What is to be done? The place of action research

Action research concerns action, and transforming people's practices (as well as their understandings of their practices and the conditions under which they practise). Sometimes we may feel that action research works best when it contributes to our understandings. In this paper, by contrast, I want to explore the 'happening-ness' of action and practice, as they are lived and changed by action research. I want to explore the place of action research in shaping and making history by changing what ...
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Introduction
In this paper, I will start with ancient history, but I will come back to a problem of today. If action research concerns transforming people's practices, their understandings of their practices and the conditions under which they practise, is it always achieving that goal? When we think of ourselves as researchers, perhaps we think that action research is at its best when it contributes to our understandings. Indeed, we often think that is what research is for - to help us understand. By contrast, I want to explore the 'happening-ness' of action and practice, as they are lived and changed by action research. I want to explore the place of action research in shaping and making history by changing what is done. In short, if we want to make a better world through action research, our action research needs to change histories.

Action research and living well
In his book Philosophy as a Way of Life, the French historian of Hellenistic and Roman philosophy, Pierre Hadot (1995), argued that the aim of the philosopher in ancient Greece was to live properly and well. The philosophers sought wisdom, not just for the sake of philosophical discourse, but in order to live wisely – to live a 'philosophical' life.

Hadot refers to the ancient distinction between three parts of philosophy – logic, physics, and ethics – which were regarded as separate only to help people learn what 'living a philosophical life' means. In ancient times, philosophical or theoretical discourse, for its own sake, was not the point. What was – and still is – the point is how we live: living ‘philosophically’. As Hadot (1995, 267) says,

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…philosophy itself – that is, the philosophical way of life – is no longer a theory divided into these parts, but a unitary act, which consists in living logic, physics, and ethics. In this case, we no longer study logical theory – that is, the theory of speaking and thinking well – we simply think and speak well. We no longer engage in theory about the physical world, but we contemplate the cosmos. We no longer theorize about moral action, but we act in a correct and just way (emphasis in original).

Hadot’s analysis of texts from the 3rd century BC to the 2nd century AD convinces him that the ‘philosophical’ life was not a matter of philosophical discourse or theory but a matter of practice – a way of life. For a professional practitioner in any field today – like education, social work, nursing or medicine – one might equally say that to live a ‘philosophical life’ is a matter of:

1) living a ‘logic’ by thinking and speaking well and clearly, avoiding irrationality and falsehood;
2) living a ‘physics’ by acting well and productively in the world, avoiding harm, waste and excess; and
3) living an ‘ethics’ by relating well to others and the world, avoiding injustice, exclusion and causing suffering.

These three come together in a unitary praxis – what Kemmis & Smith (2008a, 4) describe as “action that is morally committed and oriented and informed by traditions in a field”. The kind of action that Aristotle described as praxis is not to be understood simply as behaviour, or as action; it is action that comes together and coheres in the context of a way of life, in a way of orienting ourselves in any and all of the uncertain situations we encounter in life. An act that is praxis is to be understood as an act in a life, an act that will or will not contribute to living one’s life rightly and well, that will or will not contribute to one’s becoming a person who has sound reason to be happy because she or he has lived a good life.

To aim at the good through praxis, however, is not the same as knowing with certainty what the good consists in. What constitutes good conduct in any particular case is a matter of judgement. What constitutes the good in any practical case (that is, in a case in which a decision must be made about what to do) is very frequently
contested. Moreover, different people in fact make different decisions about what it is right to do in situations that appear similar. So people working together in an action research initiative might reasonably contest what counts as ‘the right thing to do’ at any moment. They can, however, proceed towards consensus about what to do, as a group, by giving and weighing reasons, and by being alert to power differentials that may distort their decision making process.

To live a philosophical life is not just a matter of instrumental behaviour aimed at achieving external ends or satisfactions, or following some moral rule or system of rules. As Joseph Dunne (1993, 130) remarks in relation to being an “experienced person”, praxis is always as much a process of self-formation as it is a matter of achieving an external goal or satisfaction:

… the experience of experience … leads to a deepened self-awareness or self-presence in the truly experienced person; in becoming experienced, he has been involved not only in acquiring information but also, through this very acquiring, in a process of self-formation.

