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CONTENTS

Editorial
Susan Goff

As Action Research and Action Learning practitioners we may have many ways of thinking about empowerment. Some would reach back to our field's origins such as Lewin's pioneering work in Force Field Analysis (1943), some may be more focussed to particular cultures of knowledge-making practices (Wilson, 2008), some to specific philosophies such as feminism, or disciplines and the challenges they face (e.g. Kemmis and McTagget, 1981).

This issue of our journal presents a scope of current works that together provide detailed, honest and realistically inspiring observations about empowerment at work in our Action Research and Action Learning practices.

Boucher and Fallon situate their inquiry in the social issue of problem gambling in the Western suburbs of Sydney, Australia. Their article focuses on the use of "Learning Histories" a knowledge management approach described as a 'jointly told tale' of widely differing perspectives around a shared concern (Bradbury & Mainemelis, 2001; Roth and Bradbury, 2008). They arrive at a most elegant insight:

> This review of the problem gambling case study suggests that a feature of Action Research in general, and Learning History in particular, is its capacity to be deployed as an emancipatory mechanism to assist in the pursuit of community change (White, 2011). (Boucher and Fallon, this issue, p.34)

O'Sheedy takes us into the world of Project Management, using Action Research to explore the use of Agile software development methods in the context of CIT media and publishing firms in Austria. The project refers to Zuber-Skerritt's (2000) model of integrating Action Research with Action Learning, arriving at the finding that:

> …the validity and rigour of the results were always of prime importance to ensure that the research results would form an acceptable contribution to scientific literature. (O'Sheedy, this issue, p.64)

Dent is focussed on how to understand his life, circling as it does between academic and corporate life across a global stage:

> Becoming a proficient reflective and reflexive practitioner requires adopting a life-long learner approach to work, career, family, health and social interactions. (Dent, this issue, p. 73)

Dent has for some time been interested in the relationship between tacit knowledge and good luck. The article is a record of highly disciplined and sustained self-reflexivity to understand the author's approach to improving his professional practice (Whitehead, 1989). The context is the field of marketing, located in Malaysia with a global reach; the method he uses is Grounded Theory.

Our journal includes a special notice from Dr Chivonne Algeo and Professor Shankar Sankaran about the exiting new development at the University of Technology Sydney – the "CARLab, affording the best of academic research collaboration technologies.

Fredericks, Clapham, Bainbridge, Collard, Adams, Bessarab, Anderson, Duthie, Ball, Thompson and Daniels describe conducting a literature review into Indigenous gendered health and wellbeing, within the context of Action Research and Indigenous knowledge practices and interests. The authors are members of the NIRAKN (National Indigenous Research and Knowledges Network) Health and Wellbeing node:

> We know from the work of Rigney (1999) that, in order for Indigenous research to make a difference, it needs to be grounded within the political reality of Indigenous people's lives. As researchers, it was important for us to work together in ways that would empower each researcher individually and empower the Health and Wellbeing Node as a whole. (Fredericks, et al. this issue, p.95)

The authors comment on how Action Research enabled the team to continually make choices and challenge them in cultural safety, to emerge as a strong collaboration.

Pajalic, Persson and Gillberg's paper take us to the other side of the globe, addressing the issues of food distribution to older people in Sweden. They note how decentralisation has produced fragmentation of the social service sector. Using Action Research they invited the recipients of their services into the research, finding that both care givers and clients have power. They note:

> Participation is seen as a journey between dependence and independence, affirming that people are equal and can affect the rules and circumstances of life that they live in (Pajalic, 2013b). (Pajalic et al, this issue, p. 126)

Our interest in empowerment gathers focus with Puteh-Behak's article. The author looks into how empowerment can come about in traditionally hierarchical societies, such as Malaysia's. This account uses Participatory Action Research and a form of Discourse Analysis to track the progress of two teachers becoming co-researchers in three member, multi-literacy curriculum design team. The author reflects with refreshing honesty and self-critical practice throughout the paper. For example:

> In the beginning, there was a clear line that separated the roles and status of each research team member. It became apparent that I was dominant in the conversations and I had the authority to control the direction of the research project by having the final say in almost every issue discussed. (Puteh-Behak, this issue, p.145)

Our final article returns us to the northern Europe – Sweden. Hjalmarsson and Soderstrom use Action Research to look into how school and leisure-time centres can improve the quality of care for children through the use of evidence-based knowledge. Their inquiry is whether Action Learning can be the means by which evidence for evidence-based policy and practice can be produced. Learning from experience is an aspect of this - however:

> Learning from experience easily becomes 'solidified' and is no longer a source of innovation or an opportunity for development. (Hjalmarsson and Soderstrom, this issue, p.165)

Referring to both Titler (1999) and Kolb (1984) the authors show that Action Learning adds considerably to the scientific basis for how services are delivered. The authors conclude that legislation requiring evidence-based knowledge and proven experience is essential to ensure structural support for participatory knowledge.

We acknowledge the considerable contributions of the authors and the editorial review panel and commend this issue to our readers.

About the author

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Adapting the Learning History approach for use in inter-organisational contexts: Learnings from a problem gambling project

Carlene Boucher and Wayne Fallon

Abstract

Learning History is a collaborative, group-learning process that takes advantage of the diverse perspectives of participants within their organisations. However, the evidence presented in this paper suggests that the process of developing and helping participants engage with the Learning History approach can be adapted when working with multiple organisations that hold diverse views and have different (even opposing) interests. A Learning History project examining problem gambling is analysed and changes to the approach, aimed at increasing the chances of community-level project success, are identified. It is suggested that developing a number of Learning Histories that describe the experiences of the various stakeholder organisations, before attempting to develop a unifying story, will increase the chances of success. This adaption is likely to increase the capacity of adversarial stakeholders to engage with one another. It may also increase the likelihood that stakeholders can identify actions that will result in significant change.

Key words

Gambling, stakeholders, business ethics, Learning History, Action Research

Introduction

This paper describes the learnings about methodology gained from a research project that used Learning History (Bradbury & Mainemelis 2001) to engage participants from the business, civil society and government sectors in exploring ways of dealing with the ongoing issue of problem gambling (Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal 2008). The process of doing the research went to plan initially but ultimately, it's potential was not fully realised. What happened, why it happened and what can be learnt from this are discussed. This experience resulted in the development of novel ideas and new thinking about the Learning History method used to conduct the research. Social issues such as problem gambling are highly politicised phenomenon, heavily driven by market imperatives and commanding a confounding complexity of stakeholder dynamics. These characteristics along with the challenges that emerged during the execution of this project, led to a questioning of the capacity of the Learning History method as currently described, to adequately explore the nuances of such complex social problems. In particular, the original formulation of the method was found to be inadequate when working with participants drawn from diverse and disparate groups of stakeholders. This paper contends that, to be effective in a diverse stakeholder setting, the Learning History approach needs to be adapted to allow the views of disparate (and perhaps incommensurate) interests to be articulated, shared and examined.

The paper first describes the Learning History method as it is most commonly employed, as a tool for exploring issues within organisations. The study of problem gambling that led to the re-examination of the method is then discussed. Finally, the paper describes the adaptions that need to be made to the method for it to be more successful, in inter-organisational settings, when

addressing highly political, multiple stakeholder, and community issues. The theoretical framework used to understand these issues is stakeholder theory.

Learning History as an Action Research approach

The Learning History approach is a collaborative group-learning process that draws on the disparate perspectives of the learning group. In its early phases, the Learning History approach documents a 'jointly-told tale' of these disparate perspectives, and a document (the learning history) so constructed is then used to focus the group on reflection and discussion, with the intention of producing a learning outcome (Bradbury & Mainemelis 2001; Roth & Bradbury 2008). Essentially, the Learning History approach enables lessons of the past to be analysed by an organization so that they are translated into more effective action (Kleiner & Roth 1997).

The Learning History methods have their origins in organisational learning, and most past applications of the practice have been in intra-organisational contexts. Developed during the early 1990s in the Sloan School of Management at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the Learning History approach first appeared in the management literature in the guise of a management consulting tool (Roth & Senge 1996; Kleiner & Roth 1997). Since then, applications of the Learning History approach have expanded through its use in doctoral studies undertaken at Universities in North America and the United Kingdom (for example, Bradbury 1998; Shah 2001), and through its introduction to a wider management and academic audience (Bradbury & Lichtenstein 2000; Bradbury 2001; Bradbury & Mainemelis 2001; Roth & Bradbury 2008; Gearty, Bradbury-Huang & Reason 2013). Further, as an indication of its broader application, the Learning History approach has been adapted into a Scandinavian 'form and format', in a management consulting context (Royrvik & Bygdas 2002). While little has been published about the use of the method recently, it has received increased prominence through inclusion in seminal Action Research texts (Reason & Bradbury 2008).

Characteristics of the Learning History approach

According to Roth and Bradbury (2008, p. 351), there are four principles underpinning the Learning History approach:

- Multi-stakeholder co-design around notable accomplishments

- Insider/outsider teams leading reflective interviews

- Distillation and thematic writing

- Validation and diffusion with original participants and salient others.

A distinction needs to be drawn between this articulation of the Learning History approach on the one hand and, on the other, the document used to 'distil' the stakeholder perspectives, which is a document also referred to as a learning history (see for example, Kleiner & Roth 1997). In this paper the use of capital letters will be used to indicate the approach while lower case will refer to the document that is produced. The learning history document is used as an organizational tool to solve the conundrum of collective learning (Kleiner & Roth 1997) and a written account and commentary of the disparate perspectives and assumptions about a set of critical episodes, occurring within an organisation (Kleiner & Roth 1997). While there can therefore be a tendency to see learning histories as a functional product of collaborative activity, their real force lies in their use as a process to achieve group learning outcomes, through reflection and discussion (Bradbury & Mainemelis 2001).

Kleiner & Roth (1997) describe the Learning History method as consisting of five steps, as in Table 1. These outline how different perspectives within an organisation might contribute to organizational learning and engagement.

Project Steps	Participant Activity	Researcher Activity
1.	With reference to the issue of relevance to the organisation, first scope out the stakeholder territory, to identify those internal stakeholders with most relevance to the issue. Recruit a selection of participants from a sample of the internal stakeholders, to determine their perspectives on the issue.	Undertake the scoping study drawing on organisation documents and discussions with key staff.
2.		Use interviews of the participants to uncover their perspectives and develop some themes and stories.
3.		Write a short document highlighting the narration from participants and providing a commentary on the themes and discussion points. Develop the learning history document as a 'jointly-told-tale'.
4.	All participants engage in a combined dissemination forum.	Convene a multi-perspective forum for all participants, and monitor learning across the organisation.
5.	Participants subsequently engage and interact, as they determine, across the organisation	Monitor participants' on-going engagement practices, and the participants' learning across the organisation.

Table 1: Design of an organisation-based stakeholder-learning project (Kleiner & Roth 1997)

According to (Kleiner & Roth 1997), the purpose of the learning history document is to identify recurrent themes, to question assumptions and implications and to raise 'undiscussable issues', while the Learning History approach aims to inspire communication and interaction among participants in an effort to stimulate a learning outcome and action on the issue being addressed.

In such circumstances, the document that is to represent the 'jointly-told tale' of the participants can be seen to provide the impetus for their interaction, reflection and learning. According to Roth & Senge (1996), the learning history document is constructed from 'real life" and can include interviews and other artifacts that will assist to elucidate the 'tale'. These materials are accumulated into what Roth (1996) calls "…a mess of stuff…", and the materials are mined by the Action Researcher for their themes and issues in order to construct the document.

In explaining the format of the learning history document, Royrvik and Bygdas (2002) suggest that it should have four sections:

- The "curtain raiser": acting as an introduction, this begins the "story", and is analogous to the opening sequence of a film

- The "nut 'graf" and exposition: adopting journalistic jargon for "the kernel paragraph", this is intended to provide the thematic focus of the document and to set

- The "plot" or chronological history: this can be arranged in two columns; one uses quotes from the participants to tell their "stories", and the other column synthesises or interprets the materials, with analysis, generalisations and questions

- The "closing": acting as a conclusion of the document, this is intended to shape the future direction of the communications between participants.

The role of the dissemination workshop and ongoing discussion

While the development of the learning history document is an important part of the Learning History approach, and is undertaken by the researcher, the success or failure of the approach can only be judged by the outcomes of the dissemination forum events and the subsequent activities undertaken individually and collectively by the research participants. Bradbury and Mainemalis (2001) refer to the role of the Dissemination Workshop as helping participants understand their own and other's interests and through conversation, to broaden, deepen and perhaps reconceptualise their understanding of the issue being addressed. This occurs through a growing understanding, initially through engagement with the learning history document and then through conversation among the stakeholders, the development of new networks among them and decisions to act individually and collectively. Another critical part of the process is agreement on a criteria for evaluating the effectiveness of action (Bradbury & Mainemelis 2001). Some good examples of the types of outcomes that have resulted from the use of the Learning History method in intra-organisational contexts are described briefly below.

The use of the Learning History approach in intra-organizational settings

These depictions in the literature of the Learning History method demonstrate its application as an in-house, data-gathering and management tool used by managers, or as a technique adopted in management consulting (Roth & Bradbury 2008). Its use in these 'insider/outsider' contexts (McArdle 2008) has involved a motivated researcher, (someone who can be seen to be an outsider from the organisation or from the issue to be investigated), but one who can engage targeted 'insider' participants in a facilitated group-learning process to achieve a learning outcome. The principles underpinning the process have their genesis in organisational learning (Pedler & Burgoyne 2008).

Although reference is made to the extensive use of this approach in intra-organisational contexts, and to its use in both the for-profit and not-for-profit sectors (Roth & Bradbury 2008; Bradbury Huang 2010), it is difficult to find complete written accounts of these projects, particularly those that describe achievements or outcomes, rather than the Learning History process itself. While several descriptions of the Learning History approach exist (eg, Roth & Bradbury 2008; Bradbury & Mainemelis 2001; Parent & Béliveau 2007), few report on the outcomes for the organization concerned in more than very general terms. This may be because the origins of the approach are within a management-consulting context, with its concerns for protecting intellectual property, rather than an academic research context, which values publication of research findings.

Of the few full accounts, Roch, Parent and Béliveau (2006) reported using Learning History as a way to facilitate the transfer of knowledge within Quebec's healthcare system. Although they only described findings from the early stages of the use of the approach they were able to identify a number of positive outcomes including identifying the reasons for resistance to knowledge transfer, and developing approaches to facilitate staff participation in the project.

Bradbury and Mainemelis (2001) describe the use of this approach with a small, not-for-profit Swedish environmental organization. They wrote that the positive outcomes of the project included the identification of consensus around a preferred future for the organization, along with open discussion of issues that previously could not be discussed (such as the central role of the organization's founder).

Wildemeersch and Ritzen (2008) used Learning History in a Community College context to examine issues such as unmotivated teaching staff and high student drop-out rates. They identified many changes resulting from the project including significant pedagogical advancements, adoption of an individualized student intake approach, changes to the infrastructure, adoption of a competency-based teaching model,

and a reconceptualising of the role of teacher-as-coach. Most importantly they reported changes in the power relationships between teachers and students with students being able to be more self-directed and better able to negotiate learning outcomes.

In each case the authors describe an environment where, at the beginning of the project, there was a good deal of consensus among the organisation's members of the usefulness of the exercise (Wildemeersch & Ritzen 2008) and/or a shared recognition that the organization faced serious issues that needed to be resolved (Bradbury & Mainemelis 2001; Roth & Senge 1996). While various organisational members may have had different views about what needed to change, there appears in each case to have been broad consensus with regard to the outcomes that organisational members sought to achieve; that is, they appeared to share super-ordinate goals. These are goals above the everyday that organisational members share and on which they need to cooperate if the goals are to be achieved (Fisher & Ury 1983). This seems to have been a critical characteristic that facilitated the initial involvement of organisational members in the Learning History process: the ongoing capacity to learn about and understand the views of others, and the identification of collective learnings that led to agreement about collective actions.

As will be described next, these shared super-ordinate goals are what were missing when the Learning History approach was used in the inter-organisational settings described below, including the problem gambling case. It will be argued that, because of this, the Learning History process needs to be adapted to take account of the stakeholders' varying motivations for becoming involved and the outcomes they seek.

Adapting the Learning History approach to this study

As discussed above, the use of the approach has largely been focused on intra-organisational learning (Bradbury & Mainemelis 2001; Roth & Bradbury 2008), rather than learning across organisations, or in a community context. One exception is Bradbury-Huang (2010) who describes the use of the method in an inter-organisational context. She describes the case of SEER and

illustrates how one network (that is, a network of companies along the value chain of consumer goods made in China for the U.S. market) engaged in collaborative inquiry and action toward sustainability at a regional level. It is worth noting (and it will be commented on later in this paper), that in this study, participation was not sought from all the major stakeholders, nor necessarily the most powerful corporations, rather the researcher targeted those corporations that were seen to have the most capacity and will to engage in significant change (Bradbury-Huang 2010). Also, although resistance to change among the corporate leaders is referred to in her paper, it appears that no explicit action was taken to explicate and manage this. In Bradbury-Huang's (2010) study those who were not interested in bringing about change either did not involve themselves initially, or dropped out after the initial meeting. This demonstrates one significant difference between using the Learning History method in one organisation, where participation (and perhaps even cooperation) are prescribed by management, versus using it in an inter-organisational context where an organisation's participation and engagement in action are voluntary. This will also be explored in more detail later in this paper.

Parent and Béliveau (2007) described the use of this approach to improve knowledge transfer in workplace health and safety in a Canadian Province. The Learning History project involved three organisations and, similar to (Bradbury-Huang 2010), they found that different stakeholders had different reasons for being involved and that this led to tensions and varying levels of commitment among the participants. They also reported that conflict arose among participants when some stakeholders focused more on task-related outcomes (actual knowledge transfer) and others were more interested in developing better networks and long-term relationships.

Unlike most applications of the Learning History method, and like the two studies described above, the study on which this paper is based was undertaken in a community context. The role of the research participants was taken by stakeholders around the issue of social responsibility for problem gambling in gaming clubs;

whereas in the earlier formulations of Learning History, the participants were drawn from a single organisation and learning would occur within, rather than across, organisations. Thus, in this study, the nature of the participant-stakeholders' relationships with each other and with the organisations they represented constituted a significant variation from previous formulations of the Learning History.

Because of this, the problem gambling case could be seen as being more aimed at helping a community (consisting of for-profit, not-for-profit, government organisations, and the people who worked for them) to develop a strategy and agree on actions to address a social issue (problem gambling). The case has much more in common with the two inter-organisational cases described above than the more common use of Learning History in intra-organisational settings. Because of this, and again like the two cases described above, the desired outcomes were probably more nebulous, though clearly aimed at reducing the harm caused by problem gambling (Boyd 2011), and like most community change activities, needed to produce social change that would endure in the longer term, rather than a short-term 'fix' (Gore 2013).

The inter-organisational nature of this case meant that the stakeholder organisations did not necessarily have similar views or values around gambling, and especially around who was responsible for, and had to act on, problem gambling. Their interest in acting to mitigate the impacts of problem gambling also varied. These factors will be explored below and their impact on the project will be described.

Description of the case

The case study that is the basis of this paper used the Learning History approach to investigate how a multi-stakeholder approach to addressing problem gambling might contribute to more socially responsible practice among gambling organisations. Gambling has been recognised as a significant business in Australia, and Australians have been reported to be among the heaviest gamblers in the world (Australian Government Productivity Commission 2010a). Australians spend nearly 20 billion dollars on various

forms of gambling each year (Australian Government Productivity Commission 2010b). The culture of gambling is deeply embedded in Australian society and one place where extensive gambling takes place is in the hospitality-focused registered sporting and social clubs in New South Wales. Many of these operate with a strong business focus and gambling revenues are a compelling part of club profits, often used to financially support sporting teams, subsidise food, drink and entertainment costs for members and their guests, and to fund donations to local not-for-profit community groups. Some of the latter is formally mandated by the State government (Australian Government Productivity Commission 2010a).

The study took place in the western suburbs of Sydney, Australia and its objective was to enable a range of disparate stakeholders to explore issues of mutual interest with the aim of developing strategies that might mitigate the impact of problem gambling on the local community. The participants were drawn from the sporting and social clubs in which the gambling occurred, the club peak body organisations, local and state government, interested welfare organisations and local counselling services.

What happened

The case study examined in this paper was designed around a series of interviews with the abovementioned organisations, all of which could be considered to be stakeholders when considering the issue of problem gambling. The interviews were used to draw out their perspectives on the social responsibility of clubs for problem gambling. The interviews were then used to form the foundation for the learning history document.

It was anticipated that the participants would take a pragmatic approach to the research and, in keeping with that, it was expected that the learning history document would need to be to-the-point and could not be lengthy. Although the original Kleiner & Roth (1997) formulation contemplated that learning histories would vary in length from 20 to 100 pages, in this inter-organisational study, the learning history document could be nothing like this

size as it was determined that the participants would not engage with such a large document.

Some 13 co-researchers were recruited for the study and they occupied a variety of different positions in organisations that would be considered stakeholders around the issue of the social responsibility of clubs for problem gambling. Six different stakeholder perspectives were represented by those who participated.

Stakeholder perspective	Organisations represented
Registered clubs	Club 1 Club 2
Clubs sector peak bodies	Clubs Peak Body 1 Clubs Peak Body 2
Government	State Government
Community welfare organisations	Community Welfare Peak Body
Problem gambling counselling services	Counselling Service 1 Counselling Service 2
Local government	City Council 1 City Council 2

Table 2: Stakeholder perspectives and organisations represented in the study

In addition to the 13 participants who agreed to participate in the research, another 11 prospective participants were invited to take part, but these either declined or failed to respond to an invitation. These non-participants represented an association of problem

gamblers, gambling club non-executive directors (not club employees) and gambling machine manufacturers.

Impediments to the progress of the Learning History approach

It had been anticipated that there might be a number of blocks or impediments to the ability of the research to genuinely engage the participants in the reflection and discussion stage of the research, after the learning history document had been prepared; this proved to be the case. The process of interviewing participants and gaining access to relevant documents was largely unproblematic. Even though initially, some of the key stakeholders chose not to take part in the study, those who did opt in engaged fully with the researcher in the interview process and willingly shared information and documents. However, a number of impediments to the continuation of the Learning History dissemination process emerged. The issues created by not being able to engage critical stakeholders in the Learning History process when undertaking inter-organisational studies were commented on by both Bradbury-Huang and others (Bradbury & Mainemelis 2001; Roth & Bradbury 2008) and will be explored in more detail later in the paper.

When the time came for participants to meet to discuss the learning history document, there appeared to be mixed interest in doing this. While all participants showed interest in the document itself, said they had read it and generally expressed interest in attending the Forum to discuss it, only eight of the thirteen actually appeared on the day. This may have indicated skepticism about the chances of anything positive emerging from the discussion, or the participants' exhaustion with discussing a long-term, seemingly intractable problem. After all, these issues had been on industry, government and related-sector agendas for some years and, despite a seemingly incessant stream of reports, announcements and legislative developments, there appeared to be no indication of significant future reform measures. To address these possible concerns, the research design was refined so that the study's impositions on the participants', especially for their time,

would be kept to a minimum (a few hours). Thus, time boundaries for the participants' attendance at the forums were constrained, and the attendees showed only weak interest in discussing the learning history document (which should have been central to the discussion). Rather, they chose to discuss in very general terms, the nature of corporate social responsibility, where opportunities for stakeholder networking existed and there was some possibility for ongoing activities. These discussions were therefore seen more as an opportunity to re-state the disparate stakeholder perspectives of the participants; there was less interest in engaging in discussion that might have explored the perspectives of others.

The discussion on social responsibility focused largely on financial matters and a discussion about the degree to which gambling activity should be regulated, which revealed very disparate (and largely incommensurate views) among the attendees. There was one exception of a counseling service which had, in the past, accepted funding from one of the clubs to provide counseling even though the counseling service was fundamentally opposed to gambling. The impact of these disparate views on the responsibilities of the various stakeholders and their fundamental views about gambling, meant that any further discussion was difficult to progress.

Despite this, there was strong consensus among attendees that multi-stakeholder networking may be useful, at least on a project basis or in the provision of treatment for program gambling. It appeared that all parties, whatever their fundamental view about gambling, agreed that the negative effects of gambling should be addressed and held a view that they had a part to play in this activity.

The attendee from the State government proposed a number of different types of project-based networks among stakeholders. These included collaborations among counseling treatment service providers, to consider various treatment models, and peer-level networking among clubs. The discussion that followed this suggestion identified the difficulties in establishing networks due to strong political perspectives and positions of the stakeholders

(even those who would appear on the surface to share similar positions, such as the counselling organisations). At the same time, networks had the potential to be useful for stakeholders in achieving their objectives, it was said.

While there was consensus among the attendees that the Forum had been useful "in providing a communication mechanism", there was no support for the suggestion that the attendees might consider meeting at another subsequent Forum session. This approach was consistent with their earlier comments about the difficulties of multi-stakeholder networking around problem gambling in the club sector. The views expressed by attendees at the Forum seemed to indicate that such networks would be premature. There seemed to be two key reasons for this. First, some stakeholders were understood by attendees to have shown a firm disinclination for networking or for collaborating across a broad range of stakeholder groups. Secondly, the relations and interactions among some stakeholders were not sufficiently advanced to enable those stakeholders to productively engage with others.

After the Forum all of those who took part in the development of the learning history document were emailed and telephoned. For those who did not attend the Forum, the communications were intended to alert them to what was discussed at the Forum, and to the further interactions that were proposed among those who attended. On the other hand, for those participants who did attend the Forum, the aim was to seek their reflections about the Forum process and understand whether there had been any subsequent collaboration among them. In both cases, the response from these participants was weak. Many of these participants were not available to take calls at the times they were telephoned and, in response to the emails the replies received were polite but showed strong disinterest in engaging further in a collaborative process.

In one concrete activity however, a departmental manager at one of the gambling clubs who had attended the Forum later described that, since the discussion with one of the local government representatives at the Forum, the club was proposing to conduct its

problem gambling awareness seminars for other local authorities. The same club was also involved in "peer" networking activities with another club in the same region.

The low level of attendance by participants at the Forum, coupled with the Forum attendees' decision not to engage further in a follow-up session, indicates that the participants' engagement and interactions were not sustainable beyond the initial Forum. This can therefore be taken to suggest that the inter-organisational Learning History approach adopted in this study was incomplete, in terms of it leading to the development of a socially responsible approach to the management of gambling in clubs, the initial aim of the research. However, analysis of the engagement and interactions among participants does offer insights into the configuration and nature of the stakeholder network around problem gambling, and points to a need to adapt the Learning History approach to better cater for the disparate views of multiple stakeholders with disparate interests.

