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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.

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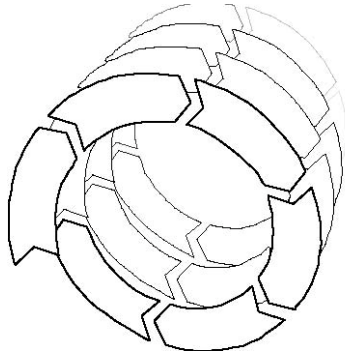
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CONTENTS

| | |
|--|------------|
| Editorial | 2 |
| Managing organizational innovation for sustaining the product life span using action research: a case study of a karaoke box in Hong Kong | |
| Barry Elsey and Christopher Chai Kit Suek | 3 |
| Action Research in the Commercial World: a community based action research project with small business owners | |
| Kate Horsey | 30 |
| TQM: an Integration of Systems Theory, System Dynamics and Organisational Learning | |
| Madhu Ranjan Kumar and Shankar Sankaran | 53 |
| Using an Indigenous worldview for action learning and action research to create equity in education | |
| Frances Wyld | 77 |
| Participatory practices: on being our field together | |
| Susan Goff | 106 |
| Community noticeboard | 127 |
| ALARA membership information and registration details | 134 |

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Editorial

As we approach the end of another busy year, this edition really sums up both the progress of AR and AL in Australia and the great diversity in the field. We have a number of articles with a commercial business focus this time around; from karaoke in Hong Kong, to computer service franchises in Queensland, and Total Quality Management (TQM) practices in India.

We have also published two articles from our recent 2007 Annual National Conference held in Adelaide, "Aboriginal Ways of Knowing and Doing". Wyld explores and critiques contemporary knowledges in education and Goff presents a commentary on participatory and transdisciplinary influences in the AR and AL fields. Our next edition will also include papers presented at this conference.

Additionally, the 'Community noticeboard' pages at the end of this edition outline calls for *Expressions of Interest* in running our next National Conference, and the up and coming 2009 World Congress. Deadlines are in January, so now is the time to submit an EOI.

We are also in the middle of renovating our journal information pages on the ALARA website (www.alara.net.au) and hope to open up the journal to some online publishing soon. If you have any comments, suggestions or thoughts about the ALARA journal going online, please don't hesitate to contact me at alar@alara.net.au - I'd be happy to take your messages.

Margaret O'Connell
Managing Editor

Managing organizational innovation for sustaining the product life span using action research: a case study of a karaoke box in Hong Kong

**- Barry Elsey and Christopher Chai
Kit Suek**

Abstract

A fad business like karaoke is vulnerable to sudden changes in cultural fashions and tastes, as well as all the other pressures of a keenly competitive market. Using the recent SARS epidemic in Hong Kong as a catalyst, a leading karaoke company identified the need to embrace the principle and practices of Continuous Innovation Management as the strategic driver for change. Action learning and action research were adopted as the methodology for engaging a 'think tank' of managers in participatory learning to consider the ways and means for sustaining the product life span of karaoke as a popular form of social entertainment. The three action research cycles generated various recommendations, which were implemented to produce tangible outcomes and benefits. The paper documents all stages of the change management process and reflects on the outcomes in sustaining the lifespan of a fad product in a competitive environment.

Introduction

During the SARS epidemic that badly affected parts of Asia a few years ago the karaoke business was severely damaged. In Hong Kong some major service providers completely collapsed and the others struggled to survive a massive downturn in customer demand. It is still something of a mystery how the survivors weathered the storm. Whatever explanations have been offered the lesson to be learned was that the karaoke business needed to think ahead and develop a strategic and operational plan for survival. SARS might return, or some new epidemic would appear that has the potential to wipe out the business behind social entertainment gatherings to enjoy leisure time activities.

In any case karaoke is fittingly described as a 'fad' business in which tastes and fashions suddenly change and it is no longer 'cool' to be seek entertainment in that way. Cultural practices are not immutable. Moreover, the karaoke business operates in an environment where it is necessary to work within a tight regulatory framework, relating to such activities as drinking and smoking. Furthermore, the cost of service provision creeps upwards but there is not much freedom to raise prices in a keenly competitive market.

In each of the ways outlined above the business of karaoke is vulnerable and has to continuously innovate and change to survive. This paper focuses attention on the design and outcome of an action research project that drew ideas for innovation and other means of survival from a selected team of company managers of a leading karaoke box in Hong Kong. It is a case illustration of workplace learning and change management using Continuous Innovation Management (CIM) as the conceptual framework for focused thinking and practical application. The core methodology was based on action learning and action research.

The key concepts that comprised the research methodology were not strictly comprehended in keeping with academic understanding but used more generally to give shape and impetus to the change management process. Within the Company there was a pressing need to get to grips with the change agenda. Therefore, no position was taken with regard to any 'school of thought'. Similarly, the understanding of other concepts such as CIM and organizational learning was more 'rule of thumb' but sufficient for the purpose of finding direction and both informing and motivating staff involved in the change process. This is not so much an excuse but more a reflection of the everyday realities of business thinking.

To provide a conceptual setting for a single company case study it is necessary to briefly outline the nature of a fad business and how the meaning of CIM applies to the karaoke business. Reference is also made to action learning and research as the key methodology for managing the innovation process.

The findings from the three action research cycles is then presented as the basis for a discussion and conclusion on workplace action learning as the building block to change management through innovation. The acid test and therefore core question of debate is whether good strategic outcomes have been achieved on at least a medium term sustainable basis.