The coherence of a unitary praxis also comes together in a way of life that aims for the good for humankind in acts consciously and collectively performed to contribute to the good. Under the disposition of phronēsis, praxis holds together logic, physics and ethics – saying, doing and relating – so that each informs the other. The coherence of a philosophical life also comes together in the way of life of a polis, the city, the nation or the world. This is the sense of collective praxis developed by Marx (1845), for example. In the living of a ‘philosophical’ life, then, neither sayings nor doings nor relatings is logically prior to either of the others. They emerge and develop simultaneously in relation to one another.

To say this is to say that understanding is not in some sense prior or superior to action or to one’s relationships with other people and the world. Yet conventional attitudes to research make the acquisition of knowledge and the development of
theories one of the two primary goals of research. It is the goal of what people once called ‘pure science’. The second principal goal of research has been to achieve technological mastery of nature – as in what was called ‘applied science’.

Like many of us today, Aristotle (384 BCE-322 BCE) venerated knowledge and the pursuit of knowledge. He thought that the contemplation of divine creation – *epistēmē* – was the most noble of human activities. But he was also the first – in his *Nicomachean Ethics* (Aristotle 2003) – to characterise what we now call ‘practical philosophy’ or ‘practical science’, to emphasise the importance of *phronēsis*, the disposition to act wisely and prudently, and to distinguish *praxis* from *poēsis* (instrumental action) and *theoria* (contemplative action).

According to Hadot, then, the several schools of ancient philosophy – the Platonists, Aristotelians, the Stoics and the Epicureans – held that each person should aim to live well by speaking and thinking well, acting well, and relating well to others and the world, in the unitary *praxis* of a philosophical way of life. The philosophical way of life was not solely devoted to the pursuit of knowledge, however, valuable though knowledge may be. It aimed at orienting each person to become wise so that they could become a *eudaimon* – a person happy in the sense that they could judge, at the end of their life, that they had lived wisely and well.

If we, too, aim for this kind of happiness, we might conclude that our *action research*, insofar as it aims to guide us in the way we lead our lives, might therefore best be understood as a process that helps us to lead good lives. If we accept this view, then we might say that *action research should aim not just at achieving knowledge of the world, but achieving a better world.*
In my view, this ‘better world’ is simply a world in which each person can be happy in the sense that they have lived their life wisely and well, in a community with others who also aim, despite our diversity and differences, to live wisely and well.

On the one hand, then, we might therefore ask for action research that will feed the reflection on experience that develops the individual and collective knowledge and wisdom to allow us to live life wisely and well. On the other hand, however, we might ask for action research to help us actually to live wisely and well – in ways that avoid untoward consequences. ‘Actually to live…’. That means ‘to live’, not just ‘to decide how to live’. On this view, action research should not just nurture our understanding or our theories; it should help us actually to live well, in our own lives and in the collective human history of which we are part.

To use Hadot’s description of the purpose of ancient philosophy, action research that will help us to live wisely and well will help us

1) to live a ‘logic’ by thinking and speaking well and clearly, which means by avoiding irrationality, contradiction and falsehood;
2) to live a ‘physics’ by acting well and productively in the world, which means by avoiding harm, waste and excess; and
3) to live an ‘ethics’ by relating well to others and the world, which means by avoiding injustice, exclusion and causing suffering.

So: the aim of action research, if it is to help us act wisely and well, is to help us to avoid three kinds of things: to avoid irrationality and falsehood; to avoid harm, waste and excess; and to avoid injustice, exclusion and causing suffering.

Clearly, action researchers examining their own practices are, or can be, one fertile source of new ideas for practice and praxis (sayings), new ways of doing things (doings), and new kinds of relationships between those involved (relatings). Action researchers can be the yeast that helps a practice evolve in individual and collective praxis. They can be part of the endless production, reproduction and transformation of
practices that is the process by which collective practices evolve to meet the needs, circumstances and opportunities of new times and new circumstances. (Sometimes, however, action research is the reverse of this, instead becoming part of the process by which old practices are reproduced and protected from changing times and circumstances).