Similarities and differences in the intra-organisational and inter-organisational contexts for Learning History projects

In a number of important ways the contexts in which the intra-organisational and inter-organisational Learning History projects were undertaken are somewhat similar. In all cases, the participants were busy managers and the lack of engagement by the participants in the cases of the inter-organisational projects could to some extent be explained by time pressures. However, the priority they gave to the project, compared to their other tasks, may be a factor. When the Learning History projects were undertaken in a single organisation, with executive approval and 'buy-in', it can be assumed that the managers in those organisations would see the project as being important and would invest time and energy in contributing to it. They would also be more likely to believe that the project could achieve a beneficial outcome for their organisations (Rafferty et al. 2012; Hansez & Nik 2010), and maybe, even, for themselves (Gotsis & Kortezi 2011). It

could be argued that in the case of inter-organisational projects, where executive support may be limited or even missing, middle managers may be less likely to prioritise their involvement in their busy schedule.

One factor that is critical to determining the involvement of individuals in any change project is their perceptions of the likelihood that positive change is possible (Baulcomb 2003). When people do not believe that change is possible, is very unlikely or will require an unreasonable amount of effort then they are unlikely to commit to it. In the intra-organisational Learning History projects described above, the determinants of change were internal, and the project members were aware that they and their fellow participants were able to commit the time, energy and resources necessary to bring about the desired change, if only they could agree on what needed to be done and how this could occur.

In the inter-organisational projects, at least some of the resources required to bring about change were controlled by other organisations, which may or may not be involved in the project (Bradbury-Huang 2010), and they could have been reliant to some extent on other organisations (possibly those not even taking part in the project), to bring about change. Also, the project participants still had to deal with the challenge of agreeing about what needed to change and how this should be done.

One way of conceptualising this difference in contexts is to think about the inter-organisational situation as being an example of a wicked, versus a more structured problem. (Hannigan & Coffey 2011). Rittel and Webber (1973) write that the ten properties of wicked problems are:

- There is no definitive formulation of a wicked problem: problems and solutions are inextricably linked

- Wicked problems have no stopping rule: work terminates based upon outcomes such as running out of time or money, or upon subjective criteria such as 'that's good enough'

- Solutions to wicked problems are not 'true-or-false', but 'good-or-bad': there are no criteria to judge whether an

outcome is 'correct', and outcomes will often be ambiguous and contingent upon group or personal interests

- There is no immediate and no ultimate test of a solution to a wicked problem: solutions will generate 'waves of consequences' which may outweigh the benefits of the solution, and which may not be fully appreciated until the repercussions cease

- Every solution to a wicked problem is a 'one-shot operation', because there is no opportunity to learn by trial and error: every attempt counts

- Wicked problems do not have an exhaustively describable set of potential solutions: there are no criteria to prove that all solutions have been identified and considered

- Every wicked problem is essentially unique: despite similarities between previous problems and current ones each has a 'one-of-a-kind' quality

- Every wicked problem can be considered to be a symptom of another problem: the higher the level of problem formulation the broader and more general it becomes

- The existence of a discrepancy representing a wicked problem can be explained in numerous ways: there is no rule to determine the 'correct' explanation of a problem

- The planner has no right to be wrong: the consequences of actions matter, and responsibility has to be taken.

This describes to a great extent the characteristics of the inter-organisational Learning History projects described in this paper. It adds to an understanding of why such projects require additional steps to be added to the Learning History process if they are to be addressed successfully. In particular, the nebulous nature of the solution and a limited capacity to objectively measure success creates greater uncertainty about both the problem solving process and the emerging solutions. Given, as discussed previously, it is likely that participants in inter-organisational Learning History projects are likely to be less committed in the first place, ways of

increasing their involvement in, and commitment to the process need to be added to the process.

In the problem gambling case, the low level of attendance by the participants at the Forum, coupled with the Forum attendees' decision not to engage further in a follow-up session, indicates that the participants' engagement and interactions were not sustainable beyond the initial Forum. This can therefore be taken to suggest that the community level Learning History process was incomplete, in terms of the research objective, to lead to a socially responsible approach to the management of gambling in clubs.

Stakeholder Theory as a way of understanding failure of the Learning History method in inter-organisational contexts

The term "stakeholder" has been used intentionally throughout this paper as it will be suggested that stakeholder theory might help articulate the dynamics that limited the effectiveness of Learning History in the inter-organisational cases described above and also point to possible ways of addressing some of the issues identified as being problematic in this context.

Employing stakeholder theory to explore organisational behavior and particularly their relationships with communities are often sourced to Freeman's 1984 text, *Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach* (Freeman 1984). Freeman's proposition was that corporations are better able to achieve their strategic imperatives, when they engage their constituents or stakeholders in the exercise. This is because stakeholders can be seen to bring their own expectations to bear in the engagement (Freeman 1984) and these can be maneuvered to contribute to the corporation's own objectives. In this paper, stakeholder theory is applied not to an organization, but to a perspective on an issue – ie, those who have a stake in the issue of problem gambling and are therefore necessary to the process of developing a solution.

Despite claims about the maturity of 'stakeholder thinking' (Rowley 1997), some notions surrounding it remain problematic.

For example, Freeman's initial definition of a stakeholder is "… any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the firm's objectives" (Freeman 1984). Later, Donaldson and Preston (1995) drew attention to the social dimensions of the stakeholder approach by articulating a definition of stakeholders that referenced the harms and benefits resulting from the corporation's actions. For them, Stakeholders are identified through the actual or potential harms and benefits that they experience or anticipate experiencing as a result of the firm's actions or inactions (Donaldson & Preston 1995).

While some scholarship has been devoted to identifying those who might be characterised as the legitimate stakeholders of a corporation (Mitchell et al. 1997), there is still no generally accepted definition of 'stakeholder' (Pederson 1999). Indeed, Mitchell et al chronicled almost 30 different, but broadly similar, definitions of stakeholder (Mitchell et al. 1997). Nevertheless the stakeholder approach has been used extensively to identify those who have a vested interest in the workings of an organization and this has been extended to apply stakeholder thinking to issues faced by entire industries (Banerjee 2007) and communities (Pederson 2006).

Mitchell et al (1997) classified stakeholders by reference to their possession of one or more of three attributes, namely: power, legitimacy and urgency. Any organization with a stake in any organisational, industry or community issue should be expected to exhibit one or more of these:

Power attribute

A stakeholder's power is represented by the extent to which it has, or can obtain access to, coercive, utilitarian or normative means to exert its influence in its relationship with the corporation. The dimensions of power can be increased or reduced, and is therefore transitory. In this case the Club Peak Bodies had amassed considerable power because of their referent power (Raven 1993), in that they were able to speak on behalf of the most wealthy stakeholders, the Clubs.

Legitimacy attribute

A stakeholder's legitimacy refers to its socially accepted structures and behaviours. There is an aspect of self-perception in this, but legitimacy is broader and more involving of others. This suggests that legitimacy is capable of being established differently in different sectors of the community. Again the Club Peak Bodies had considerable legitimacy because of the industry structure that meant they were seen as being the premier industry organisations by State and local governments and by the clubs themselves.

Urgency attribute

This is a dynamic attribute, which is based on two characteristics. The first is time sensitivity, which refers to the degree to which organisational delay in dealing with the relationship can be problematic for the stakeholder. The second characteristic of the urgency attribute is criticality. This is a reference to the importance that the stakeholder places on the claim and the timeframe in which it must be addressed. In the problem gambling case various stakeholders exhibited a different sense of urgency with regard to finding a solution, with counseling and welfare services viewing the matter as being urgent and the Clubs giving it low priority.

While the focus of stakeholder theory has generally considered the relationship between the corporation and individual stakeholders, Rowley (1997) has proposed that these relationships can be understood, in practice, to be more complex than a simple radial diagram. He suggested that, since stakeholder relationships do not occur in a vacuum of dyadic ties, but rather in a network of influences, a firm's stakeholders are likely to have direct relationships with one another (Rowley 1997).

For Rowley, then, a graphic representation of stakeholder arrangements is not a simple radial diagram with the corporation at the centre. Instead, stakeholders' relationships can be complex, multifarious, and even messy; especially when stakeholders can be expected to be in relationships with other stakeholders and, also, with others who would not normally be in direct relationship with the corporation (referred to as the 'focal organization'). Rowley

(1977) proposed several possible graphic representations of such complex relationships including a complex configuration where stakeholders have their own separate networks, in addition to their relationship with the 'focal organization'.

When collecting data for the development of the learning history document, it was noted by many of the research participants and by the researcher, that the focal organisations were the Club Sector Peak Bodies. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the relationship between the two Peak Bodies and the other stakeholders, but suffice to say that they can be treated, for the sake of this paper, as one body.

The stakeholder configuration could be described in various ways, but of particular significance was the role of the Club Sector Peak Bodies, those representing the interests of, and advocating for, the clubs (and one could suggest, themselves), to government and the wider community. As demonstrated in the learning history document, they played a pivotal role in the power structure by largely controlling the communication between the clubs and other players in the sector, especially government, as represented in Figure 1.
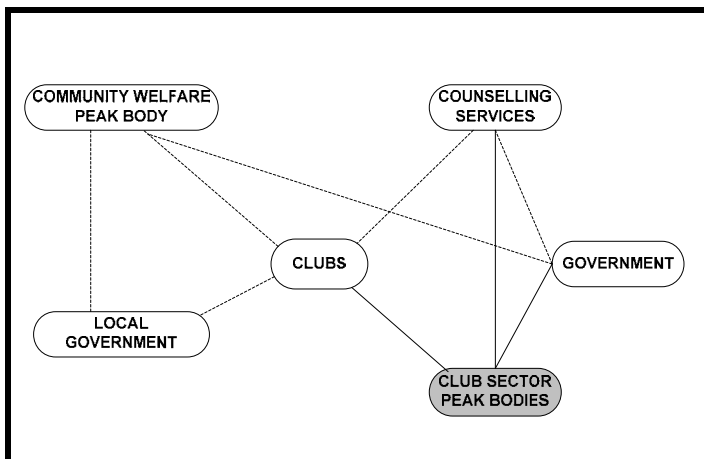
Figure 1: Structure of the stakeholder network for problem gambling showing club sector peak bodies as the focal organisation based on Rowley (1997)

This configuration had a number of impacts on the effectiveness of the Learning History approach because of the dynamics it created among the various stakeholders.

It could be argued that, at the recruitment stage, the Clubs thought that they did not need to be involved because they were represented by the Peak Bodies and/or that their views (if different to those of the Peak Bodies) would not be heard. They therefore chose to participate in a limited way. They may have held the view that it was the responsibility of the Peak Bodies to determine any action that the Clubs needed to take to address the issue of problem gambling. In fact, the Peak Bodies tended to frame problem gambling as an individual issue for the gamblers rather than one that the industry needed to help address. The Clubs may also have thought that the more powerful Peak Bodies views would be given more credence than the views of individual Clubs.

Individual Clubs had limited opportunity to engage with each other on the issue of problem gambling outside of initiatives organised by the Peak Bodies. There was therefore little scope for knowing whether their individual views on problem gambling were similar or different to each other, or how the views of other clubs aligned with those expressed by the Peak Body. It became clear during the development of the learning history document that some Directors and managers of the Clubs had considerable concern about the damage gambling may do in the community, especially because gamblers were members of their clubs. Some had attempted to address the issue (eg, funding counseling services), but these were ad hoc arrangements made by individual Clubs and not supported by the Peak Body.

While the Clubs had the capacity to engage directly with counseling, peak welfare and local government organisations, their engagement with the State government was mostly through the

Peak Bodies. Because of the Government's critical role in legislating around gambling, taxing the clubs' revenue from gambling and funding support services, the clubs would have been left in the position where they could discuss issues with some stakeholders, but could not actually engage with the one stakeholder who could fund significant change.

In the network arrangement, the role of local government was limited to advising clubs on the distribution in the community of a mandated gambling levy. The involvement of local government, the counselling services and the welfare peak bodies would also have been impacted upon by their past experience of the stakeholder network. They would also have experienced the dominance of the Peak Bodies and probably had no reason to think that this would change if they became involved in the project. The data collected as part of the learning history document indicated that those who did participate did so 'because they thought they should…' but held out little hope that it would lead to any significant change.

As pointed out in the intra-organisational and inter-organisational learning histories described above, a critical outcome of the meetings to discuss the Learning History document was the formation of new networks which disrupted the status quo and create opportunities for change. The discussion of the dynamics of the existing stakeholder network in the problem gambling case starts to explain why some organisations might have been unwilling to participate and why others may have participated in a very limited fashion. It also begins to point to a problem with the Learning History approach as described by Bradbury and Mainemelis (2001), when applied to an inter-organisational context. The existing stakeholder network arrangements need to be adapted, and the existing locations of power disrupted to allow new networks to develop. It is only in this way that new solutions to wicked problems can begin to be developed.

Suggested solutions

What was clear from the learning history document was that the participants' organisations (and therefore the participants) coalesced into a number of stakeholder sub-networks, apparently according to the participants' disparate perspectives on the issue of gambling in clubs. These were based around their joint self-interests (eg, the club's interest in revenue from gambling). This is not to say that they did not also have other concerns, for example the clubs expressed genuine concern about the impact of problem gambling on families, but rather that their willingness to be involved in activities beyond the development of the learning history document was limited.

It can be seen that the stakeholder network structures present in this case had the capacity to form into more complex arrangements of sub-networks that were built upon similarities in the stakeholders' perspectives. Before any blocks or deadlocks in the sector can be dealt with, it would be necessary to undertake a learning history participative process (much like the Forum in this study) at the level of the sub-networks, before attempting to engage more broadly across the sector. The purpose of the sub-network learning history document and Forum would be to allow for emergent disruptions to the existing power structures as a result of the engagement among participants. A diagram of the sub-networks, based on the problem gambling case is presented below:

Figure 2: Relationship between Sub-Network and Network Forums

The power of the Club Sector Peak Bodies to exert their influence in the network is the critical dynamic that needed to be changed in the problem gambling case. It is suggested that by allowing the various stakeholders to meet, first, in their 'natural' groupings (based on the function they perform), the status quo could be disrupted and new networks (and thus new solutions) would have the opportunity to emerge.

In terms of the key attributes of stakeholders, the following activities would have enabled this. First, the power of the Peak Bodies could have been addressed by allowing the Clubs to meet initially on their own and develop a position on the issues, independent of the Peak Bodies. This would have decreased the referent and legitimate power of the Peak Bodies as the Clubs' views became known to others. The Clubs would have been able to represent themselves to other stakeholders and present views that were somewhat different to those of the Peak Bodies. Once the Clubs were able to develop a view independent and different from that of the Peak Bodies, they would have been in a position to develop new and hopefully productive networks with the other stakeholders. Evidence that this was possible was found in the

existing small, but significant partnership between one of the Clubs and a counseling organisation that saw the Club finance a problem gambling counseling service. Increased conversation directly between the Clubs and the counseling services, without the mediation of the Peak Bodies, may also have resulted in the Clubs realising the need to address the issues more urgently than they had considered to be the case in the past. They may then act, and take up their power as a stakeholder more fully. The same could have been said of the need to improve networking between the Clubs and government, where direct discussions regarding taxation and legislation may have given rise to a legitimacy that could produce more useful outcomes.

Once the Clubs did not have to depend on the Peak Bodies to represent them, they may have a greater impetus to be actively involved, in the same way as occurred in the SEER case (Bradbury-Huang 2010), where greater involvement of all stakeholders, not just the peak bodies, resulted in the establishment of new networks.

A concern that this approach raises is that it may result in the sub-networks simply consolidating their position and being less open to working with other stakeholders. This is a legitimate concern. However, there was evidence in the interviews and Forum discussions that the perspective of the individual clubs was more accommodating of change than the Peak Bodies, and it is difficult to see how positions could be more entrenched than when many organisations are represented by Peak Bodies that have entrenched views and their own self-interests (Van Waaden 1992).

Conclusion

This review of the problem gambling case study suggests that a feature of Action Research in general, and Learning History in particular, is its capacity to be deployed as an emancipatory mechanism to assist in the pursuit of community change (White 2011). The methodological contribution of this paper is represented by the acknowledgement that, while the participants' engagement was not sustainable in this case study, the findings can generally

support the use of participative approaches. Participation needs to occur with strategic attention being paid to the perspectives of the stakeholders, however. This more strategic approach, with attention to alliances and similarities in the participants' perspectives, can be seen to offer a better chance for more productive engagements. In particular, the existing power structures, and particularly the power held by any focal organisations needs to be disrupted before meaningful development of new networks can begin.

It is suggested therefore, that the Learning History approach can be used effectively in an inter-organisational setting but needs to be adapted to take account of the impact of the powerful sub-networks of stakeholders that exist. Even though consideration of such sub-networks was formerly outside the Learning History discourse, this study has identified their potential to stymie the consideration of change, when a more conventional Learning History approach is adopted. Thus, given the outcomes of the study, the conventional Learning History approach might be reformulated into a type of 'stakeholder learning project' with the eight steps as outlined in Table 3.

Project Steps	Participant Activity	Researcher Activity
1.		With reference to the issue of relevance, first scope out the stakeholder territory, to identify those organisations that might be considered stakeholders in the network. The scoping study would draw on secondary research of literature, web sites and media sources.
2.		Recruit a selection of participants from a sample of the stakeholder organisations, to determine their perspectives on the issue.
3.		Use interviews of the participants to uncover their perspectives and network alliances, and any sub-network arrangements.
4.		Develop separate discussion documents to record the 'jointly-told tale' of the stakeholder perspectives from the different sub-networks.
5.	Participants attend separate sub-network forums to nominate the change that appears required in the broader stakeholder network in order to facilitate the corporation's social responsibility.	Convene separate forums for sub-networks and record the perspectives for change.
6.	Consider the multi-perspective discussion document across the full stakeholder network.	Develop multi-perspective discussion document from the various sub-networks' perspectives for change.
7.	All participants engage in a combined dissemination forum.	Convene a multi-perspective forum for all participants, and monitor learning across the full stakeholder network.
8.	Participants subsequently engage and interact, as they determine actions to be taken, either within the sub-networks or across the full stakeholder network.	Monitor participants' on-going engagement practices, and the participants' learning either at the sub-network level or across the full stakeholder network.

Table 3: Design of a community-based stakeholder learning project

This formulation of this inter-organisational Learning History approach, for use in an inter-organisational context would appear to present opportunities for future research. The case study on which this paper is based was undertaken in a belief of the value and worth of interaction among people, that is, the engagement of stakeholders, as a way of shedding light on problem gambling, an otherwise intractable societal issues. In a wider context, the study can be understood to have proposed a way Learning History can be used to address the dilemma of 'business-in-society'.

The main methodological contribution of the study is represented by the recognition that, while the participants' engagement and interactions were not sustainable in this study of problem gambling, the research findings do provide support for participative approaches to community change. Participation should be staged with some strategic attention to the perspectives of the stakeholders, however. This participative type of approach, with attention to alliances and similarities in the stakeholders' perspectives, can be seen to offer better scope for more productive engagements. The Learning History method is a way of doing this, albeit in an adapted form from that currently in use.

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Can Action Research improve project results? Results from a study of an Agile Project Management framework for an SME IT environment

Daniel O'Sheedy

Abstract

Project Management methods have reached maturity in large organisations, and these methods have been successfully deployed for many decades, especially in connection with IT projects. However, despite these advances, small software teams have often found these project methods too bureaucratic and unwieldy. This has therefore led to the style of software development methods known collectively as 'Agile' development. This paper presents the research findings of a study undertaken using an Action Research methodology. The research investigated the effects of putting into practice a framework of Agile development concepts combined with traditional project management techniques, for the management of IT projects in an SME (Small and Medium-sized Enterprise) environment. An Agile project management framework was developed to improve the implementation of IT projects, using core concepts adapted from the PMBOK (Project Management Book of Knowledge), in addition to concepts derived from Action Research and Agile software development. This framework was then critically tested and refined over a period of eighteen months. The resulting Agile project management framework was shown to assist project participants working in a fast-paced environment, where there is a need to respond quickly to changing requirements. This paper also provides a basis for further academic research into the future potential for combining Agile methods with other established techniques for a business environment.

Keywords

IT Project Management, Agile development, SMEs Action Research, Agile Project Management framework

Introduction

In large organisations there has been a strong uptake of project management methods, which have been developed from international standards, to ensure a higher success rate for projects. These project methods are also used when implementing IT projects, as these organisations have experienced the benefits gained from introducing the processes and standards necessary for the control of large and complex IT installations. However, when projects occur in an SME environment, these typically smaller organisations can experience difficulties in executing projects, due to a lack of skilled project team members or established project management methods. Employees are increasingly finding themselves in situations where they are being asked to be more productive with fewer resources, as companies try to improve resource usage, and leverage the workforce size more skilfully. This is especially the case with SMEs, who as a rule have smaller cash reserves available, and less resources to apply to business problems (Thong, Yap & Raman 1994). Additionally, it is commonplace for smaller organisations to forego the more formal project management practices, either due to a starvation of resources to successfully implement these practices, or because small projects are often viewed as simple to implement (Rowe 2007).

Two project management standards which have experienced a large uptake are the PMBOK framework and the PRINCE2 method. These two project management standards can be perceived as too bureaucratic for an SME organisation, a quality that is detrimental in an environment that must often cope with time-constrained or low-budget projects. Additionally, these smaller organisations require a project management style that is customised to their situation, due to the inherent uniqueness of SMEs (Turner, Ledwith & Kelly 2010). This situation with project

management is not isolated to this field however, and a similar scenario has arisen in regards to the field of software development. Compact teams involved in the software development industry have found that they are able to gain an advantage when using Agile development, a style of software production that allows small teams react quickly and successfully to requirement changes (Schwaber 2004).

This research was designed primarily to investigate an area that has suffered a lack of attention, namely that of non-software IT projects being conducted in SME environments. A large portion of IT research has been conducted in large organisations, due to the lack of resources available on the part of SMEs, and the individuality associated with smaller organisations (Hunter 2004). As the research took place in Austria, the definition of an SME as set out by the European Commission was used, where it defines an SME as having a headcount of less than 250 employees, an annual turnover of less than €50 million, and an annual balance sheet total of less than €43 million. Using this definition, it can be shown that 99% of all European businesses fall within the SME range (CEC 2003). Consequently, although there may be some research difficulties associated with investigating organisations of this size, this is an important economic sector, which should not be ignored.

The goal of the research was to investigate a formal project management framework, and determine how it could be modified for an SME environment, primarily when dealing with IT projects. Additionally the research focussed on the need for a responsive framework, especially in environments where projects are undergoing change. The PMBOK framework was used as a basis for the proposed framework, and components and tools that were developed for Action Research and Agile software development were combined with it, to produce a framework designed specifically for the SME environment. A substantial portion of this research took place during the global financial crisis, which saw an added emphasis on financial savings and constricted budgets in the business arena. In a time where businesses needed improved results with fewer resources, the reduction of project failure was an important issue to many SMEs.

Review of information technology in SMEs

The introduction of IT to business has brought with it many advantages, for the organisations willing to take advantage of the improved methods of conducting business. Information technology is an industry that is progressing exceptionally fast, with a constant stream of new technology emerging. Some organisations have found that they can gain a strategic advantage by deploying the latest technology. There are many possibilities open to an SME to use technology to gain an advantage, for example in areas such as product differentiation, by reducing the cost of production, or driving business innovation in the organisation (Dibrell, Davis & Craig 2008; McFarlan & Nolan 2003; Porter & Millar 1985).

Access to information is an important factor for the successful growth of an organisation, and technology has enhanced the access of SMEs in a multitude of industries. This access has also allowed SMEs to compete more effectively with not only their competitors in the market, but also with organisations many times larger. This has changed the way businesses need to compete, and with whom they compete against. Typically an SME is able to leverage the information that they have access to more successfully, and as a result, is able to be more flexible in their dealings with customers, and more flexible when external demands are made of them (Barba-Sánchez, del Pilar Martínez-Ruiz & Jiménez-Zarco 2007). By its very nature, the SME is able to be more Agile than a large organisation, and IT can be used to develop this flexibility even further (Levy & Powell 1998).

Researchers have been keenly interested in the uptake and use of information technology by SMEs over the last few decades. This research has investigated the effects that have been noticed as a result of the uptake of information technology in SMEs, with such outcomes as business value creation, the potential for economic improvement, and employment creation (Dibrell, Davis & Craig 2008; Lee et al. 2009). By judiciously implementing information technology, an SME has the potential to improve the chances of success for the organisation. Technology can furthermore be used

to provide organisational longevity, financial stimulation, and increase the overall stability of the business (Bharati & Chaudhury 2006; Lester & Tran 2008; Pavic et al. 2007). Traditionally there have been two major motivating factors, as to why an SME would invest resources in information technology. The first area is to provide substantial cost-savings, by enabling an organisation to refine work processes, and the second is to provide business growth and increase the organisation's competitive advantage. In this second area, researchers have been able to show that SMEs who align IT with strategic business goals are more often than not able to realise benefits for their business (Levy, Powell & Yetton 2001).

Throughout the research a common thread emerged, namely that information technology plays a pivotal role in the business success for SME organisations (Qureshi, Kamal & Wolcott 2009). As a result of this significance, increasingly these organisations endeavour to ensure that information technology projects are implemented efficiently and successfully. To this end, project management has undergone a new round of scrutiny, with a focus on providing successful IT implementations.

Review of the development of Project Management

Project Management has been a topic of interest for organisations in the past few decades, though project management in itself is not a novel concept, introduced in recent times. Throughout history there have been numerous large-scale construction projects, including such notable examples as the construction of the pyramids, the raising of the stones at Stonehenge, and the development of a substantial highway system by the Romans. However, as projects became more complex and costly, the US government and large construction companies began to implement project management techniques, endeavouring with these tools to improve the focus the project efforts, and provide better resource utilisation. These project tools were initially implemented for the control of complex engineering situations, such as were found in major construction projects, aerospace missions, or the production of advanced missile systems (Morris 1994).

As time progressed, more companies witnessed the fundamental success being achieved with Project Management, and made the decision to adopt these practices as well. The 1960s were a notable turning point for Project Management, as the field started to be viewed as a serious management discipline. As a result of this commercial interest in Project Management, scientific interest in this field similarly increased (Kwak 2005). This increased scientific interest brought with it the development and introduction of improved methods and tools. Research and development from both industry and academic sources has brought about even further expansion, and the consequent establishment of several Project Management standards over the years.

Information technology projects are becoming a standard part of business processes, and as government bodies and businesses rely heavily on IT to produce results, these organisations have introduced tailored Project Management processes to ensure the success of these projects. Several European governments have established Project Management standards in this field, with methods such as Hermes (FSUIT 2004), V-Modell (BMI 2006) and PRINCE2 (OGC 2005). The Swiss government has established the Hermes method, which is used for the control of government IT-related projects. This method has likewise been adopted by a sizeable number of organisations in the private sector in Switzerland and Luxembourg. The German government introduced the V-Modell method, initially to improve the management of software projects; however this was later expanded to include all IT projects, and is now in use throughout Germany by both federal and local government bodies. Another very popular project management method, PRINCE2, was introduced by the British government to improve the management of complex IT projects. This method has been rigorously adopted by the British government, and is also used by private sector organisations that have dealings with this government.

One of the most wide-spread project management frameworks is the PMBOK (Project Management Body of Knowledge), which was developed by PMI (Project Management Institute). Due to the wide-spread uptake of this method it has become one of the

primary standards for Project Management today, and is viewed by many as the de facto method.

