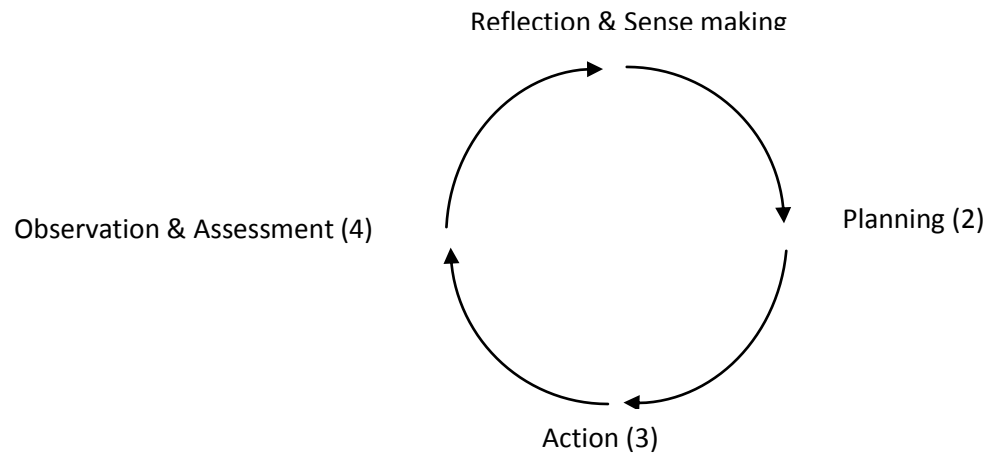


Systemic Action Research: An architecture for leadership as learning

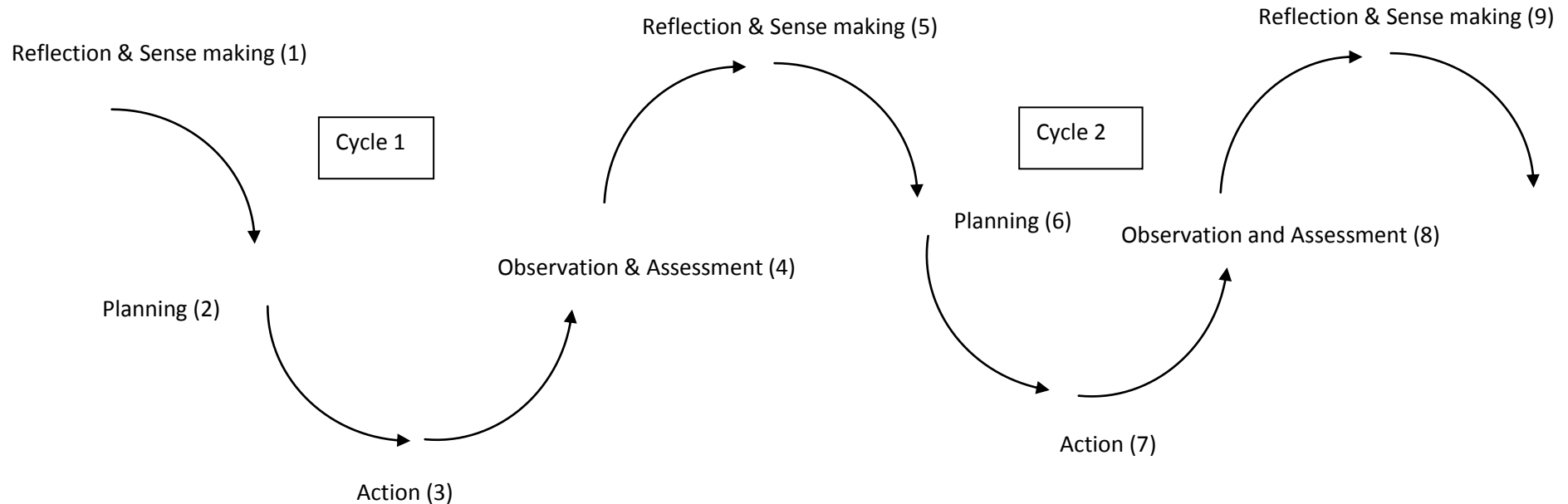
Danny Burns January 2009

The action research process

Action research is based on a series of continuous cycles. There are many slightly differing versions of this model but essentially these are the key elements.