This to me is part of the collective responsibility of a profession like education or medicine: to contribute to the evolution of the professional practice for which its practitioners are not just accredited operatives but also stewards – custodians of the practice for their times and generation. As stewards, they have the responsibility to protect, nurture, support and strengthen the practice for changing times and circumstances, not as something fixed and fully sufficient but as something that must always evolve to meet new historical demands in the interests of changing communities, societies and the good for humankind.

If this is the collective responsibility of professional practitioners for their practice, then critical, collaborative action research is one way for practitioners to fulfil their stewardship for their generation.

**Understanding, acting and relating as goals of action research**

As a practice (Kemmis 2009), action research is itself constructed in a logic, a physics, and an ethics – ways of saying and understanding action research, ways of doing it, and ways of relating to others in the process of action research. And the practice of action research becomes entwined with other practices whenever it aims to understand those other practices, to change the way they are done, or to change the ways people relate to each other in them. That is to say: in action research into other practices, the sayings, doings and relatings that compose the practice of action
research become intertwined with the sayings, doings and relatings that compose those other practices.

As a general form of practice, action research is shaped by particular discourses that justify it, and particular action research initiatives investigate and change particular ideas and understandings about other practices (sayings). As a general form of practice, action research is shaped by inherited ways of doing the work of action research and particular action research initiatives also investigate and change particular ways that other practices might be re-shaped (doings). And, as a general form of practice, action research is shaped by pre-existing patterns of relationships between different people involved in the research process, and particular action research initiatives investigate and change relationships between the researchers and others involved in and affected by other practices (relatings).

Is one of these more important than the others? Clearly, they are intertwined, in action research theory and in action research practice. Let us explore what might be at stake in considering sayings or understanding, doings or acting and relating as goals of action research.

(1) Understanding as a goal of action research
According to Kemmis & McTaggart (1988, 1):

Action research is a form of collective self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own social or educational practices, as well as their understanding of these practices and the situations in which these practices are carried out (emphases added).

In this definition, we asserted that the aim of action research was as much to change people’s practices and the situations in which people practise – the conditions for their practice – as to change their understandings of their practices. Let me emphasise that I think developing our understandings of our practices is a crucial
element of action research. But it is just one element among three named in this
definition.

As I suggested at the outset, Pierre Hadot argued that for the ancients the aim
of philosophy was not solely to participate in philosophical discourse, or to develop
philosophical theory, but to live a ‘philosophical’ life – that is, a life in which one
aimed to live well by thinking and speaking well, by acting well in the physical world,
and by relating well to others. I believe this is also a crucial aim for action research –
to help us to live well.

According to Plato, one way by which we could come to live well was by
living an examined life – by reflection on our individual and collective conduct – our
individual and collective praxis – and its consequences. I have argued (Kemmis
forthcoming) that this is how we learn wisdom and how we develop what Aristotle
called phronēsis – the disposition to act wisely and well.

that becoming experienced is a process of self-formation – one makes oneself through
practice, one does not just make things and states-of-affairs in the world. I have
argued (Kemmis forthcoming), that it is praxis that makes phronēsis, not the other
way around. It is by living well and reflecting on our attempts to live well that we
learn how to live well and, through this experience, we develop the disposition to live
well; we cannot simply set out to follow some set of moral or political rules as if they
were what constituted the disposition of phronēsis. Rather, we learn phronēsis by
acting as well as possible under uncertain practical circumstances and by experiencing
and reflecting on the consequences of our actions – the consequences of our
individual and collective praxis. And, of course, as we develop this phronēsis, it
guides us to act (praxis) in ways that we judge will be wise in future uncertain
situations, and we become still further experienced by seeing the consequences of our praxis.

On this view, action research can help us learn phronēsis, the disposition to live wisely and well, by facilitating our reflection on our individual and collective praxis.

If we think of phronēsis as a kind of understanding to be developed through action research, then it is a rather different kind of understanding from the kind that is usually regarded as the ‘product’ of research. If, as is conventionally thought, we think that the product of research ought to be ‘knowledge’ or ‘an original contribution to knowledge’, then we may be thinking about the kinds of ‘understandings’ that action research should produce in a very different way. We might be thinking not of individual or collective self-knowledge, the knowledge a person has of him- or herself or the knowledge a community has of its communal practices, for example, but we might be thinking instead of some kind of ‘book knowledge’ that stands apart from the people and lives from which it emerged.