Project Management research has been wide-spread in its focus, distributed among many of the IT industry segments. Some researchers have focussed on the area of software development (Berndt & Jones 2008), whereas others have focussed on the broader discipline of Project Management, and how it can be adapted to work with IT projects (Reich, Sauer & Wee 2008; Sauer & Reich 2009). As research into the field of Project Management expanded, the focus also turned to smaller projects, to determine if these environments could similarly gain benefits from these processes and management tools (Grable et al. 1999). One principal finding to emerge from this research into smaller environments has been the confirmation that smaller organisations quite often work with a lower degree of bureaucracy. This in turn means that the traditional project management methods are viewed as too bureaucratic to be deployed with any measure of success in these smaller environments (Nicholson 2004). It was found that, whilst these smaller projects did not require the same amount of processes and control necessary for large projects, they could benefit from a management method or style that was specifically tailored to an SME environment (Turner, Ledwith & Kelly 2009).

Even with these studies into smaller projects, the majority of research involving Project Management tools and techniques has been undertaken in large corporations (Bryde 2003; Kloppenborg & Opfer 2002; White & Fortune 2002). This lack of a broad palette of research in smaller organisations is due in part to the unique nature of SMEs, a limiting factor when comparing research results from one organisation to another. However, despite these barriers to research in this area, there is a great deal of potential for improvement for these smaller organisations.

A great deal of research into the field of Project Management has been undertaken in specialised industries, such as in the areas of heavy construction, engineering and information technology. Due to this extensive research, these large industry sectors have been able to increase the value of processes by implementing formalised

Project Management methods and frameworks (Thomas & Mullaly 2008). Witnessing the success of projects in these larger industry sectors, other sectors of industry that do not traditionally have a history of Project Management use are also now investigating whether they too can leverage project management processes and tools to improve the success of their project work (Carden & Egan 2008).

To improve the focus of this research, the area of interest was refined even further from generic IT project management. There has abundant studies concentrating on complex and large IT projects (Glass 2006; Shore 2005), managing risk in large IT projects (Cooper et al. 2005; Kappelman, McKeeman & Zhang 2006), and controlling software projects (Bechtold 1999; El Emam & Koru 2008), to list a few of the more established areas of this field of research. However limited research has been conducted into IT integration and adaptation projects, especially when conducted in an SME environment.

Another area where researchers have conducted comprehensive investigations involves software projects occurring in an SME environment. One of the impelling factors to this research is the important status that software has in business, and how the successful and timely development of software is a major concern to many organisations (Augustine et al. 2005; Benko & McFarlan 2003; Fioravanti 2006). This research into software development methods in smaller development environments has led to the introduction of Agile development methods, encompassing some of the more common development methods such as Scrum and Extreme Programming. These Agile teams have left behind the process-heavy methods and have adopted a more reactive style of software development. The focus of these development teams is primarily on producing a product that is useful for the business, whilst allowing for requirement changes, occasionally even quite late in the development process. Tools and concepts derived from these Agile software development methods form an integral part of the foundation of the research discussed in this paper, due to their adaptability and responsiveness.

A Description of the research environment and approach

The research was conducted over a period of sixteen months in an SME environment, and was designed to investigate the primary research question:

> To what extent can a mixture of traditional project management methods and Agile development methods improve IT project success in an SME environment?

This research therefore investigated whether formal project management methods could be combined with Agile methods in an SME environment, for the management of IT implementation projects. The framework was formed from a foundation of traditional Project Management methods, as established in the PMBOK, in addition to multiple tools and techniques obtained from contemporary Agile methods. Such a framework has the potential to enable SME project workers to respond rapidly to requirement changes throughout the project. This can help to improve the success of projects, especially in cases where the project environment is instable or is undergoing change. Because the research was investigating an emerging technology in a unique environment, it was decided that Action Research would be the best research methodology to deploy.

The research occurred in two closely associated media and publishing companies based in Austria, Publish-Com and Media-Com, though all company and participant names have been changed due to privacy reasons. Both companies consisted of approximately 60 employees, thus placing them in the SME range of 1 to 250 employees (CEC 2003). Over the course of the research about twenty individual projects were undertaken, varying in their size and level of impact to the business. These projects were predominantly projects relating to IT infrastructure and integration, and involved such topics as: migrating the businesses from legacy email servers to the parent-enterprise email server; upgrading workstation and server hardware; relocating businesses to new premises; setup and configuration of new business units;

expanding publishing systems into new countries; implementing a new digital asset management system; implementing a new mobile management system; and implementing a new CRM (Customer Relationship Management) system.

Initially the projects were conducted in Publish-Com, but once the project team were also given the task of conducting IT projects in Media-Com, this organisation was included as well. This therefore expanded the research environment to a second environment, and tested the transferability of the Agile Project Management framework in an organisation with a different style of management and culture. Over the course of the research the amount of project work was distributed relatively evenly between the two organisations, and this allowed new insights to be gained due to the unique structure and organisation style found in each company, though they shared a common social environment.

To ensure that the research commenced with a solid footing, an initial investigation of the pertinent academic literature was conducted, to ensure that the current body of knowledge in this particular area was understood and taken into consideration. This investigation was used to form a representation of the current state of the research in this area, with particular interest in the areas of IT Project Management, problems that SMEs face in business, and the emerging research interest in Agile development. The academic literature was also consulted as the research progressed, to not only test and probe new concepts that arose, but to also keep abreast with the latest research and findings in this field.

For the implementation of the Action Research, a model as proposed by Zuber-Skerritt (2000) for Action Learning and research was adapted to this particular situation. This model provided a proven basis for the research, whilst at the same time accommodating for the flexibility needed in Action Research. This research model is depicted in Figure 1.
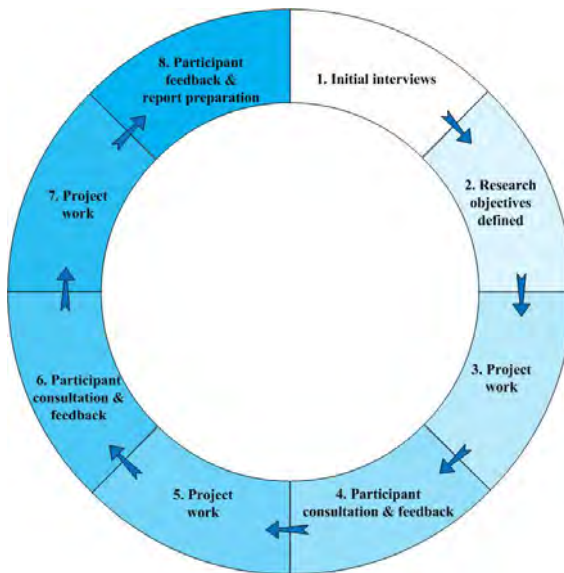
Figure 1: A model of the planned Action Research strategy
Source: Developed for this study.

Each phase of the research also contained the cyclic Action Research processes within itself, which consisted of problem identification, planning, acting, and evaluating. This is a more traditional Action Research approach, and was originally developed by Lewin, one of the founders of Action Research (Argyris, Putnam & McLain Smith 1985, p. 9). This iterative process allowed for a recurring refinement of practice and theory as the research progressed.

After the initial literature review, discovery interviews were conducted with a group of ten employees from both Publish-Com and Media-Com. The demographics of the ten interviewees can be seen in

Table 1. Of the interviewees, nine were male, and one was female.

	Publish-Com	Media-Com
Industry	Magazine publishing	Magazine publishing and online media
Size	70	40
Interviewee numbers	5	5
Interviewee roles	1. Art Director 2. Editor 3. IT 3. Journalist 4. Production	1. Company Founder 2. Designer 3. Production 4. Manager 5. Project Manager
Interviewee education level	1. Industry courses 2. Master of Arts 3. TAFE courses 4. Industry courses 5. Industry courses	1. Business school 2. Bachelor of Arts 3. Industry courses 4. Master of Business 5. Master of Arts

Table 1: Demographics of the interviewees. Source: developed for this research

Attention was paid to the role that the interviewees held in the company, and the knowledge that they possessed in their area of expertise. This is known as a "judgment sampling approach", where participants are chosen based on their ability to provide the information desired, as they are experts in their area of the business, and where a random sub-section of the group would not realistically produce a richer data set (Sekaran 2003). The interviews followed a semi-structured approach, and were used to reveal the thoughts and opinions of the participants about project management in the company, how these processes could be improved, and their thoughts on Agile concepts in general.

Each interview was approximately 45 to 90 minutes in length, depending on the role of the interviewee and the amount of clarification required to uncover their thoughts and views. Once these ten interviews had been conducted, it was concluded that theoretical saturation had been achieved with this interview group. This occurs when additional interviews will only minimally add to the data set, and the researcher finds the observations repeating more frequently (Eisenhardt 1989). The sampling was concluded once it was noted that the rate of new information from each new interview had declined markedly, as redundancy in the data set had been achieved (Lincoln & Guba 1985).

After the completion of the interviews the audio files were transcribed and analysed with the assistance of a qualitative analysis program. A thorough investigation of the resulting data set was then conducted, to reveal the reoccurring themes that were relevant to the research (Auerbach & Silverstein 2003). This process was introduced at the beginning of the data collection phase, as it is a valuable tool when used to uncover concepts that are grounded in the data. Action Research has an iterative process as an integral part of the method, and as such the data investigation was an ongoing process, occurring at regular intervals throughout the research. This ongoing investigation enabled important research issues and discoveries to be quickly identified at each stage, so that concerns could be addressed before progressing to the next stage. There were several recurring themes which emerged from the interview stage of the research. These included such topics as, the importance of responding quickly to change within the IT environment, minimising risk associated with IT projects, increasing communication amongst participants involved in IT projects, and improving the alignment of IT goals with business goals. These themes were consequently used as the basis for the planning of the remainder of the research.

The subsequent stage of the research involved developing a strategy for the Action Research component. The traditional tools used in IT research have consisted primarily of case studies, interviews and surveys (King 2006). Additionally, a large portion of the research into IT projects has investigated the effect in large

organisations, which has enabled the collection of larger sample, thus improving the statistical reliability when employing a quantitative analysis method. This research diverged from the path of these standard methods, and an Action Research methodology was implemented. As mentioned previously, this form of research is particularly appropriate in situations where new insights are desirable, or where a researcher needs to investigate an environment where a traditional approach would have shortcomings. One example of such a situation of where a traditional approach would be less than desirable, is an environment where complex social issues are in force (Baskerville & Stage 1996). Action Research as a methodology has been designed with an emphasis focussed more towards the aspects of problem solving, rather than the more academic work of establishing theories, though developing knowledge is an important part of practice in Action Research (Dick 1999a). Indeed the very nature of Action Research is weighted towards producing action, and outcomes which arise from the data are able to be tested in the next iteration of the research. This provides the researcher with an emergent condition, where the theory testing methodology becomes more refined as the action itself becomes more refined and informed (Dick 1999b).

The initial project work phase was used to introduce the proposed Agile Project Management framework in its initial form. This included the basic concepts and ideas of Project Management, as described in the PMBOK, whilst also incorporating the aims of Agile development. This phase of project work comprised several small projects, thus enabling an evaluation and adjustment period within this phase of the research itself.

During each of the three project work phases, the Project Management framework was put into action and tested for suitability, and then adjustments were made where necessary. Data was collected from each project phase, and as shown in Figure 1, was then interpreted with the cooperation of the research participants. This method of research, where the researcher collaborates with the participants to interpret and refine the solution, recognises and places value on them as co-researchers

(Argyris, Putnam & McLain Smith 1985). Additionally, this approach also enables researchers to achieve rigour in their research results (Dick 1999b). Working in tandem, the researcher and participants devised a plan on how to address issues which occurred in the previous phase. The project implementation plan was reviewed, and a revised set of actions was used in the next stage, incorporating the suggested changes to improve the implementation of the subsequent projects. Neuman (2006, p. 405) notes that this style of input and feedback from participants is extremely valuable to a researcher as a form of member validation, and that 'a study is member valid if members recognize and understand the researcher's description as reflecting their intimate social world'. This method of participant consultation also provides a valuable source of triangulation of the research results.

The research commenced with a literature review, and this process continued throughout the research stages as well. This enabled the researcher to ensure that emergent topics and issues uncovered during the action cycles were examined in light of the known literature, and tested these results against an academic framework. This constant literature review component was also a valuable input when planning and refining for the next Action Research cycle.

The initial Project Management framework was designed around the fundamental elements and concepts established in the PMBOK from PMI. One substantial reason behind the choice of this framework as a basis for the research is that PMI currently has over one million members around the world, making it a tried and tested method and one of the de facto frameworks in the market today. This more traditional style of project management was then combined with concepts and tools derived from Agile software development, primarily components from both the Scrum and XP development methods. The end result of this amalgamation was an Agile Project Management framework, which was then used to assist in the implementation of projects in a more flexible and Agile manner. This framework was assembled and refined over the course of the research, producing the final version of the resulting framework, depicted as a model in Figure 2.
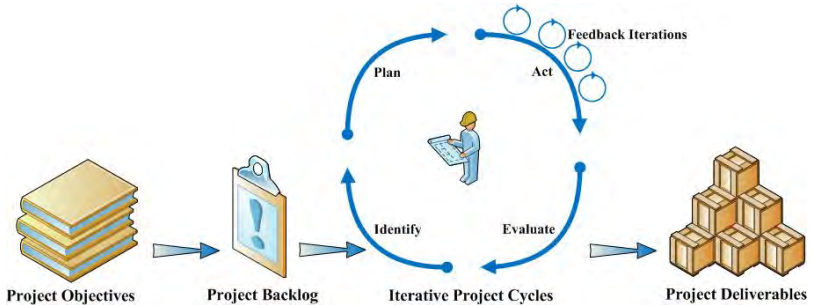
Figure 2: A model of the final Agile Project Management framework. Source: Developed for this study

With the commencement of each project, the project goals are discussed and clarified with the project stakeholders. These stakeholders may include upper management who have a stake in the outcome, department heads, or even the end-user of the final product. This step of the complete process is where the project objectives are set out. However, if the product is rather unique, a detailed result may not be initially definable at this stage. This is an environment for which Agile Project Management is particularly suited, though at the very least the goals for the first work cycle need to be defined. These project objectives are then used to define the set of tasks that make up the project backlog.

The project backlog is a list of tasks that need to be completed in order to achieve the project goals. Each of these tasks is a part of the whole, and must add some value to achieving the end result. If a task does not add value to the project goals, then either the project has been incorrectly defined, or the task has been erroneously included in the backlog. Once all the tasks have been added to the backlog they are ordered and prioritised, as some tasks are more important and others may have dependencies which need to be first addressed. This artefact then provides the input for the action cycles.

In the action cycle stages the work is broken into four phases. Using the backlog tasks as an input, the goals for that particular

cycle are determined, with internal agreement in the team about how a successful implementation of the tasks will be determined. Planning occurs in the second phase of the cycle, and in this phase the implementation of each task is organised and discussed, and then assigned to the proper individual or team depending on the size of the task. In the third phase of the cycle the planned work is put into action and the implementation work is done. This stage is flexible in the amount of time it involves, depending on the size of the project and the speed with which the cycles are happening. A project with a long implementation time may have cycles of a week or more, whereas a project with a shortened length may have cycles of just a day or two. As depicted in Figure 2, during the act stage of the cycle there are also feedback iterations at regular intervals. This is a process where the project team regularly takes time to step back and assess the progress of the tasks for that cycle, and ensure that progress is not drifting away from the intended goal. Since each cycle can possess a variable time frame, the feedback iterations are also variable in their timing. An act stage that is implemented over several weeks will benefit from daily feedback, whereas a shortened and more intense act stage may require feedback iterations every few hours, especially when the implementation is happening quickly or there is a heightened level of project risk involved. Ultimately the project manager and team will need to determine the correct timing for the feedback iterations to enable them to fulfil the goals for that cycle. The final stage of the cycle is an important step to the complete process, and one that is easy to neglect. This phase is where the project team takes the time to summarise the work completed in that cycle. The team examines what has transpired, and judge whether the goals established in the earlier phase of the cycle have been achieved. If these goals have not been achieved, the team will need to determine what went wrong with the implementation, and how the project execution could have been improved. This is a vital step, as an Agile Project Management framework needs to be able to react quickly and positively to change, and if problems or processes are not adapted quickly then issues can quickly mount and become substantial problems.

The purpose of each cycle is to produce a portion of the desired end result that is usable. Hence, this style is best suited to a product or project where the deliverables are able to be implemented in an incremental fashion. This incremental approach allows the project stakeholders to test the portions of the end product as they are delivered, rather than requiring them to wait for the final product. Additionally, allowing stakeholders to test the product in an incremental fashion enables their suggestions for adjustments to be used as an input for the next cycle.

An Agile Project Management framework can improve the success of the project delivery, allowing the project team to take a more flexible and reactive approach. This style is best suited though for projects involving a changing environment, or where project goals cannot be fully defined. Critics of Agile methods assert that this style of management has few controls and a lack of accountability, leaving project teams to implement in their own manner without interference or control from outside influence. Whilst it is a less bureaucratic style by nature, it is possible to implement controls using traditional project management tools. The project manager will need to assess the size and complexity of the project, as well as the size and diversity of the project team, to determine the requirements for the individual project tools. For a small team or project, a task-based board system as used in Scrum development may provide sufficient control and task allocation (Schwaber 2004), which can take either a physical or an electronic form. A more complex project may require work breakdown structures, project resource scheduling, work schedules, or other typical traditional project tools, to provide the level of control and oversight that the project manager requires. In all these decisions the project manager's skillset is a crucial factor, and holds a central role when implementing an Agile Project Management framework. The project manager needs the skills to know which tools to bring into operation for each project and with what level of detail to deploy them.

Limitations of the research

As with any study, there are limitations to the scope of the research and the applicability of the results. One limitation of this research is also an innate attribute of Action Research, the research methodology used for this work. Action Research enables researchers to interact with and gain an in-depth knowledge of a social system, and focuses their efforts to problem solving for that society setting. However, the research results may be coloured with the occurrence of the Hawthorne effect (Roethlisberger & Dickson 2003). This occurs when research participants are aware that they are being observed, and as a result their behaviour is influenced by the very act of observation. As Action Research is susceptible to occurrences of the Hawthorne effect (Baskerville & Stage 1996), the potential for the generalisation of these research results is difficult to determine.

Another potential limitation to the study is that whilst Action Research is tailored to a specific environment, the results may not be valid or meaningful when applied to an alternate social group. Though quantitative research strives for repeatable results, this is not the primary goal of Action Research, and is often not a desired result. However, this research was prepared with the aim of being 'recoverable' (Checkland & Holwell 1998), where the researcher strives to establish scientific validity and rigour to a level that is greater than simply scientific plausibility, which then enables future researchers to subject the work to further scrutiny and build upon it.

Primary findings arising from the research

Responsiveness to project requirement changes was improved. The research involved a series of projects that were extremely unique in the situations that they dealt with and the products that they delivered. Quite often the products and solutions that these projects were focussed on involved niche media markets. Projects had very brief lead times, as the company aimed to be first to these new markets, and it was common for changes to be introduced at several stages of the project implementation, often when the

project progress was quite advanced. This is one of the core principles of Agile development, where changes are welcomed even at an advanced stage, if the change will improve the end product for the stakeholders. The Agile Project Management framework was used to improve the flow of the projects and enhanced the management of the projects, particularly in situations that contained a high degree of uncertainty or where project requirements were shifting. By adapting the mix of Agile and traditional project management techniques to each project, the responsiveness to change with projects improved within the IT department, and the team was able to improve the effectiveness of the execution of projects.

The Agile Project Management framework was adaptable to projects and organisations. Each project was unique in the style and amount of processes required for proper management. The project management undertaken for each company also required different levels of detail and processes, conditional on the requirements of upper management. This is an ideal approach, as Agile works best, not when it is used in its pure form, but when it is adapted to the organisation (Smith & Sidky 2009). For Publish-Com, a more informal task-based style of management adopted from Scrum development was able to be implemented, although for Media-Com a more formal style of project management was required. Media-Com is a subsidiary of Global-Com, which is a multinational group of companies, and as such company-wide IT governance processes and standards were required once projects reached a certain budgetary size.

The project management style adopted by Global-Com is structured along the lines of a traditional waterfall model, where project phases are meticulously planned and implemented in a structured and linear manner. It was still possible however for the project team in Media-Com to use the Agile Project Management framework locally, and insert it into the overall project management structure required by Global-Com. This type of situation is dependant of the local project manager for implementation, and they need to have an understanding of both traditional and Agile project approaches, and the requirements of

each approach and how it fits into the overall scheme of project management. With Global-Com, the waterfall-style processes were required for IT governance and budgetary control, whereas the Agile project framework was necessary for the local execution of the project in Media-Com. For each project, the project manager was required to adapt the exact style and approach, as 'one size does not fit all' (Shenhar 2001, p. 413) when managing projects, especially in a changing environment.

The project manager holds a central role. The importance of the project manager for a successful project should not be overlooked. Holding a pivotal role in the implementation of the project, this manager needs to be trained and proficient in the use of a variety of project management styles, in addition to possessing adequate domain knowledge (Leybourne & Sadler-Smith 2006). Even the management style and personality of the project manager need to be carefully matched to the project to ensure a high level of success, as a great portion of the success hinges on the project manager (Dvir, Sadeh & Malach-Pines 2006). If the project manager does not possess this training, or possesses a personality or management style that is mismatched to the project, then the success rate will undoubtedly be diminished when implementing this project management style. Furthermore, the project manager also needs the skills and personality that will enable them to examine the more traditional project management tools, and be able to combine them in a balanced mixture with the Agile development tools (Amason et al. 2007). With this examination they are able to determine the best course of action for each project, and deliver a customised project management strategy.

Agile Project Management is flexible, but cannot solve all problems. Some of the issues encountered during this research were exacerbated by the global financial crisis. The effects from this event were noted in the research organisations approximately halfway through the research and as a result budgetary and personnel resources available to projects were reduced. The workload was higher than normal for most employees, during this crisis period, and there were decreased levels of engagement by participants, as over-worked team members concentrated their

efforts primarily on their everyday work, and less-so on project work. It required a concerted effort to engage participants in project work during this period, especially when decreased budgets limited the solutions to problems in project. This is a known issue that project managers face, when they must source project team members from functional departments, especially so in times when those departments are overworked and starved of resources themselves (Grenny, Maxfield & Shimberg 2007). Projects were still completed successfully, though as one participant remarked; maybe this is due more to the determination of eager project team members to complete the project, rather than any specific project delivery style.

Use a compact team structure. Project delivery in an SME environment primarily occurs in small teams, as small organisations usually undertake small projects. Since the project teams are typically smaller, the team members will often be required to perform the functions of more than a single role. In a large organisation the project manager often holds a supervisory role, whereas in a small team the project manager is frequently hands-on, providing both technical and managerial skills. The concept of a four-man team was adopted from the Australian army, where it has been proven under adverse conditions that a four-man team is an ideal configuration, providing both flexibility and adaptability (Colton 2008). These concepts were adapted to the project team, where small teams of approximately four members were chosen. This enabled the project teams to remain adaptable and flexible, whilst still able to scale up for larger projects, by adding extra teams as required.

Conclusion

It is becoming common practice for project managers to adapt their project management style to the specific situation, rather than applying one approach across all projects, choosing the correct tools and processes required for each unique project. When taking such an approach the project manager needs to employ a flexible and adaptable management style. Adopting an approach to project management that can be implemented in a flexible manner can

also provide noticeable benefits, and allows an Agile Project
Management framework to be used as a set of complimentary tools
even in situations where another style of management is already in
place.

The Agile Project Management framework provided useful tools
for the project team, and improved the project implementation
work. This style was also favoured by research participants, as
noted when discussing the incremental implementation style.

Interview excerpt:

> 'I find it a good idea. … Because for nearly everyone they
> are not noticeable changes… When you make changes in
> small steps, and people don't notice or realise it, then it is a
> perfect solution.'

Interview excerpt:

> 'When you have the possibility to go step-by-step, then you
> can try to avoid obstacles or to optimise (the product)… or
> when new information is added, you can incorporate that.'

The project management framework presented here should not be
implemented simply in a step-by step manner, or used as a process
manual for beginners. This is not a description of the 'right' way to
manage projects, but rather it presents a flexible and adaptable
project management style, which can be used for projects
associated with uncertainty or where the requirements have the
potential to change.

The organisations and specific environments where this research
was conducted formed an extremely unique situation, and is one
that would be difficult to recreate. The overall research
environment was formed from a combination of the SME
organisation structure, the artistic nature of the employees
working in a media and publishing industry, and the external
influence of the global finance crisis during the research process.
Whilst this created a particularly unique environment, the validity
and rigour of the results were always of prime importance to
ensure that the research results would form an acceptable
contribution to scientific literature. This was achieved with a

constant review of associated academic literature, feedback from research participants, triangulation of data, and the use of critical review by the researcher, as a strategy to ensure the scientific nature of the findings.

The Agile Project Management framework is still in early stages of development and research, and further research needs to occur into the model itself to investigate whether it can produce favourable results in a wider range of environments and organisations. Potential research could investigate whether it can be scaled to environments that are larger than the SME-sized organisations researched here, and whether it is possible to design a toolkit that can provide benefits for the typical project member. This could potentially increase the success of projects by providing team members with tools that could be implemented, without requiring the education and training level of the project manager.

Projects occurring in an SME environment face some particularly unique challenges. These projects are usually carried out in an environment that is more fluid, thus limit the extent of project planning that can be carried out. Projects are generally carried out in small teams, with roles being assigned to a few people, with team members occasionally needing to fulfil the functions of multiple roles. Quite often the project manager is not only performing a project supervisory role, but is also charged with the physical implementation as well. As SMEs are generally operating with a less bureaucratic style of management, the more formalised methods of project management are ill-suited to this type of work, and can even introduce problems due to their lack of flexibility. After taking these factors into consideration, a project management style that combined a proven project management method with tools and concepts adopted from Agile development was found to provide real benefits in such a situation, and provides a solid foundation for future investigation. As the IT industry is increasingly required to react to business demands in a flexible manner, the topic of Agile Project Management will increase in importance, and this study endeavours to assist IT project teams in this journey.

About the author

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A Reflexive Study of the Continuous Practice Improvement of a Global Marketeer

Michael M. Dent

Abstract

This short paper aims to introduce the methodology applied by a Global Marketeer based on the paradigm of Critical Theory and utilising an Action Research methodology with interpretative and hermeneutic foundations.   The overarching approach is known as Living Educational Theory as promulgated by Professor Jack Whitehead (formerly of the University of Bath).[1] The specific approach I use has been referred to as "The Living Thesis", the methodology that I have chosen to adopt is that of Wong (2007), which is that of a case study applying ethnographic reflection to my professional practice.