A situation, an issue, a problem, or a question is reflected upon by group participants (1). The group begins the process of sense making through story-telling, dialogue, work with images, assessing data, complex system maps etc. This enables them to see how diverse elements in a system interact with each other and impact upon each other, supporting a situated understanding of **how** and **why** things happen. This process will typically generate theories of change. Early insights will emerge through dialogue. As the process unfolds the group begins to plan action (2), to take action (3,) and to observe and assess the impact action. The group is now able to facilitate a dynamic interaction between dialogic and experiential/ experimental learning. (4)It will then move into a second phase of inquiry beginning with an assessment of the intervention and moving around the cycle for a second time (5). The process is repeated for as long as it is useful as depicted below (6 to 9 and beyond):



Systemic Action Research

Typically action research has focussed at the level of the 'group'. The group may think systemically, but the 'reach' of individuals and groups is limited, and the system that they can engage with is necessarily constrained by the lenses through which the group members view the issues. Systemic action research is a way of "scaling up" the action research model so that it can work across large social and organisational systems. It involves multiple inquiries running in relationship to each other. As a result it is able to bring into view and interact with the many complex inter-relationships which affect interventions on the ground.

The **Systemic** is important because any intervention we will be affected by

- Underlying patterns and social norms
- Complex power relationships between multiple stakeholders
- Activity beyond the normal "field in view"
- Non linear effects of multiple linear interactions
- Different (sometimes contradictory) impacts at different levels of the system.

The entry points where possibilities for change can occur, and the “tipping points” which support sustainable phase change are often invisible in typical research analysis or organisational development practices.

Action is important because we learn through action. New opportunities and entry points open up through action. It should not be assumed that action follows from analysis. Action should inform analysis which should in turn generate new action.

Research is important because our inquiries need to be documented in order to generate evidence, to move evidence across the system, to test resonance etc.

Systemic Action research has the following **characteristics**:

It is **multi stranded**. By opening up more than one strand of inquiry we see issues from different perspectives and begin to understand the complex inter-relationships between issues.

It involves **multiple stakeholders** and **interest groups** both on the ground, within the wider local system, and in more strategic arenas. This allows all of the key players to engage in learning, dialogic and the co-construction of action enhancing the chances that solutions will sustainable

It must be able to **link informal** inquiry and action **with formal** decision making systems and networks of power.

It identifies the significance of issues through use of **resonance** rather than representativeness

It is highly **emergent** in its design mirroring the emergence of the phenomena that it is exploring.

It requires us

to identify underlying patterns; surface and challenge underlying assumptions: identify systemic blockages

to identify possible entry points, opportunity spaces, leverage points, and to enter the “entry points” discovering where they lead

