

Action Conversations

Asking strategic questions in conversational style as a ‘tool’ for developing community and social action projects, and the evaluation of these projects.

© Tony Webb
Visiting Research Fellow
Centre for Popular Education
University of Technology Sydney

Much of what follows is commonsense. Much of it is what people already involved in social and community action do already – sometimes intuitively. The aim is to draw out the strategic elements of this and offer a framework that enables us to better understand what we are doing at any stage, what we might have missed at some stages, where we are going on the path from ‘Concern’ to ‘Action’.

A brief word on social and community action

Most of the time we are working with people’s sense of anger or indignation about some issues of concern and channelling this into social action,. Rarely are we able to deal with (other than despair about) the sometimes overwhelming sense of apathy among large sections of the community.

Working with indignation is the basis for most of our ‘education’ and campaigning in social issues. We aim to ‘inform’ people about what is wrong and point them towards what they can do about it. And are either surprised, or accept with resignation, when many people ignore or actively walk away from this invitation to become involved. We say these people are ‘apathetic’ and we can do little about it - except more of the same education that failed in the first place.

Even with people who are ‘active’ this education, especially when it is telling people what we think is needed, isn’t very useful. At best it may encourage people to get involved in projects based on our ideas for action – but these are usually people who are already involved in community or social action anyway and often overcommitted already. While our aim is ‘empowerment’ of people in the community to tackle the issues that affect their lives our practice often falls short, sometimes far short, of this ideal. At worst the ‘education, information and activism’ approach actively drives some people further away. It feeds their sense of apathy and alienation – a withdrawal from involvement in anything that looks like ‘social’ or ‘political’ activity or at least anything other than the limited range of social activity people have already chosen for themselves.

This is one of the primary reasons why community and social action initiatives have been going backwards over the past 20-30 years. Our social action tools are primarily geared to working with people who are already or who can be mobilised around ‘indignation’ – the sense that something is wrong and something needs to be done about it. This tool-kit only rarely contains ideas and activities that work with people who are ‘apathetic’ or alienated from (and sometimes by) effective community and social action. Most of the time we assume that success can only be achieved if apathy can be turned into indignation. Rarely do we ask if there are tools for working with apathy directly

Apathy/Alienation and Aggression/Violence are not opposites. They are best seen as two sides of the same coin. Apathy can be seen as frozen violence – capable of being thawed in the heat of the moment to produce a degree of violence as deep as the apathy was moments before. Indignation – that sense of social injustice and the need for action to change it – is the socially usable part of this ‘violence’. What might be the useable part of apathy/alienation? To date the best answer, found in practice and then grounded as part of the theory for social and community action, is that the useable element of apathy is **Curiosity** and/or **Doubt** – doubt about whether the way things are is the only or best way, and curiosity about how they could be otherwise and what can be done to bring about change.

This suggests that part of our work will be to stimulate curiosity as well as or perhaps instead of simply working on indignation. It also suggests that the primary tools for engaging people and communities characterised by apathy will involve asking questions more than providing information.

This is hardly new. Many a teacher learns that the ‘Socratic’ method of asking questions is more likely to engage a class of bored kids than churning out information – however interesting. And that getting curiosity is often a pre-requisite for ‘teaching’ anything whether in the classroom or the world of adult and public education.

This is what the ‘Action Conversations’ approach is based on. It is usually explored in ‘workshop’ mode with groups of people who have similar or sometimes very different concerns. It is introduced by asking questions – exploring how people see what they are doing and how we can structure this so we have a clearer picture or framework for what we do. We use questions to explore how a person or group of people who share a concern about some issue can use questions to both develop community and social action – and evaluate what they are doing as they do it.

Asking questions

Asking questions works on both sides of the aggression / alienation spectrum. There is little by way of information that cannot be explored through asking questions, at least initially until an action conversation has started to happen. Asking questions also taps into the curiosity of that section of the community that we call ‘apathetic’ – or at least finds out more about what it is that stops or undermines our ideas for community development and empowerment. Sometimes it can engage people who thought they had no role to play in any form of social action around the issues that they come to see as of concern to them.

