

Emancipating our ears and voices – 'Re-sounding' Action Research

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Abstract

I recently completed PhD research exploring the experiences of a number of Australian action research oriented one-person businesses. Toward the end of the research I recognized that the consulting practices of all my research partners were auditory in nature. I began to explore the nature of auditory phenomena and realized that the Western world within which I work is visually oriented – very visually oriented. This realization led me to explore the 'silencing' of our auditory nature and to consider the 're-sounding' of our auditory potential.

This paper introduces the auditory gestalt that emerged from this research, a gestalt that includes 're-membering' our auditory selves, interacting with the auditory world, and learning from auditory experience. Hopefully the result is evocative, memorable, challenging and enjoyable, and a contribution to your understanding of yourself as an auditory being. I hope you also gain further understanding of the potential offered by emancipating our ears and voices and 're-sounding' action research within a dynamic living-working-researching world.

Introduction

This paper is not the result of an action research project in itself. I am an academic who runs an Action Research-based Masters degree program. I recently completed my PhD, which was a heuristic-hermeneutic exploration of the experiences of a number of one-person businesses who were skilful Action Researchers and approached their consulting work with an action research orientation. Over the period of my research, for reasons beyond the scope of this paper, my understanding of Action Research itself transformed. As a result of my insights AR shifted from being a methodological 'option' to being an epistemological one (informing our ways of knowing and especially not knowing) and eventually emerged as a way of 'being in the world' (our ontology). It was the 'essence' or the core of my research partners' work. It was not something my research partners 'did'. It was 'who they were'. I also realized

that the 'essence' was relational (participatory?) and that, in 'relating', the auditory world was instrumental.

The practices of my research partners are built on dialogue, listening, advocacy and inquiry, building ongoing relationships, handling the ebb and flow of work volume and energy, being passionate about and experiencing work as a process, helping people find their real or metaphoric voice, experiencing living as a whole, storytelling. The 'A Ha' occurred when I recognised that all these things were connected auditorily. And so it was that I began to explore the 'auditory dimension'.

Until this time I had perceived that my research partners' stories were different from what I had read about in the small business literature but I had not perceived them all as related to the world of the auditory. At the same time as I was recognising the implications in my research, I began to understand the consequent implications of this in my 'teaching' and the 'research practice' of AR for my masters participants.

I began to understand the nature of auditory phenomena and also to recognize for the very first time that our Western (business) world is visually oriented – very visually oriented – particularly our traditional 'official' working world.

And then it all started to fit together!!

I began to see the depth and importance of the contribution of my research partners, in 're-sounding' their worlds, in 're-remembering' our auditory potential.

This paper then is not an explication of the research but a journey back in time to recover our lost auditory aspect, to reflect on our auditory world (something I had never done in all my years in business or academia), and then to consider ways of 're-sounding' our world, particularly through our action research practices. I realise this is not a "traditional" academic Action Research paper, but that is part of its value to the field isn't it?

How, as a culture, had we become so visually oriented and 'word-bound'? It was not because we lacked auditory potential. Indeed, I found that for much of human history our auditory nature had prevailed. I went back in time – back to the days when humans lived in caves, gathering and hunting.

Before 'cultivation'.

Before 'civilization'.

Looking for what had happened to our ears and our voices. Searching in the margins of our historical 'story'. Here is what I found ...

A short auditory history

In archaic cultures, sounds – not words – were the interpreter of human thoughts and emotions. Music and rhythm preceded the use of words in communicating (Kane, 1994). The sounds of animals, the sounds of the wind,

the melodic sounds of voices were full of meaning. Pre-verbal cultures believed that every object and being had a soul or spirit (Kittelson, 1996) and that its spirit was contained through sound.

In oral cultures – as language developed – stories, songs and oral poetry were a lifeline, connecting people and communities with one another. People told stories and poems and played music to communicate and celebrate. They created a space where people could remember their social identity and re-experience their shared values. (Kittelson, 1996) Singing and chanting were an integral part of every tribal and village person's life – lullabies, working chants, walking songs, spinning and weaving songs, ritual chants. (Armstrong, 1997)

As abstract understanding grew, expression through voice and sound declined. (Kane, 1994) Written expression increased, though early manuscripts were written for the ear (Brophy, 2002; Rodenburg, 1997), to be read aloud and never silently. Eventually a 'spell was cast' (Lawlor, 1991), as static 'spellings' and graphic aids for written language pushed words further from their vibratory oral meanings.