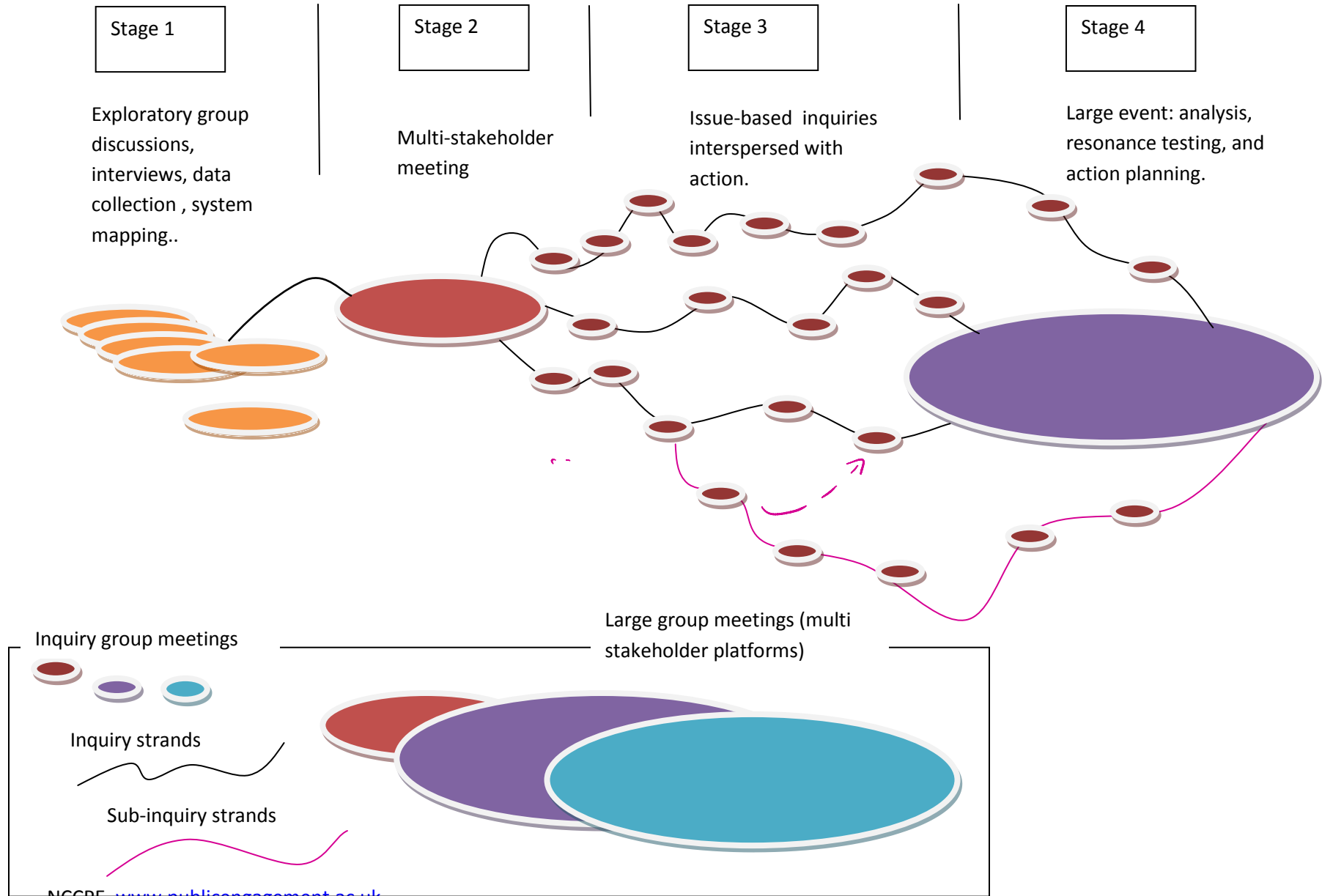
to bridge between different parts of the wider system