The vulnerability of the karaoke box in Hong Kong as a fad business

The social entertainment business in Hong Kong, as elsewhere, is subject to the changing interests and tastes of customers. Karaoke is considered particularly vulnerable to

customer preferences and has been described as a 'fad' business, expressed in the well-known phrase 'here today and gone tomorrow' (Baig, 1991, Taylor, 1993, Lucille, 2003). Fad business survival and success depends on a number of critical conditions being met; such as the ability to retain customer loyalty and attract new ones (Lashley, 2000), well motivated staff providing a quality service at a reasonable cost (Lowenstein, 2003), crafting strategies and creating a culture in the business that works effectively (Zangwill, 1993, Kotler, 2000, Jeannet and Hennessey, 2001), using new technology to deliver the best service (Zangwill, 2003, Miller, 2002), and having the flexibility to adapt the enterprise to a rapidly changing environment (Jaffe, 1989, Clarke and Manton, 1997).

Taken together the fad business of karaoke presents significant strategic challenges to sustain the lifespan of a service-oriented product that combines elements of entertainment, hospitality, high-tech equipment and the novelty enticement to attract customers and maintain their loyalty. What the company considered necessary was to develop a strategic decision-making model that could serve as both a monitoring device on business performance and a direction finder for continuous innovation management.

This thinking produced the core issues as the drivers for the participatory action research project;

- to seek ways and means to lead change through innovative ideas for improving karaoke service quality provision, using CIM as a conceptual template, and
- to identify the key strategic choices required to extend the product lifespan of karaoke as a fad business.

Key concepts: Karaoke and Continuous Innovation Management

Although there was a business imperative driving the project, what distinguished the action research was a general grasp of underlying theory relating to change and Continuous Innovation Management (CIM) as a process, from conception through to completion. By no means was it a refined understanding but certainly sufficient to move ahead in a systematic way.

A first step was to fully understand the nature and historic meaning of karaoke, which grew out of Japan and has taken root well beyond the cultural boundaries of Asia (Yano, 1998, Mitsui, 1997). Karaoke is generally described as the activity of singing to pre-recorded music from a machine. A karaoke box is a compartment (or room) of varied size where people gather to entertain themselves for a given period of time (Mitsui and Hosokawa, 1998, Ogawa, 1997). Karaoke has grown rapidly in popularity and today it is estimated that upwards of 100 million people worldwide participate on any one day (Dr. Karaoke, 2002). It is believed that the leisure time diversionary activity of karaoke performs useful personal and social functions, notably in dealing with work-related stress and as a means of bringing people together (Drew, 1991, Allison, 1994, Oku, 1998, Yano, 1998).

Not surprisingly karaoke has proven popular in crowded Hong Kong and the business ventures to meet the demand experienced during boom times. In the late 1990s competition became much keener and a series of fire safety incidents forced the government to tightly regulate the local industry, which placed a huge cost burden on karaoke providers (Chow and Lui, 2002).

The present post-SARS situation for the karaoke industry is recognised as being in a slow state of decline in the product life cycle. The common explanation is that the fad nature of karaoke implies it is easily replaceable with other forms of leisure activity, not least advances in home entertainment where karaoke can be provided on instant demand through real-time video and audio delivery.

It can be easily understood that given the fad nature of the karaoke business it is imperative to seek ways and means of 'bottom line' survival by keeping ahead of the competition. The case study company decided to become acquainted with the concept of Continuous Innovation Management (CIM), which had appeal as a relevant approach to the strategic thinking and management that was going to be necessary in the future.

Continuous Innovation Management (CIM) embraces a number of ways of giving expression to the need for the karaoke enterprise to add value to the business through the imperative of innovation; notably by technical and administrative means, through organisational learning by human resources, together with strategic management and the operations of marketing products that customers want and return for more (Kuczmariski, 2003). Innovation as a process can range from the incremental through to the radical (Bacon and Butler, 1998, Beaver and Prince, 2002).

In the case of the business of karaoke technical innovation means having the latest and best performing equipment, faultless processes and service delivery to customers (such as efficient song selection, billing and membership schemes). At another and deeper level innovation means being able to anticipate and satisfy customer psychological needs; such as producing a novelty through devices for enhancing singing

or creating the right kind of ambience in the karaoke box. These imply regular changes in what is offered to customers to sustain their interest and loyalty. A 'static model' of service delivery may not work in karaoke, which has to deal with both new customers, who are exposed to a kind of 'shock of the new', and regulars who may require a more incremental approach to the environment they have become familiar with (Afuah, 1998).

At the core of innovation in high risk business ventures like karaoke is the power of new technology to transform the process of the enterprises to ensure it keeps fresh and alive (Cumming, 1998). But innovation, as implied in the few examples given, also entails having the right kind of organisation structure and culture, to ensure the administrative and social relations of the enterprise is as good as the tools of technology (Dreyer, 2002).

Taking a 'big picture' overview, faith was placed in continuous innovation becoming the driver of change to benefit customers and employees, as well as the company and its shareholders. In the service-minded karaoke business the possibilities for innovation embrace such activities as customer relations, food and beverages, diversity of provision of boxes (from small to large), convenient location, hygiene and decoration, song varieties, billing and other operational systems and many other intangible attributes that make up the 'feel' and fashion of this particular form of entertainment. In short, continuous innovation at every level and aspect of the karaoke has to be conceived and managed as the only means of maintaining competitive edge and survival.

More particularly, CIM in the context of karaoke suggests a practical template framework for conducting a SWOT type

analysis for digging deep into an organisation across the three major functions of (1) knowledge management, (2) administrative processes and (3) technical innovation. The simple premise is that by obtaining employee involvement or 'buy in' in these three functions innovative ideas would flow that provides benefits for customers and the overall wellbeing of the company.

At the outset of the action learning process the members were introduced to the ideas of CIM and then given further insight into the challenge of managing change in a fad business. This cognitive and conceptually driven induction process was deliberately intended to mentally focus the action learning 'set' on the task ahead. The members of the action learning 'set' did not need persuading that change is a constant in order to remain viable as a business. This was definitely not a project where it was necessary to 'unfreeze' resistance as the company management and workforce was young and proactively minded. The template of CIM generally provided a focused way of undertaking a systematic SWOT analysis. The next step in the change management process is to be clear about what to do with the results of the SWOT analysis. In that regard several leading thinkers were introduced all emphasising the need for an organised plan (Moran and Brightman, 2001, Kirkpatrick, 2001, Tuominen, 2000, Bechtel and Squires, 2001).