Key words

Gently Phenomenon; Serendipity; Critical Moments

Prologue

The paper examines the career of a global professional as he moves across three continents whilst working for a large multi-national organisation.   It describes the circle of Academe to Corporate and

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[1] Whitehead, J. (1989). Creating a Living Educational Theory from Questions of the kind 'How do I improve my Practice'. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 19, pp41-52.

back to Academe. It builds the narrative from that of a student, to a practitioner, on to a learner and finally to that of a reflexive practitioner.

The target audience for this paper is both Academics and Practitioners. The single case study approach permits observations that can be utilised as building blocks in a theory of organisations and the individuals that work within them. This complex interaction of large numbers of variables produces chaos in some dimensions (in the sense that they are both unforecastable and uncontrollable), undesirable consequences (through some deterministic interactions) and some predictors of success or failure at an individual level. This case study is therefore applying Grounded Theory using a Qualitative methodology and an interdisciplinary approach. Grounded Theory requires an in depth analysis of empirical material, it is not dependent on the ability to prove or disprove hypotheses (Glaser, 1998) (Glaser & Strauss, 2009).

Marx tended to look on organisations and their managers as all with similar objectives and approaches. Critical analysis rejects this perspective and this thesis attempts to show how individual conflicts of interest can lead to undesirable consequences at organisational and societal levels. This has implications for a wide slew of legitimate State interests, including corporate taxation, legal Structure, Society etc. I portray Organisations as complex entities whose behaviour can be mapped, analysed and future predictions made. But this behaviour is the result of a large number of interactions which may not have any guiding hand. Essentially Organisations may have a will to survive but they themselves are soulless.

Improving individual performance requires clear objective setting, regular reviews with (ideally) 360 degree feedback and the willingness and drive to reflect, followed by remedial action as necessary. The actions need to be focussed primarily on the emotional and rational needs of the primary actors and not necessarily on deficiencies that the target audience are unaware of or consider of minor importance.

The Action Research methodology employs a hermeneutic and interpretative approach. The stance taken is that of Critical Theory, that is to say with an objective ontology and subjective epistemology. It therefore rejects the Post-Modernism position of subjective ontologies and epistemologies whilst accepting that language is in itself value laden and requires careful interpretation. I do write, however, in a Post Modernist style. In a sense it is an emic ethnographic investigation into the field (or society) of Marketing. It does, necessarily, possess autobiographical elements in order to apply the Action Research methodology but it is not in itself an autobiographical study. The strength of the Action Research approach is that a wide range of data is presented and is then subjected to evaluation and an ever-decreasing spiral of supportive data based on warranted assertions in order to produce fresh insights into the field of the researcher.

Epistemology is a central theme within this paper and the importance of warranted knowledge as an underwriter of validity and reliability is underlined. Similarly the link between tacit knowledge and luck is examined and found to be far stronger than has perhaps been previously recognised.

Becoming a proficient reflective and reflexive practitioner requires adopting a life-long learner approach to work, career, family, health and social interactions. All of these domains overlap and interact with one another. The language of English is also of import, as indeed is the structure of language. The research explores the philosophical conceptualisation of business and how it is experienced from an emic perspective. Hidden frames of reference can provide a barrier to understanding and hence this research provides a richer insight into language within the business context.

The danger of reflexive research is that there must necessarily exist a correlation between the subject of study and the psychology of the researcher; therefore without knowledge of both, fuller understanding remains unobtainable.

I also underline the rôle of creativity and indeed tacit knowledge, based on a thorough understanding of existing theory, empirical

observation and abductive reasoning which can result in inspirational thought which results in the discovery of patterns new to existing human knowledge.

Fundamentally the process of action, critical self-reflection and writing empowers the writer as a thinker and hence improving his capability of excellence in analysis and thus superior action in the future. The results produce insights both for future international professionals and also researchers and teachers in the field of business administration.

Methodology

The diagram below provides a concise overview of the methodology employed which is based upon an understanding of the philosophical constructs of this research methodology, reflective writing, triangulation with secondary data sources and literature and finally analysed as part of a meta data matrix
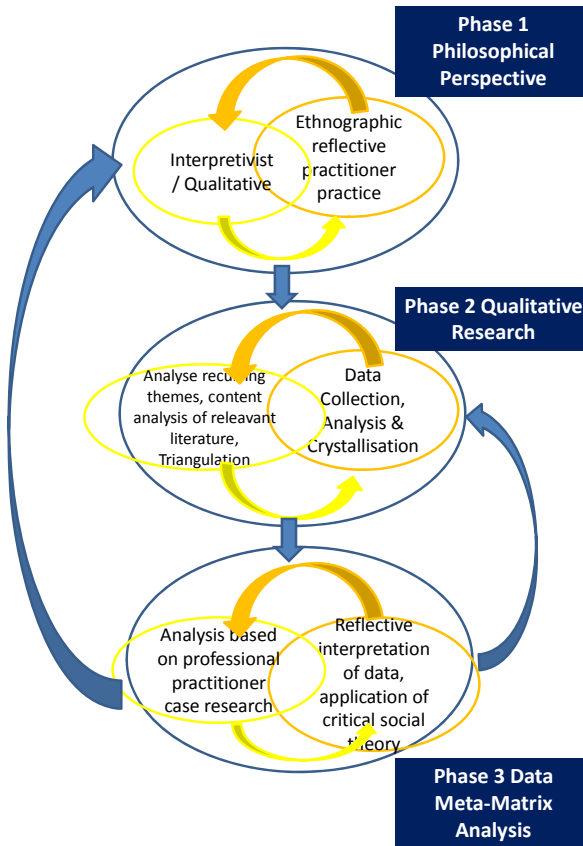
Figure 1. A Qualitative Case Study Methodology, employing Habermas's critical social theory perspective within a phenomenological, reflective practitioner approach, adapted from Lavertu (2007).

This methodology employs heuristics applying both depth and breadth of reflections on my experiential material thus producing insights into the field of international marketing. I feel that I have been consistent with my own brand map in which my espoused theory is mainly consistent with my lived theory (Jack Whitehead

(1993)), although I recognise that this has not always been the case. Self awareness is vital to the correct recognition and identification of the inconsistencies between espoused and lived theory (Noffke, 1997). My writing is within what Jack Whitehead calls the "Living Thesis Paradigm", he asserts that the use of the first person singular ("I") is not only acceptable, but also recommended, encapsulating as it does the subjectivity of the paradigm. Enquiries of "How do I improve what I am doing" involve the clarification and evolution in the cycle of action reflection, action plans, data and subsequent reflection on the effectiveness of the actions and then evaluation. This is then followed by the modification of the action plan and the cycle continues (Whitehead, 2012).

The research question

I presented some of the outputs of my research at the ALARA conference in Brisbane in September 2013, however, I regard these conclusions as secondary in importance to the application of the methodology to a long term professional business career.

The central problem that I start with is:

> "How do I improve my professional practice?"

I see myself astride two complementary professions – that of an Academic and a Marketeer[2].   I re-entered academia in 2009 after some 30 years in the corporate world. This was not an idle move, I had taught previously back in 1981 and it was always my intention to return.

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[2]   My spelling is intentional. And the Economist Style Guide would indeed agree with me (c.f .Black Marketeer, Free Marketeer etc.). But my professional body (the Chartered Institute of Marketing) is driving its' brand image strongly away from any pejorative connotations and prefers the use of the term "Marketer".

I have in other published articles[3] (all related to the problem identified above), covered the theory and epistemological foundations of my research, the overall gestalt of my career and some vignettes illustrating critical moments or lessons learnt. All conclude with reflections on the implications for the theory of the philosophy of management.

This paper represents a summation of the primary observations I have made regarding Organizational Theory and how this knowledge can be applied by both myself, and others like me.

My 2013 ALARA conference paper focused on three of the major observations I have made in the course of my studies; namely Critical Moments, the importance of Tacit knowledge and Serendipity and finally the Gently Phenomenon.

Structure of the research

In this section I provide an overview of the structure of my research and how I approached it. The outline provided below suggests an iterative process, in fact it was circular, or spiral in practice.

I had access to old diaries, Powerpoint presentations, reports, photographs etc., but sadly, very few e-mails (which had been erased either deliberately or accidentally by various IT departments).

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3   Dent. M.M., Wong Sek Khin E. & bin Ismail M.N. (2012) Action Research and critical theoretic approaches to management studies. Actual Problems of Economics, Scientific Economic Journal, No.4 (130), pp366-371, Dent.M.M. & Wong Sek Khin E. (2012) Marketing Action Research: The career of a professional marketeer. Actual Problems of Economics, Scientific Economic Journal No.6 (132), pp360-366, Dent.M.M. & Wong Sek Khin E (2012) The Marketeer experiences: Action research conceptual developments. Actual Problems of Economics, Scientific Economic Journal No.7 (133), pp 324-330, Dent, M.M., Wong Sek Khin, E & bin Ismail M.N (2013) Critical and interpretive social science theory: A case study approach. Actual Problems of Economics, Scientific Economic Journal No.8 (146), pp268-275, Dent, M.M., Wong Sek Khin, E. & bin Ismail M.N. (2013) Reflective practitioner case research: Ontological and epistemological orientation. Actual Problems of Economics, Scientific Economic Journal No.9 (147).

I commenced with an overview of the research problem and my approach to it. I detailed what it is that I wish to improve and various methods for measuring my progress. I committed to paper an insight into my family background and commenced the critical reflection process. I detailed my philosophical position within the environs of Critical Theory and then gave some background to the development of the theory of continuous improvement commencing with Deming and also discussing Lewin's Action Research feedback loop (Lewin, 1959) and Reason & Bradbury's work (Reason & Bradbury, 2006) on the heuristically reflexive practioner approach. I concluded with some observations on the actual revealed benefits of the critically reflective cycle.

I then examined how epistemology impacts on my research, the drawbacks and circularities involved and then moved on to discuss how the concept of warranted knowledge can help deal with some of these issues.

Whilst all of the above was going on I was also reading widely, building the foundations for that which is to follow. I would not say that much of the reading that I did was wasted, but certainly some aspects were discarded at various stages. In particular I read much philosophy, without really knowing what I was looking for. Later I focused on the work of Habermas on Critical Theory and then moved on to discuss how relevant it is to Management research. Habermas is renowned for his re-vitalisation of the Critical Theory paradigm (Pusey, 1987).

I then examined my own identity (applying a marketing tool known as a Brand Map) and sought to see how I could apply Critical Theory to my career. The Brand Map is used to determine the key functional and emotional evaluative factors used by Senior Management, Rivals and Followers to assess one's performance. Marketing theory tells us that the emotional drivers of choice are frequently more important than the functional ones (which are only used to achieve post-facto rationalisation). The insights of Habermas reveal how these factors may be very different to both reality and the perception of others. My ultimate conclusion revealed my true purpose which is to voice and put on record my thoughts on social justice. This is consistent with the Greek ideal

of Ethics that is to say a life well lived. This might be termed "the Socratic project of creating a better world through the use of liberating human reasoning".

I then (remembering that much of this was often contemporaneous) investigated the theory of the reflective practitioner and the case study approach. I used various approaches to identify areas for development.

The penultimate stage was less theoretical and more applied, relating events and then reflecting on how this fits with my current understanding: whether I need to review my past actions and then further consider what other options may have been preferable. I then attempted to move on from the specific to more general but also more fundamental issues, which may have been hidden from view. I described a phenomenon of inter-connectedness, which in today's increasingly global economy I foresee becoming more prevalent in the future. The backdrop for this analysis is my movement across the Globe in various marketing rôles

The final twist in the spiral of continuous reflection was to consider the impact that a few critical events can have on one's career. Both Luck and Religion were examined and how they may impact in improving one's professional practice.

Conclusions

The research methodology does not require the generation of new rules for behaviour or explanations of organizational behaviour, nonetheless three observations are made which may prove of value to future researchers. This is partly the role of Action Research, to provide fuzzy answers to fuzzy questions, which can then generate more precise questions and research methodologies appropriate to the new problems identified (Bob Dick, ALARA Conference, 2013)

I would put forward three observations relating to Critical Moments, the Gently phenomenon and the value of Tacit Knowledge.

Critical Moments

At any one time some events seem quite momentous and others fairly insignificant. However, on reflection it becomes clearer that

some that seemed insignificant were seminal and other momentous events merely shooting stars. I would differentiate between critical moments, which I see as key decision nodes in one's life or career and critical events or incidents[4] which relate to a change in one's external environment which result in a significant impact on one's planned or expected future.

My observation in respect of both my own and others who I have observed is that political rivals will take advantage of any identifiable weaknesses. For this reason alone playing with a straight bat is necessary not just for one's own integrity but also for corporate survival itself. To give but one example, one colleague of mine was ousted when his rival combed through over 6 months of receipts to find a (very) few anomalies: he was accused of padding his expenses and summarily dismissed.

Secondly key decisions are often seen as dichotomous whereas in reality there is often a third way. I have been told (twice) in my career to fire someone as my line manager did not approve of them (one because she smoked, the other because she was not young and pretty enough). I declined in both cases and then had much cause to regret my actions. On reflection I realise that I did have other allies and resources that I could have called upon to help me out.

The Gently Phenomenon

Various writers on organizations (Back, 1992), (Bechtold, 1997) & (Black, 2000) utilise Chaos and Complexity Theories to posit a view of multiple dynamic interactions within a company. On reflection I now see this as even more complex still – there is also an industry dimension where the same actors come into contact with each other in different roles at different times in different organisations. In the absence of a suitable name for this principle of interconnectedness I will refer to it as the "Gently" phenomena.

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[4] Smears (2009) uses the term "incident" to describe a debilitating cycle accident and the impact on her career.

I refer to the Gently Phenomenon as being the probability that in any one person's career, they will come back into contact with past colleagues in other organizations later in their career. Given, Geography, Educational Background, the Job Specifications, Age Group etc this (in my experience) is quite common. The way I would describe it would be similar to that of the basic nuclear model, with the Organization represented by the centre of the atom with various professions (Marketing, Engineering, Finance, IT, HR etc) whizzing around. Any individual may be closely attached to his professional discipline or area of expertise or more closely attached to the organization itself. This is clearly demonstrated in the HR practices of UPS and DHL in the early 2000s where UPS would deliberately move executives from one discipline to another whilst DHL relied more upon professional expertise. Nonetheless some people would leave and join other organizations - usually within the same discipline. The reason that the Gently Phenomena is important is because these individuals may know more about you than your current work colleagues (c.f the Johari Window) which can provide either a positive or negative influence on your career.

Figure 2. The (Balinese version) Johari Window[5]

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[5]   The Johari Window is taken from the names of Joseph Luft and Harry Ingham, who developed the model in 1955 (Luft, 1969)

Tacit Knowledge, serendipity & the science of being lucky

> Dans les champs de l'observation le hasard ne favorise que
> les esprits prepares (Pasteur, 1854)

As discussed previously I now realise that tacit knowledge is of critical importance, far more so than qualifications or time served in a particular role. The ability to anticipate the moves of others is the key to being in the right place at the right time. Many would describe this as luck, but I would reply that in many cases people (to a large extent) can make their own luck.

I have been described by many people as a very lucky person. And I do agree that, for the most part, life has treated me most kindly. The important question is why have I been lucky ? When being accused of being lucky, a golfer famously replied "Yes, I am, and the funny thing is that the more I practice, the luckier I get"[6]. In other words experience and practice are slightly improving the probability of success. Indeed skill and talent can often be seen to be subordinate to practice (Syed, 2010).

One of the Agency planners gave me some advice early in my career – make friends before you need them. I think this has to be one of my key learning points from my own reflections.

The counterpoint to this would be the danger of a new boss – particularly one that does not know you, has no loyalty to you and may have conflicting objectives. In my case this has proved to my detriment on three separate occasions (once in the UK, once in Belgium and once in Malaysia). Whilst this is unsurprising the learning point is identical to the one above. Make friends before you need them. The difference is that between that of opportunities and threats. Maximising opportunities and minimising threats would be the mantra. Both require maintaining

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[6]   Often misattributed to the US Golfer Gary Player.

strong networks and creating favourable impressions but the latter may require more of an external rather than internal focus. After many years in not only the same industry (which was itself consolidating) but also in the same company, I found that my external networks were actually quite weak. In retrospect I should have been more active with the Chartered Institute of Marketing and certainly monitored external job opportunities more closely. Networking and taking advantage of the Gently Phenomenon could have proved serendipitous.

About the author

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Special Notice from the Faculty of Design Architecture and Building at the University of Technology, Sydney: Collaborative Action Research Laboratory (CARLab)

Chivonne Algeo and Shankar Sankaran

The Faculty of Design Architecture and Building (DAB) at the University of Technology Sydney has recently established a laboratory with a collaborative interface that will be of great interest to researchers studying group activities.

Project Manager Karyne Ang of the Faculty of Engineering and Information Technology at UTS conducting an Action Research project at CARLab with Dr Timothy Aubrey Associate Dean of Teaching and Learning of the faculty.

CARLab located in the 5th Floor of Building 6 at UTS in Harris Street provides a new dedicated collaborative environment that integrates single and multi-user user interfaces. This is achieved through the use of the Cruiser connected surfaces software developed by Cruiser Interactive which "provides seamless and immersive connectivity across touch and gesture-based hardware" and a flat interactive table with a 55″ screen. The lab will aid in investigating individual and group activities using Activity Theory and Action Research. The interactive surface can also aid in studying group decision making, Action Learning, collaborative learning and group dynamics.

Several activities happening in UTS culminated in the conceptualisation of CARLab. Three years ago Professor Alfons van Marrewijk, the extraordinary Chair in Business Anthropology at the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Amsterdam http://www.fsw.vu.nl/en/departments/organization-sciences/staff/van-marrewijk/index.asp lectured at UTS about research that he conducted to study group decision making at Shell Oil Company where project teams used a roller table to discuss project schedules. In 2010, Dr Michael Er, a senior lecturer at the School of the Built Environment (SBE) at UTS, completed his doctoral studies using activity theory as a lens to investigate information system use of mobile knowledge workers. In 2013 Professor Barbara Czarniawska, Chair of Management Studies Gothenburg Research Institute at the University of Gothenburg visited UTS and gave a talk about studying computer work using emerging approaches to field studies of organizing that aim to avoid the problems of traditional methods and techniques http://www.gri.gu.se/english/contact-us/staff/barbara_czarniawska/. In 2013 Dr Julien Pollack, a senior lecturer at SBE, proposed a research project to study group dynamics by observing teams that worked on a project to create the spectacular fireworks to celebrate the New Year over the Sydney Harbour Bridge and surrounds. Dr Chivonne Algeo, a senior lecturer at SBE completed doctoral research in 2014 using Action Research investigating how project managers exchanged knowledge.

A talk given by Professor Yrjö Engeström at the European Group of Organisations Studies (EGOS) conference in 2013 about The Centre for Activity Theory and Developmental Work Research (CRADLE) established at the Faculty of Behavioural Sciences at the University of Helsinki http://www.edu.helsinki.fi/activity/people/engestro/ also provided the inspiration to establish CARLab.

CARlab was proposed and implemented by a project team at UTS comprising of Professor Shankar Sankaran, Dr Julien Pollack, Dr Michael Er, Dr Chivonne Algeo and Daniel Adler. Professor Sankaran completed his PhD in 1999 using Action Research and Action Learning in combination investigating how managers in a Japanese multinational in Singapore learned by working on real problems facing the organisation that resulted in a large-scale change. Dr Pollack completed his PhD using Action Research to investigate practical ways of combining project management with systems thinking techniques to meet the demands of organizational change in the Australian public sector. Daniel Adler is a PhD scholar at UTS applying activity theory to study project management.

After investigating several options the UTS team decided to use the Cruiser Interactive Software developed in Australia http://www.cruiserinteractive.com.au/cruiser-interactive. Cruiser is a platform developed by Smart Services CRC (funded by the Cooperative Research Centre program) in collaboration with researchers at the Computer Human Adapted Interaction (CHAI) research group, at the University of Sydney.

The researchers UTS are planning to use CARLab to conduct research to simulate situations to investigate teams carrying out various activities and contribute to Action Research and activity theory and group dynamics.

CARlab was recently opened by Professor Peter McNeil, Associate Dean of Research at DAB and A/Professor Heather MacDonald who is the Head of the School of the Built Environment. UTS expects to engage with industry to conduct research using the equipment installed at CARlab.

For more information on CARLab please contact Shankar Sankaran on shankar.sankaran@uts.edu.au

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'Ngulluck Katitj Wah Koorl Koorliny/ Us mob going along learning to research together': Drawing on Action Research to develop a literature review on Indigenous gendered health and wellbeing

Bronwyn Fredericks, Kathleen Clapham, Roxanne Bainbridge, Len Collard, Mick Adams, Dawn Bessarab, Clair Andersen, Deb Duthie, Rowena Ball, Marlene Thompson (Longbottom), Carolyn Daniels

Abstract

This paper describes the collaborative work practices of the Health and Wellbeing Node within the National Indigenous Research and Knowledges Network (NIRAKN). The authors reflect on the processes they used to research and develop a literature review. As a newly established research team, the Health and Wellbeing Node members developed a collaborative approach that was informed by Action Research practices and underpinned by Indigenous ways of working. The authors identify strong links between Action Research and Indigenous processes. They suggest that, through ongoing cycles of research and review, the NIRAKN Health and Wellbeing Node developed a culturally safe, respectful and truly

collaborative way of working together and forming the identity of their work group. In this paper, they describe their developing work processes and explain the way that pictorial conceptual models contributed to their emerging ideas.

Keywords

Action Research, Action Learning, Collaborative Relationships, Indigenous, Literature Review, NIRAKN, Pictorial Conceptual Model

Introduction

Academic research – particularly the literature review stage – tends to be a solitary task. Even in jointly-published work, in our experience the literature review tends to be coordinated and directed by a solitary researcher. From our perspective as Indigenous health researchers, the solitary approach to research brings two key problems: firstly, it sidelines Indigenous, collaborative ways of working and risks undermining the richness that collaborative practice can produce; secondly, it mirrors the approach of much research about Indigenous people – as research conducted by one group (usually a non-Indigenous group) about a different group (the Indigenous peoples being studied) – with the accompanying risk that the research outcomes reflect the perspective of the dominant group who conducted the research.

As Indigenous health researchers, we wanted to explore whether a collaborative, action-research-informed approach could be applied to writing a literature review. We worked together through the National Indigenous Research and Knowledges Network (NIRAKN), as members of the Health and Wellbeing Node, to develop a literature review. In this paper, we describe our collaborative processes and reflect on the outcomes that it produced. We argue that our work processes – collaborative practices that were informed by Action Research and underpinned by Indigenous processes – helped us to work in a truly collaborative way, establish our identity as a Health and Wellbeing Node, and provide a culturally safe working environment where all members were welcome to contribute. As a new research team,

we developed ways for working together and learning from each other. Our Action Research approach to the literature review helped us to organise collaborative relationships and conduct regular review cycles. It also helped to ensure that all members of the Health and Wellbeing Node participated, critiqued and reflected on the content and direction of the literature review. In the spirit of Action Research, Health and Wellbeing Node members became part of the research process, rather than being separate from it (Veal 2005).

What is NIRAKN?

The National Indigenous Research and Knowledges Network (NIRAKN) was established in 2013 with funding from the Australian Research Council (ARC). NIRAKN was established to develop a critical mass within Australia of Indigenous researchers who can address the needs of Indigenous people through culturally appropriate research. NIRAKN operates from the premise that Indigenous knowledge systems should inform and frame the network's research (NIRAKN n.d.).

NIRAKN is a collaboration of 44 Australian Indigenous researchers, all at different stages of their research careers. The researchers come from 21 Australian universities and 5 partner organisations (the partner organisations are Ninti One, Waminda South Coast Women's Health and Welfare Aboriginal Corporation, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Healing Foundation, the National Congress of Australia's First People's and the United Nations University). NIRAKN is supported and guided by a 10-member Advisory Board of people who are recognised as leaders and Elders within the Indigenous community.

NIRAKN operates through a hub and spokes model. The central hub has overall responsibility for administration, coordination, and capacity building. The four spokes (or nodes) develop and conduct NIRAKN's research program. The four research nodes are (1) Indigenous Sociology and Knowledges, (2) Indigenous Health and Wellbeing, (3) Indigenous Law, and (4) Yuraki – History, Politics and Cultures. Node membership is fluid, with several

researchers belonging to multiple nodes or working across nodes on interdisciplinary research projects (NIRAKN n.d.).

As a research network, NIRAKN has six key aims: (1) build a strong network of Indigenous researchers; (2) support postgraduate and early-to-mid-career Indigenous researchers; (3) connect Indigenous researchers both nationally and internationally, and develop a culturally supportive and inclusive environment for multidisciplinary research; (4) develop ongoing integrated research collaborations with government, research bodies, industry, community and philanthropic organisations; (5) seek national and international recognition for Indigenous research expertise, knowledge and innovation; and (6) inform community and government policy and program delivery relating to Indigenous research agendas by utilising Indigenous knowledge and expertise (NIRAKN n.d.).

NIRAKN has an interdisciplinary focus, and its members come from a broad array of disciplines and research backgrounds. While many NIRAKN members knew each other personally before the network was formed, few of the researchers had previously worked together. Forming NIRAKN gave the network's members an opportunity to work together under one banner and to explore new ways of working that would both progress our research agenda and allow us to explore whether we could further Indigenise our research practices.

The NIRAKN Health and Wellbeing Node

When we started to work together as NIRAKN's Health and Wellbeing Node, we agreed that one of our focal points would be a holistic, gendered approach to health viewed through a lens of social and emotional wellbeing (NIRAKN n.d.). We were conscious of the ongoing crisis in Indigenous health, and the urgent need to develop research approaches that could lead to positive outcomes for Indigenous peoples in Australia. We agreed to focus on the strong links between gender, social and emotional wellbeing, reproductive health, and chronic diseases such as heart disease and diabetes.

In the initial stages of our work, we focused on establishing our work practices, learning about each other and developing our relationships. Our initial face-to-face meetings were full of excitement about the opportunities that the Health and Wellbeing Node presented for us. Our early meetings were also intense periods of forming relationships, engaging and yarning with each other to increase our understandings of the work ahead.

Yarning was central to our developing work practice. For us, yarning is a conversational process that takes place amongst Indigenous people and involves the telling and sharing of stories (Bessarab &Ng'andu 2010; Franks &Curr 1996; Fredericks et.al 2011). Yarning helps us visit and revisit who we are and who we are in connection with each other. It recognises our own distinct cultural heritages. It helps us acknowledge our existing relationships and create new ones. Yarning relies on cultural protocol (Bessarab &Ng'andu 2010). It is a process of communication and exchange – of linking stories and creating new conversations that are both cooperative and culturally embedded (Fredericks et.al 2011). Through yarning, we work through protocols and begin to develop both relationality with one another and accountability to one another (Martin 2008; Wilson 2008). For us as Health and Wellbeing Node members, the process of yarning helped us to build sustainable relationships as individuals and as a group of Indigenous researchers (Martin 2008; Wilson 2008). It gave us a culturally appropriate way of beginning our work together.

