BARREL-ROLLS DURING FLIGHTS OF FANCY
An Editorial

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When reading through an article within this issue - the one by Cathryn Smith from Brandon University - I was delighted that she had revisited and expanded upon a pithy analogy I haven’t seen for a while. It was a phrase written by Kathryn Herr and Gary Anderson back in 2005 as they endeavoured to explain the challenges of engaging in Action Research during the dissertation process: That engaging in this methodology is like “designing the plane while flying it”. When I originally read Herr and Anderson’s simile, I had seen it as a rather humorous, yet negative one. Using wild exaggeration, the conclusion the authors seem to draw was that it was an impossible task – daredevil activity to say the least... or suicidal, more likely. Now, 13 years later, I am happy to see Dr. Smith take a pragmatic twist on this flight of hyperbole. Rather than seeing this aphorism as a mere “blow off” statement, scaring away potential researchers with its connotation of being a nonstarter, she looks at this phrase as a mere statement of the way things are. The trick is to understand the fact, and to ground your mindset around these parameters. Equally inventive, she parses out her work using aviation analogies, which allows her work to take wings.

Inevitably, as I thought more about this statement, I came to the same conclusion that Dr. Smith must have reached. The meaning behind the phrase was that Action Research is tricky, but not impossible. More importantly, it forces us to change our view of research as a whole. As we travel forward, no pre-made design can completely prepare us for what we will encounter: We do not know what atmosphere we will be passing through, what obstacles, how long we will go before re-fueling. As such, the Action Research model is one that may offer guidance, but cannot be seen as a complete blueprint before the journey even begins. That would be a false perception. Of course, we can begin with certain designs and goals (i.e., a desired destination). However, it is only as we proceed that we can see how to design the research by understanding the surroundings: As most Action
Researchers have concluded, it is the process that drives the design rather than vice versa. Smooth flights can be hoped for, but never expected. At times, the research process will enter a nosedive and the pilot must know how to compensate for that and pull back to keep the whole thing from hitting rock bottom. As well, it is important to keep record of these experiences to allow researcher to gain wisdom: For accumulations of experience can trump many a pre-made, untried ideal.

Our contributors in this issue admirably display the hallmarks of this adage. Robert Carreau and Dan Robinson from St. Francis Xavier University in Antigonish, Nova Scotia, describe their ‘active research’ as a journey which emerges from a desire for reconciliation and winds to a series of recommendations after a five year experience. Pat Briscoe, from Niagara University, also takes a long term approach (3 years). Through a critical reflection framework she describes the process that both the researcher and participants undertake to help transform themselves into more responsive teachers. This could only be done on the journey, however, as each stakeholder comes to grips with obstacles that blocked passages to learning along the way. The final author in this issue, Rodney Beaulieu from California State University in San Marco, engages in the act of creation before our eyes as he endeavours to meld two disciplines into “Phenomenographic Action Research”: an inflight redesign if ever there was one. In doing so, he not only tries to aid his own travel path, but to create a new way of viewing the journeys to come.