Asking questions can:

- Give useful information about what other people think about issues and where they might be involved
- Give information about aspects of the concern we didn’t think about originally
- Stimulate people to think – perhaps becoming curious about what can be done and perhaps even becoming involved
- Stimulate a conversation that starts to ripple through the community about this and related issues – beginning to influence the ‘culture of apathy’
- Enable us to better identify what needs to be done and the obstacles we need to overcome if we are to take effective action on the issues that concern us
- Enable us to identify allies in the action and also those who will be our opponents - and, as important, those bloody nuisances (sometimes more politely called ‘fence-sitters’) who can derail an action when it gets to the critical stage.
- Allow us to plan community and social action projects – exploring and using the questions in a series of four clearly defined stages so that we have a strategic framework, scaffold, or ‘road-map’ for turning our concern into action.
- Enable us to ‘evaluate’ what we are doing, where we have reached at any stage, and the difference we are making in the community and society – so that the end we can not only know what we achieved and how, but can help others follow in our footsteps.
- Finally there are some additional questions that can help avoid the pitfalls of ‘failure’ and ‘success’ that so often de-rail a group that has undertaken a social action project – with sometimes the consequence that people are left feeling cynical – “been there, done that, what’s the point?” etc.

What follows is necessarily oversimplified. Life, like real conversations we have with real people is inevitably more complex and complicated but it has been found useful as a framework or scaffolding for groups wanting to make a difference. It fits into a wider body of work that seeks to develop a ‘tool-kit’ for social activism – similarly simple frameworks for understanding what we do that works and how to teach it to others who want to make a difference so that they don’t have to re-invent the ‘flat tyres’ that we had to learn to change based on the painful process of learning from our mistakes in the past.

Powerful questions

Useful questions are those that:

- Open up a conversation with other people.
- Identify issues of concern to these people and explore what ideas they have about what can be done about them
- Give us information about the issues (so-called 'objective' information) - and what another person thinks and their willingness to engage in Action (and other so-called 'subjective' information)
- Hopefully, stimulate people to get involved in issues of their own choosing – that may or may not be the ones that we care about

What other criteria would you use to describe 'questions that work'?

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Open and Closed Questions

“Too often we find it is taken for granted that one already knows what questions to ask. In fact we find that by asking open-ended questions of a general nature we get many answers to questions we never asked. The people's own priorities come out and the standards by which they see their own problems, something which no one coming from a different culture or even from a so-called objective point of view, can possibly do.”

Richard Hauser

The first thing that stands out is that we can (and often do) ask 'closed' questions.

These are ones that:

- Yield a “yes” or “no” answer (or one of the range of “agree . . . disagree” spectrum of responses)
- Or that prompt people to give a limited response based on stereotyped opinions – that they may or may not have thought deeply about – or worse, what they think we want them to say.

Opinions are sometimes useful but more often than not they close down the kind of action conversation we are trying to stimulate. Getting people to agree with us is rarely useful. We all know of projects that have 'surveyed' the community for support for an idea developed by the organisers (who get answers that seem to give that support) only to find that this 'support' evaporates when the time comes for community involvement in the action. Even getting people to say they disagree is still only tapping a reaction to our ideas – not really finding out about theirs. The fallout from asking 'leading' questions can be hidden resentment and further disengagement from involvement with some projects that can sometimes last for years – and we call these people 'apathetic'!

Alternatively we can ask 'open-ended' questions. These are ones that invite people to tell us what they think in their own terms. They can be:

- 'Mouth openers' – questions that start a conversation where people are – not necessarily where our concern is focussed so that we learn what the people we are talking with care about and whether our concerns have any interest to them
- Questions that invite a truly open response – not a reaction to our 'hidden agenda' – we leave our agenda and our ideas for what needs to be done outside of the conversation for a while – after all if it is an important issue (to the person we are talking with) and our ideas are good they will surface as the conversation proceeds – and if they don't we have some important and useful information about this person (and people like him or her) to add to our understanding of what is needed for action. In any case we can return to our issues and ideas – and the group we are working with who share this concern - with additional information and perhaps some ideas we hadn't thought of.
- Questions that start a real conversation between equals – where each may be curious about the ideas of the other(s) – and where exchanging ideas is not only appropriate it is welcomed and invited – and where the ideas are then 'shared' rather than being 'our' ideas. It is a sad fact that most people (ourselves included) will work for ideas that are 'ours' but tend to reject or find fault with ideas of 'others'.

This is not as easy as it sounds. Often people's first response to an open-ended question will be to ask what we want to talk about – effectively “what do you want me to say?” This at least is a start. We have stimulated curiosity. But we need to develop the skills and persistence to keep the questions (and the basis for the conversation) open.