In addition, other writers stress the need for a normative perspective as a means of securing desired outcomes, such as shared commitment, emphasising the people element of change and good communication (Clark and Manton, 1997). It should be obvious that a great deal of time and attention was given to setting the action learning project on a firm footing before the work really got underway. Before explaining the process and outcomes of the action research cycles it is useful to identify the nature of the methodology.

The action learning and action research methods

As should be evident from the outline above the approach to the change management process was decidedly systematic and conceptual, rather than ad-hoc or simply passing the whole project over to a consultant. This applies to the choice of methodology, for as far as practicable the process followed the spirit and form of the mainstream of writing. The obvious point to highlight is that in the Hong Kong context the Chinese workforce are not so familiar with Western ideas on being consulted and encouraged to engage in active participation in decision-making. The Confucian tradition of showing respect for and deference to authority still holds sway, in spite of the influence of Western business practices being abundant.

Therefore it was necessary to start the action research process much further back by exposing the learning set to some rather different expectations regarding participatory workplace learning (Eley and Leung, 2004). A very practical example of this process is that all documents relating to the project had to be either translated in Chinese or verbally explained in the mother tongue, including conceptual material, such as the meaning of CIM and action learning/research. Moreover, the team had to be thoroughly familiar with the conceptual nature of their work and were constantly reminded of the two main points of focus of the project; (1) to seek ways and means to lead change through innovative ideas for improving karaoke service quality provision, using CIM as a conceptual template and (2) to identify the key strategic choices required to extend the product lifespan of karaoke as a fad business.

Once the induction period was completed the project followed closely the ideas of the founding father of action learning Reginald Revans (Zuber-Skerritt, 2002). Notably, the leading ideas that action learning should be built around

a small focus group or learning set addressing a clear problem (Marquardt, 1999), with a process that moves back and forth from concrete experience to critical reflection through discussion and facilitation by a leader (in this case an external management consultant), was firmly embedded as the ideal mode of operation (Zuber-Skerritt, 2002, Weinstein, 2002, McGill and Beaty, 2001). The action learning process naturally incorporated the notion that seeking solutions to business and management problems involves being concerned with continuous improvement as well as active reflection on what is being addressed and comprehended in a cognitive way (Limerick, Passfield and Cunnington, 1994, Pedler, 2005).

It was important to the sustainability of the whole action learning and research process that it should involve managers of the company, as they not only had day-to-day leadership responsibilities but were a key part of continuity. To that extent the project drew ideas about the skill formation benefits of such a strategy of management learning and development from some leading writers (Marquardt, 1999, Dotlich, 1998, Bowerman, 2003).

From the overview above it should be clear that there was a solid understanding of the leading ideas and desired outcomes of action learning, which were then practically adopted by the company using the action research method. Once again, a close comprehension of the literature guided the implementation of the action research process, starting with another founding father (Kurt Lewin as explained by Perry and Gummesson, 2004) and following with ideas from other writers (Kemmis, 1981, Cunningham, 1993, Rapoport, 1970).

The general understanding was that action research was an approach suited to facilitating organisational change, mostly by involving people in collaborative, problem-based learning. The actual process was designed and facilitated by an experienced consultant. The induction program introduced the action learning set to the mechanics of action research as outlined by some leading writers (Gummesson, 2000, Elliott, 1987). In the case of Elliott (1991) he altered and enhanced the original action research model advanced by Kurt Lewin.

More important than the actual action research model was the belief in the virtues of active participatory involvement, not just the learning set members but all those engaged in the karaoke business and its successful management. It would be fair to observe that with a workforce predominantly aged under twenty five years there was an eagerness to learn and apply the emerging ideas for continuous improvement through innovation. The literature lends support to the spirit of this line of thinking (Coghlan and Brannick, 2002, Nakamura, 2001, Allen, 2002). More technically, the action research process took account of the practical matters that revolve around data gathering and analysis and the deeper issue of reliability and validity (Gill and Johnson, 1991, Cunningham, 1993, Hussey and Hussey, 1997, Hughes, 2003).

The actual design for the three cycles of the action research was based on the application of a working model used to gather and analyse the data collected at particular phases, as illustrated below.

Table 1. Action Research Cycle at three karaoke boxes in Hong Kong

| Moment of the cycle | Methods | Events |
|---------------------|---|--|
| Reflection | a) Informal and formal discussion b) Presentation c) Keep diary d) Form workshop | Identify the problems and ask for solutions |
| Plan | e) Brainstorming f) Internal/external data analysis g) Tape/video-recording h) Keep diary i) Questionnaires | Choose the main priority ideas and develop action plans |
| Action | j) Participant observation k) Interviews l) Keep diary m) Keep field notes n) Tape/video-recording | Action plan implementation and practitioners' intervention |
| Observation | o) Review workshop p) Keep diary q) Presentation and reports r) Tape/video-recording s) Questionnaires | Modify and monitor results |

| | | |
|--------------------------------|--|--|
| Reflection/self reflection | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> t) Questionnaires u) Discussions v) Keep diary w) Field notes x) Presentation/report | Evaluate the outcomes and define their thematic concerns |
| Reflection/holistic reflection | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> y) Brainstorming z) Questionnaires aa) Interviews bb) Surveys cc) Presentations/report dd) Keep diary ee) Recognition announcement ff) Tape/video-recording | Overall review of the project and develop new plans to fill the gaps |

Throughout the three action research cycles the learning team was facilitated by the external consultant and any problems arising were dealt with on a team decision-making basis. To all extent and purposes the whole project operated smoothly.