We agreed that our first Health and Wellbeing Node project should be inclusive. It needed to involve all members of the Node in some way and help us to develop as a cohesive research collective (Fredericks et.al 2011; Kendall et.al 2011). We also wanted to add freshness to the field and ensure that Indigenous perspectives were embedded throughout our work (Henderson 2000; Smith 1999). We were conscious that our work practices should reflect our Indigeneity and resist any temptation to be driven by forms of neo-colonialism (Bishop 2008; Chilisa 2012;

Collard & Palmer 2006; Rigney 1999; Smith 2008). We were also conscious that our first project would establish our work in future projects, and that we needed to develop a way of working that would welcome and include new members as NIRAKN develops and grows.

We agreed to begin our work program with a literature review about gendered Indigenous health and wellbeing. The literature review became a platform to both understand the field of work and develop our work practices. We worked from the understanding that our concepts of health and wellbeing were underpinned by Indigenous understandings (NAHS 1989).

Using Action Research to inform our work

Our literature review project involved building relationships between Indigenous researchers who had not worked together previously, and were newly linked through the establishment of NIRAKN. We learned to work together through cycles of questioning, planning, implementing, adjusting, reflecting, analysing and synthesising – working as a team, rather than as autonomous individuals (Bruce, Flynn & Stagg-Petersen 2011; Reason & Bradbury 2008a). We ensured that our work processes were underpinned by Indigenous perspectives (Bessarab &Ng'andu 2010; Collard &Harben 2010; Martin 2008). We then reflected on our practices and outcomes to ensure that we were learning to work with each other in a good way.

Action Research provides a useful theoretical base for reflecting on and understanding our practices as health researchers. Action Research can be seen as a practice for the systematic development of knowledge that differs from the traditional academic research model because it has different purposes, different relationships and different ways of conceiving knowledge in relation to practice (Reason & Bradbury 2008b). Action Research involves repetition of processes, where researchers and practitioners work together through cycles of activities that include problem diagnosis, action intervention and reflective learning (Avison et.al 1999). For us as members of the NIRAKN Health and Wellbeing Node, an Action

Research approach involved embracing a participatory process. We developed practical knowing and sought to engender action and reflection, combined with theory and practice, in order to develop practical solutions that would allow for the flourishing of individuals and their communities (Reason & Bradbury 2008b). Moreover, Action Research enabled the flow of action and inquiry within our work. It supported vigorous debate about the choices we made throughout the research process, about our different intellectual perspectives and about our different practical approaches to health and wellbeing (Bryant1996: Glesne 1999; Reason & Bradbury 2008a). The diversity of our Health and Wellbeing Node researchers – with varying levels of research experience, different skills and abilities, and varying Indigenous standpoints and perspectives – added depth and vigour to our work (Cram 2009; Dulwich Centre 1995).

We know from the work of Rigney (1999) that, in order for Indigenous research to make a difference, it needs to be grounded within the political reality of Indigenous people's lives. As researchers, it was important for us to work together in ways that would empower each researcher individually and empower the Health and Wellbeing Node as a whole. All Health and Wellbeing Node members have the right to claim and reclaim Indigenous values and to articulate what they mean for us (Cram 2009; Dulwich Centre 1995; Rigney 1999; Smith 1999).

Stringer's (1996, p. 7) work is important for us as Indigenous researchers; he proposes that 'those who have previously been designated as "subjects" should participate directly in research processes and that those processes should be applied in ways that benefit all participants directly'. The Health and Wellbeing Node members agreed that Stringer's work had direct application to all of our work – including the work within our Node and our work with Indigenous peoples more widely. In this instance, Action Research begins by working with a group, community or organisation to define the problems, situations and issues that are relevant; it then involves the group, community or organisation in the process of working towards change and finding solutions or answers (Glesne 1999; Stringer 1996). For the Health and Wellbeing

Node, this underscored our commitment to work as a collect to define the issues we would address, develop our work processes and conduct the research. The Action Research enabled us to break away from traditional conceptions of a literature review and work within an Indigenous framework.

The Action Research perspective encouraged us to continually make choices and challenge them, to critically examine our choices and to clearly articulate our arguments to the Node's members (Reason & Bradbury 2008a). Each cycle of our Action Research process added to our emerging theories (Avison et.al 1999) – both about the literature we were reading and, perhaps more importantly, about the collaborative working relationships we were establishing. Collaboration is a necessary part of accumulating knowledge in Action Research (Denis & Lomas 2003). The discussion of Bruce, Flynn and Petersen-Stagg (2011, p. 451), who suggest that 'part of the knowledge creation is focused on the nature of collaboration itself' was particularly relevant to our work. We were conscious that we were enacting the collaborative practices of Action Research, illustrated in Figure 1 (Reason & Bradley 2008b).
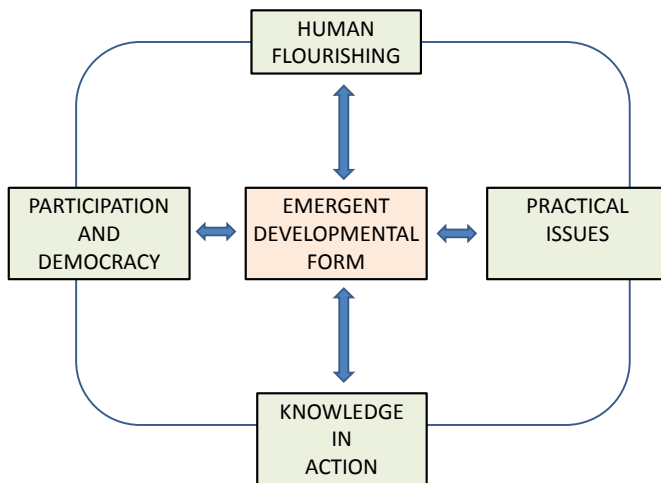
Figure 1 Characteristics of Action Research (Reason & Bradbury 2008b, p. 5)

Developing teamwork, collaborative relationships and Action Learning

While we were focused on producing a literature review (a document designed to assist researchers and influence decision makers) our Action Research cycle helped us to build our collaborative relationships in order to produce the end product (Avison et.al 1999). We developed a cyclical approach to communication that helped to establish the Health and Wellbeing Node as a team, build our collaborative relationships, and support an Action Learning approach to the work. We adapted Bruce, Flynn and Stagg-Petersen's (2011, p.440) Collaborative Action Research Relationships, Processes and Outcomes Model to help us reflect on our communication cycle and work practices. Figure 2 illustrates our adaption of their model and reflects the cycles, communication channels and outcomes within our work.

Figure 2 Action Research Collaborative Relationships, Processes and Outcomes (Adapted from Bruce, Flynn & Stagg-Peterson 2011, p. 440)

The first box in Figure 2 (Action Research Relationship Influence) describes the leadership roles and relationships in our literature review project. Our Team Leader facilitated the work and communicated with both the Research Officer and the NIRAKN Health and Wellbeing Node members. A critical part of our successful work was a Team Leader who was enthusiastic and organised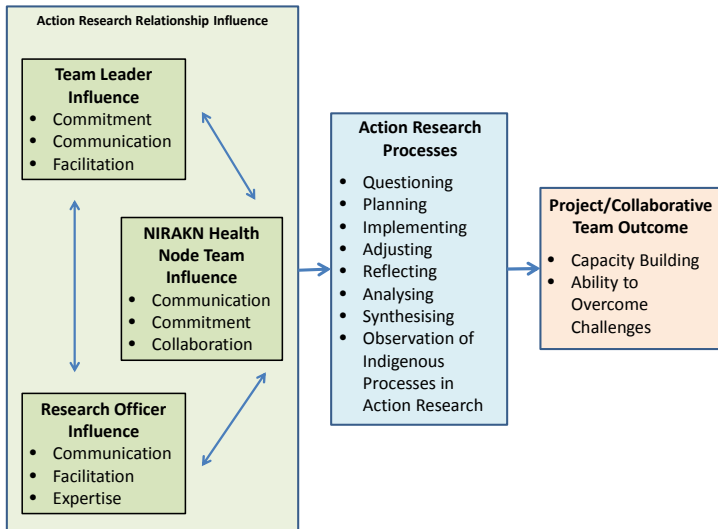, was an effective communicator and whose inquiry led to more questions amongst team members (Bruce, Flynn & Stagg-Petersen 2011). The Research Officer was a second key influence on the work, with responsibilities such as correspondence with the Team Leader and the NIRAKN Health and Wellbeing Node, administration support, compilation of the literature review, presentation of the literature review at face-to-face team meetings, and editing and proof reading. The NIRAKN Health and Wellbeing Node members also influenced the project; they analysed, questioned, reviewed and reflected on the document, and their collective input guided its development. Their collaborative enquiry facilitated deeper understanding (Bruce, Flynn & Stagg-Petersen 2011) of gendered Indigenous health and wellbeing issues within the Australian health system.

The second box in Figure 2 (Action Research Processes) identifies the Action Research processes that we used: questioning, planning, implementing, adjusting, reflecting, analysing and synthesising (Bruce, Flynn & Stagg-Petersen 2011; Reason & Bradbury 2008a). In practice, these processes included communication to Health and Wellbeing Node members via update emails, weekly meetings between the Team Leader and Research Officer, face-to-face meetings with all team members to review the draft document, incorporating team members' contributions into the document, distributing the draft document for review, and developing ways to finalise the document and submit it for publication. The team found it particularly helpful to interrogate the literature through

pictorial conceptual models; these conceptual models were incorporated into the final literature review.

The third box in Figure 2 (Project/Collaborative Team Outcome) defines the outcomes experienced by our Health and Wellbeing Node members (Bruce, Flynn & Stagg-Petersen 2011). Our Action Research processes helped to manage one of the major challenges that the Health and Wellbeing Node experienced: our geographical separation. Health and Wellbeing Node members are based in Brisbane, Sydney, Perth, Hobart, Canberra, Cairns, Rockhampton, Wollongong and other places. While regular email communication was useful for administrative details and document reviews, our face-to-face meetings helped to facilitate our key outcomes. The face-to-face meetings produced rich feedback, aided capacity building and inspired our collaboration. The value of the face-to-face meetings was particularly noticeable in our development of the pictorial conceptual models.

Indigenous processes

Before beginning this work, we were aware of the strong links between Indigenous processes and Action Research. For example, Indigenous processes such as yarning (Bessarab &Ng'andu 2010; Palmer & Collard 2001), upholding respectful conventions and relationality (Martin 2008) and the sharing of conversation and food (Fredericks et.al 2014) strongly support the Action Research processes. Under the canopy of Indigenous practices, we developed our broader processes of Action Research. The triad of collaboration achieved between the Team Leader, NIRAKN Health and Wellbeing Node members, and the Research Officer was the driving force behind our Action Research process (Bruce, Flynn & Staff-Petersen 2011). Our Indigenous approach to Action Research provided a culturally safe environment in which to develop the project and learn about our work practices (Fredericks et.al 2014).

Capacity building

Our work processes also involved a conscious effort towards capacity building for all members of the Health and Wellbeing Node. We looked for ways to support members to flourish as

researchers, through their collaboration on the literature review. All members were able to contribute, dialogue, reflect and ask questions. Each member was able to develop and increase their research capacity, and therefore grow their capacity as an individual and as a team member.

Capacity is defined as the 'ability of individuals, organisations or systems to perform appropriate functions effectively, efficiently and sustainably' (Milen 2001, p. 1). Building capacity is a continuing dynamic process that is linked to performance and can be viewed as a vehicle for individuals, teams, organisations or systems to accomplish objectives (Milen 2001). Just as capacity is a dynamic process of continual renewal, capacity building is also a continual process of improvement within a team, organisation or system (Milen 2001). Capacity building strengthens existing capabilities and builds on what already exists within the group (Milen 2001). It is an integrated and holistic process that strengthens individuals, teams, organisations and systems from within. This is quite different from the traditional, segregated process of addressing problems or issues (Milen 2001). Our focus on capacity building as we developed our literature review helped to establish and strengthen our Health and Wellbeing Node team. It also helped to develop capacity that will ultimately flow back to the members' organisations, communities and other work collaborations.

The processes of developing the literature review

Initial meeting between Research Officer and Team Leader

Our literature review project began with the appointment of a Research Officer as part of the triad of collaborative relationships. The Team Leader and Research Officer set the direction of the project in their first meeting. They scheduled weekly meetings throughout the project and agreed to a dual process that would involve the literature review as a concrete outcome while also reflecting on and synthesising our approach to Indigenous Action Research (informed by Bruce, Flynn & Stagg-Petersen 2011).

Compiling the literature

The Research Officer conducted database searches with a range of relevant terms, including 'gendered health', 'health', 'Aboriginal', 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander', 'Indigenous', 'Australia', 'cultural training', 'colonisation', 'racism', 'systemic racism', 'women's health', 'men's health', 'male health', and 'ACCHS'. Relevant databases included the Australian Indigenous Health*InfoNet,* the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS), and government websites including The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and Discover It! The Research Officer also explored relevant grey literature such as technical reports, conference papers, theses, bibliographies, government reports and documents not published commercially. More than 120 documents were accessed and processed by the Research Officer.

Developing pictorial conceptual models

As the literature review progressed, we realised that gendered Indigenous health needed to be contextualised in contemporary Australian society relative to the complex historical factors that formed the relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples (Attwood 2005; Dudgeon et.al 2014; Miliwanga & Clapham 2012). The team created pictorial conceptual models from the literature to express the past, present and future in relation to colonisation and its ongoing impacts.

Pictorial conceptual models are used extensively for synthesising and communicating ecosystem science. They were pioneered by collaborating scientific organisations in Australia and the United States in the late 1990s (DEHP 2012). Pictorial conceptual models offer valuable and powerful ways to synthesise and communicate complex concepts to diverse audiences (DEHP 2012). Generally, the models are used to exemplify the real world in a variety of ways including through numerical models, tables, box and arrow diagrams, conceptual models and pictorial conceptual models (DEHP 2012). They are simplified, abstract depictions of reality that provide a general overview of complex processes or systems (Fischenich 2008). Pictorial conceptual models can capture and

integrate relevant information into an engaging diagrammatic form (DEHP 2012). As such, they provide an alternative way of communicating about complex concepts.

When conceptual diagrams are used to depict specific processes, deeper meaning can be added to diagrams by replacing labelled boxes with pictures (DEHP 2012). Conceptual pictorial models can be developed using literature reviews and synthesis workshops (DEHP 2012). Ongoing iterative peer review is important when producing the draft model, particularly if the model is breaking new ground and/or the content is diverse (DEHP 2012).
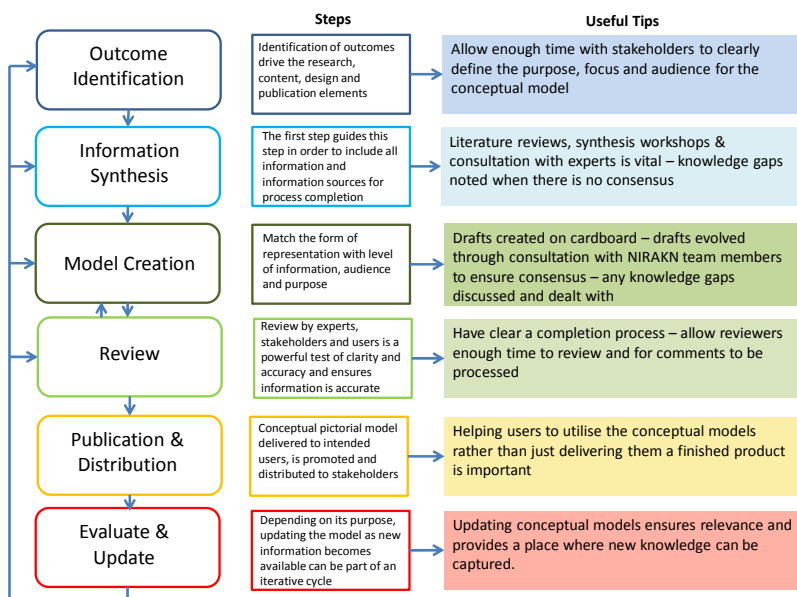

	Steps	Useful Tips
Outcome Identification	Identification of outcomes drive the research, content, design and publication elements	Allow enough time with stakeholders to clearly define the purpose, focus and audience for the conceptual model
Information Synthesis	The first step guides this step in order to include all information and information sources for process completion	Literature reviews, synthesis workshops & consultation with experts is vital – knowledge gaps noted when there is no consensus
Model Creation	Match the form of representation with level of information, audience and purpose	Drafts created on cardboard – drafts evolved through consultation with NIRAKN team members to ensure consensus – any knowledge gaps discussed and dealt with
Review	Review by experts, stakeholders and users is a powerful test of clarity and accuracy and ensures information is accurate	Have clear a completion process – allow reviewers enough time to review and for comments to be processed
Publication & Distribution	Conceptual pictorial model delivered to intended users, is promoted and distributed to stakeholders	Helping users to utilise the conceptual models rather than just delivering them a finished product is important
Evaluate & Update	Depending on its purpose, updating the model as new information becomes available can be part of an iterative cycle	Updating conceptual models ensures relevance and provides a place where new knowledge can be captured.

Figure 3 Steps for creating a pictorial conceptual model (Adapted from DEHP 2012, p. 32)

Figure 3 outlines the steps we used to develop our pictorial conceptual models (adapted from DEHP 2012, p. 32). In ecosystem science, pictorial conceptual models are typically first developed by articulating their intended purpose to develop and identify a

clear set of outputs and outcomes (DEHP 2012). In our project, we adapted these processes to inform our development of a pictorial conceptual model illustrating the experiences of Indigenous Australians since colonisation. We developed the models from the literature in an effort to convey the impact of the past and its cumulative effect on Indigenous peoples today.

The Health and Wellbeing Node team developed four pictorial conceptual models during the literature review project. We developed the models collaboratively through email conversations and face-to-face meetings. At each stage of the process, Health and Wellbeing Node members reflected on the models' content, relevance and accuracy. The members questioned, adjusted, analysed and reflected on the development of the models through the information synthesis process (Bruce, Flynn & Stagg-Petersen 2011; DEHP 2012). Figures 4 and 5 show some of this work.
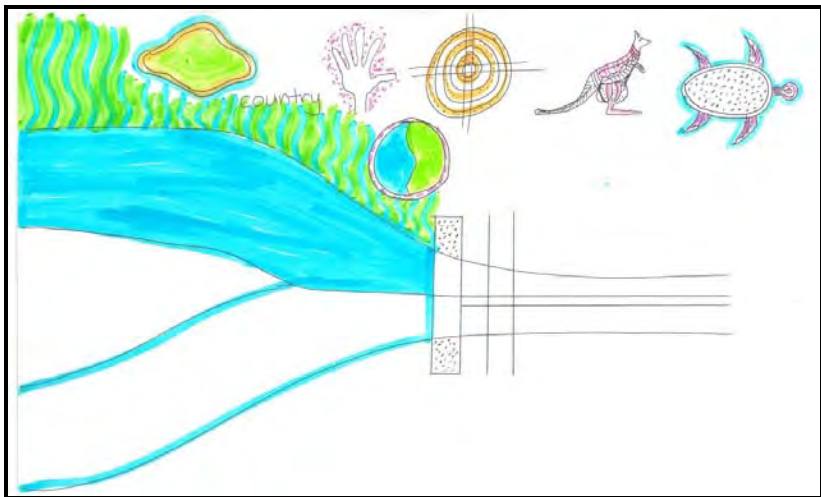

Figure 4 One of the draft pictorial conceptual models arising from the literature and discussion

Figure 5 Carolyn Daniels talking about the pictorial conceptual model diagram

Collaborating on the literature review

Our final literature review emerged through a process of team collaboration and vigorous conversation. At the same time, our Health and Wellbeing Node grew as a team through the cyclical nature of our Action Research. Our work practices encouraged collaboration, communication, participation, critiquing and accountability. We continued our dialogue through telephone meetings and ongoing exchanges to continue the work at hand. Communication enabled us to keep the Action Research work happening (Wadsworth 1993).

Tay and Hase (2010) argue that researchers should not be frightened of the conflict and ambiguity that can occur during Action Research; instead, researchers should recognise the opportunity for learning within these situations. It is often within states of instability that questions lead to deeper learning (Tay & Hase 2010). We were conscious of this through our literature review project: our Action Research processes helped us to move through times when we were unsure about the outcomes and our work practices. Through the uncertainty and questioning, we emerged as stronger researchers and a cohesive team. Figures 6 and 7 show some of the NIRAKN Health and Wellbeing Node members collaborating on the literature review project.

Figure 6 Some of the NIRAKN Health and Wellbeing Node members working on the literature review: yarning, reviewing sections of the document, collaborating, participating, critiquing and reaching agreement

Figure 7 Professors Dawn Bessarab and Kathleen Clapham reviewing the work at hand, sharing thoughts and ideas on the collective document

Project/collaborative team outcomes

At the end of the literature review project, the Health and Wellbeing Node members all reflected on our outcomes and processes. Members reported that they experienced increased research capacity, stretched thinking, increased team participation skills and transformational thinking. They also cultivated an ability to 'see' the development processes required for creating pictorial conceptual models. A common theme from Health and Wellbeing Node members was their experience of deep learning.

Our literature review is in the final stage of review before being prepared for publication. Through the project, our Health and Wellbeing Node members have developed as a collective. Working within the cultural safety of Indigenous processes and protocols, members developed greater unity and respect as the project advanced. We see the development of the NIRAKN Health and Wellbeing Node as a journey, rather than a destination. We will

continue to develop our skills in forming a cohesive team, informed by Indigenous processes and Action Research practices. The literature review project provided us with a concrete outcome and an opportunity to develop our work capacity.

Figure 8 NIRAKN Health and Wellbeing Node Members Mick Adams, Dawn Bessarb, Bronwyn Fredericks, Kathleen Clapham (Back), Len Collard, Debbie Duthie, Claire Anderson (Front)

Conclusion

The NIRAKN Health and Wellbeing Node members used an Action Research approach informed by Indigenous process to develop our research capacity and work towards the concrete outcome of a literature review. Our project helped to build the capacity of our individual researchers and our Health and Wellbeing Node team. We learned to work together in a positive way, using Action Research processes that were underpinned by Indigenous processes and protocols. Our Action Research approach led us to use pictorial conceptual models to understand

our work and place it within its historical context. Pictorial conceptual models gave us a cycle of collaboration, expert input and synthesis of information in a way that demonstrated capacity building in action. For the members of the NIRAKN Health and Wellbeing Node, the literature review project provided a new learning experience that involved cycles of questioning, planning, implementing, adjusting, reflecting, analysing and synthesising information in a new form of expression and communication. The content and direction of the literature review was developed through collaborative relationships that expressed Indigenous perspectives. In addition, the Health and Wellbeing Node members were involved in the process of learning how to work together and how to use pictorial conceptual models to support our research development. Action Research practices, underpinned by Indigenous processes, provide a useful platform for developing collaborative working relationships and reflecting on the learning opportunities that emerge from intense discussion and debate.

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Implementing the Action Research approach in the context of Swedish municipal care: A facilitator's reflections

Zada Pajalic, Lena Persson and Claudia Gillberg

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to describe the implementation of Action Research (AR) in the context of Swedish municipal care from a facilitator's' perspective. Four empirical studies using the AR approach were performed during 2007–2012 in six municipalities. Establishing support for AR was time-consuming when it concerns starting up processes that were created and were changeable over time. Further, the processes were focused on the sustainable development of practice, based on practitioners' and care consumers' knowledge that is a precondition of organizational change. An important precondition was that the participants were motivated and participated actively in all phases of the AR cycle. Another important precondition was that the participants got along with each other and trusted each other. The participants' engagement and the collaboration that was established between the participants and the facilitator were likely a result of this. Moreover, even positive interaction with participants representing a "top–down" perspective was important for the implementation of proposed changes to the practice. In conclusion, AR enhanced sustainable action based on participant's everyday knowledge relating to areas they want to change and improve in the context of municipal care practice.

Key words

Municipal care, implementation, reflections

Introduction

All Action Research (AR) designed studies aim to change something, and the researcher tries simultaneously to share and become part of the research fields. From an ontological perspective, AR is not isolated from the study participants and their views regarding the practice. As a result, the research design of AR studies often has a qualitative nature (Stringer & Genat, 2004) in its aim of systematically examining the success factors and problem areas of the participants' practical fields. The researcher focuses on the study participants' perspectives and interacts with them to understand their world and their thinking.

There are three modes of AR: first-person research, second-person research, and third-person research (Reason & Torbert, 2001). The boundaries between these modes are not compact but rather commuted from person to person. The first-person mode focuses on the investigation of the person's daily actions viewed "from the inside," as experience and personal competence. Discovering one's own personal competence is logically defined as "initiation to act". The second or "other" person in AR focuses on the dialogue situations, when people meet and interact because of common issues, to improve their personal or professional practice. This is based on interaction through dialogue. Third-person AR focuses on building bridges between research subjects and research entities to larger groups of people who cannot be reached because of the long distances between. An example of such bridge-building would be conferences based on dialogue involving the mutual approach of people in different positions. With third-person AR, it is important to write about the research process and results (Stringer & Genat, 2004).

AR is an umbrella term for various forms of research, such as: Participatory Action Research, (PAR), Action Science (AS), Participatory Research (PA) and Practice Research Engagement

(PRE) (J. Meyer, 2000; Reason & Bradbury, 2006; Stringer & Genat, 2004). The intention to employ AR is based on the idea that it can be a way to make improvements in practice. AR as a scientific approach usually has a direct and immediate impact on the research context by drawing on the participants' everyday lives or practice (Pajalic & Westergren, 2013b). AR is based on trying to understand the social context in order to facilitate change by involving and motivating participants based on their individual circumstances. Furthermore, the AR approach implies research involving people, and considers them as subjects or participants. Participants in an AR-designed project are seen as representing a genuine critical mass of knowledge with first-hand experience of importance for future change in the specific context (J. Meyer, 2000; Reason & Bradbury, 2006; Stringer & Genat, 2004). Democracy, equality, participation, and change are important concepts in AR. AR presents as a process of research and change that takes place simultaneously with the production of new knowledge and the development of practice (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Pajalic & Westergren, 2013b). The AR approach facilitates a focus on the practical assumption that humans exist in the natural world through their interactions with each other (Kitson, 2009). Epistemologically, AR is based on the construction of knowledge that leads to change through dialogue and reflection on general perceptions and standards, and reviewing them in terms of their aims to perceive the new options (Mattsson & Kemmis, 2007).

To implement change through AR, it is important to consider not only the bottom-up approach (bottom-up) representing practitioners and (in our case) patients, but also the perspective from above, that is, management levels (top-down) (Stringer & Genat, 2004). Both perspectives are required because the balance of power can lead to progression. An imbalance of power between participants and organizational levels may hinder the progression of AR. Relationships between management representatives and practitioners may be sensitive and stressful, necessitating the steady building of these relationships over time. Furthermore, it is important to involve decision-makers in the AR process. They need to be involved and represented in the research process

because it can induce them to more easily to accept the results (Stringer & Genat, 2004) Thus, proposed changes in practice may be possible if policy makers actively participate and encourage the AR project (Pajalic, 2013c).