As abstraction continued even further, a suspicion of voice, poetry – and the auditory dimension itself – increased (Ihde, 1976). The education system was intent on civilizing young voices. Forster's Education Act (1870) gave the Western world the notion of compulsory 'education' for all. Teachers from upper and middle classes, where the dominant aesthetic was "excessively genteel", oozing "refinement and niceness", had the task of 'civilising' the massed ranks of poor and illiterate children – children who sang naturally in a "bold raucous voice", who did not fit the "ideals of refinement and musicality" of their educators. (Armstrong, 1997) The process of which we are heirs was set in place. Robbed of our voices as children, we continue to inhibit these voices in order to be acceptable to the dominant and imposed aesthetic. At last, voices were 'civilised'. This 'civilising' has resulted, for most of us, in the silencing of our natural voice. From this comes the 'received wisdom' (incorrect) that some can sing and some cannot.

And thus we arrive at:

Our current auditory state

We are living in a world where the 'eyes have it!' (Kittelson, 1996) Oculo-centrism dominates. Visual language dominates our English-speaking world.

Our ability to listen has been dulled (McAllen, 1989) by 'sensory flooding', by a cacophony of mind-numbing sounds – causing us to 'turn a deaf ear' even to the voices of others close to us, thus creating for many an 'invisible cage within', a cage that has come to be labelled 'autism' or Exposure Anxiety. (Williams 2002) Interestingly, the diagnosis of autistic spectrum disorder has been increasing exponentially in recent years (Autism Victoria, 2002).

Vocal expression continues to diminish (Barton, 1997), with our voices straining to be heard amidst the noise. Our vocal expression has been subordinated to

speech (spoken words) (Moses, 1954), with speech increasingly being perceived as a singularly 'human' quality, ignoring all other living, voicing creatures (Kane, 1994). With diminished vocal expression, our capacity for storytelling has declined. Psychically losing our ability to cry out, call out, sing out, sound out can physically damage our vocal and hearing 'instruments', which in turn affects our psyche, – and a damaging cycle begins. (Newham, 1999)

For many, even their speech is silenced. Lost in a world of dogma, they are living in the language of others, with no questioning of its origins or impact on themselves or others. In 'bureaucratese' and 'econospeak' our language has become passive, voiceless, impersonal and lifeless, such a long way from the energy and rhythm of our ancestors' oral tradition. Rhythm is lost in a mechanistic world. Meter has taken its place.

It need not be thus.

Remembering our vibrant auditory nature

A lyric fragment echoed again and again in my head.

"This is the story of how we begin to remember
This is the powerful pulsing of love in the vein
After the dream of falling and calling your name out
These are the roots of rhythm
And the roots of rhythm remain"

I knew this was part of a Paul Simon song but which one? I eventually found that it was from a 'walking song' called "Under African Skies" (Simon, 1986). How wonderful! How appropriate! These lyrics helped me organise my thesis – my written 're-membering'.

This is the story of how we begin to re-member

'Member' originally referred to a part of the body. To 'dis-member' was to tear the body apart. To 're-member' literally means to put the body back together again (Kittelson, 1997; Milz, 1999). In an auditory world we begin to re-member our living bodies. We find room to breathe. Inspiring and expiring; in-spirit-ing and ex-spirit-ing; im-pressing and ex-pressing. We begin 'breathing ghosts away'. We begin re-calling our innate musicality and re-membering the connections our voice has with our ears. We re-call our auditory nature and it responds to us in echo – re-membering 'vocation' and 'calling'. Our auditory world connects us to one another: as your voice enters my body through my ear cavities, through my skin's resonance as a 'differentiated piece of ear', and through the reverberations of my bones in response to your voice.

- - - This is the powerful pulsing of love in the vein

Of the 5 senses, sound is closest to force itself, to pure, non-material energy. (Rudhyar, 1982 cited in Kittelson, 1996) We do not actually hear sound. We

hear the resonance aroused in material instruments by the impact of inaudible currents of energy. There are three dramatic transformations – utilizing three types of energy – all to hear one sound! Auditory energy moves from the outside AIR into a cave where the eardrum resonates with the bones, the element of EARTH. From there, it moves into the cochlea, into WATER. The auditory energy then makes the long chemical and electrical journey from the inner ear, into the cranial nerves and to the brain centers, entering the element of FIRE, or electrical charges. (Campbell, 1989)

In an auditory world we can thus understand boundaries as places of energy exchange and transformation. The Haida sense of boundary, *xhaaidhla*, is that of a membrane, stretching “skin-tight and resonant over everything in the world.” (Kane, 1994) The metaphor of boundary as the resonating, energy-transferring membrane of a drum-skin is appropriate: flexible, resilient and impermeable to some things while permeable to others.