The findings from the three action research cycles

Cycle one:

Once the learning set team membership was formed work began with an audit of the company; purposefully to identify its external and internal situation, the perceived strong and weak points and the availability of resources to deal with the

problems. The CIM model was consciously used to critically examine both *technical* (karaoke related products and information technology processes) and *administrative* (customer related services, human resources management and overall organisational capability) issues. As others had observed, it soon became clear that the process of conducting an audit was intellectually challenging and it took sometime before the issues crystallised, which had the bonus of focusing team thinking and enabling them to work together effectively (McNiff and Whitehead, 2003).

It should be noted at this juncture that the whole project, while addressing fundamental business and organisational problems, was articulated in a conceptual way as much as a practical one, with a leading role played by both the company owner and the action learning consultant making considerable effort to explain abstract and complex ideas as the research cycles proceeded. This key point will be returned to in the conclusion.

The practical outcome of the audit identified problems in both the technical and administrative domains of the company. For example, the audit showed that;

- (1) staff given training roles were not knowledgeable enough,
- (2) several catering and cleaning staff were inadequately trained,
- (3) service delivery processes were not standardised,
- (4) several means used to entice customer loyalty were not user-friendly enough,
- (5) the brand building strategy was confused,
- (6) Human Resources were functioning below par, and
- (7) there was an absence of any co-ordinated means of enhancing innovation.

It was obvious from the audit that the company definitely needed to focus immediate attention on improving the training of staff at all levels, empower junior staff to take the initiative in providing customer service, increase incentives to attract and retain more talented staff, emphasise service quality over the speed of delivery, and actively promote a teamwork-based and innovative organisational culture.

Taken together it was clear that the audit had produced ample evidence of under-performance in the company, notably in the interface between staff and customers and in the 'backroom' support services, resulting in a crying need for more innovative ways of doing things. Hence the first cycle developed an action plan that focused on improving various operations in the three areas of Human Resource Management (HRM), Information Technology (IT) and Customer Relationship Management (CRM). The learning set was sub-divided into four study teams that matched the above and included a special focus on innovation that had an over-arching brief. The teams regularly reported to each other in a joint forum to pool and exchange ideas.

Specifically, such matters as improving staff uniforms, sourcing and upgrading the range and currency of karaoke songs, web-site improvements, speeding up customer queuing, getting closer to customers by recognising special events (birthdays and other celebration events), upgrading the customer database for subsequent analysis, improving the payroll system and so forth all flowed from the audit and became part of the agenda of the action plan. To an outsider these may seem mundane but from a business perspective they were believed to be integral to re-designing the image and performance of the company. In any case these small things when considered as a whole were seriously addressing the underlying questions about how to prolong to life cycle of the fad business, by focusing attention on staff

behaviour, customer needs and developing a process for monitoring the impact of the changes on performance outcomes.

It is sufficient to note that all four teams produced plans and outcomes during the first cycle of the action research, too detailed to document here. It is perhaps more important to report that the process involved in implementing the audit and the team-based plans for change fostered the work behaviour required for participatory action research, and developed the skills of team learning and leadership qualities in the managers. In other words, the company had taken steps to transform the culture of the organisation and to inculcate the habit of continuous improvement through innovation using the CIM model.

Cycle two:

The confidence of the learning set was a great deal higher and the second cycle began by deliberately using an extant problem-solving framework suited to the action research approach (Whyte, 1991), as shown below in Figure One.

The framework reinforced the decision to carefully re-analyse the findings of the audit, with special attention paid to what happened in cycle one and the room for improvement, which then became the action plans for the second cycle. This process was in any case essential as new members joined the learning set to replace those that had left the company or to provide different expertise. Thus the second cycle developed a smooth way of operating, notably arising from the learning experiences in the previous cycle and an improved capacity to anticipate and solve problems within the organisation. The obvious lesson that everyone realised was that continuous learning was the key driver for innovation focused change management. Moreover, it was

decided that more company staff should know about the principles and practices of CIM and accordingly a two-day workshop was arranged. In other words the action learning set had recognised that innovation means little without an adequate process of knowledge dissemination.

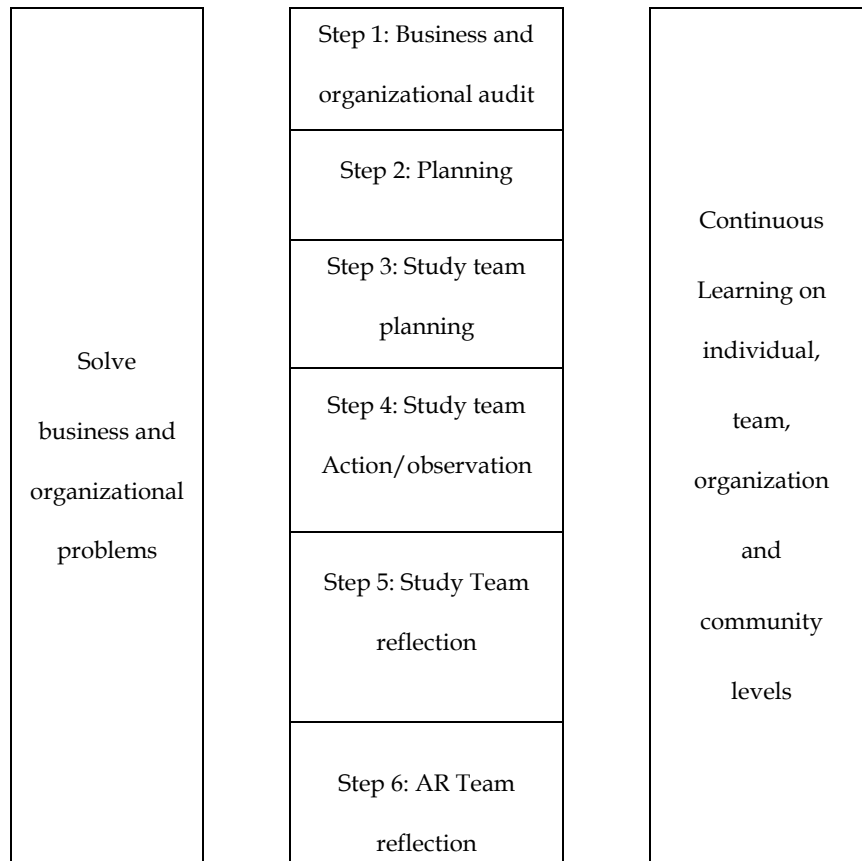


Figure One: The six-step problem solving and learning framework

At the conclusion of cycle two a number of concrete achievements had been secured by the four teams. For example, the HRM team had designed and implemented a pre-employment training program for new staff, before they were allocated to a particular karaoke outlet. A large number of company staff had also been introduced to seminars on

