

## REFLECTIONS ON MONDAY 12/28/83 “MORE INTERVENTIONS”

FRED EMERY

The significance of the open cut and thrust of that engagement did not strike me until, at the close I overheard three elated male students saying (as best I recall) “I have not sat in on such a discussion of S<sup>3</sup> practice in the four years I have been here!”, “Not in the seven years I have been around,” “Yes, it was something.”

I did not know enough of the past of S<sup>3</sup> to intervene, but I was saddened to hear that three old-hands could, between them, have such a perception.

The discussion about how we relate to clients goes right to the roots of (a) the relationship between the current body of students and those now in practice and (b) what kinds of students the S<sup>3</sup> wants to attract. The discussion about what kinds of projects fit harmoniously with our teachings (e.g. Martin Marietta, the arms manufacturer) was very inconclusive but indicated some deep concerns amongst the student body and staff (some).

In the attachment to this note is a statement of my considered, and published views, on these matters (from A.W. Clark, ed. *Action Research*). There is one matter, however, which is not mentioned in that statement. That is, that the open debate of these matters, at Tavistock and elsewhere, provoked bitter and divisive conflicts as the Faustian alternative is just too lucrative in cash flow and self-aggrandizement. Bodies like S<sup>3</sup>, Tavistock and the CCE (ANU) are inevitably stuck with this dilemma. S<sup>3</sup> might well have best served itself by choosing to stay in the frying pan rather jump into the fire of this debate. I am in no position to judge but, like Solomon, could offer that we cut the baby, the centre in half.

Some parts of Russ’ note possibly requires an answer from Hasan but I cannot quite ‘draw a bead’ on his other allusions. No one in the discussion of 12/14 was suggesting that we should not intervene at any stage of a collaborative relation (cf his reference to the Alcoa project). In fact recommending and arguing the virtues for a search conference is a very clear-cut intervention and is very consciously intended to manipulate the other party into staging such a conference when, for specific reasons, we think it would be in the best interests of the client. And that is not always.

My remarks on Monday 14<sup>th</sup> were specifically and explicitly about staff interventions during the course of a search conference. I stand by those remarks because they reflect a long process of learning that my learned interventions were doing more harm than good to our aim of having the participants coming away with a ‘satisfying’ result which they saw as their own product.

Russ refusal to accept that the design of a search conference forces the conference manager into a restricted role reminds me of the hero of Ayn Rand’s *Fountainhead*. That is also Maslow’s hero but it is not mine. That hero felt free to commit rape and arsony in his unrestricted pursuit of beauty. I would sooner play the role of an ‘intellectual enuch’ in a search conference – assuming, which I do not, that managing a search conference is intellectually undemanding. Of course, if one does allow for the reality of group emotions than there is little to manage.

**Dear Rafael**

**5 December 1984**

When I read your letter my first reaction was to laugh, like, “you mug you walked straight into it”.

My apologies.

I knew you had read Merrelyn’s manuscript on Searching and that she had a chapter on the dreadful “Search, search Conference” of 1976. On reflection I had a twinge of conscience; it did not seem at all like you to walk past a sign marked “Mine-field”. So, I checked back on her manuscript. In chapter 1 there is an outline of the event but she had not included any of the detailed reanalysis we had done. Given the happy truce with which that event ended the newcomer could easily walk straight past the implicit lessons.

Let me first put the issue as broadly as possible the come back to the details of our experience with the Search-search (and to what seems very much like your experience).

There is an essential duality to consciousness – our awareness of what is out there or our own bodily processes and our awareness of that awareness. The search process is about the first; it is not about awareness of awareness, introspective reflection or re-search. If people are to understand the search process they must first engage in at least one such genuine search and then reflect or research what happened. To attempt to use the search process as an introspective tool seems self defeating.

I was deeply uneasy at the concept of the Search-search conference; as I was about a similar exercise Merrelyn ran for students on the Fourth Floor. In neither case was there the discipline imposed by a pressing real world problem for a group of people who bore some responsibility for finding a solution.

The task confronting the participants in the Search-search was about as well as defined as a Rorschach Blot and hence an open invitation to gamesmanship in the game of theory construction. The structure of the task was inherently divergent not, as in a real search conference, inherently convergent.

(It was only five years later, when I did the paper on Educational Paradigms, that I realized the vast epistemological gap between the search conference concept and the academic world to which I and my colleagues at that conference belonged. Koestler would say that I had been ghost-walking; walking backwards into the future. Quite right).

The lesson seem clear. A search conference is not the way to research the value of search conferences. Such conferences must be done by the ordinary criteria of research e.g. the re-analysis Merrelyn and I did for Project Australia. (p. 337 in Searching). Much more needs to be done by way of follow-up e.g. the B.Ae 146 that flies around the skies as a vindication of the creative work done at the very first search conference with Bristol-Siddley, 1960.

Now to details.

The Search-search floundered in its opening hour.

The participants included a strong contingent of overseas social scientists who had reputations in fields of applied and action research. The local participants had, for the most part, been involved in action research. They search a commitment to action research that would not normally be found in a professional gathering, such as this.

Nevertheless, they felt outraged at being expected to put together a world-picture in the manner we proposed. Our proposal, as usual, was to collect as many 'telegram messages' as they cared to send in about what was happening in their world, list them up for all to see and then let them, in small groups, try to put together a picture of what is happening in the L22. Then let them compare pictures in plenary. The aim? To see if there was confirmation that I lived in the same world.

The resistance took several forms:

- a. Denouncing the methodology as childish and subjective.
- b. Feeding back only negative scenarios.
- c. Accusing the process managers of manipulation.
- d. Giving speeches when only telegram messages were asked for.

The rest of the conference hardly matters. Normally we would not proceed any further if participants could not, in this first phase, establish a mutually shared view of the world (occasionally we have had to recycle a conference back to this first phase when it has become clear that the shared view was superficial). In this case our institution had invited these participants, including the overseas participants, to a conference on a new social science methodology and the conference had to go on. Unwittingly, we had put ourselves in a situation where we were responsible for running not a search conference but a typical academic conference on research methodology.

The rest of the conference hardly matters because we are looking at the dynamics of a conference, not a search conference process.

The overriding question is about what went wrong on the first evening.

The larger part of my answer has already been given; namely, that we had already defined a task which was inappropriate to the search process. As a result the participants saw themselves as coming to an academic type conference. To meet that expectation I should have spent the first evening doing a tour de force: laying out the history of the development of the method, its logic and summing up of the evidence based on case studies. Instead, they were asked to engage in a childish game of 'spotting the trend'.

The dynamics of a conference (Merrelyn) are about challenging the ruling paradigm and establishing personal, professional statuses relative to the defence or destruction of that paradigm. That is precisely what the gathering settled down to do.

It takes two sides to play that academic game. We adamantly refused to play and of course they refused to search. No mutually agreed world picture emerged in the first evening's session, nor in the following morning's attempt. As a result the work done in small groups was not approached as if they were task forces working on a job for the whole conference – they treated their work as their private possession. Eventually, on the last night they suggested that we might as well piss-off; we did.

I guess that we will continue to live in 'interesting time'. Expect our tracks to cross from time to time.

Very best wishes.

Fred and M