Asking strategically powerful questions

The powerful questions almost always involve one of the **W-H** words

WHAT . . . ?

WHEN . . . ?

WHERE . . . ?

WHO . . . ?

HOW . . . ?

WHICH . . . ?

And sometimes

WHY . . . ?

‘Why’ questions can be a problem. A ‘why’ question usually produces one of two answers. The first is “dunno . . . !” - sometimes because people do not know but often they use this as a ‘put off’ – to avoid answering/ avoid thinking about it. The other is “Because . . . !” This is often a statement of opinion. This is sometimes useful but we can often get more information if we reframe the question as what, when where who or how? Why can sometimes be a useful question to ask after the others – it invites people to pull together or ‘synthesise’ some of the ideas that have been explored with the other questions.

Often when a conversation either ‘jams up’ or starts ‘going round in circles’ the stalemate can be broken by asking the relevant W-H questions – or, with a group that understands the process, by asking “which of the above questions do we need to ask now – which is the most important thing to focus on: what, when, where, who, or how?

An ‘A-Frame’ for strategic questions.

These questions can be constructed a variety of ways. There isn't a ‘right way’, it is a chance to be creative – to use imagination and, in actual conversations, our intuition about what might work. There are some forms of the questions that have been found to be particularly useful – ones that work. In particular, when exploring issues of concern we will want to not just find out about the problem but also what could or should be done about it.

Below are a set of basic questions that have been found useful in mapping the field of concern about a wide range of issues. The actual form of these questions can and should be adapted to both the specific area of concern and the people being asked. Remember – the aim is to develop a conversation within which the strategic questions are ‘embedded’ – asked as part of the conversation that is exploring what people think about issues of concern.

The following set of five generic open-ended questions is useful as a starting point. These can be asked in different ways but represent five distinct stages in exploring how we, and later how others, see the issue and the scope for action. These questions are:

1. *What's The Problem – what is it we are concerned about – how do we see this issue?*
2. *What is currently being done – by whom – and is it good, bad or indifferent?*
3. *What needs to be done – what ideas do we have about what could or should be done that would make a difference?*
4. *What are the obstacles to change – what gets in the way - what stops good ideas from happening?*
5. *Where do we go from here? – what are we prepared to do about it (tomorrow, next week in the next month year etc) – and who else might have something significant to contribute – who should we talk to - etc.?*

To some extent we can start anywhere in this frame – and a good action conversation will range over all five areas of concern. The aim of this framework is to ensure that we have a basic set of questions

that cover the whole field. Under this framework we can and will be asking a range of other questions as we will see below.

As we use this framework we will discover that the conversation can and often does ramble or wander all over the map. This is the nature of real conversations. In particular, while we may ask one question, we may get answers that fit one of the others. This can be the source of valuable information in itself. For example we often find that when we ask about what is needed the conversation will drift back to talk about the problems or what is already being done – even though this may be recognised as inadequate. Alternatively attempts to explore what can be done will only result in discussion of the problems – all the reasons “why not” and lots of comments like “yes, but . . .” What is this telling us about people and their ability to think about, even conceive of ways of changing the situation? Sometimes we get this pattern of response consistently as we have these conversations across a community. Some people (and sometimes whole communities) are ‘blocked’ – in that they see obstacles to actions that they recognise as needed. Others are not merely blocked but ‘shrunk’ in that the limit of their vision – the horizon of their thinking about social action is the range of obstacles that they see as stopping change. To start to involve people in a ‘shrunk’ community requires different tools and techniques from the traditional tools for ‘un-blocking’ and ‘empowerment’ of people who face obstacles to social action they can imagine and can be assisted to overcome.

Action Research: Using Action Conversations to make a Social Action Survey

Why go the long way round? Why not just jump in and propose an action and see who gets involved?

If we want to make long term changes to the way our society functions (or doesn't) then we need people who can not only do it but can teach others who follow in their footsteps to do likewise. The Centre for Popular Education at UTS is committed to developing this kind of community ‘educator’ and social activist – people who can be not merely community leaders but also ‘action-researchers’ – able to get involved in issues and work with the people directly affected to define, plan and effect change and at the end contribute to our knowledge about how we can make this process part of what is normal in a democratic society.

Even if we think we know what is needed it is important that we carry the community with us – not just the other activists but those who are ‘at the sharp end’ of the problem.