the leading ideas of change management, leadership and teamwork. The third big achievement was to create an in-company Business Management Program (BMP), which started with a course on marketing. The IT team developed an improved customer queuing system, a kiosk system was revamped with improved design and functionality and a new web-site was launched accompanied with positive feedback. The CRM team found new ways of enhancing the karaoke experience of customers with gift schemes, improved membership cards, more songs were added with an improved sourcing system and a number of the boxes were re-designed and decorated. Finally, the fourth team, with its overview of innovative ideas throughout the company built upon staff invitations to suggest improvements by forming an innovation club and a regular feature in the newsletter which gave recognition for outstanding contributions.

With such concrete improvements it is easy to overlook the fact that the learning set members and many other company staff had been newly exposed to the rigours of systematic learning through the problem identification and solving framework, as well as to some underlying theory about change management and other ways of developing a CIM culture. Although there were difficulties it was demonstrated that staff could embrace organisational learning and develop the required learning mind-set. The condition was that the challenge had to be clearly expressed and they were genuinely encouraged to actively participate in the change process. Given the tradition-bound mindset typically associated with the Chinese it was evident that many company staff were willing to become active teamwork learners.

Cycle three:

The second cycle had shown that the learning set members and other company staff had been able to practically integrate the CIM with an active and planned approach to problem identification and solution. Although new members continued to replenish the four teams they were quickly incorporated into the action learning agenda, which for the most part followed the developments established in the previous two cycles. When new challenges came along, such as a government ban on smoking in public venues, the CRM team organised a number of information meetings for staff to listen to civil servants explaining the policy. Such an event typified the changing environment for the karaoke business and as a consequence the CRM decided on forming a rapid response team to deal with such challenges. As a result an anti-smoking team was formed to initiate a campaign in the various outlets to educate the karaoke customers. Meanwhile the HRM team was able to show a good response to the first instalment of a training program with over 70% passing the examination in the marketing subject. Similarly, the innovation team processed 53 ideas for enhancing the karaoke experience and customers reported a positive response to the 10 that were implemented on a trial basis. As for the IT team, they continued to struggle with developing an advanced system of video-on-demand (VOD), which not only increased the availability and range of songs but also improved the system for ordering refreshments and other customer services on-line. Without going into detail the third cycle built upon the foundations laid previously, while ensuring that the process and outcomes of various innovations was effectively communicated throughout the entire company staff.

In fact, the biggest achievement of cycle three, which was understood well before it concluded, was to create a system for disseminating innovation and to communicate the

expectation that continuous change was a way of life for the whole company, not the sole province of the management. More specifically, the company conveyed the message that good results would be recognised and communicated as well as rewarded, unfinished projects would be completed and that it was okay to learn from ideas that were tried and failed. Going further, the principal owner of the company recognised the importance of being 'hands on' and being seen to be actively seeking ideas for innovative change. The managers were encouraged to regard themselves as front line researchers and the whole workforce were given incentives to embrace a learning culture.

The important element in the changes undertaken by the learning teams, and the dissemination of various innovations through the company, was the feedback given by customers and the response of staff. The systematic attempts to obtain customer feedback showed that their response had been positive. It was also evident to the action learning teams that staff had embraced the ideas of workplace learning and commitment to innovation as a survival strategy. Not least in the changed mindset was the principal company owner, who realised that he had to be more visible and actively leading by example. Such an intense learning experience drove home the message that solving an organisational problem involved personal change as well as specific work behaviour modifications.

Indeed, the overwhelming experience, not just for the action team members but to other staff in the company that was affected by the series of changes taking place, was that such concentrated experiential learning opened minds to new ways of thinking and problem-solving. In the Asian workplace context asking questions and knowing how to frame them intelligently is not a widely understood practice, nor is the capacity to see the 'big picture' a regular thinking

habit, anymore than engaging in open discussion and mutual problem-solving through teams is a familiar practice. Well before the three-action research cycles had concluded all these things seemed to have bedded down into organisation culture, which was considered the biggest step forward for the company.

At the conclusion of the third cycle many of the specific change items that had been identified as in need for improvements, together with a number of fresh ideas that were innovative in a new and interesting way, had been adopted and tested for customer satisfaction. Perhaps more significantly, there had been a visible change in the work behaviour of many company staff, starting at the executive and management levels and cascading down the organisation. Previously unfamiliar concepts, such as CIM, had been inwardly learned and practically applied, and this had shifted the company to becoming more aware of the power of workplace learning as the driver of the change management agenda.

Discussion and conclusion

The 'bottom line' in a business environment is whether the change management strategy produced good outcomes in keeping with the identified problems that gave rise to the action research expectations and objectives. In this particular case the short-term outcomes can only be appraised in a general way, not in terms of revenue and profit margins but rather in perceptions about the way in which the company staff, from the management to other positions, seemed to respond to the change agenda. As well as dealing with the immediate agenda of shaping the business activity of the company to better meet customer needs and expectation, essentially to foster a climate of novelty to stimulate and sustain motivation to regard karaoke as a regular feature of

leisure-time activity, the deeper purpose was to change to organisational culture. Reduced to essentials this meant empowering the company staff to embrace participatory action as a means of continuous learning. This approach challenges the old idea that in a Chinese owned and managed business staff should simply obey and not be expected to think independently. In other words, the company through the action research project deliberately set out to encourage a culture of learning throughout the organisation. This was seen as a necessary first step for a longer-term strategy in which all staff were expected to think continuously, constructively and creatively (3Cs) about ways and means of ensuring the company kept close to the customer and inventive in the kind of provision that attracts and sustain their interest in spending valuable leisure time in a karaoke box.