Some contexts are more adaptive and receptive to new ways of working and to change, and these usually include contexts with a lead knowledge that is accommodating to change. AR studies usually aim to have a direct and immediate impact on the research context by taking the interested parties or everyday practice as their starting point (Reason & Bradbury, 2008). In AR studies, the researcher strives to understand a specific context in order to change it, and assumes that there is a connection between facts, values, feelings, and knowledge. Criteria for willingness to change are: that all participants are involved, based on their own circumstances, to focus on individuals in their context, and to have a future orientation and an interactive relationship between the research process, the action and the evaluation. Achieving sustainable change requires four components: knowing, becoming incapacitated, resolve and action. In order to realize change and sustainable development, space—for both action and courage—is required. Engaging in meaningful collaborative work is essential for sustainable development, where participants represent a genuine critical mass of knowledge based on first-hand experience. This experience helps to create feeling of confidence that realistic change is possible.

Reason and Bradbury (2008) argue that AR and Critical Theory overlap, sometimes to such an extent that they cannot be separated (Reason & Bradbury, 2006). Critical Theory focuses on the critical examination of society and social law-governed relationships, to detect and simultaneously discover if these relationships are an expression of power-related oppression (Reason & Bradbury, 2008). Both Critical Theory and AR focus on the integration of theory and practice so that people become aware of the contradictions and differences in their perceptions and be inspired to transform them. Critical Theory also involves a self-reflective aspect. The design of research based on Critical Theory begins with the analysis of certain aspects of the problem such that automatic

assumptions lay the groundwork for the problem. This design interacts with the participants in such a way that the participants' expertise is stressed (Levi & Nyberg, 2009).

Stringer and Genat (2004) explain that AR is context-specific and that the AR process is educationally empowering, as it involves dynamic linking to problem identification, planning, action, and evaluation (Stringer & Genat, 2004). Moreover, empowering strategies are defined as: information that is shared between participants in order to achieve a better understanding of the problem area to be developed, forming relationships internally between participants and externally with local and regional stakeholders and decision makers, as well as to raise awareness and create insights by "social learning" to find new ways to solve specific problems (Pajalic & Westergren, 2013b; Stringer & Genat, 2004).

An AR approach requires two parties: an outsider who is to manage the facilitation of the process (the researcher), and the insiders (the study participants), who stand for expertise related to a specific context. A prerequisite of change in practice is a common body of knowledge developed through research conducted in concert with individuals, and that new knowledge is created. Participants representing the practice have an inside knowledge of the problem and the researcher brings an outside perspective that helps participants have a critical insight and consider how they might resolve the problem. Researchers work on problem-oriented, dialogue-based and situational issues (Pajalic & Westergren, 2013b). According to Nowotny et al. (2001), AR is a model of knowledge (Nowotny, Scott, & Gibbons, 2001). The model of knowledge includes the following: equal relationships, problem-based joint action, usability as the goal, a flexible form, a short time horizon, an interactive attitude, broader social responsibilities and local responsibilities, stakeholders, scientists and practitioners, specific and context-bound knowledge, a focus on development and use, dynamic planning, open availability, concurrency discovery change, and the model is internally and externally scientific society (Nowotny et al., 2001).

The AR approach is both research process and research findings—two integrated components that cannot be isolated from each other (Stringer & Genat, 2004). Moreover, AR has a cyclical nature, based on four elements: seeing, thinking, acting, and evaluating (Pajalic & Westergren, 2013b; Stringer & Genat, 2004). "Seeing" refers to investigating an issue by mapping what is going on in the current context. "Thinking" refers to analysis and reflection on what is happening in the current context. "Acting" refers to the chosen action, while "evaluating" aims to reflect on the chosen action and its effects (Stringer & Genat, 2004).

Current AR empirical studies

The overall aim of the studies was firstly to gain insight into municipal food distribution from several perspectives: elderly care consumers, and various professionals, such as caregivers and decision-makers. Secondly, all of these stakeholders we asked to identify developmental areas in the food distribution practice, and to suggest, implement, and evaluate changes.

In the first and second study, the elderly care recipients' and the various professional's views on the food distribution service were identified. The practitioners described the food distribution as a fragmentary intervention lacking a comprehensive perspective and clear allocation of responsibility. The food distribution organization appeared to be strictly divided and limited by time and financial constraints. Due partly to the organizational fragmentation, the responsible staff tended to limit their sphere of responsibility to their particular part of the distribution chain, which meant there was no one who really had a complete picture of the organization and who had the overall responsibility for the food distribution process. However, some professionals took on more responsibility than they were supposed to. The result was that the food distribution organization that was the subject of this investigation appeared as an extremely complex chain of different but connected activities, exposing the fact that there was need to clearly outline the responsibilities of those involved (Pajalic, Persson, Westergren, & Skovdahl, 2012b; Pajalic & Westergren, 2013a).

The elderly clients said their feelings of dependency and loneliness were often reduced by their being able to have their meals delivered to their homes, and for this they expressed their sincere gratitude. The participants often expressed an uncomfortable sense of dependency due to their having no influence over the food products used in their meals or the time of day the meals were delivered. This dependency could cause the participants to avoid accepting outside help *from strangers* under circumstances they could not influence. Feelings of dependency could be exacerbated, for example, if a taxi driver delivered a meal but left immediately, even if the elderly client needed help to open the meal box and put the food on a plate. The participants referred to loneliness as a result of their involuntary isolation at home, due to difficulties in getting to a day center where they could enjoy their meals in company. Many participants needed taxi transportation in order to visit a day center, which often entailed extra costs that they could not afford. In general, the participants expressed sincere gratitude for the daily meal service. They described their meals as being varied, healthy, reasonably priced, and a good alternative to home-cooked food. The conclusion of this study was that there was a clear indication that greater attention should be given to meeting both the practical and psychological needs of elderly people and others who are dependent on the municipal food distribution service (Pajalic, Persson, Westergren, Berggren, & Skovdahl, 2012; Pajalic & Westergren, 2013a).

In the study three professionals identified areas for improvement regarding the municipal food distribution service for elderly people living at home. The results showed that there was a need in municipal food distribution to update and increase recipients' knowledge related to nutrition by distributing information to them by mail. A total of 1,700 information sheets were distributed. The general estimation was that the response to the information sheets indicated that this was a suitable method for updating the care recipients' competence regarding nutrition. This study showed conclusively that systematic work inspired by an AR approach, with engaged, motivated participants can be beneficial, and can also be the starting point of a process of change in municipal

services and care practice. The main conclusion of this study was that systematic reflection on everyday practices can be a vehicle for future changes in practice (Pajalic, Skovdahl, Westergren, & Persson, 2013).

The fourth study involved the decision-makers, politicians and top-level administrative managers' in two steps—through individual interviews and discussions based on feedback from previous studies. The findings indicated a discrepancy between reality and political vision. It was shown that decision-makers often realized that they needed to make crucial decisions despite their uncertain knowledge of the complexity surrounding the correct fulfillment of an elderly person's rights and needs. This includes freedom of choice and individual consideration. Three areas related to municipal food distribution were found to require change. These were: implementing monitoring of the elderly person's health and wellbeing while providing food distribution, an increase in professional competence, and the creation of a forum for inter-professional communication (Pajalic, Persson, Westergren, & Skovdahl, 2012a).

Discussion

With an AR approach, the involvement of the participants in this specific case was aimed at identifying problems and suggesting solutions for better food distribution, service, and practice. In studies using an AR approach it is important that the participants are open to playing an active role in the research process and to the planning of practice improvement. Throughout the project the level of the researcher's role was continuously discussed with the participants, in accordance with the ethical principles guiding research involving people. The results showed that municipal food distribution should be seen as an inter-operability issue. Everyone concerned needs to be involved in the plans for improving the municipal food distribution service, including the receivers. It is important that the various professionals involved should be able to act in accordance with their professional roles – from the position of their professional roles - when participating in planning to promote optimal development. The registered nurses should be

involved in assessing clients' needs related to food distribution so that they can screen a food distribution recipient's nutritional status and follow up all new municipal food distribution recipients. Further, the registered nurses' role requires continuous upgrading of their nutritional knowledge, with respect to both the other professionals involved and the food distribution recipients (Pajalic & Westergren, 2013a, 2013b).

All of the studies' results showed that there was no clearly defined function with the overall responsibility to monitor what happens to the delivered food. Hasselbladh et al. (2008) highlights that major organizational changes in the care sector in recent decades have been due to limited financial resources. As a consequence of these changes, a new method of "new public management" (Hasselbladh, Bejerot, & Gustafsson, 2008) was introduced to inform the organization of the care sector. New public management involves the introduction of an organizational model inspired by marketing. The model implies that the operations are standardized, detailed and controlled from above, by a team of professionals (Hasselbladh et al., 2008). This has led to tension in the financial side over the introduction of limited standardized interventions that do not allow for personalized and needs-based interventions. A study by Åhgren showed that the fragmentation of the social care sector is a result of decentralization and specialization. Decentralization and increased specialization were direct effects of straightened economic conditions, which resulted in operations being shared by small units with a high degree of autonomy and weak integration of strategies of task fulfillment (Åhgren, 2003). Care efforts converted into time, and time is converted into the price of the operations, which reduces flexibility and limits the influence of the staff performing the work (Kilbride, Perry, Flatley, Turner, & Meyer, 2011). The focus is on practical performance more than on the social interaction of the staff and the elderly. In another study it was shown that the care sector needs to promote and invest in communications to promote collaboration between different professions (Dickinson, Welch, & Ager, 2008). There are thus many possible explanatory factors, among them being the fragmented organization of food distribution. Other

examples of explanatory factors are the economy, limited timeframes, decentralization, specialization, and lack of communication.

Fixed routines and limited influence make it more difficult for care staff to provide personalized service and care (Petersson, Springett, & Blomqvist, 2009) It was found that the welfare system tends to be more mechanistic, focusing on financial control and "top–down" control, resulting in difficulties in establishing efficient communication between different professional groups (Szebehely, 2005). Inter-professional communication has been impeded by the content of various professionals' qualifications and professional integrity (Åhgren, 2003) . This development eventually led to different professions tending to focus on their professional integrity, taking a more independent role and assuming more personal responsibility. At the same time it created the hierarchical gap between professions, which complicated collaboration between different professions and different organizational levels (Koch, Selim, & Kralik, 2002; Reason & Torbert, 2001). Consequently, professional integrity can also be considered a contributing factor in clients' perception that the food distribution organization is fragmented. Constant changes to the social and care services require constant adaptation to new conditions, which can result in staff experiencing limited control over their work situation. Cooperation between management in an organization is often weak, and interventions are often fragmented and divided between different organizational levels. This means that each management function should contribute to a partnership. Different professions often have little knowledge of each other's skills and responsibilities, which places great demands on inter-professional communication in order to achieve effective service delivery (Kitson et al., 2008). Based on professional theory, many professions have been driven to voluntarily create a field with the exclusive right to explore relationships, to plan and execute services, and to have control over their own education and work quality (Tritter & McCallum, 2006) .

To reduce the gap between the different professions involved in food distribution, it is important to provide a forum for inter-

professional communication, focusing on food distribution. Important aspects for such a forum to deal with would be: relationships, understanding, and clarity. In order to obtain improve food distribution, political support is also required. Politicians should gather information so that they can monitor how their decisions are implemented in practice and what effects they have. This project has shown that systematic work with motivated, engaged participants can be the beginning of a transformation of local food distribution (Pajalic & Westergren, 2013a, 2013b).

The need for inter-professional communication, which frequently appeared in the studies, could also be understood as a need for the development of organizational means to promote practitioner communication skills, even during rapid, multiple changes. Furthermore, communication skills are essential to integrated work, and to the efficient management of resources in pursuit of the same goal (Buchanan, Caldwell, Meyer, Storey, & Wainwright, 2007). Inter-professional communication leads to the exchange of knowledge [93] and also generates new knowledge (Springett, 2006). Inter-professional communication is necessary to positively influence the quality of care by enabling transparency in other areas of responsibility and expertise, facilitating the capacity to plan together. Each profession can contribute its own knowledge; all professionals are experts in their own field and equipped to identify service gaps. If given the opportunity to meet and exchange each other's observations and suggestions, problems that arise will be resolved (Bridges, Fitzgerald, & Meyer, 2007). Different professions often have little detailed knowledge of each other's skills. Insufficient information between them negatively affects cooperation. Another important factor for the cooperation between professions is geographic distance between professionals and service recipients. In Sweden, the collaboration is usually divided between the various organizations and political bodies (Kitson et al., 2008). Thus, the results of sub-studies II-IV indicate a need to increase the inter-professional communication related to food distribution. This would be likely to favorably influence the quality of food distribution, and also provide follow-up to it.

The information sheets were evaluated as an appropriate means of disseminating knowledge related to nutrition. According to Meyer and Silow-Carroll (2003), the development of the practice depends on how much time it can take for new ideas to be incorporated into practice (J. A. Meyer & Silow-Carroll, 2003). Reflections on knowledge transfer have been shown to be important for change in an organization, with a particular focus on the tacit knowledge that is difficult to communicate and share with others. Furthermore, the increased knowledge of importance for the development of organizations focused on improving practices in healthcare (Saletti, 2003; Westergren, 2008). It is important to take into account the different types of knowledge that already exist and that facilitated the implementation of transparency in operations (Batljan & Lagergren, 2004). Furthermore, it has been shown in another study that the development of knowledge and practice should take into account the clients' own expertise (Laforest, Goldin, Nour, Roy, & Payette, 2007). Bringing knowledge into practice also requires the socio-cultural aspects and the context in which knowledge turnover to take place (Pajalic, 2013a, 2013d). Knowledge can lead to behavioral changes. Knowledge of nutrition is also important for older persons and has been shown to have positive impact on their food consumption. Studies of participants that acknowledge their unique knowledge of specific situations related to food distribution served as a basis for the identification of areas for development of the food distribution chain (Pajalic, Persson, Skovdahl, & Westergren, 2012; Pajalic, Persson, Westergren, Berggren, et al., 2012; Pajalic, Persson, Westergren, et al., 2012a, 2012b). The area they chose to develop was the dissemination of nutritional knowledge through distributed information sheets, which were evaluated as an appropriate educational alternative that could reach many individuals (Pajalic & Westergren, 2013a, 2013b).

The importance of involving older persons who are beneficiaries of food distribution and different professionals involved in the food distribution was clear in all studies. The results showed that older people were actively involved in the selection of their food and the annual evaluations of the food. Caregivers represent power –

through their authority, status, responsibility for individuals who need their help, and their role as makers of decisions about treatment. Clients also have power, in that they can complain or make demands (Atwal & Caldwell, 2005). Shared power is referred to as empowerment and it is an individual process whereby the individual interacts with the environment. Empowerment of vulnerable populations lead to a sense of confidence and self-reliance (Smith, Lavoie-Tremblay, Richer, & Lanctot, 2010). Participation involves trust, searching, and maintenance of sense of control. Furthermore, subject involvement refers to involvement in problem identification, prioritization, selection of what is to be changed, and determination of how the change will take place (Reason & Torbert, 2001; Stringer & Genat, 2004) Participation is seen as a journey between dependence and independence, affirming that people are equal and can affect the rules and circumstances of life that they live in (Pajalic, 2013b).

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Empowerment in Participatory Action Research conducted in Malaysia

Fariza Puteh-Behak

Abstract

Participatory Action Research advocates participation and egalitarian relationship among its participants. This study was conducted in Malaysia amongst the Malay society, where the Malay society has been labelled as having high power distance in its social structure. In a society that recognizes status differences among individuals in the society depending on their rank in the hierarchical structure, egalitarian or equal relationship among research participants could be quite problematic. This paper will outline the Malay's social hierarchy and explore how members of a hierarchical society became empowered through Participatory Action Research. Through qualitative methods such as observation, informal conversations, journal reflections and semi-structured interviews, this study investigated the experiences of two Malay teachers in negotiating the Western-based concepts in a Participatory Action Research project. Due to the importance of reflection and action in a Participatory Action Research, data was analysed through a Critical Reflective Analysis Steps (Puteh-Behak, 2013), which included the process of observing and noting personal reflections, confronting and thinking, and taking action. Findings suggest that through Participatory Action Research, the participants of the research were somewhat empowered to challenge their traditional role in the hierarchical structure.

Key words

Participatory Action Research, power, hierarchy, empowerment, teaching, Malaysia

Introduction

Participatory Action Research advocates participation and egalitarian relationship among its participants. This study was conducted in Malaysia amongst the Malay society, where the Malay society has been labelled as having high power distance in its social structure. In a society that recognizes status differences among individuals in the society depending on their rank in the hierarchical structure, egalitarian or equal relationship among research participants could be quite problematic. This paper will outline the Malays social hierarchy and explore how members of a hierarchical society became empowered through a Participatory Action Research.

The Malay society is often labelled as a hierarchical society, where different individuals have different status depending on their position in the structure (Asma 2009, Hamzah 1991, Norma & Kennedy 2000). Parents possess a higher position in the structure (Hashim 2008, Hashim, Normahdiah, Rozira, and Siti Sarah 2012). A true Malay is signified by his ability to be loyal and obedient to his parents. It is considered the duty of children to serve their parents in a variety of ways. The loyalty and obedience towards parents were also recommended by Islamic teachings and since, the Malay culture is highly influenced by Islam (Hamzah 1991, Jeannot & Khairul Anuar 2012, Khairul, Jin & Cooper 2000, Othman, Zainal Abidin, Rahimin Affandi, Nor Hayati & Norhidayah 2011, Zainal Abidin 2010), parents in the Malay society is highly regarded and hold a high position in the hierarchical structure.

The Malay social hierarchy also acknowledges the elders as having a high position in the societal structure. Jeannot and Khairul Anuar (2012) stated that all members of Malay society are encouraged to be courteous and respectful, especially to older people. This is because older people in the society are seen as people that are knowledgeable and possess the same status as parents. The Malay also has a popular saying to describe the elders, which is "*banyak*

makan garam" (eats more salt). This saying suggests that the elder people have eaten more salt thus they have experienced more in their life and know better about life than the younger people. Here, experience are highly regarded as much as academic knowledge. Othman et al. (2011) stated that in a Malay society the elders are the catalyst of the harmonious relationships in the society. They argued that elder people are "intellects, educator and the coordinator of social relationships so it can remain harmonious" (p. 74).

The Malay social hierarchy also has a high regard for people in authority such as community leaders. Hashim (2008) and Hashim et al. (2012) asserted that another Malay characteristic highlighted in traditional Malay poems and verses was that the culture of being loyal to fair leaders. As mentioned earlier, these traditional Malay poems and verse reflects the cultural values of Malay society (Hashim 2008, Hashim et al. 2012). According to Hashim et al. (2012), the following verse highlights how Malay perceive leaders in the community:

> *Elok kampong ada tuannya, elok negeri ada rajanya,* (A good village has its master, a good state has its kings)
>
> *Adat hidup orang terhormat, kepada pemimpinnya ia taat.* (A ritual of respected people is to be loyal to their leaders)

Respect towards leaders is often materialized through loyalty and obedience. Mohd Faidz, Jamaie, Mohd Rizal and Mohammad Rodzi (2011) described that the traditional Malay political culture was based on loyalty and sensitivity towards the sovereignty of leaders such as sultans. They asserted that the people were usually submissive and subservient. According to Asma (2009) in the traditional Malay community, when a person is given a high position by a company, community or the government Malays acknowledge their status and rank and expect the person to uphold his duties and responsibilities as leaders. As leaders, they were expected to be polite, courteous, trustworthy, and have excellent manners and good leadership qualities. Asma (2009) further suggested the Malay community expect leaders to have paternalistic roles where they become the 'father' in an

organization and provide help and support for the workers or other people. As an exchange, the people will give their loyalty, obedience and commitment towards the leaders. Jeannot and Khairul Anuar (2012) suggested that in the Malay culture, a leader is always right and it is improper to contest their opinions. Mahfooz, Zainal, and Rehana (2004) stated that: "societal norm dictates that juniors do not disagree with seniors (superiors or elders)" (p. 115). Similar points were also suggested by Lim and Asma (2001), who explained that leaders are entrusted to make the right decisions and other people are expected to obey and respect the leaders and not to question or challenge what they say.

The basic social structure of the Malay community can be summarised as below:

- Older people in the community are considered knowledgeable due to their experiences in life

- People with leading positions also hold a high status in the community due to their leadership qualities

- Both elders and leaders are respected and hold a higher status in the Malay community

- Respect is materialized through loyalty, obedience and using the correct language in communicating and addressing people with a higher status.

The existing hierarchical relationship among members in the current research project proved to be a huge challenge in achieving egalitarian relationship among research members as advocated by the philosophy of Participatory Action Research. The paper is going to answer the following question:

- Can Participatory Action Research process encourage active and equal participation among members who have different status in a hierarchical structure?

- How the participants in a hierarchical structure can be empowered through Participatory Action Research?

Issues of empowerment and social transformation in Participatory Action Research

Empowerment is a significant topic of discussion in research on Participatory Action Research; it is difficult to pinpoint the exact definition of empowerment (Hipilito-Delgado & Courtland 2007, Kasmel 2011). Aral (1997) described empowerment as a change of capacity to control, or an increase of power and the ability to use it. Empowerment relates to the concept of the ability of people to understand and control over personal, economic and political forces in order to take action to improve their life situations (Israel, Chekoway, Schulz, & Zimmerman 1994). Gutierrez (1995) defined empowerment as "the process of increasing personal, interpersonal, or political power so that individuals, families, and communities can take action to improve situations" (p. 229). According to Hipilito-Delgado and Courtland (2007), the main aim of Empowerment Theory is the liberation of marginalised people and communities. Based on the definitions, being empowered is about having the understanding and control to change the present situation. It is a process where individuals take charge and act to improve their situations. Baum, MacDougal and Smith (2006) argued that that Participatory Action Research challenges the concept of knowledge control established through mainstream research. So, when people are involved in a Participatory Action Research, they seek control through researching, thus establishing themselves as powerful agents.

In negotiating the issue of power distance in Participatory Action Research, some research also shows that Participatory Action Research did provide opportunities for empowering the research participants. Chowns (2008) suggested that even though the balance of power oscillated among her participants, in the end, through collaborative effort, the children were empowered in terms of knowledge about what they were facing and her study shows that children are more capable and articulate than adults think. She argued that through the collaborative effort of Participatory Action Research, the children were empowered as the research inquiry put the children as "knowers, actors, and

equals" (p. 568) and as an adult, Chown "endeavoured to assert this in word and action" (p. 568). Ospina, Dodge, Foldy and Hofman-Pinilla (2008), upon reflecting on their Participatory Action Research, argued that the control of the direction of the research process was eventually shared among the co-researchers; however, it involved a "lot of negotiation over who would do what, who would take ownership over what" (p. 425). They concluded that in their study the power dynamics were contested but the research participants were empowered through the negotiations of the research process.

It appears that Participatory Action Research provides an outlet for people who were traditionally marginalised by the mainstream research to be empowered to change their own social practice. Atweh's (2003) The Students Action Research for University Access (SARUA) project aimed to increase the participation of youth from targeted disadvantaged groups such as the Aboriginal students, Torres Strait Islanders students, women in traditional and post-graduates courses, students from certain non-English background as well as low income students in higher education. He began the research project with the notion of empowering students, who according to him have been exposed to research activities that are not genuine and do not engage the students in the decision-making or problem solving of real life problems. In addition, he advocated that students as stakeholders in the educational planning have often been left behind and through Participatory Action Research these students were able to conduct research on themselves rather than be a subject or object of research. The project was conducted for eight years with the participation of university lecturers, school teachers and under-represented students. Atweh (2003) particularly highlighted that the students were empowered as they engaged in the research process. He said that the students demonstrated considerable research sense and critical appreciation of the research process. The students also gained knowledge and understanding of the university system through research activities conducted in the university and some students were empowered by the knowledge that they were considering studying in a university themselves.

From the findings of this study we can see that Participatory
Action Research is an effective tool to generate empowerment
among marginalised parties. It is achieved through active
participation in research activities that helped people to gain
further knowledge about their own social practice. Furthermore,
Participatory Action Research also provides a platform for
developing practical ways to solve the issues.

What is intriguing about Participatory Action Research is that it is
not only restricted to the empowerment of marginalised groups,
but it is also a suitable tool to improve any situation that requires
practical solution. James (2006) talked about Participatory Action
Research as a tool for teachers' professional development in her
Colorado Educators Using Participatory Action Research to Study
Homeless and High Mobility Students (COPAR). COPAR involved
eight school administrators, eight teachers and one homeless
shelter education provider. COPAR aimed to investigate the areas
of educational disadvantage such as homeless children and high
mobility students. James asserted that, at the initial stage, some of
the participants felt frustrated due to the high-commitment needed
by the research project and the complexity of Action Research
concepts. However, as the research progressed, some of the
participants demonstrated engagement with the research process
through having more understanding of the issue and felt
empowered to change the existing social practice. One co-
researcher, a small town teacher, claimed that COPAR empowered
him to investigate the issue further in practical ways that he
thought he would never done before. He stated that:

> I never talked to the lunch lady before, until I needed to
> figure out why one of my homeless students wasn't eating
> breakfast. I never talked to the homeless liaison before, until
> I needed to figure out why the bus wasn't getting a student
> to school on time (p. 531).

It seems that Participatory Action Research has emancipatory and
transformative characteristics (Brydon-Miller & Maguire 2009,
Cahill 2007, Langhout & Thomas 2010) because action is part of the
inquiry process. Participatory Action Research process involves
research groups in a dialectical process of planning, action,

observation and reflection (Grant, Nelson & Mitchell 2008, Kemmis & McTaggart 2005). James (2006) stated that Participatory Action Research was emancipatory because three of the 2003-2004 COPAR research group members were motivated enough to participate in another round of COPAR in 2005-06. Fazio and Melville (2008) initiated a Participatory Action Research with the objective of improving teachers' professional development through investigating the issue of implementing two government-mandated curriculums, which were students' engagement and expertise in scientific inquiry and development of reasonable conception of the philosophical and the nature of science in the teaching and learning of science in Canada. The study was conducted with four science teachers and one researcher. Through the Action Research design, the research team successfully explored its own conception about the government-mandated categories in the learning of science. Fazio and Mellville stated that one of the outcomes expected from the project was modified curriculum practices that suited the two government-mandated categories. They asserted that by the end of the research project, the teachers "developed their own curricular practices suitable to their local school context" (p. 200).

Another study that reflected the emancipatory and transformative characteristic of Participatory Action Research was reported by Swantz, Ndedya and Masaiganah (2006). The article reported the learning from *Participatory Research to Explore Women's Potential for Credit*: a case study of Muungano Women's Group in Ruangwa Tanzania. The study began with the notion of enabling women in the rural areas to make exploration of "potential opportunities and constraints to take the decision themselves whether or not to apply for credit for carrying out economic activities" (p. 288). According to the standard practice, the application for credit is usually made on behalf of the women where a government official will write up a project proposal and make decisions for the women. The study mapped out the research process of these women from deciding on producing bricks to generate income, to analysing their needs to improve the brick-making activity. Through the research process the women decided to take a loan from a bank. The women's

leader stated that the women now had the knowledge on the cost of buying tools and had plans how to repay the loan, knowledge that they did not have before engaging in the Participatory Action Research. It seemed that the women successfully transformed their own social practice. They were no longer waiting for things to be done for them but now managed to assess their own needs and plan for action.