Using questions, as explored above, is part of the process. Now we will explore how we can weave these questions into a four stage process. The action survey is a generic framework for turning concern into action – and in the process being able to evaluate our progress. In practice of course the process like life and social conditions we are trying to change can be more complex but let's start by making it simple so we can see the ‘scaffolding’ on which we will later hang the detail.

The framework involves four stages:

- **The concern** – where a small group get together to work out how they see the problem and what needs doing;
- **The pre-survey** – where this group sets out to explore what questions should be asked across the whole fields of ‘stakeholders’ in this issue of concern. Note the emphasis here is on **finding the right questions** – those that work in identifying and motivating people to action – and this is done by engaging a sample of these stakeholders in action conversations ;
- **The main survey** – where the group, now expanded by stakeholders who have been drawn into the process through the pre-survey and with a clear idea of what the stakeholder community wants, is willing or can be mobilised to act on, asks these questions that work across the community.
- **The action** – which will flow out of the survey process. This may require further mini surveys to overcome blockages and can draw on a wider range of, social action and campaigning skills from the toolkit. It also includes the evaluation where people involved analyse and report on what they did so that the lessons can be learned more widely and we start to change the whole climate of social activism based on these experiences.

Step 1: The Concern

'Concern' is used in the old Quaker sense of the word – the problem we want to 'have a go at'. It is either a concern that we are directly involved in, or one that concerns the lives of others.

Social action is by its nature a group process, though it can start with a very small group or even a single 'catalyst' researcher. It starts with a concern – one that focuses attention on some social issue or problem and the **concern stage** is where people start to come together to explore their ideas. The first step is to link up with others who share the same or similar concerns and clarify our ideas about it. We do this quite subjectively – how we think and feel is as important as the facts.

Here the A-Frame of five key questions above can be a useful starting point for the conversations. These allow a group to quickly map the field of their own ideas. These ideas can then be examined to reveal our individual and the group's biases - against which we can then be on guard. These biases cannot be eliminated. They can be contained. When we start the survey we may get conflicting answers. If the answers obtained by one of the team keep confirming his/her own bias – and they always do even when we try hard to be unbiased - this can be challenged by the group and another member can be asked to check whether they get similar results.

The A-Frame questions also invite people to think about and discuss what ideas might be held by other people and who the other stakeholders might be in this issue of concern. Having a good idea isn't enough – it is only a *really* good idea if it can be turned into action. This means fitting it into a social reality. So our job is to go out and find out what this reality is and how to make our ideas work. This may mean we need to modify our ideas – or alternatively we need to find ways of changing the social reality – but that means changing the ideas that other people have. As we have explored above, telling people isn't very effective. But asking questions can not only tell us what they think, it can also start them thinking and sometimes changing their ideas.

What are these questions we need to ask? How do we adapt the A-frame questions to the particular concern? What are the other questions – under these general A-Frame ones – that we should ask? Who should we ask them of – who are the stakeholders? These are the questions we will need to explore in the Pre-survey – to find the 'ones that work'.

The result of the concern stage is a working set of ideas (sometimes called the **first hypothesis**) for what can be done and how the wider community could be involved in tackling the concern. It also develops a tentative strategy about what we might aim to achieve – short, middle, and long range. It starts the process of looking at the questions that need to be asked and who we need to ask?

Step 2: The pre-survey

Our next step is to go out and test these ideas against the political realities on the ground. Who out there shares our vision or part of it? Which bits are these people prepared to work on or support us in doing? What other ideas are out there? Who will oppose us – and why? Who are the bloody nuisances who will say 'yes' and not only do nothing but often get in the way of action? How can we maximise support, minimise opposition and piss-off the nuisances without turning them into opponents?

The tool we use for this is the **Pre-survey**. This is where we develop a working model in miniature of the main survey to follow. The aim is to confirm in broad terms whether we were right or wrong about our concern and ideas for possible action. At the end of this pre-survey we will know whether action is now possible and if so what this action might be. We will also know the questions to ask so that we find out: what people really think; what they are willing to help or support; what stops them from acting; and how they can be either turned into allies or neutralised as opponents.

The questions we ask in an action survey help us to uncover:

- Objective facts rather like any other survey.

- Subjective opinions surrounding these facts –the emotional, invisible facts surrounding the objective ones. The aim is to get behind the initial or stereotyped views to real ideas and opinions and understand something about people’s fears, anxieties, shame etc. that get in the way of action.
- We particularly are looking for the points where people are “ambivalent”. What people say and what they feel (their emotions – which often show in their body language) may contradict one another. The survey aims to uncover both thoughts and feelings because ambivalence is the first sign that people may be ready to change.
- The people we can collaborate with: particularly groups and potential leaders who can assist us in the future or even join us in the survey and/or take on exploring some ideas for action themselves.
- Lines of action that are open. Also those that are closed for now and those that could be open if some things change – and how we might change these things.