This kind of knowledge that stands apart from the knower is frequently the product of the kind of contemplative action Aristotle called epistēmē, oriented by the disposition of theoría, the disposition to seek the truth. This kind of external knowledge can also be the product of poiēsis or ‘making action’, guided by the disposition of technē. As Wilfred Carr (2004, 2006a, 2006b, 2007) has recently argued, this is the dominant view of the knowledge produced by science in Modernity. This view of science held that, by following a scientific ‘method’, researchers could produce ‘objective’ knowledge in the form of propositional knowledge (a kind of ‘saying’) which is both external to particular knowers and can
become available to other knowers by their encountering and apprehending these propositions.

Wilfred Carr (2004, 2006a, 2006b, 2007) has shown that through Modernity we have come to identify truth with this particular view of science as ‘method’. Following Hans-Georg Gadamer (1975, 1981) he argues that this view is flawed, especially for the human and social sciences whose aim should be to help us interpret the social and historical circumstances of our lives and to act more wisely and well in the circumstances in which we find ourselves. He offers instead a view of science as practical philosophy, which aims to help us interpret the circumstances of our lives and to act more wisely and well. On this view of science as practical philosophy, then, action research might also aim to enrich our interpretive or hermeneutical understanding and thus to prepare us to interpret the world more sensitively and to act in it more appropriately in the present and future.

It appears, then, that there are different kinds of understanding that might be the goal of science, of research, or of action research. First, there is the ‘external’ truth that may accumulate in scientific theories – the goal of *theoria*. Next, there is the kind of interpretive or hermeneutical understanding that might result from education, or from grasping the perspective of another, from reaching a historical interpretation, or from richly appreciating a work of art. And third, there is the kind of wisdom and self-knowledge that emerges from experience and reflection on experience that fosters the disposition of *phronēsis* – the disposition to act wisely in uncertain practical situations.

This third kind of understanding is the kind most particularly relevant to action research because it is the one that our own action research most directly feeds; that is, it is the kind of understanding in which we understand ourselves (individually and
collectively), our practices, the situations in which we practise, and the consequences of what we do. Theoretical understandings might help us understand our own circumstances by being ‘applied’ to them; interpretive understandings may help us understand our circumstances by educating us about what has happened to other people or in other, related situations; but only the third kind of understanding – self-understanding – is grounded in the unique circumstances in which we find ourselves and arises uniquely from our own struggle to understand our own lives.

Developing individual and collective self-understanding – situated self-understanding – it might be argued, is what action research is uniquely suited for. Nevertheless, developing individual and collective self-understanding is not the sole or principal goal of action research. It is not done for the sake of knowledge alone; rather, I will argue, it is for the sake of history – what happens as the consequences of our actions, individually and collectively, for others and for the world. In this sense, what happens is more central in action research than our knowledge of it.

Those involved in action research nevertheless rightly aim for improved understanding of themselves, their practices and the situations in which their practice is carried out. And, as Hadot pointed out, by improving their understandings, they may learn – and those with whom they collaborate may also learn – to live a logic: to think and speak better and more clearly, and to avoid irrationality, contradiction and falsehood.

(2) Acting as a goal of action research
Action research that brings about changes in sayings (understanding), doings and relatings must confront this powerful fact: it changes what is done and cannot be undone (Kemmis & Smith 2008). Action research may be a way of coming to understand the world and becoming experienced in order to act more wisely in the
future, but it also transforms the world and transforms us. What is changed in the world as a consequence of those transformations is, as it were ‘written in history’, and written, one might say, in a shared collective history that transcends individual knowledge and lives. It follows that the most important goal of action research is to help us do what is right for each person (individual praxis) and what is right for humankind (collective praxis). Our concern, in action research, should not just be with us – the ones who intend to do the right thing – but also, and perhaps more particularly, with what happens (what is done). Our focus should be on what happens to the world and to people as a consequence of what we do, individually and collectively. The focus should be on how we can live, and how the world can live, with the consequences of what we do. Thus, the point of doing action research, it seems to me, is for each of us and all of us to find more sustainable – or, more precisely, less unsustainable – ways of living in the world.