In conclusion, Participatory Action Research is a branch of Action Research with the emphasis on participation by members from all levels of a community, as equals in the investigation of practical issues in their own community. This is done by providing practical solutions. Studies showed that Participatory Action Research became the catalyst for empowerment and social transformations.

The main question discussed in the current paper is whether Participatory Action Research process in a Malaysian context, where individuals have different status depending on their rank in the structure, can empower the research participants to actively participate in the research process as equals.

Methodology

Participants

The current study was carried out by a research team, which consists of a doctoral researcher, - the author of the current article, and two Bakti Polytechnic (pseudonym) teachers; Siti and Arfah (pseudonyms), as co-researchers. The research team were investigating the implementation of the multi-literacies approach in Malaysian English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom.

Data collection

The inquiry process in the current study involved a recursive process consisted of Action Research processes of planning, action, observation and reflection stages. Data was collected through observation, informal conversation, journal reflection and semi-structured interviews. The author became a participant observer to observe and document the team's professional conversations, so she gained personal insights into the teachers' experiences. These

conversations were audio recorded to be reviewed at a later time.
Useful data such as the teachers' responses, reactions and
interaction during the professional conversations were also
documented in a research journal. The teachers' reflections on their
experiences in a Participatory Action Research project were also
obtained through semi-structured interviews.

Data analysis

Data was analysed through Critical Reflective Analysis Steps
(Author, 2013), which included the process of *observing and noting
personal reflections, confronting and thinking, and taking action*. At the
observing and noting personal reflections stage, significant events
were noted in the professional discussions through observation
notes and journal entries. Then, at the *confronting and thinking*
stage, significant points that emerged from personal reflections on
the collaborative effort of the team members as well as from the
verbatim transcription of the semi-structured interviews with the
teachers were identified. Data were then classified into categories
and possible themes. Next, a few practical solutions were provided
to improve the Participatory Action Research process. Finally, at
the *taking action* stage, practical solutions were implemented to
improve the collaborative efforts of the research team in the next
research project.

Findings and discussion

Teachers moving from supportive research subordinates to active co-researchers

This section will discuss the status differences within the research
team and how it influenced the collaborative research processes. It
then highlights how the teachers, who became co-researchers in
the project shifted from research subordinates to active co-
researchers.

The collaborative effort among the team members; Siti, Arfah and
me, worked well but the role each member played was initially
influenced by our position in the Malaysian hierarchical structure.

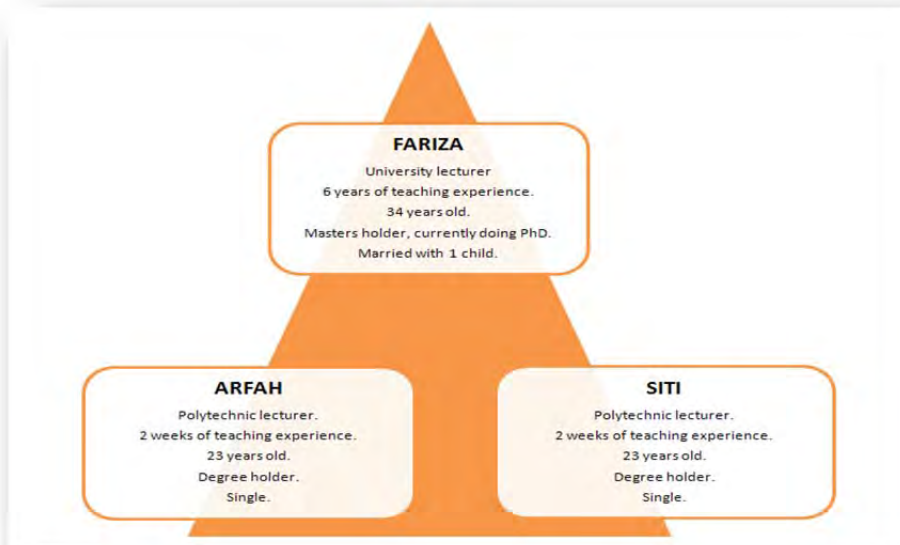Figure 1 shows the power position between the individual team members.

Figure 1. Status position between the individual research team members

Figure 1 shows the hierarchical relationship and status position of the members of the research team. The status differences were influenced by age, academic experiences, academic position and social experiences from the Malaysian socio-cultural lens. In the Malaysian context, the age difference between Siti, Arfah and myself determined the status positions of the research team members. I was 11 years older than Siti and Arfah and as mentioned earlier, older people usually hold a higher status in the

Malaysian society, and thus culturally I had more authority in many areas such as in decision-making over Siti and Arfah.

According to the Malaysian socio-cultural lens, the superior rank that I had in the hierarchical structure was also attributed to my academic experience and position. My seniority was represented by my academic qualification in which I had a Masters degree and at that time was pursuing a doctoral degree. Siti and Arfah had just graduated from their first degree. I had nine years of teaching experience and they had just three months of teaching experience. In terms of the hierarchy of workplace, a university is at the top of the structure as compared to polytechnics, which offered diploma programs. Generally in Malaysia, a university is often viewed as having a higher rank than polytechnics. In this case, working in a university put me in a higher position as compared to Siti and Arfah's positions as polytechnic lecturers. In addition, my position as a researcher boosted my power status. Gosin, Dustman, Drapeau and Harthun (2003) discussed how researchers are socialized to believe that they are the experts and this puts them in a power position. This was also stated by Lofman, Pelkonen and Pietila (2004) who indicated that a researcher has been seen as "holding the power because of their knowledge base, membership of the intelligentsia and as managing the research agendas" (p.337). As a university lecturer, I had more resources, thus I had been given a higher position in the hierarchical structure as compared to Siti and Arfah in a polytechnic setting.

Based on a Malaysian cultural perspective, Siti and Arfah were at almost similar ranking in the hierarchical structure as illustrated by Figure 1.1. This was because they were at the same age and both had just graduated from their first degree. They both had three months teaching experience which was conducted in their final year of their first degree. They both started work at Bakti Polytechnic at the same time. Since they were at the same position in the structure, their relationship was more open and collegial.

At the beginning of the current research project, the role each of the team members played was influenced by our position in the hierarchical structure. Siti and Arfah took up supporting roles, in

which they assisted me in every way to complete the research process. As a novice Participatory Action Research researcher, I was also influenced by my higher status in the research team structure and took the leading role. Extract 1.2 shows an example of how I dominated the conversation in our second professional discussion. We were discussing ways to incorporate the English Language Department's curriculum to our multi-literacies module. It appeared that I dominated the discussion because I was giving suggestions and making all the decisions. For example, I selected

Extract 1.2:

Fariza: Okay, last week basically if we look at this one, the curriculum, the one we discussed last week was parallel to this one right, For example, our interview activities meets the criteria of this one right, Item 1.1 'To make enquiries', 'Asking questions', right?

Siti: Yes.

Arfah: Yes.

Fariza: And then, I think [item]1.6, we are not going to do that because we don't have anything on our module on that item, right?. But, we have item 1.7: 'Responding to current issues', we have that in our module right?

Siti: Yeah.

Fariza: Maybe we don't have this item too. So, whatever [syllabus] item we are not covering in our present module, you have to cover them after the research project ends.

Siti: All right.

Fariza: Do we want to include 'To make clarifications'?

Arfah: Yes, yes maybe together with 'Making enquiry'.

Fariza: O yes, when they interview the job task, maybe they can ask clarifications. 'Making suggestions'? Are we going to cover oral presentations?

Arfah: Umm (Silent)

Fariza: But we are asking them to do oral presentations, so might as well we do this [conduct lessons on making effective oral presentations] ya?

Siti: Yeah. I think in the assessment, we have one assignment under oral presentation.

Arfah: Yup.

Fariza: So, okay, we try to include that.

Arfah: Yup.

Fariza: Around one hour should be enough, right?

Siti: Yup.

the curriculum item that we would cover in our multi-literacies module and it seemed that Siti and Arfah held subservient roles, as they agreed with my suggestions most of the time. They responded to my questions or suggestions with a "yes" or "all right", indicating agreement. Furthermore, they did not elaborate or ask any questions based on the decisions I made.

In the collaborative research process in the Participatory Action Research Project, the authority to make decisions was solely given to me, and Siti and Arfah were providing supporting information to support the decision-making process. In Extract 1.3, we were discussing the type of assessment that could be included in the multi-literacies module. To ensure that everybody in the research team were involved in the decision-making process, I ran through my ideas with the group. It appeared that Siti and Arfah were not comfortable in the process of shared decision-making as they were silent in a few instances. When I expressed my opinion that allocating 100 marks for the first and second multi-literacies projects was quite unreasonable, they did not state their stand on the issue. I continued the conversation by suggesting including only certain parts of the whole assessment scheme. Arfah responded by sharing her experience in assisting a lecturer for a previous year's assessment process. I saw her input to the discussion as an opportunity of including the research team in shared decision-making process when I provided a provocation statement of whether the type of assignment mentioned by Arfah could be applicable for our multi-literacies projects.

However, the process of including Siti and Arfah in the discussion and the decision-making process was unsuccessful, as it appeared that they were willing to provide information but not contribute to the shared decision-making process. They left the decision-making to me. At one point, Siti stated her opinion; before ending her statement, it seemed that she asked for my approval, before deciding not to continue with her statement. This excerpt also shows that I made the final decision on the assessment issue based on the information provided by the research team members. At the end of Extract 1.3, I stated that the assessment included the career

research presentation and the *Majalah 3* (the first and second multi-literacies projects). I responded to Siti's approval-seeking action with a final statement, suggesting that I was influenced by the authoritative position that I had in the hierarchical structure.

Extract 1.3:

Fariza: So, I think it is a bit too much to assess them with this 50% and then another 50%. What do you think?

Silent.

Fariza: How about if for the sake of this research project, we just take this one the 15% assessment, so we can have an assessment on group discussion for 15%. Do we have any individual presentation in our module?

Arfah: Last semester when I was helping one lecturer with her assessment, we asked the students to present their group work but each student had different parts to present, so we assessed them based on the individual work.

Fariza: Can it work with our module?

Silent

Fariza: Umm, we have presentations, right?

Siti: We have the career research presentation

Fariza: Yeah, that one, can we assess that and give them 15%?

Arfah: We have another one, the Majalah 3.

Fariza: Umm, Majalah 3, umm, I was thinking about the career blog | presentation.

Siti: Yeah.

Fariza: How about we take two parts from the assessment scheme? Maybe we can assess Majalah 3 and the career research presentation. We can take the career research presentation as an individual assessment and Majalah 3 could be assessed as a group assignment.

Siti: I was thinking the career blog, because, umm, No? I don't know, I have no ideas (laugh)

Fariza: I think we take both projects.

(Professional discussion 2, 24 November 2010)

Extract 1.4 is another example where the decision-making process was not shared by all research team members. In this extract, Siti suggested a classroom activity that involves students recording their group's role-play and the recording could be presented in the classroom. This suggestion was supported by Arfah, but I thought that it was not necessary. Siti stated that if I had decided that the activity was not necessary, she would just agree with my decision.

Extract 1.4:

Fariza: *I think maybe we don't have to use computers in all of the lessons.*

Siti: *I was thinking of asking the students to record their role plays.*

Arfah: *Yup. We can ask them to take turns and later present their recordings. But this process will take time.*

Siti: *I think so too. But since you say we don't have to, then it is okay.*

Fariza: *Umm, I think that would not be necessary. So, what else can we do here?*

(Professional discussion 1, 10 November 2010)

Once again, I made the final decision about the topic of discussion. In this excerpt, I made my stand and closed the discussion on that topic by orienting the discussion to a different topic. It appeared that I was hesitant in relinquishing the authority that I possessed in the research team structure and Siti and Arfah remained obedient.

In the beginning, there was a clear line that separated the roles and status of each research team members. It became apparent that I was dominant in the conversations and I had the authority to control the direction of the research project by having the final say in almost every issue discussed. Siti and Arfah also confirmed this point when in an interview carried out after the planning stage in the first cycle; they commented that they saw me as a person who guided them in the initial course of the research project. As illustrated in Extract 1.5, even though Siti and Arfah did not highlight the element of status differences in our research relationship, they described the dominant role that I played in the planning of the multi-literacies project. They mentioned that I was mainly guiding the discussion process by helping them

Extract 1.5:

Siti: *I think you are more as a facilitator. As a leader, I don't think so, because if you were a leader, you would instruct us of what to do. But, yeah, you facilitated us more; you guided us in many areas that we don't know.*

Arfah: *I see you as a facilitator and co-researcher because we were not familiar with the system. We were not familiar with the concept of multiliteracies, and we don't have the experience yet. It was more of you facilitating the teaching and the researching process. Sometimes I see you as a co-researcher, because you tried to listen to our opinions and based the lesson plans on our ideas as well, so, sometimes I see you like a co researcher. But, more of a facilitator role.*

Fariza: *When you say that I facilitated the discussion process, what do you mean?*

Siti: *(laugh) I see that you helped us a lot because we don't have much knowledge in teaching as well as researching, so you gave us a lot of tips.*

Fariza: *Do you think that I was a bit bossy?*

Siti: *Sometimes (laugh), no, no, I think you helped us a lot*

Arfah: *Yes, yes, we have limited knowledge in this area, so you have to guide us a lot. If you were the leader, we might not have our discussions right, you can just tell us what to do.*

(Interview 1, 25 November 2010)

understand the concept of multi-literacies and researching. Arfah stated that she saw me as having two roles, a facilitator and sometimes a co-researcher. She highlighted that I made efforts to listen to their ideas and incorporate their ideas in the planning of the module. Nevertheless, ultimately she viewed me as a facilitator. Siti jokingly indicated that I sometimes dominate the conversations; however, she reiterated that it happened because of their limited knowledge on teaching and researching. She stressed the point that they needed more guidance from me in most instances.

In short, I think that the element of power distance was evident in the initial stage of our research project. At this stage, the research team's collaborative practice was highly influenced by the Malaysian cultural values and practices. In Hawkins (2010) Participatory Action Research project, which was conducted in an Australian setting, she recorded a significant event when her research team did not do what she had intended to do. She stated that she was initially frustrated with the situation; however, later concluded that the situation signified the true undertaking of a Participatory Action Research where the research process was a bit messy and unpredictable. In the case of my Participatory Action Research Project, I think the evidence of power distance was quite clear as indicated in Extract 1.2 to Extract 1.5. The lecturers, who held an inferior position in the hierarchical structure, were more subservient and I, who had a more superior position, dominated the discussions.

Active co-researchers

The initial stage of my Participatory Action Research Project began with the elements of status differences influencing the roles each research team members played in the collaborative research process. As the collaborative research process progressed, the roles of each member began to shift. It seemed that the research process empowered each member to improve her roles and contribute more to the research process. This section will focus on the way the Participatory Action Research process helped to empower each team member.

As we moved deeper into the Participatory Action Research process, Siti and Arfah were becoming closer to the research project by showing a sense of belonging to the project. At the earlier stage, the research project was often described as "Fariza's research project". Siti and Arfah kept on using the phrase "*your research*" whenever they were referring to the project (see the bold words in Extract 1.6).

However, as the Action Research project progressed, I noticed that

Extract 1.6:

Siti: *Luckily for you, that there was a change [in terms of the students' learning]*

Fariza: *Yeah, there was a change.*

Siti: *At least, **your research** recorded a change; it shows that it is moving forward.*

Fariza: I was a beginning to get worried actually

Siti: *Me too! I was worried too. I thought **your research** would be ruined after the first interview with the students.*

(Interview 2, 5 January 2011)

Siti and Arfah displayed more of a sense of belonging to the research project by referring to the project as "our project". The conversation extract in Extract 1.7 shows that Siti suggested conducting informal conversations with the students to see the students' current view towards the multi-literacies approach. This time, instead of highlighting the word "your research'', she showed a sense of belonging by using the word "we" (see the bold words in Extract 1.7). Extract 1.7 illustrated her sense of belonging to the research project and she was no longer assisting me to complete my research project, but she was giving suggestions to improve the data collection method for the research project as a research team member.

Extract 1.7:

Siti: *You have not interviewed the students, right?*

Fariza: *Not yet.*

Siti: *Ha, before we interview the students again, how about if we have a pre-interview session where we talk to a few students*

Fariza: *Yup, maybe we should do that.*

Siti: *Maybe, we can take up 10 minutes from the class time, have a chat with the students, and see how they view the [multiliteracies] approach now.*

(Professional discussion 4, 19 January 2011)

Arfah also showed a sense of belonging to the research project by explaining that she felt connected to the research project as described in Extract 1.8:

Extract 1.8:

Arfah: *In the beginning, I seriously thought that this type of research would be tedious. That was my initial assumption. But then, when we actually carried out the research, we observed the class, then we discussed, and then we reflected on the data and discussed how to improve our teaching. It was really, really fun. I was so connected to this research project.*

(Interview 3, 2 February 2011)

Through the participatory research process, Siti and Arfah were empowered to move from research subordinates, who provided necessary information for the decision-making process, to the initiators of discussion by providing suggestions and alternative methods to better improve the research process. This point was evident in Extract 1.9, when Siti suggested alternatives for the existing data collection method after our unsuccessful attempt of getting rich data through the students' interviews at the first cycle. In this excerpt, I voiced my concern regarding the students' reluctance in sharing their opinions regarding their learning experiences. Siti, without hesitation, suggested using a written questionnaire to obtain richer data. It seemed clear that Siti was taking a different role from the one she took up at the beginning of the research project. She was no longer providing necessary information to aid my decision-making process, but she was *initiating* a discussion to improve the project. She had become an active member of the research team as she was suggesting alternatives to get richer data. Siti used the word "we" to refer to the collaborative effort of the research teams (see bold words in Extract 1.9.).

Apart from initiating discussions, Siti and Arfah were also taking part in the decision-making process. Extract 1.9 shows that the decision-making process was shared between Siti and me. In this extract Siti and I both negotiated ways to obtain richer data. Siti was quite fluent and confident with what she was saying. The conversation in Extract 1.9 did not show any signs of Siti seeking my approval to suggest ideas regarding the research project.

Extract 1.9:

Fariza: *I don't know why the students would not express their views*

Siti: *In that case, **we** try to use other channel to collect data. **We** design a questionnaire, just a simple one and give to the students. Because they refused to say anything, we ask them to answer a questionnaire.*

Fariza: *Umm,*

Siti: *Don't ask them to write their names*

Fariza: *I don't know whether we could use this method for data collection because this study was fully qualitative.*

Siti: *This is off record, you just let me and Arfah conduct the questionnaire (laugh)*

Fariza: *Or, we have said earlier that we wanted them to write reaction papers, right? We can use that method [to collect data].*

Siti: *Yup! **We** can ask them to write their opinions. Arfah told me that they are okay with writing.*

(Professional discussion 4, 19 January 2011)

Extract 1.10 also shows that the decision-making process was shared among the team members. In this conversation, Siti, Arfah and I were conducting a reflective analysis on the issue of whether the students were showing any signs of improvement on their English language skills after learning using our multi-literacies module at the end of the second cycle. The input for this discussion was shared equally among members and was not dominated by any one member. I no longer dominated the discussion as I did previously and it seemed that Siti had more to say on the topic than I did when I mentioned that it was good that the students prepared scripts before recording their video and Siti elaborated on that point further by stating her opinion on how writing and preparing the scripts helped to improve the students' English language skills.

Extract 1.10:

Fariza: *Let's look at their English language, whether there was an improvement in terms of their proficiency. Through the videos, I can see that their language is improving.*

Arfah: *How about outside the video?*

Siti: *I think in the videos, the language should be okay because everything was scripted. They have written it earlier and then practiced what to ask, what to say.*

Fariza: *In a way, I think it is good that they wrote a script and practiced the presentation.*

Siti: *I think so too because at least they practised using the language. In a long run, they will become conscious of what they should say. First, they practised and tried perfecting their scripts, later they might develop the language for real life interactions.*

Fariza: *Yeah, if you do something repeatedly, you can develop the language. Can we say that through our multiliteracies activities, the students had language practice and opportunities to develop their English language skills?*

Arfah: *Definitely*

Siti: *I think so too. I still remembered their first presentation [career blog presentation]*

Fariza: *(laughs) yeah I could remember that too*

Siti: *If they had points on what they presented, maybe I would have understood what they were saying. However, that is not the case, I didn't understand and I kept asking myself, what were they saying? (laughs)*

Fariza: *As if they were speaking German, right? (laughs). Nevertheless, this cycle was quite different, right?*

Siti: *Yeah*

(Professional discussion 5, 2 February 2011)

The shared decision-making process was also evident in Extract 1.11. In this professional discussion, we were engaged in a discussion on the issue of whether the first multi-literacies project was a failure as we had assumed earlier. We anonymously agreed that the first cycle was not a failure. Instead, it was an experimental

stage for us to improve and tailor the multi-literacies pedagogy to particular characteristics of our cultural context. This conversation excerpt shows that the decision-making process was shared equally among the team members. I did not dominate the conversation and did not have the final say on the topic of discussion. Siti and Arfah were also quite comfortable in expressing their ideas in my presence. It seemed that they had more to say on the subject matter than I did. For example, in Extract 1.11, Siti was the one who expressed the idea that our first cycle was a trial-run instead of a failure and Arfah added that the project would not be successful if we did not have the failures in the first cycle. This conversation shows that they were no longer subservient members of the research team, but had transformed into active co-researchers. They did not provide supporting information and they were no longer seeking for my approval when expressing ideas. This situation was really contrastive to the conversations we had earlier as depicted in Extract 1.3 and 1.4 where I dominated the conversations and controlled the direction and outcome of the discussions.

Extract 1.11:

Fariza: *After we discuss all these things, I felt that it was not right to say that the first cycle was a failure. Do you consider the first cycle as a failure?*

Siti: *I don't think it was a failure. It was a trial-run. It was like a catalyst for this cycle. If we don't have the first cycle, then we would not have the success in this cycle.*

Arfah: *I think so too. Let us see it [the second cycle] like this, if we did not have the first assignment definitely we won't have this outcome [in the second cycle].*

Fariza: *It does seem like that, right?*

Siti: *We actually identified the flaws of our multiliteracies approach at the first cycle, and then we amended our approach for this cycle. So, if we don't have that, we won't have this outcome.*

Arfah: *I agree with you. If we did not improve our approach based on the outcome of the first project, we would not have this.*

Fariza: *Yup. We would not have realized the deficiency of our approach without a trial –run at the first cycle, right?*

Arfah: *Definitely we would not have realized.*

Siti: *Yeah.*

(Professional discussion 5, 2 February 2011)

The most interesting situation at this stage was to see that Arfah and Siti were no longer reserved in expressing ideas that were contradictory to my statement and I did not dismiss their ideas like I used to do at the beginning of the project. In normal circumstances in Malaysian hierarchical society, it would be quite rare for members at a lower rank in the hierarchical structure to express disagreement directly to the person who was at a higher level of the structure (Asma, 2009). Extract 1.12 shows that the hierarchical gap between us had started to diminish.

In Extract 1.12, we were talking about the students' videos. Siti and Arfah stated that the students had better presentation skills because they were not talking in front of real audiences. Siti stressed that the students felt more relaxed presenting in front of the camera because the recording could be edited. I suggested that it was possibly better for us to bring the second multi-literacies project to the first cycle, so that the students could overcome their fear of presenting in front of the audience through this project. Arfah was suddenly silent and expressed hesitations after listening to my statement and the discussion moved to another topic about the students' creativity in the videos. After a few moments, Arfah stated her opinion regarding my statement earlier. She argued that if we have swapped the multi-literacies projects, we would not have the same outcome to the ones that we were having. Here, Arfah's hesitation to voice her opinion was very much related to the Malaysian cultural practice of expressing disagreement with superiors. Arfah at that point might be evaluating and contemplating her intention of expressing disagreement to my statement. Contradicting a person, especially people who have a higher status in the hierarchical structure is very complex. The action involves serious consideration of the issue of power distance, maintaining harmonious relationships and politeness. In most situations, subordinates would remain silent and avoid contradicting superiors. Arfah at this moment must be thinking whether it was appropriate for her according to her cultural values to express her disagreement. However, she did express her disagreement with me despite her hesitations and cultural values. In this case, her action of expressing a contradictory idea to mine , a person of higher status in the hierarchical structure was a big move. It shows that the collaborative and reflective process in a Participatory Action Research process have empowered Arfah to challenge her role in the hierarchical structure.

In addition, through Extract 1.12 also depicts that I did not dismiss her idea as I did during earlier stage in the research project (refer to Extract 1.4). This shows that I was too through the Participatory Action Research were also changing my assumptions about being the primary researcher to being a co-researcher. I was more willing to accept and listen to ideas from my 'juniors' in the hierarchical

Extract 1.12:

Siti: The students' behind-the-scenes video clips showed that they actually did the recording again and again, right? I saw that as their effort of perfecting their work. I think when they do that, they had more confidence.

Arfah: Doing presentations in front of a camera was different from presenting in front of the class.

Siti: If you present in front of the camera, you will feel more relaxed and less stressful because you are not facing an audience, just the camera. Then, you can edit [the recording].

Fariza: Maybe if we swap this project [second multiliteracies project] with the first one, maybe we could have overcome the students' fear of talking in front of people. It is like we let them practise in front of the camera, it is like a grooming session before we ask them to do an oral presentation in front of the audience, for our career blog presentation. Then, maybe they would be more confident.

Arfah: Umm,

Fariza: Surprisingly, the students were very creative as shown in their documentaries, right?

Siti: (laugh) Right, I don't see that quality in the classroom.

Arfah: I think it is because they were doing something they are interested in.

Fariza: Umm, I think they really put a thought on what they were doing. I remembered this one group, in their videos the host were walking forward as they were talking, so that was different from the conventional way, just remain stationary. And, then there was one group actually used different camera angles. I think it was interesting.

Siti: (laugh) I noticed that one group, the host, had a few change of clothes.

Arfah: That was Ali [pseudonym], he had several change of clothes.

Fariza: O really? I missed that detail (laugh)

Arfah: They used the same setting but different shirts for each scene.

Siti: I noticed that too.

Arfah: I think, even though this cycle was successful, I don't think if we have brought this project to the first cycle, I don't know how to say this, but it [the second multiliteracies project] might not have the same outcome as we had now. Because during the first cycle the students had not developed their critical thinking, teamwork skills. It doesn't seem right; I don't know how to say it.

Fariza: I can see that too

Arfah: The outcome would not be the same as what we have now.

Fariza: Yeah, I think it is true. I get your point.

(Professional discussion 5, 2 February 2011)

structure even though the Malays cultural norms dictates the unlikeliness of juniors expressing disagreement to seniors (Mahfooz et al. , 2004).