The practical details of pre-survey involve us exploring:

- The questions that, when asked, uncover the above. The pre-survey is as much about finding the right questions as getting the answers.
- The people these questions need to be asked of – who are the ‘stakeholders’ in this concern?
- The outline of what this whole field of stakeholders thinks, feels and is willing to do.

The Action Survey Questions:

There are three levels of questions. We’ll call them: A, B, and C.

‘A’ Questions are the ‘mouth openers’.

As discussed above, the most powerful questions are the ‘WH’ questions - **What? When? Where? Which? Who? How? and Why?** These are powerful because they are ‘open-ended’. These ‘mouth openers’ invite the people we are surveying to talk, to tell us what they think and feel, rather than agreeing or disagreeing with our ideas.

With practice, these ‘A’ questions can be carried in our heads and used to guide the conversation with a stakeholder/participant such that at the end we have a map of his/her responses to the ‘interview’. Some people need not even realise they have been part of a survey – it may look and feel just like a conversation – but one that is focussed on our concern and gives us valuable information.

‘B’ Questions are things we particularly want to ask of particular stakeholder groups.

Underneath the ‘A’ questions there will be some areas where we’d like to explore specific issues, with specific groups.

Here we will be seeking the form of the question – the way to phrase it - that best unlocks information about the situation and information about the person being interviewed. What moves or blocks him/her to taking action to deal with the issue? Often these questions also use the same power question words - who, what when, where, how why – but may be more focussed on something we need to know.

‘C’ Questions are luxuries

These ‘luxury questions’ are things that might be interesting to explore if there is time and the interview goes well, but not essential.

All the questions are subject to alteration; being changed if they are misleading, added to as new areas of interest emerge and changed as we learn how better to uncover the facts and the hidden/subjective elements of the concern in different sections of the community.

Stakeholders:

We want to know what ‘everyone’ out there thinks about the issue or concern. We can’t talk to everyone (even when we get to the main survey) so we take a small sample of one or two people from each of the major ‘stakeholder’ groups.

In this way we survey a small sample across the full range of ‘experts’ who might have opinions on the subject of concern, i.e. anybody who knows anything about the problem.

These include: professionals and people with a specialist viewpoint, non-professionals who may have knowledge about the field, and people directly affected by the problem - across the full range of ages, income, sex, geography and any other factors we think are relevant.

We draw up an initial list of the groups we think have an interest in the issue. We identify or chose one or more people to go talk with – try out the questions on. And we also ask these people who they think has an interest in the issue – who we might then go and talk with either as part of the pre-survey or the main survey which follows.

The survey questions (when we get them right) start to draw an ever widening circle of stakeholders into the process. They start to build networks, alliances and eventually strategic actions that enable us (and these other stakeholders) to influence the situation we are concerned about.

The pre-survey is a dry-run for the main survey. It can indicate if the project should proceed, be abandoned or approached from a different direction. It is designed to test and modify the questions so that these uncover: the realities of the situation, the possibilities for action, the actors who can make a difference, and what it will take for them to do so.

Once the questions start to yield some consistent responses we can reframe our initial ideas for action – make a second hypothesis. This now includes a clear idea of the questions to be used and the people to be involved in the main survey.

Step 3: The main survey

At this point we will have a clearer idea of both the points around which action might be built, and, the form of questions that uncover which individuals and groups of people are or might be willing to re-think, grow personally and socially, and take action.

It is useful to draw this together into a second plan for action (or second hypothesis) so we know what we know and how we know it – and so that everyone in the action survey is now working off the same plan. We are then ready to move into the main survey.

The main survey involves a larger number of people across the range of stakeholders and is carried on until there is sufficiently large group of collaborators who are willing to help and are willing to show some leadership when it comes to time for action.

At this stage the questions often reveal elements of the social climate. This is often more than just what people think and are willing to act on. What sometimes emerges is an inability of some people or groups to think beyond the problems.

There is often a tendency to confuse the obstacles (like lack of money, or lack of support from some authority) with the problem – which has often to do with human needs, rights and problems of fairness and decency.