And this is a task which necessarily invokes questions about our shared destinies, projected from our present perspectives and our present interests. What is done will irreversibly be done, but what it will be and what it will mean for a group collectively, or for a society or for humankind, is always uncertain and unpredictable. The whole range of consequences of an action cannot be known in advance and with certainty. Thus, we require practical reasoning to decide what to do, and we require collective practical reasoning among people involved in and affected by practical proposals for action in order to determine what should be done – how those involved in an action research initiative, for example, will intervene in history. And this, in turn, requires collective deliberation about what to do – which is generally speaking a matter of contestation. As Robin McTaggart and I have argued elsewhere (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005), arriving at a shared decision can proceed through forms of public
discourse in public spheres, in which people can do their best to remain open to hearing the views of others, to reaching intersubjective agreement about the ideas in play in their discussions, to reaching mutual understanding of one another’s positions, and aiming for unforced consensus about what to do. And all of this, of course, takes place in contexts characterised by contestation where different people and groups have different starting points, different interests, and different locations in matrices of power – as, for example, in the abiding disputes over Indigenous versus non-Indigenous perspectives over land and land use, culture and cultural heritage and language, and the interests of social justice in Australia today. Such contests exist, and often they can be worked through so people feel a genuinely shared commitment to agreed courses of action. Wise judgement, for individuals and groups, consists in proceeding in the light of different perspectives and interests, not by cutting through them.

This is what acting collectively in history means. It means acting in the knowledge that the consequences of action are irreversible and that the only responses available when consequences are untoward for some individuals or groups are asking forgiveness, making reparations, or making and keeping promises not to cause such consequences again. Acting ‘for the good of humankind’, then, always proceeds in the knowledge that this good is always uncertain and contested. But the aim – to act for the good of humankind – is something to which individuals and groups can commit themselves, and to which they can commit inclusively, to attempt to embrace the different perspectives and interests of those who will be differentially affected by the consequences of actions taken. The commitment to act for this good, knowing that one does not see or adequately understand all perspectives or interests, however, can be universally shared, even if, in practice, actions will always fail perfectly to achieve
this end. To know and deeply appreciate this frailty is wisdom (phronēsis) borne of praxis.

And thus, in Hadot’s terms, those involved in action research initiatives, and those with whom they collaborate, may therefore also learn to live a physics: how to act better and more productively in the world, avoiding harm, waste and excess.

(3) Relating as a goal of action research
Action research also aims to bring about changes in how people relate to one another in the practice in which they act and interact. In general, one might say, action research aims to create the conditions for public discourse in public spheres (Habermas 1996, especially Chapter 8; Kemmis & McTaggart 2005): that is, communication aimed at reaching intersubjective agreement, mutual understanding and unforced consensus about what to do. It aims to model democratic relations between people in which there is recognition and respect for difference, and in which people strive to reach understandings and agreements on the basis of the arguments ‘on the table’ about issues and states of affairs in the world.

One might therefore say that a goal of action research is to create models of democratic dialogue and practical deliberation, and thus to offer people other ways of relating to one another.

And thus, in Hadot’s terms, those involved in action research projects learn how to live an ethics: to relate better to others and to the world, and to avoid injustice, exclusion and causing suffering.

Conclusion: What is to be done?
In the title of this presentation, I used the famous question ‘what is to be done?’ borrowed from Vladimir Ilyich Lenin’s (1902) book of that name. Lenin asked and answered the question in order to say, at a particular moment in the development of
Russian socialism, what needed to happen to move from a moment of contestation and confusion, in which there had been a premature institutionalisation of a particular form of party bureaucracy, to a new period in which socialism could achieve revolutionary potential. For Lenin, then, the title concerned a specific historical period and a specific need to move on from an impasse.

In this presentation, I have used the question ‘what is to be done?’ as a general question as well as because it has a specific relevance at this historical moment.

