ACTION: EQUAL & OPPOSITE
An Editorial

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In rare company, I jokingly refer to myself as a “Recovering Elitist Academic Researcher” (or R.E.A.R. for short). What I mean by this is that I was trained to stand apart as a scholar from my subject and examine it like I was getting ready to estimate and split up a diamond. And this is what I had done for the first few years of my career. An educational historian by trade, it was quite easy for me to combine people into groups, or movements, or schools of thought, countries, or even cultures. I, of course, felt that my job was to record as objectively as possible the world around me. I was in the world, but not of the world. It was in this way that I could remain aloof and write the truth...

Then, I met a little old retiree (well, not so little as he stood well over 6 feet, even with a slight stoop). I had read about his contributions to curriculum development in Canada back many years ago, and a paper trail led me to his front door. I had hoped that it would be a quick “in and out” job – interview him, get the pre-made questions answered and move on, after I had squeezed him for more contacts. However, he got the better of me – and thank goodness for that.

It started small. I conducted an interview... and like Scheherazade, his tales brought me back again and again. His wife served tea, we chatted informally, and they both began asking multiple questions about my life. We would sit in their garden, and talk about what he was growing. Or, I would lounge on the couch as he sat back in his wing-chair, feet up on his old footstool, conversing about education in general. Then, he took me to his basement where he kept a vast store of collected material. I began cataloguing it all. Soon, one interview turned into years of visits. Together we would discuss the many memos he kept, the decisions he made in his position and why he did it. I began to understand not merely the seemingly action-reaction of a momentary decision, but how this decision was based on a lifetime of experiences. It was in this way that a seemingly nonsensical action made sense in the long span of time.
Inevitably, perhaps, I came to think of this little old retiree as a surrogate grandparent. For many of my colleagues, this was a great sin. By focusing too closely, had I not blinded myself to the “big picture”? Well, maybe I had, but I began to question this term – wasn’t the large canvas just a composite of small drops of paint? If we only used the wide-angle lens were we not just staring at an illusion?

Last year, I rounded up the other retirees who knew this man, so that we could attend his funeral. I went, tried to comfort those around me, and became filled with a great emptiness. He was gone - a library had burned, never to be rebuilt. However, his son called me shortly thereafter. They were clearing out the homestead so that it could be sold. He had instructions that his collection of material would go to me, so that I could continue preparing it for the archives.

In ancient Celtic law, there was a clause that if you had killed anyone (they didn’t distinguish too greatly between a homicide or an accidental death) you would have to pay a price. One option was to step into the dead man’s shoes – take on his family, his land, his debts. In essence, you became this man you killed. I now think that this is not a bad plan for a researcher. Rather than studying someone, you have to try to essentially become this person to understand why they have done things. For in doing so, it doesn’t just allow you to make conclusions and endeavor to change things based on your research – it also changes you. For all my earlier thoughts as an aloof historian, I learned that this fact is inevitable. In this way, I have also learned Newton’s Third Law extremely well, without ever having to take a science class or enter a laboratory.

So, as I sit typing, my feet firmly planted on the old footstool I know so well, I realize the old retiree and his vision are not gone, but are carried on in me through his influence and mentorship. While my research may suffer, I can no longer stand at the sidelines. For me, no truer words were spoken than by Jean McNiff, who is aptly quoted by Susan Hughes in our opening article “Joining the Game: Living and Learning as an Action Researcher”. The game of research, like life, is not meant to be merely observed, but played.

The other authors of this issue have also seemed to embrace this outlook... such is the habit with action researchers. Pam Adams at the University of Lethbridge looks at ways that reflective practice can help intern teachers increase their ability to engage in professional learning. At the University of Regina, Wanda Lyons endeavours to see how pre-service education prepares principals for leadership within inclusive schools. Finally, Michael Dunn, Brenda Barrio, and Yun-Ju Hsiao at Washington State University look to a group of educators as they helped students with developmental disabilities and their parents develop life-readiness skills through iPad apps.

While action researchers may struggle with their connections to the big picture, one issue that no longer plagues most of these scholars is bench-warming (as is so often the case for a R.E.A.R.) .