While some groups may have many ideas about what needs to be done, others show a lack of creative or strategic thinking. Often a question about what needs to be done is heard as *'what can we do?'* - i.e. what's possible?

This can apply to us also. One of the biggest problems we face in attempting social change is the tendency to allow our thinking to be cramped by what we believe to be possible rather than what we often know to be necessary. There is a time for being practical – tackling the possible – but we also need to think outside this framework to get a better direction on where we are headed.

As noted above, it can be useful to see this in terms of the ideas of 'blockage' and 'shrinkage'. Sometimes we can see where we need to go but there are obstacles in the path that (initially) prevent this. The thinking of a group can be focussed on strategies for overcoming these 'blockages'. For some people and groups the problem is more severe. It is as if their horizons have been so shrunk that the obstacles are the boundary of their vision. At best their action is 'anti-negative'. Their attention is focussed only on opposing social injustice and the social forces that maintain it, but they have little vision for how to change it and what to replace it with. Imagination is needed to build a bridge

between the 'negative' current situation and the future 'positive' alternative. Strategic action needs both anti-negative and positive elements. Anti negative alone leads to political action of the kind that advocates we 'smash the system' with little idea of what can be put in its place and still less about transition strategies for getting there. On the other hand much 'new-age' thinking has been characterised by a focus on 'positive thinking', which ignores the need to deal with current injustices and, equally, has little to offer strategically in making the transition.

Part of what we will be learning in this process is how to help people to 'unblock' whatever is holding them back from being effective actors in the social change drama. This often involves working with feelings and emotions – looking at what keeps us locked in old patterns of thought and behaviour and which block us from new ways of thinking and acting.

Where we are dealing with a problem of shrinkage we may need to change the whole 'social climate' before action on any particular concern is possible. There are a number of tools in the kitbag that have been found useful in this. One of the ways is a flow-on from the action survey itself. Because we are asking open-ended questions – inviting people to identify their issues of concern and any ideas they have for what is needed – we will often get a lot of ideas some of which may be way off our initial concern but which together start to build what we have called a 'menu of micro-projects'. Where there is any curiosity or interest shown in the action conversations these ideas about community initiatives can be shared with people (sometimes as a list 'that people in the community are talking about'). The result can be that the ripples of conversation about these ideas will often start to spread until the community starts to think about these as part of the 'currency of debate'.

Another 'pull-through' that can raise the sights of the community beyond the barrier of obstacles to change is to explore the role of 'arts' and 'artists' in the community in making some of the issues – and ideas about what is needed more visible. These 'Community Cultural Development' tools can include things as simple as community art walls or murals – preferably getting some of the younger 'graffiti' artists involved in the design and production of these displays. They can also include 'Photo-Voice' projects where people at the sharp end of issues are invited to use disposable cameras to capture images of their world and its concerns and then discuss the stories behind these pictures and are helped to organise photo-voice exhibitions that make these concerns more visible and understood. Similar scope exists for various forms of theatre including 'Playback' theatre that draws stories from the audience and then 'plays these back' using professional or trained amateur actors and uses this drama as the starting point for a wider discussion. The ideas here are many and we will be exploring some of these in more detail as part of the broader social action toolkit.

Step 4: Social action:

Action follows from the main survey. The whole point of the survey is information-gathering for the purpose of action. **The survey itself is part of that action.** The survey questions explore 'the social climate' around our issue of concern - what is being done and can be done, by whom, and what stops it happening. The aim is to promote responsible community action – by others on the things they believe in as well as clarifying what we want to do and how we can do it.

This kind of action involves the people affected by a concern investigating, planning and determining what should be done. It is social planning not social engineering. It is people deciding what they think needs to happen and how to make it happen, not an elite group of planners deciding what people should do or what should be done for them. Social planning is a process by which people are inoculated against submitting to or being controlled by the plans of any such elite, but instead become responsibly involved in the planning, the decision-making itself, and the actions in which they have had a responsible voice.

Theory and Practice

The above is an outline – a framework or scaffolding that weaves together a number of simple ideas and stages in which they can be used to move from concern into action and evaluation – an action research methodology. Learning how to use these – and above all how to adapt them to particular concerns and the personalities of the people involved takes practice.

The invitation now is to take these ideas and make them our own. How would we like to use the ideas? How and on what issue can we practice asking questions – particularly open-ended and powerful/strategic questions? Can we use four step action-survey processes to refine these questions and use them to uncover information about issues of concern, the stakeholders, and how we draw people – particularly people at the sharp end of the problem - into the action? Can we using the same questions to collect the information by which we measure progress, judge success or learn from the experience so that we develop our own and the capacity in the community to undertake similar strategically planned action in the future?