Finally, like many other action learning and research projects it was soon realised that once the process of innovation management had formally begun it had to become a continuous feature of the climate and culture of the entire organisation. A decisive element in this kind of learning is that the ethos had to be actively embraced by management, setting an example for others to follow. Furthermore, all staff had to be recognised for the value-adding potential of the thinking contribution to the wellbeing of the company. It is a testament to the conceptual thinking that drove and designed the action learning and research that this was an outcome that transcended the immediate problem focus of the entire change management undertaking.

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Action Research in the Commercial World - a community based action research project with small business owners

- Kate Horsey

Introduction

Research issue

The primary purpose of this research was to explore issues that affect the success of new entrants to a home services-focused franchising business; to identify ways in which the business owners could take action to improve their business results and to build both individual and group capacity and commitment to taking those actions.

Initial exploration focused on engaging with the franchisees to understand their view of the situation, individually and collectively. The initial research question, confirmed with the research participants in the early stages of the project, was framed as:

What factors are affecting our current or potential success in our new businesses as franchisees of Sunrise Computer Services?
And what shall we do about it?

This paper focuses on the early stages of the project, including the initial interviews, analysis of the information

gathered and on a workshop held with the participants for their first engagement with the work as a group.

Context

Background

Liam Wallace, Regional Franchiser for Brisbane and the Gold Coast for Sunrise Computer Services*, has just passed a major milestone – he has sold his tenth franchise in less than 12 months.

Liam's entry into the franchise business has been a bit of an experiment for Sunrise. Unlike the other Regional Franchisers, who operate a franchise themselves as well as managing franchisees, Liam has no background in computer servicing; rather, his experience is in owning, managing and marketing small businesses. While he is pleased with his achievements so far, Liam is very aware of the need to prove that his approach to the franchise business is valid and successful. For him, this means ensuring that his franchisees are successful, with their businesses earning enough to support their lifestyles and meet their goals – and in as short a time as possible from the purchase of their franchise.

With five established franchisees holding six franchise territories (one franchisee owns two territories, one of which is operated on his behalf by a sub-contractor) and four new franchisees who have very recently bought in, Liam is concerned that they are not reaching the standard of business success he would like to see as quickly as he had hoped – and that they may be disappointed with their experience with Sunrise.

* Not the real name of the business, or Franchiser.

Liam speculates that the poor results are due to a range of causes, and is keen to build understanding of the issues and what may be done to improve the situation and the results achieved for the franchisees both individually and collectively.

The existing five franchisees are diverse in their backgrounds, reasons for buying the franchise, and stage of development of their new business; and they are experiencing varying degrees of success. Similarly, some of the new franchisees are off to a flying start, while others are experiencing more challenges in getting established.

In the context of this research study, an action research process is well suited to meeting the goals of the 'client': to engage the participants and involve them in identifying action to be taken; in a way that would secure their commitment to the plan, that acknowledged and allowed for their differing needs and capabilities and that would help build relationships between them to promote their capacity to learn from and support each other.

Making the circumstances of their situation visible to each franchisee through a participatory, collaborative approach and building relationships between them provides a strong basis for ongoing support and action; harnessing their personal motivation and commitment towards helping themselves, and each other to reach a satisfactory level of business performance as quickly as possible.

About the business

Sunrise Computer Services was established in 2001 as a new division of a successful franchising business which specialises in home-oriented mobile services, with a broad

range of existing divisions covering services such as tree lopping, fencing, antennas and gardening.

The business operates on a typical franchise model – that is, the Divisional Heads sell to Regional Franchisers the rights to operate within a particular Region. The Regional Franchiser is responsible for finding prospective Franchise Owners (franchisees), negotiating the sale to them of a franchise territory and supporting them in initiating and operating their business.

Franchisees pay an initial fee of under \$20,000 (making this one of the cheapest franchise businesses available), a fixed monthly administration fee and a fixed fee per business enquiry that is referred to them by the Sunrise Call Centre. They are also responsible for taking action independently to grow their business, and they pay no additional fees for business they generate through their own efforts.

Essentially, buying a Sunrise franchise is a means for prospective small business owners and operators to start a business that already has significant brand recognition, to benefit from shared marketing and to use existing business systems to support and grow their new business.

Procedures

Following initial informal discussions with Liam Wallace which provided background information for the study and agreement for the research to be undertaken, six interviews were conducted – four with franchisees and two with franchisees who are also regional franchisers for another region; all of whom have been operating their business for between 4 and 12 months. The research was undertaken

based on a research design and methodologies as described by Stringer (2005).

After a brief explanation of the circumstances leading to our meeting, and covering ethical issues, each interview commenced with an opening 'grand tour' question, along the lines of 'so tell me about your experiences with Sunrise so far. How has it been for you?'

This generated overview comments about the business performance, their personal satisfaction with their results to date and provided insights into their reasons for choosing to purchase a franchise. The focus of each participant's comments varied significantly thereafter, generally reflecting their previous experience of small business, technical ability and level of sophistication and knowledge of small business management and marketing. The process of member checking elicited further details and clarification.

Interviews ranged in duration from 45 minutes (limited by the franchisee's following appointment) and two hours. Total duration of all interviews was approximately 8.5 hours and all interviews were recorded verbatim in writing. As interviews were mostly conducted at the franchisees' homes, there was opportunity to observe their home-based working arrangements, office facilities and often their vehicle (with Sunrise branding) and other marketing materials.