The energy exchange in listening puts us more in the world than looking. The context in which we listen profoundly affects what we perceive. Light bounces off surfaces whilst sound reverberates in and through them. Looking makes each of us a focused observer, listening makes each of us a surrounded participant. We listen in a context. We listen to events and meanings not to acoustic sound waves. (Handel, 1989)

Listening is not a naive or purely passive act. It is more than the comprehension of words. Effective listening is a two-way, active, responsible, relational process. ‘Mmmmm’ we say as we listen to the speaker, entering into her thoughts, a contemplative sound that signifies entry into a wider communication situation. (McAllen, 1989) We receive the other as if she were music, listening to the rhythm and cadence of her tale, its thematic repetitions, and its disharmonies. (Hillman, 1979 cited in Kittelson, 1996)

Good listeners keep their ears open to the background, the ‘underground’, the overtones, as well as the main theme. They listen ‘evocatively’, probing beneath surfaces, hearing the interior of speech. (Ihde, 1976) This listening requires attentiveness, humility, time, patience and care and a tolerance for confusion and ambiguity. (Kittelson, 1996) Such ‘ear-minded’ listening is listening without resistance. It is willing to be influenced by what is said. Listeners enter dialogue with receptivity to being influenced and changed, temporarily letting go of attachments both for and against our own and others’ positions, providing space where thoughts themselves can be examined and can creatively influence one another. The ‘contents of the unconscious’ sound themselves, taking shape in images, with their layers and reverberations. They communicate in the margins, the spaces, the resonance, and the silence. This listening recognizes what “speech conceals and silence reveals”. (Kittelson, 1996)

Listening is thus the art of discovering silence. (Beaulieu, 1987)
Talking less and hearing more.

If sound is to reach its full potential, it must be ‘surrounded’ or ‘secured’ by a silence, which allows it to sound forth musically. (Ihde, 1976) Silence between

two people can be a place where they can simply 'be', where they have a mutual sense of the space, a natural place of being. It is a profound experience of just being, just playing, together. It is separate yet with the sense of the other person being reliably there. Out of this space of silence it is possible for a more reflective response to ensue.

- - - After the dream of falling and calling your name out

The silence of spaces can speak as loudly as the words we use to speak, but here we consider the naming that comes from letters, words, and language - both written and spoken.

Language is not a one-to-one description of the world but a tool within that world. (Gold, 2002; Hock, 1994; Ihde, 1976) Language shapes our perceptions. To enter language is to enter a form of life. Culture rides on language and language on culture. One perpetuates and sustains the other in both enabling what 'is' and limiting what is 'other'. Language also holds the potential for changing culture.

Many of us have become lazy speakers, with little sense of articulation and the possibility of life in our letters. I'd like us to consider bringing our letters back to life. All 'Western' languages have vowels. (McAllen, 1989; Berry, 1997; Newham, 1999) Vowels are open sounds made from a continuous airflow. We carry them on our breath, continuing on and on until our lungs are empty. They are expressive of our feelings, evoked by something outside us to which we respond. An exclamation of surprise, fear or pleasure. Consonants, on the other hand, are 'plosive' sounds made by interrupting the airflow. (McAllen, 1989; Newham, 1999) They have the power to form. They have a definite structure, beginning, ending and 'shaping' sounds in construction of the word.

Words, combinations of vowels and consonants, are powerful tools. They describe, define and differentiate. They give us 'handles' to express and manipulate ideas and experiences. In many a corporate report they sit dull and lifeless on the page. In a more poetic and reflective vein, they suggest and associate. They create a vibratory web. They can 'e-voke', 're-sound', 'in-tone'.