How about we start asking these questions - perhaps practicing with people we know? After all the general public (and our families and friends) are stakeholders in these issues too. With practice this survey can become a part of our everyday conversations with people we meet – the questions gradually gathering information about what a wide range of ‘stakeholders’ think – and we can go to the ‘authorities’ and ‘experts’ when we are ready and confident that we have some of the right questions to ask.

Finally a quick summary:

- The action conversation and action survey approach to community and social action is a simple but powerful tool for finding out what can be done, how and who with.
- It allows people who have a direct stake in the issue of concern to plan what needs to be done – and test their ideas against the reality of the wider network of stakeholders in the issue.
- It uses questions – particularly the ‘right’ questions - as a tool for mapping the field of stakeholders and within this field identifying and mobilising allies for social action on the issue of concern.
- It also uses questions to begin to identify and work with the often invisible feelings and emotional elements in the situation that can interfere with ‘rational’ action.
- As well as being a useful tool for a particular social issue and action, it helps people involved to better understand and hence influence the social climate in which they operate on a wide range of other issues.
- Like any skill – we all have a piece of this already – we all have a long way to go – and along the road to mastery we can mentor others by sharing/teaching the ideas behind this tool and what we have learned from this process of using it.

Tony Webb

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Further information:

- Action Conversations is one of a series of tools for action research developed by the Centre for Popular Education at UTS. For information on others in the context of the work of the Centre visit the website <http://cpe.uts.edu.au>.
- For further information, comments or reflections on the use of this Action Conversations approach to social action contact Tony Webb: tony.webb@uts.edu.au
- The ideas in this paper have been adapted over the years from the work of Richard Hauser (1910-1991) his wife Hephzibah Menhuin-Hauser and colleagues at the Centre for Human Rights and Responsibilities in London. They developed a range of tools for social growth that could be used by people engaged in social planning – working **with**, rather than for, people affected by issues of social concern. Much of his work including his work on Action Surveys remains unpublished but some idea of the breadth of vision and focus of his concern can be found in:
 - Hauser R and H Hauser (1963). *The Fraternal Society*. New York, Random House.
- This is not the only model for Participatory Action Research. The following can give you ideas and other models you may wish to explore:
 - Deshler, D. & Ewert, M. (1995). Participatory Action Research: Traditions and Major Assumptions. Available at : http://www.PAR.net.org/parchive/docs/Deshler_95.
 - Freire, P. (). *Creating Alternative Research Methods: Learning to Do It by Doing It*.
 - Seymour-Rolls, K. & Hughes, I. (1996). *Participatory Action Research: Getting the Job Done*. (see <http://www2.fhs.usyd.edu.au/arow/arer/004.htm>)
 - McTaggart, R. (Spring 1991). Principles for Participatory Action Research. *Adult Education Quarterly*. vol. 4, no. 3
 - Hall, B. (1996). Participatory Research. In Albert Tuijnman (Ed.) *International Encyclopedia of Adult Education and Training*. Paris: OECD
 - Elden, M. & Levin, M. (1991). *Cogenerative Learning: Bringing Participation into Action Research*. In William Whyte (Ed.) *Participatory Action Research*. Newbury Park: SAGE
 - Glaser, B. G. and A. Strauss (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory : strategies for qualitative research*. New York, Aldine De Gruyter.
 - Lewin, K. (1951). *Field Theory in Social Science*. Westport Ct., Greenwood Press.
 - Tandon, R. (1988). Social Transformation and Participatory Research. *Convergence*. vol. XXI, no. 2/3
 - Hall, B. (1981). Participatory Research, Popular Knowledge and Power: A Personal Reflection. *Convergence*, vol.14, no. 3

- McTaggart, R. (1991). Principles for Participatory Action Research. *Adult Education Quarterly*, vol. 41, no. 3, p. 168-187
- Selener, D. (1992). *Participatory Action Research and Social Change: Approaches and Critique*. Ph.D. thesis, Cornell University
- Wadsworth, Y. (1984). *Do It Yourself Social Research*. Melbourne: Victorian Council of Social Service and Melbourne Family Care
- Whyte, W. (Ed.) (1991). *Participatory Action Research*. Ithaca: Sage.