It has a specific relevance at this historical moment because I believe that action research needs to move on from the impasse of justifying itself as ‘research’ on the model of the empirical-analytic sciences which aim to produce new (‘external’) knowledge. When action researchers (or other researchers) seek to justify action research as research on the grounds that it contributes to the production of such ‘external’ knowledge (and thus to justify it as ‘scientific’ in this particular sense), they turn their attention away from the most important thing – what happens in some particular place and time as a result of the action research (something which can only be known, we should note, by human understanding).

In my view, the principal justification for action research is that it makes a direct contribution to transformative action and to changing history. On this view, we might reasonably judge its contribution to ‘external’ bodies of knowledge as valuable but secondary. To address the question of ‘what is to be done?’ for action research at this particular historical juncture, then, is to invite action researchers to re-order (if they need to) their priorities regarding the contributions of action research. In my view, the first concern of action researchers should be the contribution of their action to history, not so much to theory.
The question of ‘what is to be done?’ also has general and continuing relevance for action researchers, however, because it is the eternal practical question, raised anew by every new historical period and by every new setting in which people practise. What it is best to do, for each one and for humankind, is always uncertain and contested. New situations, circumstances and periods throw up new questions for education, for medicine, for law, for social work… This eternal opening of possibilities and the eternal need to respond to historical change is, to me, at the heart of the justification for action research. Action research aims to explore new ways of doing things, new ways of thinking, and new ways of relating to one another and to the world in the interest of finding those new ways that are more likely to be for the good of each person and for the good of humankind, and more likely to help us live sustainably.

In our time of global warming and the human threat to life on Earth, it seems to me that a huge task is required of action research – action research for sustainability (Kemmis 2009; Kemmis & Mutton 2009). In all kinds of settings, from education to the health sciences, and in the professional practice of every field from social work to agriculture, we are confronted by the challenge of living more sustainably. There is a worldwide social movement for sustainability, and action research is already a part of this movement. In the era of global warming, we are confronted starkly by the question ‘what is to be done?’ both at the level of the individual and at the level of humankind. To find out what needs to be done differently, we need action research – action research that will inform our individual praxis and to inform our collective praxis. In many settings – in contexts of Education for Sustainability, for example – action research is already part of this movement.
Sustainability offers a criterion for considering how well action research initiatives contribute to the life of the settings in which they are conducted. Kemmis (2009, 470-471) argued that social and professional practices would need to be changed

… if the character, conduct or consequences of the practices involved were found to be unsustainable in any of five ways:

1. **Discursively unsustainable**: incomprehensible or irrational, relying upon false, misleading or contradictory ideas or discourses.
2. **Morally and socially unsustainable**: excluding people in ways that corrode social harmony or social integration; unjust because it is oppressive in the sense that it unreasonably limits or constrains self-expression and self-development for those involved or affected, or dominating in the sense that it unreasonably limits or constrains self-determination for those involved or affected …
3. **Ecologically and materially unsustainable**: ecologically, physically and materially infeasible or impractical, consuming physical or natural resources unsustainably.
4. **Economically unsustainable**: too costly; costs outweigh benefits; transferring costs or benefits too greatly to one group at the (illegitimate) expense of others; creating economic disadvantage or hardship.
5. **Personally unsustainable**: causing harm or suffering; unreasonably ‘using up’ people’s knowledge, capacities, identity, self-understanding, bodily integrity, esteem, privacy, resources, energy or time.

These different faces of unsustainability are ‘built into’ some of the practice architectures that shape our lives, enabling and constraining our collective possibilities for praxis – for morally-committed action oriented and informed by traditions of thought and action.

These, then, might be criteria against which to judge the contribution of action research initiatives to history, and to evaluate what is done and cannot be undone as a consequence of action research.

*These* are criteria by which to judge whether an action research initiative is worth doing, or whether particular kinds of educational practice or nursing practice or medical practice or the practice of history are worth doing. As researchers, we are encouraged to make original contributions to knowledge; as action researchers, let us hope to do that but also to do something far more important. Let us hope to *make history* by living well, individually and collectively, and by living well *in* and *for* a world worth living in.
References