Words are instruments of craft and instruments of art, describing concepts and opening out images. We cannot help thinking in terms of metaphors, analogies, models and images. (Sheldrake, 1994) All language is metaphoric in nature. All language 'is like' something else. Words are not the things themselves but abstractions, labels, seductively spare and one-dimensional. (Burke, 1997) Every word we say creates some image, showing us its metaphoric beginning. (Landau, 1998)

Words mean more than what is set down in paper. Words both define and release feeling and are never separate from it. It takes the human voice to infuse them with the shades of deeper meaning. (Maya Angelou, cited in Wearne, 2002) It is now often difficult to hear the voice in written language, amidst all the visual clues. Such visual clues can distract us, shifting the text away from the flow of sound in it. (Brophy, 2002) They can 'deaden' the text,

taking its life away. Let's move away from passive, limp, third person written language to writing with an ear and a voice! With exercise, words can 'take on different shapes and lengths', vowels become extended, consonants more muscular. The word becomes active in every sense. (Berry, 1997)

Speech is language in its auditory form. To really re-vive our auditory nature, revitalizing our speaking will need to be joined by revitalizing our hearing. The two are in a dynamic relationship. One assists and complements the other. Some even say you can't have one without the other. Let us once again hear the music and rhythm of our speech.

- - - These are the roots of rhythm - - -

We are all born with rhythm. All our automatic processes have rhythm: the beating of our heart, our breathing, and the walking of our feet, our speaking. This life rhythm pulsates in our movement and our speaking. (McAllen, 1989)

There is nothing static about rhythm, with constant change in environment, and in human beings. Rhythm is irregular, ---like waves in the ocean--- similar yet never the same.

Rhythm expresses a temporal quality to life (day and night, the seasons, waves and tides) and gives shape to experience. These rhythms are assumed, so much a part of our felt lives it is challenging to imagine life without them. They evoke and shape our experience in subtle and unconscious ways. (Kittelson, 1996) Rhythmic organisation is an inherent part of all human activity, existing in all activities, and a constant and vital part of our lives: The ebb and flow of intensity and momentum.

Babies understand this. They are able to respond to the rhythmic flow of language better than most adults. We are born with the ability to analyze the flow of sound in any language. Newborn babies are immediately able to engage in 'interactional synchrony'. (Many of us lose this ability as we become 'literate'.)

With literacy (which Kane (1994) says is a mindset not a skill), our perceptions become more linear. Writing occurs in a line, a series of words one after the other. Reading is following the series. In reading 'soundlessly' there can be a loss of rhythm, a certain 'seriality' or 'linearity'. In listening to voiced word there is a different type of all-at-once gestalt. Although serial in a strictly temporal sense, storytelling is a gestalt in which the 'meanings', - which are more than merely grammatical ones - occur within this all-at-once-ness, giving dramaturgical voice, in particular, its amplified sense of possibility. (Ihde, 1976) Storytelling - in its broadest, richest sense - is a way of introducing new language forms yet its impact is far greater than the language of the story's telling.

"Stories create time and space." (Owen, 1994)

According to Thomas Berry, "the universe is the great story," but he cautions that people need some sense that entities within it have "their own

spontaneities, their own voices, their own ways of expressing themselves.” To hear these voices we must remain open, suspending our assumptions, with “a practice of attentiveness and an attitude of respect.” (Lupo, 1999)

In our current environment, I perceive language, especially written language, as a ‘crossover space’, a ‘potential space’ in which both auditory and visual worlds may play together. If our meaning is genuinely new we will have to rely in part on metaphor to suggest it - the employment of words in violation of previous ‘rules of use’. Old words and their syntax dissolve, reconstituting themselves as a new entity. Even if we use many of the same words in a new phrasing, they will be different words, with their meanings subtly altered by the new context.

We will have entered a lively pursuit of the language of the auditory. In entering a new language, we recognise it is one we have known all along. It is a language that circumscribes, that circumambulates new territory and understanding. We will nurture this - a language that triggers our critical faculties and awareness.

We will engage in a renewal of language. Living or active nouns - gerunds, verbal nouns, and ‘-ing’ words - are fundamental. With new language and new ways of using language come new meanings and the potential for new ways of acting. An important aspect of re-vitalising language is remembering “the voice which speaks at the edge of the ordinary, carrying the listener into the unseen turbulent worlds beyond the stillness of tribal memory.” (Kane, 1994)

An ‘auditory language form’ will have as its content

*“a series of actions that flow and merge into each other,
without sharp separations or breaks.
Thus, both in form and in content,
the language will be in harmony
with the unbroken flowing movement of existence as a whole.”*
(Bohm, 1980)

Conversations and storytelling are much more sound-based and rhythmic than we are often aware, more like a musical dance or duet than merely a series of verbal responses. (Kittelson, 1996) People naturally accent syllables or words or phrases making them come forward to attention. There can be a stream of meaning flowing among us and through us and between us, leading to new understanding; (Veling, 1996) if they are based on receptivity rather than mastery, on responsiveness rather than control, on openness rather than distancing. In dialogue, people think and learn together. Participation in the subject matter is an ‘encounter with’, not a ‘control over’. It is being receptive to the ‘other’, risking our pre-understandings, allowing the play of to-and-fro questioning, dialogue and conversation.