Based on Extract 1.6 to Extract 1.12, it could be said that each of the team members were empowered to transform their roles in the research project. I was no longer in the leading role and Siti and Arfah were no longer playing the subordinating roles. These extracts (Extract 1.6 to 1.12) mapped out my journey from an authoritative facilitator who constantly controlled the direction of the discussion and made the final decision to a more collegial role. As the research project progressed, the cultural gap between the research team members and I as illustrated in Figure 1 became closer. Siti and Arfah also became closer to the research project. They showed signs of ownership of the research project Extract 1.6 to 1.12 also mapped out Siti and Arfah's journey from subordinating members to active co-researchers. They were more involved in determining the direction of the research project by providing constructive suggestions and comments. They were no longer subservient but were more engaged in the discussion and decision-making processes.

Conclusion

Conducting a Participatory Action Research in a hierarchical setting was challenging. The basis of Participatory Action Research philosophy itself was a challenge to the basic principle of the hierarchical society in which I lived and worked. Participatory Action Research strives for egalitarian relationship among members of the research team; meanwhile, in a hierarchical culture, inequality is acknowledged, accepted and considered normal. Conducting Participatory Action Research in a hierarchical setting was like working in two contrastive worlds.

Based on the findings of this study, the participants of a Participatory Action Research project in a hierarchical setting can also be empowered to contribute more to the research process. In the beginning, Siti and Arfah who were at a lower position in the hierarchical structure, played a supporting role where they

provided necessary information for the discussion but refrained from giving ideas and contributing to the decision-making process. But, as they were more engaged in the collaborative process, they became active co-researchers as they were more comfortable in contributing ideas and making decisions. Similarly, I began the journey as an authoritative facilitator and as the research project progressed, I became a more collegial facilitator. These instances show that Participatory Action Research in a hierarchical society would not only be influenced by the elements of power distance, but could also empower participants to disassociate themselves from the influences of the hierarchical power.

Data in the current study showed that elements of power distance are quite significant and visible in the interaction amongst the research team throughout the research process. It shows that the idea of total equality and egalitarian relationship in Participatory Action Research in a hierarchical setting is almost impossible. My Participatory Action Research project did not offer a totally free and equal power ratio in the research relationship but it allowed me to discover the significance of status differences and how to negotiate and manage it so that we could achieve a democratizing collaborative research effort. Even though the Participatory Action Research process did not liberate the research members totally but it empowered us to challenge our roles as defined by our hierarchical background. That is the most significant learning from this study where collaborative principals in Participatory Action Research process provides a platform for us to be empowered to contest our traditional norms to a certain extent.

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Capturing the proven experience through Action Learning: The systematic work of developing quality in Swedish leisure-time centres

Maria Hjalmarsson and Åsa Soderstrom

Abstract

The aim of this article is to discuss the requirement of the Swedish Educational Act that says that the activities of school and leisure-time centres should be based on (soft) science and proven experience. The discussion is carried out through illustrations from a collaborative Action Learning project that took place between researchers and leisure-time teachers with the overall aim to strengthen evidence-based knowledge about leisure-time teachers and to clarify their proven experience. The combination of pupils' proven experiences and the leisure-time teachers' reflective and researching approach proved to be the best route to follow in increasing the quality of the leisure-time centres. The leisure-time centres involved, to a greater extent than before the project, are now built upon a scientific approach as well as the proven experiences of both the pupils and the leisure-time teachers. The project underlines the well-known facts that developmental work needs stability and continuity to lay the foundation for sustainable change and that changes need to be a clear part of the schools' development organization.

Keywords

Action Learning, Leisure-time teachers, systematic quality work, improving schools, pupils 'experience

Introduction

The aim of this article is to discuss, through illustrations from a collaborative Action Learning project between researchers and leisure-time teachers, the requirement of the Swedish Educational Act (Skollagen, 2010:800) that says that school and leisure-time centre activities should be based on evidence based knowledge and proven experience. As Swedish leisure-time centres do not have an exact equivalent in countries outside Scandinavia, we will begin with a brief description of their governance and task

In Sweden, younger pupils are offered child care in leisure-time centres before and after school hours, as well as during school holidays. As many as 85% of all pupils between six and eight years of age are enrolled there (Skolverket, 2014b). Leisure-time centres are today an integrated part of the school system, governed by the Education Act (Skollagen, 2010:800) and with the same curriculum as the compulsory school (Skolverket, 2011), guided further by general outlines from the Swedish National Agency for Education (2014a). The activities of the centres are to be based on *evidence-based knowledge* and *proven experience*. The foremost tasks of leisure-time centres are to complement the school by offering a different pedagogical content, provide meaningful leisure and support the pupils' intellectual, social, physical and emotional development and learning. Yet, compared to school, leisure-time centres only have goals to aim for, not attain. Leisure-time teachers work during early mornings, afternoons and school holidays, but they also carry out lessons with the younger pupils, often focusing on more hands-on and artistic aspects of the theoretical school subjects handled by the compulsory school teacher in integrated work teams. The integration of compulsory school and leisure-time teachers in school has led to changes in the profession and conditions of everyday practices at leisure-time centres as well as

to clarified conditions of governance and control of the activities (Saar, Löfdahl, & Hjalmarsson, 2012).

Conditions of leisure-time centres – an issue of quality

Over a period of twenty years Swedish leisure-time centres have been exposed to extensive changes. Statistics show that over the decades the number of pupils enrolled in leisure-time centres has expanded radically while the frequency of teachers has not increased in a proportional way. It is reasonable to assume that the demand of offering child care to all younger pupils has been prioritized at the expense of the demand on high quality of the content of the activities. Indeed, evaluations and inspections over the last decades have shown that the quality of Swedish leisure-time centres is insufficient (Skolinspektionen, 2010; Skolverket, 2000, 2010). While the criticism has mainly focussed on how the activities are static and carried out in a routine manner, there has also been discussion of how they do not take their point of departure in the uniqueness of every child and how he or she has certain interests and needs. The pupils spend a good deal of time left to their own devices, which might imply a risk that some pupils for example get excluded from the peer group without an adult noticing or helping. On average there are about forty pupils enrolled in each group at a leisure-time centre (Skolverket, 2014b) and this high number of pupils has been pointed out as a critical factor behind the problem of raising the quality of leisure-time centres (Persson, 2008). We interpret our assignment to supervise the Action Learning project discussed in this article as a response to this criticism.

Learning from experience

Taking our departure from the leisure-time teachers' proven experience demonstrates the difficulties of developing through learning from experience. A natural reaction when one encounters a difficult situation is to take immediate action. The many decisions and the many subsequent actions taken by school

personnel during a normal workday are often based on each individual's experience of similar situations. Our actions often rest on knowledge that has been incorporated into our thinking patterns, where they have become a part of our 'knowledge by familiarity' (see e.g. Handal, 1996; Johannessen, 1999; Lauvås & Handal, 1993; Schön, 1991).

Our actions are not always based on a deeper certainty about proven experience. When we find ourselves in difficult situations we often do random testing: 'I'm not getting my pupils to take responsibility for their work so I will try to solve this problem by taking various measures, from setting clear objectives to threatening with poorer grades'. Some actions are more suitable than others, helping us to draw conclusions about the best way to form responsible students. 'Knowledge by familiarity' is often based on this kind of random testing (Söderström, 2012).

A problem arises however when our own experience is not enough to help us improve or when we want to share our experiences with others. Learning from experience easily becomes 'solidified' and is no longer a source of innovation or an opportunity for development. This problem is reflected in the saying that a teacher's ability to assimilate the experiences of 25 years of work can result in *25 years of experience, while others experience one year 25 times* (Handal, 1996p. 109). Learning from experience requires a certain amount of aloofness so that new impulses help you view the problem from a new perspective.

The work of the leisure-time teachers is carried out as teamwork, with colleagues expected to play a supportive and challenging role, creating opportunities for shared learning. This learning in interaction with others requires that knowledge by familiarity can be articulated and that leisure-time teachers can and dare distance themselves from their own way of acting (Söderström, 2012). It is necessary to relate individual experience to more general models if these experiences are not to be just something personal but also something that is meaningful to share with others.

What is required if experienced learning is not to end up with what we hold as taken for granted? Reforms are often carried out

in the belief that there is a solution to every problem. Hargreaves (1998) however turns this around and says that there is at least one problem to every solution and that leisure-time personnel thus must acquire tools to work together if they want to learn from their own actions. Time is needed to be able to reflect on actions, both individually and with others, but time is not enough. Knowledge of how to systematise experiences in a committed and critical way, to clarify the proven experience, is also needed. When leisure-time teachers' own experiences are emphasized as an important source of learning, there is a risk of forgetting that theoretical knowledge is also necessary within the area to be developed (Ranagården, 2009).

How can one's own actions become a common source of learning? Can a more structured and organised learning experience inspired by Action Research and Action Learning be an alternative? In the collaborative project between researchers and leisure-time centre teachers presented and discussed below we tested a model of Action Learning to meet the challenges of learning from experience and how to develop knowledge about proven experience.

The concept of Action Learning

The collaborative project between us, the two researchers, and seven teachers representing three leisure-time centres was based on a model of Action Learning described by Zuber-Skeritt (2002) as a way for practitioners to develop knowledge based on their own proven experience. With flexibility and systematic methods, learning can be conceptualized from experience. Some of the characteristics are learning by acting, reflecting on practice, collaborating and learning from actual workplace issues.

Action Learning as a model for learning from experience is used in many fields of professional and organisational development, often in relation to learning organisations. Tiller (1999) used it as a concept for school development, describing it as teachers' and principals' way of doing research on their own activities and as a way to develop systematic knowledge based on problems in the everyday practice of schools. It can be seen as an attitude—we

could call it curiosity—in relation to the dilemmas teachers and principals face in their everyday work: 'What is there to discover that I do not yet understand?' It is also a planned systematic change (Moksnes Furu, 2007) which aims to help clarify as well as challenge our own 'familiarity knowledge'. *Action* in the concept suggests that learning is linked to action and that one needs to learn together with others. This includes striving to improve the individual and collective practice, but also the school as an organization.

The model that guided our work was inspired by both Kolb's model of experiential learning (Kolb, 1984) and Tiller's model of Action Learning (Tiller, 1999). Using our model, the aim was to challenge the leisure-time teachers' own experiences through systematic surveys of their perceived problems. The model is described and illustrated in Figure 1:
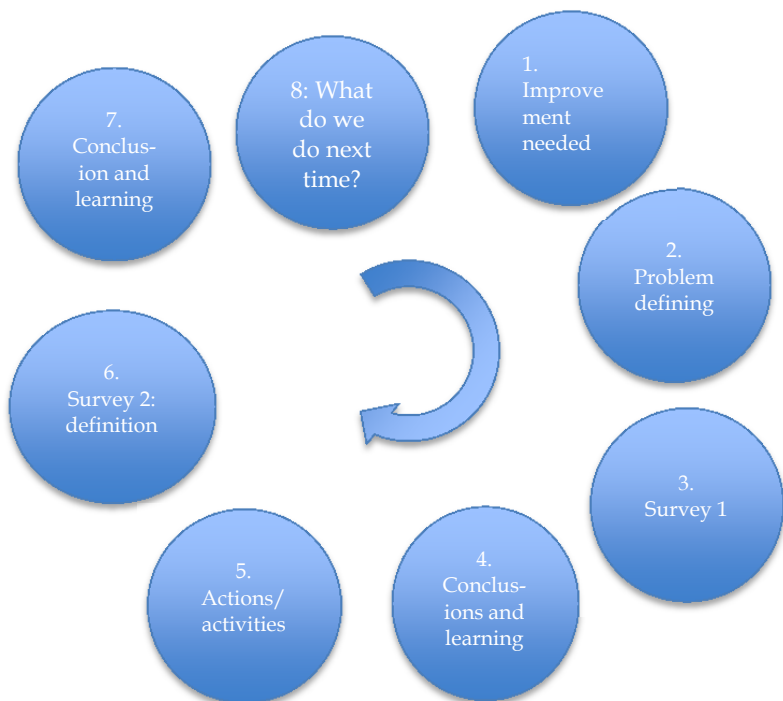
The diagram illustrates the process of using knowledge and experience from elsewhere and creating knowledge through:

1. The work starts by identifying something that is perceived as problematic in the teachers' everyday practice.

2. The problem and the perceived need are defined as a background for further work.

3. A survey is carried out to identify the current situation.

4. The survey is analysed and conclusions are formulated.

5. Actions are taken based on the new knowledge, in an attempt towards improvement.

6. When one can expect that the applied measures have led to some effects, a new survey is made.

7. The second survey generates new conclusions.

8. The original problem statement can now be reformulated.

In connection with the concrete work, knowledge and experience are applied 'from outside' through conversations between participants and through knowledge in the form of literature and lectures.

We maintain that the model differs from leisure-time teachers' everyday work when the action compulsion made the experience of something problematic require immediate action. The model aimed at forcing the leisure-time teachers to stop and define the problem and identify the current situation as a basis for action. Implementing Action Learning based on this model requires time, as each step requires reflection. In addition, time is also required, of necessity, between implementing measures and identifying their effects. The work based on the model has a clear purpose and there are a number of requirements that are not obviously associated

with either evaluation or systematic quality work. The aim is to create knowledge about actions as a basis for collaborative learning. As in all Action Learning, working with the model requires that the starting point is a problem in practice.

The Action Learning project

During a period of one year, seven leisure-time teachers, representing three leisure-time centres and work teams, applied our model of Action Learning. The overall aim of the project was to increase the quality of the work in the leisure-time centres by strengthen the leisure-time teachers' evidence-based knowledge and to clarify their proven experience. The main goal of the project was for the leisure-time teachers, the pupils and their parents to experience increased quality in the leisure-time centres but also for the teachers to develop a deeper understanding of the importance of a scientific approach to their work. At the request of the municipal school administration we, the researchers, supervised the work process in meetings with the leisure-time teachers once a month. We alternated between meeting the whole group to discussing research on leisure-time activities and the leisure-time profession and different methods when doing research in their own practice one month and meeting each team separately the month after. to discuss specific questions concerning their process of their own the month after. The teachers in each of the teams, along with their principals, took their point of departure in trying to formulate something they saw as problematic at their own leisure-time centre, after which they carried out a systematic mapping of the identified problem following the model for Action Learning. All three teams took into account the possibility of exploring how the pupils themselves understood the problem at hand. In accordance with the project description the prior task of the principals was to create conditions that were favourable to the practical work of the leisure-time teachers through the Action Learning process. By presenting the process of the three teams in brief below, we aim to put the learning of the project in concrete form.

Three areas of improvement

The leisure-time teachers at *Leisure-Time Centre A* reacted to how they perceived the pupils as strongly influenced by their friends when choosing activities which the teachers saw as limiting their development. The teachers had a presumption that if the leisure-time centre offered fewer activities the pupils would be better in finding out their own activities and also become more independent in their choices. The teachers began by interviewing the pupils to gain knowledge about their attitude towards the activities that were offered. They had taken pictures of the leisure center's premises and asked students what facilities they enjoyed and what activities they liked to participate in in these premises. Based on the interviews the teachers discovered that their presumptions were only partly confirmed. To the pupils the content of the offered activities was the primary aspect in choosing an activity, not which friends had chosen it. Further, based on the interviews, the leisure-time teachers noted that the pupils appreciated how the activities were presented as voluntary offerings. The teachers said they were surprised over the results of the survey. As a consequence of this insight the teachers did not offer fewer activities. Instead they expanded the planning and organisation of more well-thought-out activities. Every afternoon the pupils were offered a specific activity, which they were informed about before the end of the school day.

Through this procedure the content of the leisure-time centre activities was varied and framed by an explicit structure. The teachers conducted follow-up interviews with the objective of exploring the comprehensions of the pupils regarding the implemented changes. These showed that the majority of the pupils had participated in the activities offered. Further the pupils suggested activities that they wished to engage in during the afternoons and, according to the teachers, all of their suggestions could be put into practice, which may be seen as confirming the perception that the pupils took the opportunity to influence the everyday practices of the leisure-time centre seriously. Through the systematic exploration of the pupils' views of the leisure-time

centre activities the teachers' question of whether friends control the pupils' choices of activities was answered. Through the interviews, the teachers also experience how important it was to listen to the children's knowledge and experience and the teachers contributed to increasing the ability of the pupils to influence the development of the leisure-time centre by focussing on their experiences and views of the activities.

At *Leisure-Time Centre B* the teachers had a feeling that the pupils were stressed out and that it was hard to make contact with them. The situation before and during snack time felt particularly stressful. The teachers were interested in finding out if the pupils had the same feeling. They did a random sample of a group of students and conducted interviews with them. They asked how students experienced the situation during snack time. If they experienced the situation as stressful they also asked if the students had suggestions on how the situation could be improved. Teachers also conducted a series of observations during snack time with the aim of creating systematic knowledge and challenge the feeling of stress experienced teachers. Observations and interviews with the pupils showed that the pupils, to a greater extent than the teachers thought, were not aware that the situation was problematic. A teacher sum up that: *The investigation of the snack-time resulted into something completely different than an improvement of the snack-time. It led to a democratization of the whole Leisure-Time Centre.*

Based on the views of the pupils, and as a way of trying to improve the environment of the leisure-time centre, the teachers introduced a kind of leisure-time council, where pupils and teachers could discuss questions related to the social climate and the environment of the leisure-time centre. In the beginning the discussions were mostly focused on the snack-time situation but as time went on the discussions broadened and focussed on various other aspects of the leisure-time centre activities. By applying role-play the teachers illustrated various scenarios surrounding the snack-time situation, after which the pupils were free to make suggestions on how to handle each particular scenario. As a

consequence of this work the pupils and teachers drew up rules of well-being and a pleasant atmosphere that were then applied to the everyday practices of the leisure-time centre. By means of observations the teachers noticed that the snack-time situation became calmer. They drew the conclusion that this was due to the fact that the pupils were involved in the process of change. An explicit structure on ways to assert influence and discover which rules work in the snack-time situation had led to an increased understanding on the part of the pupils regarding the importance of a calmer social climate for everyone's well-being. Now, the leisure-time teachers maintain that the environment at the leisure-time centre has indeed become less stressful.

The snack-time situation was also the focus of the teachers at *Leisure-Time Centre C*. They felt that they devoted a great deal of time to preparation and supplementary work but still found it difficult to create a comfortable atmosphere in the room, which offered too little space to all the pupils. The question at hand was how to increase efficiency and well-being during the snack-time situation. These leisure-time teachers conducted group interviews with their pupils. In these they presented the situation during snack-time as problematic and asked the pupils to help them solve the problem. The pupils came up with a number of suggestions for improvements. During interviews with the pupils the teachers learned more about the pupils' experiences and thoughts as well as their suggestions on how to improve the situation. They suggested, for example, that a teacher along with two pupils should take responsibility for snack-times during a week. Supported by the views of the pupils the group was also divided into two and began to eat in separate rooms. The teachers formulated a clarified division of work tasks and responsibilities, including the entire snack-time process. By introducing a system of hosts who would lay the table, cooperation between pupils and teachers was encouraged. The teachers had earlier made preparations together to speed up work. Now the teachers who did not have the responsibility could engage in activities with pupils.

An evaluation of the implemented measures showed that the pupils appreciated the new routines and that the snack-time situation, from their point of view, had become calmer and less noisy. For their part the teachers felt that the time they devoted to the snack-time situation had not decreased as much as they wished. On the other hand their perspective had changed from seeing the situation as simply a matter of 'feeding' to focussing on the pedagogical value of eating together with the pupils in a pleasant environment. The teachers said: *We would never have made these changes unless we systematically investigated the students' view of snacks. We were so inclined to help each other within the staff group that we did not see students as a resource.*

To sum up, based on the experiences of the project, we see that focussing on and trying to make a change in one area of the leisure-time centres may bring positive effects to other aspects of the work as well. For example the effort to contribute to pedagogical content during the snack-time situation simultaneously led to a greater level of structure in the teachers' distribution of work tasks and areas of responsibility. However we would maintain that the biggest change occurred in the pupils' influence, as all actions to make improvements led to an increase in the pupils' influence on their leisure-time. Before the project the teachers based their organisation and choice of leisure-time centre activities on presumptions about the needs and interests of the pupils. Afterwards, as a result of the Action Learning process, the teachers began to plan and organise the activities based on the results of the surveys of the pupils' views. This turned the thoughts and views of the pupils about their time in the leisure-time centres and the activities offered there into the basis for the quality efforts.

Conclusions

In an evaluation of the project the leisure-time teachers expressed an understanding of the value of surveys in order to make progress in their work. Before the survey they had to define the problem together. During the survey they could in tranquility

focus the pupils and their views of the problem. In the analysis they deepen their knowledge about their own activities. And the improvement actions rested on solid ground. They felt they had learned a lot from the research results and begun to adopt an explorative and reflective attitude in the systematic work of quality. We put forth that Action Learning contributes to an increased scientific base of knowledge in the work of the leisure-time teachers. Moreover, we claim that it is possible to achieve increased quality even when the conditions are not optimal, such as with small groups of pupils and well-adapted premises.

As supervisors of the project we wish to call attention to some of the most important things we learned through the process. We maintain that the pupils' proven experiences along with the leisure-time teachers' researching and reflective approach was the best combination for increasing the quality of the leisure-time centres. In the beginning some of the leisure-time teachers were doubtful as to whether all of the pupils should be involved, as they thought some of them wouldn't take the questions seriously, but they were compelled to reconsider this conception later. In addition, when the project started, the leisure-time teachers interpreted the concept of proven experience in a limited way, only including that *of the leisure-time teachers*. Through the reflective process of Action Learning their views changed. They realised that the pupils can play a more prominent role in the process of increasing the quality of the activities and that it is a question of broadening the concept of proven experience to include those *of the pupils*. We maintain that the three leisure-time centres to a greater extent than previously made changes that rested on evidence based knowledge and proven experience. The model of Action Learning helped create a system in the learning process which is pursued with a scientific approach.

Discussion

Despite the achievements described in this paper, the project has not been an entirely lasting success. The development of a scientific approach in relation to learning and change that began to

evolve among the leisure-time teachers in the project has experienced problems in surviving. In the project we tried to build in stability and continuity by engaging the principals, as they have the power to integrate the changes into the organisation. The municipal school management gave the principals the task of creating a development organisation that supported the project and the Action Learning model. But too soon after the completion of the project, the conditions at the three leisure-time centres changed. Two of them had their principals replaced, while the third disbanded one of its groups, leading to a reorganisation of the teaching team. This reflects a classic problem in both Action Learning projects and school improvement: the danger of basing a change on a small group of enthusiasts (Fullan, 2001; Hargreaves, Lieberman, Fullan, & Hopkins, 1998; Zuber-Skerritt, 2002). The planned systematic implementation of Action Learning as a model for change had not been given the time needed to withstand the instability created by the changes at the leisure-time centres. Even if the teachers who participated in the project are still using what they learned there is no guarantee that their knowledge and skills will spread if what they learnt is not also 'owned' by the new principals. The leisure-time teachers as individual said they developed a scientific approach to their work from the project. They also said they developed the professional relationship in their teams. But when the changes occurred at the organizational level that affected their work situation was difficult to be the sole bearers of the change. The project teaches us once again that stability and continuity are alpha and omega in Action Learning and the work of laying the foundation for sustainable change, and that change needs to be a clear part in the schools' development organisation and the shared responsibility of both school management and school staff. When the Swedish Education Act now included the requirement that the school and leisure-time centre activities should be based on evidence based knowledgeand proven experience we can expect that a scientific approach will be established not only in individual teachers and principals but also becomes part of the school organization. Here, knowledge in Action Learning will become central.

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The journal aims to be accessible for both readers and contributors while not compromising the need for sophistication that complex situations require. Where previously our commitment was to publish new practitioners as a way of developing the field, while also introducing novice practitioners presenting creative and insightful work we now encourage experienced practitioners and scholars to contribute.

Accordingly, our rate of rejection has increased. We will only receive articles that have been proof read, comply with the

submission guidelines as identified on the journal's website, and that also meet the criteria that the reviewers use, also available on the journal website. We are unlikely to publish an article that describes a project simply because its methodology is drawn from our field.

The intention of the journal is to provide high quality works for practitioners and funding bodies to refer to in the commissioning of works, and the progression of and inclusion of Action Research and Action Learning concepts and practices in policy and operations.

AlARj has a substantial international panel of experienced Action Research and Action Learning scholars and practitioners who offer both double blind and transparent reviews at the request of the author.

Making your submission and developing your paper

Please send all contributions in Microsoft Word format to our Open Journal Systems access portal: http://journal.alara.net.au

You will need to register as an author to upload your document and work through the four electronic pages of requirements to make your submission. ALARA's Managing Editor or Issue Editor will contact you and you can track progress of your paper on the OJS page.

If you have any difficulties or inquiries about submission or any other matters to do with ALARA publications contact the Managing Editor on editor@alarassociation.org.

For the full details of submitting to the ALAR Journal, please see the submission guidelines on ALARA's web site www.alarassociation.org/pages/publications/submission-guidelines

Guidelines

The journal is devoted to the communication of the theory and practice of Action Research and related methodologies generally. As with all ALARA activities, all streams of work across all

disciplines are welcome. These areas include Action Research, Action Learning, Participatory Action Research, systems thinking, inquiry process- facilitation, and process management and all the associated post-modern epistemologies and methods such as rural self-appraisal, auto-ethnography, appreciative inquiry, most significant change, open space technology, etc.

Our reviewers use the following criteria, which are important for authors to consider:

1. Criterion 1: How well are the paper and its focus both aimed at and/or grounded in the world of practice?

2. Criterion 2: How well are the paper and/or its subject explicitly and actively participative: research with, for and by people rather than on people?

3. Criterion 3: How well do the paper and/or its subject draw on a wide range of ways of knowing (including intuitive, experiential, presentational as well as conceptual) and link these appropriately to form theory of and in practices (praxis)?

4. Criterion 4: How well does the paper address questions that are of significance to the flourishing of human community and the more-than-human world as related to the foreseeable future?

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6. Criterion 6: How well do the paper and its subject offer critical insights into and critical reflections on the research and inquiry process?

7. Criterion 7: How well do the paper and/or its subject progress AR and AL in the field (research, community, business, education or otherwise)?

8. Criterion 8: How well is the paper written?

Article preparation

Journal submissions must be original and unpublished work suitable for an international audience and not under review by any other publisher or journal. No payment is associated with submissions. Copyright of published works remains with the author(s) shared with ALARA Inc.

While *ALARj* promotes established practice and related discourse *ALARj* also encourages unconventional approaches to reflecting on practice including poetry, artworks and other forms of creative expression that can in some instances progress the field more appropriately than academic forms of writing.

Submissions are uploaded to our Open Journal System (OJS) editing and publication site.

The reviewers use the OJS system to send you feedback within a 2-3 month period. You will receive emails at each stage of the process with feedback, and if needed, instructions included in the email about how to make revisions and resubmit.

Access to the journal

The journal is published electronically on the OJS website.

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ALARA's vision is that action learning and action research will be widely used and publicly shared by individuals and groups creating local and global change for the achievement of a more equitable, just, joyful, productive, peaceful and sustainable society.