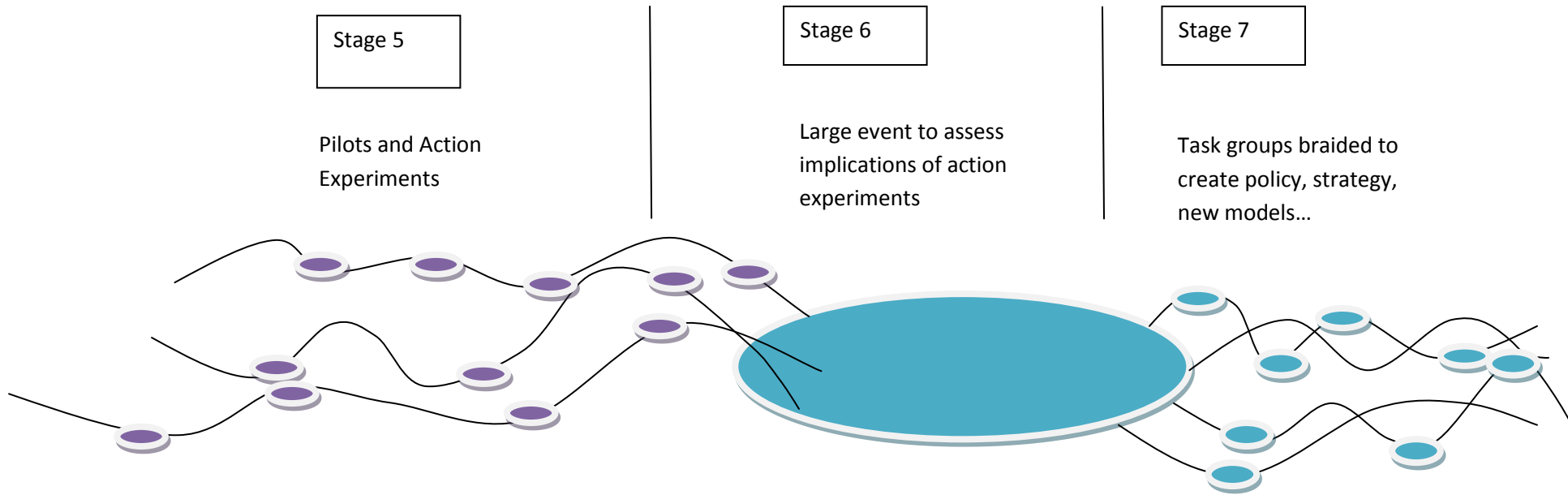
to identify and catalyse powerful sources of leadership

to support action in multiple arenas

The following pages outline a possible design for an action research process in the sorts of contexts that UMA is working. It should not be followed to the letter but used as a set of guidelines which might help thinking about the inquiry process design. Similarly the order of the elements should be viewed flexibly. More important is an understanding of their role in relationship to each other.

A simple design for systemic action research





Stage One: Exploratory Group discussions, interviews, data collection

In the first stage the aim is to get as many narratives around the central issue as possible.

Stage Two: Multi stakeholder meeting (staging post 1) to analyse early inquiry findings

Here we can bring together all of the data generated in the first phase. The multi stakeholder meeting might comprise members of what we think will be our on-going multi stake holder platform, people who have been involved in inquiries, and some outsiders who can help to reflect on the issues. This stage should identify the lines of inquiry that seem most central to the question in hand, and those lines of inquiry that seem most promising for generating action.

Stage Three: Issue based inquiries interspersed with action

This is the heart of the process. Here we open up multi-stakeholder meetings to analyse the issues that have been identified. Stakeholders are brought in because of their specific relationship to the key question identified. Typically each meeting might last a few hours to half a day. The first few meetings are likely to explore the issue in detail, generate maps of likely relationships, seek additional data for sense making. After this, the meetings should generate action between meetings. This could take the form of small interventions to test understanding and create change, or larger interventions on the scale of a project. These actions are observed and assessed, and learning takes place in the meetings as the action evolves.

Stage Four: Large event analysis, resonance testing, and action planning

This is our second staging post. Here we analyse the main messages that are emerging from our inquiry process. This can lead us to construct more formal action experiments which may be a precursor to major policy change, mainstreaming of new approaches etc.

Stage Five: Pilots and Action Experiments

Pilots and Action Experiments may last anywhere between say three months to a year or two.

Stage Six: Large event (staging post 3) to assess implications of action experiments

This is the third key staging post. Here we are likely to involve key institutional players as well as those involved in both the inquiries and the action experiments. A large event can include anything from 50 to say 100+ people. Depending on what is appropriate, pragmatic and helpful. This large event will analyse the data that has emerged from stage 5 and explore the implications for policy, strategy, organisational change, and new models of delivery.

Stage Seven: Task groups braided to create policy, strategy, new models...

The final stage is to organise implementation task groups. But these too are subject to learning. As change is implemented it should be documented, reflected upon and modified as a result.