The to and fro of conversation partners, walking together - talking together.

- - - *And the roots of rhythm remain*

Are we living up to our potential?
We have choices to make.
Important choices.
Critical choices.

The latent potential is in us still,
though our auditory 'muscles' have atrophied.
Our tongues are slack.
Our ears have lost their hearing.
Our 'interactional synchrony' is dormant.
We have become 'short-eared', 'focusing' only,
missing messages being sounded at the horizon.

Our rhythm remains.
A rhythm of wondering, revealing, contemplating.
We can't lose this rhythm.
It is in us, waiting for us to slow down, be silent, be aware and to listen to it,
To 're-member' it.

Despite living in a uniquely visual world, we ARE subliminally in tune with our auditory world, (Kittelson, 1996) unconsciously receiving auditory input indirectly - from the side, from the ears, from the skin. A shift of focus from the visual to the auditory, however partial, will symbolise a hope for recovery of the richness of primary experience. (Ihde, 1976)

We sang out our feelings long before we spoke our thoughts. Our healing journey (Newham, 1999) involves uncovering the original instinct to sing; recalling the song of the soul, taking the prosody (music) of the word, turning it back into melody. Airwaves carrying sound intended for hearing have a way of weaving unraveled things back together (Nor Hall, cited in preface to Kittelson, 1996). We can experience the healing flow of sound. We can experience living as a healing journey. It is time for us to put our energy into this healing journey.

Taking responsibility for focusing on the auditory as well as the visual opens a whole new galaxy of experience, (Barton, 1997) where we are not pushing away uncertainty, ambiguity, even panic (Saul, 1993), but instead are listening for their origins, listening for the questions raised rather than the answers provided.

Once we begin, we discover a foundation of awareness that softens and melts away habit-conditioned patterns, making them more fluid.

We can take responsibility for focusing on the auditory elements of our living and working, on voice, on listening, on acoustics, on resonance, on rhythm, not in splendid isolation but as a priority, (Burke, 1997) with all the body's attendant awareness, energies, physicality and movement in play. We will then be building bridges of understanding amongst ourselves, forging structure for acceptance rather than vehicles for war; treasuring our ability to speak and

listen, helping others learn to do likewise. (Hampton, 1997) We will be encouraging and supporting interconnections of the whole, leading us not to Derrida's deconstruction, or re-construction but a re-conceiving - a living, dynamic gestalt to re-sound a living, dynamic world, - that includes what some, in our current state, call 'negative capability', an ability to "endure" absence, uncertainty, partiality and relativity and "to hold at bay the desire for closure, coherence, identity, totality". (McFague, 1982, cited in Veling, 1996)

We may then recognise ourselves as a part of a polyphonic network (Kane, 1994), of a world in which everything has intelligence, everything has personality, everything has voice, where all beings, human and otherwise, are in networks of communication with each other.

Closing remarks

"To suddenly be given the gift of hearing, feeling and speaking after a largely visual life is extraordinary."
(Owen, 1994)

Looking and listening back,
I realize that the 'rhythm' of my research was 'sound-full'

- hmmm ... - ... A ha ... - ... oohhh -

Experiencing silence in language, in practice, in self,
listening for, listening with, listening to, re-hearing,
shifting between focus, field, and horizon to experience again

- hmmm ... - ... A ha ... - ... oohhh -

I experienced the 'hmmm ... A ha ... oohhh ...' rhythm
not so much as a cycle but as a spiraling ebb and flow
between

curiosity, (hmmm...)
reve(a)lation (A ha...) and
contemplation (oohhh...).

The rhythms and stories were like traveling down a river
-sometimes in calmly moving water -
then at the corners speeding up considerably.
With dangerous currents and undertow.
Sometimes there were rapids and turbulence.
Sometimes I experienced the calm and respite of eddies.
Always there was a rhythm of flowing
- in the end revealing not a problem in need of solution
but an essential question -
a mystery in need of evocative comprehension and articulation.

I wonder what would happen if, as action researchers, we reflected on and developed our auditory nature?

Hmmm...

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