people’s entire history, as demonstrated by figures such as Gandhi, Stalin and Jesus. For me, the idea of the generative transformational nature of influence in one’s own and others’ thinking lies at the heart of action research, as well as ideas about what kinds of influence matter, and why; for the nature of the influence of Stalin or Al Capone may not have been the same as the influence of Gandhi or Eliot Ness. These ideas incorporate other ideas, about the need for dialogical mindsets, seeing oneself in relation with others and the universe, insisting for others and oneself on the conditions of freedom that will enable these processes to flow in an untrammelled and self-organising fashion.

Action research and a third cognitive revolution

In his Powers and Prospects, Chomsky (1996b) speaks about the first and second cognitive revolutions. The first cognitive revolution took place during the seventeenth century, during the Galilean revolution, with the onset of ‘the mechanical philosophy’. People were creating automata, and came to see the world as part of a giant machine. The Cartesians argued that everything in the world, except humans, should be regarded as complex machines. This provided the basis for philosophical–scientific thinking, and a fertile ground for the later emergence of structuralism and behaviourism. The second cognitive revolution took place, he says, in the early to mid-twentieth century
with the rise of computers, where attention shifted from the study of behaviour to the properties of mind that entered into thought and action (see also Gardner 1987).

I am suggesting here that we have entered a third cognitive revolution, where attention is shifting yet again, from a study of properties of mind to a study of embodied minds and their interactions, especially through the mediation of Web 2.0 technologies, the move from abstract theorising to embodied communicative action, where the responsibility for the enquiry has also shifted from external researchers to persons themselves. Theory is no longer seen only as communicated symbolically to represent thought, but as enacted through the lives of people who recognise themselves as in relation with one another for personal and social purposes. Thus the locus of power has also shifted. These ideas are explored further in Chapter 11.

So, how do all these ideas enter into this new edition? Here is an outline of how the ideas are organised.

**Organisation of the ideas in the book**

The book is written as five parts:

**Part I  What do we know? The principles of action research**

Chapters 1–4: These chapters deal with the philosophical frameworks of action research and ask ‘What is the nature of action research? What are its origins?’ Chapter 1 sets out what we need to know in terms of good research practice; Chapter 2 deals with issues of linking theory and practice; Chapter 3 gives a brief history of action research; and Chapter 4 links these ideas with personal and social development.

**Part II  What do we do with our knowledge? The practices of action research**

Chapters 5–7: These chapters focus on practical issues and ask ‘What is involved in doing action research? How do we create knowledge?’ Chapter 5 contains information on how to do action research; Chapter 6 gives examples of putting action plans into action and gives advice about monitoring practice and data-gathering; and Chapter 7 outlines some practical ‘dos’ and ‘don’ts’ of doing action research.

**Part III  How do we share our knowledge? Writing up and making public**

Chapters 8–10: These chapters focus on sharing and communicating action research and ask ‘How do we show that our knowledge is valuable? How
do we test and communicate its value?’ Chapter 8 focuses on generating evidence to make knowledge claims, and testing their validity; Chapter 9 gives advice on writing as a means of communicating those claims; and Chapter 10 discusses how to judge the quality of knowledge claims as they are communicated through your action, research and writing.

**Part IV How do we use our knowledge? Action research for good order**

Chapter 11 and 12: These chapters discuss the significance and implications of doing action research and ask ‘How do we use our knowledge? What do we use it for?’ Chapter 11 is about the uses of action research, and how these may contribute to personal and social development; Chapter 12 discusses how the development of good social orders can contribute to the creation of good ecological orders, and to the maintenance of the natural order, for the benefit of all.

**Part V Hopes and prospects**

Chapter 13 offers some ideas about where action research may be going, and gives examples of the kind of work that may move it in the direction of explaining what might count as universal values.

The book is written from several perspectives. *From a focused perspective*, it may be seen as a straightforward guide to doing action research: how and why to do it, how to make judgements about its quality and explain the significance of what one is doing, and how to disseminate the findings. It is a ‘how to do’ book, framed within the conceptual issues discussed here.

*From a wider perspective*, it is a report of the action research I have engaged in since 1988. It sets out what I have learnt, how my learning has developed and what I hope to learn in future, so it becomes my report on knowledge (see Lyotard 1984). I have learnt about action research through doing action research.