Following first round interviews, a second interview was held with one participant and further discussion and preparation for the workshop was undertaken by phone with the others. A copy of the initial interview analysis was provided to the participant and I asked them for their comments and reflections on the document, including

feedback on whether the analysis accurately reflected the most significant things that had affected their experience.

Information gathered through the interviews and subsequent member checking of the analysis was used to prepare a framework of issues. Six initial interviews were analysed, using an epiphanic analysis approach to identify common categories of concerns and resulting themes (Stringer 2005). The data is characterised by cumulative and minor and illuminative epiphanies (Denzin, 2001), which, while significant, are not as obvious as major epiphanies and hence can be more challenging to accurately identify.

A workshop was then conducted with 14 participants, including existing and new franchisees and other interested parties that they may wish to bring along, e.g. their contractor, spouse, and for those who are regional franchisers for another region, their franchisees.

Initial analysis

Each person's circumstances, past experience and specific situation contributes to varying but overlapping views about their experience in establishing their new business with Sunrise. This report therefore attempts to describe a continuum of experiences and perspectives ranging from the early stage franchisee focusing on issues around getting and servicing customers through to regional franchisers whose primary concerns lie more in the bigger picture of strategy and longer term business positioning and growth.

Initially this report was prepared to help all those involved with Sunrise in southeast Queensland to explore aspects of their experience and to assist them in choosing ways, individually and together, to move their businesses forward.

Choosing to join Sunrise

Working for yourself is like flying a trapeze without a net.

In describing the reasons they chose to buy a Sunrise franchise and what they expected at the time, most people spoke about lifestyle matters and the support they anticipated would be available through buying into an established franchise system. They said they wanted to work for themselves, and have the freedom to make decisions about when and how they worked.

Several said that they did some research prior to making the decision to buy by calling existing franchisees and exploring the market. Several noted that this research, and information they were given about Sunrise resulted in expectations that it would be easier to start the business and get customers than it turned out to be.

Domestic and business customers

Most of the franchisees are getting the bulk of their business from domestic customers who want their home computer fixed or have problems with viruses. There were a number of common characteristics described about these customers – primarily around their reluctance to pay for the service or to minimise the costs. Sometimes when you make the trip to visit them they have changed their minds or just don't keep the appointment. Its unpredictable and there are peaks and troughs. Having noted these issues, the domestic market suits some franchisees well and the current Sunrise marketing efforts are aimed more at this sector.

By contrast, almost everyone described the benefits that could be found in building a client base of small and home-

based businesses. For small business there is an advantage in having their computers working and they can generally afford to pay. A retainer for ongoing work or maintenance contracts may be available and this can help to smooth cash flow; and you can plan to do the work in a 3-4 hours in a block which helps get the billable hours up. You don't have to spend time finding out about the situation and there may be opportunities for contracts to upgrade hardware. On the technical side there's a lot more to think about, with more people using the systems and on the internet more.

On the technical side

There's a lot of elephant traps.

Several franchisees talked about the challenges of the technical side of the work. It is hard to know what is the cheapest or shortest way of fixing a problem with a customer's computer. The work can take a lot longer than expected; and its unpredictable. Sometimes it is quicker and cheaper to recommend they buy new hardware.

Once you take on a job, you have to 'chew it till you finish it'. You can't say its too hard or taking too long, and you have to follow up and support what you do and keep going till its finished. The work isn't straightforward, you have to 'coerce and manipulate' computers.

However, as one franchisee said, you learn through experience and after several months 'immersed in this kind of work' you are finding the problems and learning to deal with them much faster next time. Another notes that its important to find time to keep up to date, and not just on

learning new things but the older systems as well – ‘not everyone has stuff that’s up to date’.

Customer relations

The more unforgettable you are the better the chances.

You have to make them feel special so they will refer you on to others.

There are a lot of things we do well – turning up on time, ringing the customer back promptly, being ethical and professional. One franchisee commented that he had thought this would have counted for more.

You need to build customer confidence in you and what you do and get their trust. Some computer technicians have a bad name so you have to overcome this.

One person noted that he takes care to be honest with the customer and tell them what they don’t want to hear – being honest that sometimes he can get the computer running how they want and sometimes not. Several people said it was important to speak with the customers in a language they understand, to slow down and make it simple for them.

Part of getting more business is the way you deal with people. If you’re good on the technical side you won’t lose customers – but you also won’t see them very often.

Getting leads and finding customers

Several franchisees commented that finding customers was harder than they thought – that they thought the business

would just come to them, and it hasn't worked out that way. 'I thought that if you did a good job for people they would spread the word for you.'

It is very hard to pinpoint the source of a lead and its very inaccurate. When asked where they heard about Sunrise, customers forget and will say the local paper when there has been no advertising there. Or the franchisee forgets to ask them. Other lead sources include referrals, discount coupons, yellow pages, someone saw the car.

Customers say that they choose Sunrise because they recognize the brand; they are unlikely to have a dud technician, as they need to protect the brand. Other reasons for choosing Sunrise include - 'I didn't want to take my PC to somewhere else' - 'I like the idea of someone mobile, coming out to me.' Usually they can fix it, they're fast and friendly, it's a name you can trust.

Marketing for franchisees

Keep it simple, keep it local.

Several franchisees said they needed help with the marketing. 'That's why you buy a franchise - you need help with the marketing. If you knew how to do it yourself you would. I'm expecting a lot of help in that area. I need the systems - that's what I paid for.' Several people particularly commented that they need help with copywriting and knowing what to put in an ad or on a flyer.

It would help if there were materials ready to go and strategies that are known to work. Some people thought that there should be standard items created in each category, and

it should be compulsory to use the standard formats. There was a general feeling that the materials available upon starting the business were 'not there or poor quality'.