*From a wider perspective still*, it is a critical reflection on my own practice as an action researcher and a writer who is presenting ideas for other people’s consideration. Writing as a practice carries considerable responsibility; for writers have to be honest with their readers, alert the reader to the language they are using, and try not to use language to cover up the hidden messages they are persuading their readers to assimilate. This is especially important if the message is supposed to be educational, which involves being self-critical. It is especially important if dialogue also becomes a key criterion and organising framework, because it then becomes a case of using language to reflect on itself, to ensure that the language is dialogical and to make visible the underlying logic of critical dialogue that it allegedly espouses.
I hope to show how, through studying my practice as a professional educator, a researcher and a writer, it may be possible to explicate the transformational relationships between the following:

- How I can encourage others and myself to explain how we hold ourselves accountable for the development of good order in our practices.
- How this personal accountability can contribute to the development of good social orders through education, in the sense of exercising our educational influences in learning to enable others to do the same. Furthermore, ‘education’ is not meant in the narrow sense as only to do with the profession of teaching, but as about exercising the kind of influence in people's thinking, and one’s own, that will enable us to realise our humanity, which includes realising the capacity for thinking critically about what we are doing and saying, and how we are relating to one another (Kemmis 2009).
- How such improved personal and social orders may help or hinder the development of the environmental order, as a realisation of natural order.

Thus a focus on the individual-in-relation may transform into the social, which in turn may transform into the global. While a focus may remain on each or any aspect, all aspects may be seen as parts of a focus on the wider whole, where the whole becomes more than the sum of its parts.

I hope therefore to show how, over the years, I have undertaken focused research projects within the broader research project of working to contribute to a global order that is a realisation of the natural order, and how I have come to reconceptualise the nature of action research as a problematic process of coming to know and demonstrating epistemological accountability rather than as a pathway to right knowledge. I have come to see that there are no happy endings or ‘end of’ statements in action research, only new and more interesting (and probably more problematic) questions that form the beginning of new enquiries, always holding the spaces open for the emergence of new possibilities as new realities.

So I am asking, ‘What have I learned? What do I know now? How have I come to know it? How do I test the validity of my knowledge? How do I explain its significance, and who is it significant for? How do I share my knowledge? What will I use my knowledge for?’ These questions act as organising principles throughout; they are the kinds of questions used in any action enquiry.

A key aspect of the enquiry is an understanding of the importance of critiquing the assumptions that underlie my own ideas and practices. This would not have been the case when I wrote the first edition, and was only partly the case for the second. By this edition, I think I have become more critical, and I try to influence others also to become critical, because criticism would
seem essential for generating non-coercive knowledge in the creation of good order (Said 1991: 28).

Today, I think I understand my practice and its contexts better than I did before, as a professional educator, a scholar and a writer; this book, I hope, provides evidence to ground this claim. However, I continue to ask questions about what I am doing and how and why I am doing it. These questions lie at the heart of the book because I want to know better what counts as good, and how to justify what I am doing and the values I hold, in relation to all the practices of my living; and how and why we may claim some values as virtues, and what entitles us to do so (Chapters 11 and 12).

Action research should never be perceived as only about actions, but also as about thinking, and how a particular form of thinking informs a particular form of action. So, like Elliott (2007), I believe that action research should be appreciated as a kind of practical philosophy, and even practical theology, inspired by an enduring sense of awe and wonder as we ask questions about what we should do and why we should do it; and it is also about psychology, and ethics, an ever-present awareness that we need to understand what we are doing in order to do it well, and to think critically about which standards we are prepared to use that enable us to say this with justification. It moves from rights to responsibilities, from a main focus on improving practice from the researcher’s perspective to an equally important focus of making judgements about the improved practice from other participants’ perspectives.

There is the old saying that you should always let caged birds fly free. If they come back to you, it is because they want to be with you. If they don’t, they never did. It is the same with people. People make up their own minds; as participants in one another’s lives we can advise but we cannot tell. We need to remember this, as action researchers and as ordinary people, for it is only by recognising the right of, and creating the conditions for, each person to accept the responsibility of their own decisions that the world will ever be a happier and more productive place.

Please contact me at jeanmcniff@mac.com, or at www.jeanmcniff.com. I will respond.

Jean McNiff
Dorset, June 2012

A note about case studies
All the case studies in this book are from people I have worked with or met while working, or communicated with through email. Their names appear on pages viii–xii. Most of the texts are edited with permission. The full versions are at http://www.jeanmcniff.com/action_research_principles_and_practice/.
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