Marketing tools

A range of specific issues regarding marketing tools were raised, including the availability, suitability and costs of marketing materials. Individual franchisees are responsible for developing some of these materials and several commented that working together on this issue would be valuable, to standardise materials, share information about effectiveness and share costs. One person suggested that there was intellectual property in these items and if someone came up with something good it could be sold to the rest of the group.

Items mentioned included physical materials such as stationary, promotional letters and flyers; issues relating to presentation such as uniforms and car signage; and things beyond the franchisees' direct control such as the website and use of the call centre phone number.

Marketing activities

People talked quite a bit about the activities they have done to try to build their business and awareness of it in their area. Some of these include:

- Delivering flyers – takes a lot of time and has a very low hit-rate. 'If I'm not doing anything else I may as well do it, but its very variable.'
- Cold calling – 'It's awfully hard and I hate doing it. People are seasoned deflectors of cold callers (they get so many of them). You know the stuff you give them goes straight in the bin. You feel the futility of it – all

that time and effort and the response rate is not worth it.'

- Networking groups – A number of people mentioned this as one of their most successful activities. While groups were hard to find, most people said they had had referrals through the group.

Other approaches that were mentioned and that some people had tried or planned to try included giving a talk at a school about children using the internet, having a stall at a local street fair, attending a trade show with an aligned business, canvassing businesses in the city, building alliances with businesses such as web designers to cross refer, focusing on a particular type of small business customer such as pharmacies, cross promotion to other Sunrise divisions.

Keeping customers and getting more

Farming for the future.

Building relationships is regarded as a key to building the business – 'putting your face in front of more people'. Getting referrals through networks of people you know – through networking clubs, existing customers, and other activities.

Providing service to existing customers and telling them when you are going beyond the 'call of duty' was important; including explaining that you want to do the best job for them so they will tell others, and explaining the referral system. You can be very pointed with them and ask them if they know anyone who needs their computer serviced and will you give them my number. Building their trust and confidence and making them feel special. One franchisee

said he treats his customers as close to friends as he can, without stepping over the boundary.

Planning and strategy

Home customers need support but small business is where the money is.

We need ways of getting customers that aren't too time consuming.

There were varying views about the effectiveness of different types of advertising. Generally it was regarded that the radio advertising didn't work, however some people felt that leads had gone down when the radio advertising stopped. Discount coupons were regarded by some as a good source of leads that was working well for them where others felt it didn't work. The difficulty of identifying the source of a particular lead was commented on by several people.

There has been quite a bit of trial and error in exploring different places and ways to advertise - and due to the cost, some advertising has to stop while another way is tested and if it doesn't work then business levels suffer.

Most franchisees said that while a majority of their business comes from domestic customers, they would like to build their customer base with small businesses. Some people said that different marketing strategies would be needed for domestic and business markets - and that current marketing targets the domestic customer more.

How do we know what works? There had been a lack of structure to the reporting required by franchisers and it is

difficult to get meaningful statistics on referral sources, lead conversion rates and repeat business and referrals. Lack of good information makes it hard to know where to focus your efforts.

Three people had talked with a business coach about their businesses and found this useful. One said, 'He didn't add anything to my knowledge but he helped change the paradigms'. He asked the hard questions and made me aware of what I'm not doing. If you're hands-on all the time you can't see what the actual problem is.' Another said that the business coach was a useful link into a referral network through his clients and could be a source of future business. 'The key is knowing how to apply our time.... We can waste it without any help! Its no good if you're a hamster on a wheel, doing things that don't work.'

Running the business and the financial side

The ideal situation:
A client base that you get regular work from
Working 30-40 hours a week
Earning ~\$2000 a week at \$50 an hour
Ratio of paid to non-paid hours is right.

Several people said that the capital costs of getting in are reasonable and the challenge then is to make the business pay. One said 'I like running the business, its everything I want it to be except for one thing, I just need to make it pay.'

The technical challenges can contribute to difficulties with quoting and knowing what to charge. The hourly rate needs to be higher to compensate for travel time and the times when the job turns out to take a lot longer than you expect. You can only charge what you've quoted. You need to try to

make enough each week to cover you when you want to take holidays. Another noted that billable hours is a huge issue. You can be running around and be busy all week but at the end of it the billable hours aren't much. He says you need work that occurs in a block of time and to try to minimize the 'other stuff' that takes up time and is not billable.

Getting to sustainability is also a challenge. One franchisee said 'Given time you can blunder through. If you are prepared for the long haul, and you've got the funds behind you and you can give it two years. I'd like to have it up and running in six months and self sustaining. Maybe its unrealistic expectations. You need some understanding of how long you've got to last. Maybe I just haven't allowed enough time, or we're not experienced enough in running the business.'

Helping each other

Working for the greater good – there's good karma in that.

There was a strong sense among the group of the potential for working together to help and learn from each other.

On the technical side, there are opportunities to get together to set up a system, 'throw some spanners in' and throw it around together. This gives an invaluable opportunity for practical learning. There are also opportunities to share technical knowledge via email chat, sharing contractors with different expertise, calling upon other franchisees with different skill sets and problem solving on a national basis by tapping into franchisee networks outside the region.

At meetings, there are opportunities to get to know each other and each other's strengths and interests, and working out collectively what we can do. Round tables at meetings where everyone contributes and talks about problems they are experiencing and draws on the group for solutions.

One person spoke strongly about the benefits of pooling resources on marketing efforts and developing marketing collateral and tools. A common approach to marketing would help everyone win and requires a like-minded approach from everyone.

The Sunrise brand

From a marketing perspective, the Sunrise brand brings benefits and disadvantages. On the upside, it is well recognized, and has credibility as people expect that there will be good service (protecting the name of the brand).

On the downside, there is 'the stigma of Sunrise' - the first reaction from people is 'I don't need my lawn mowed' - there is a lack of awareness of the range of Sunrise franchise divisions that have grown from the original lawn mowing business. From the perspective of marketing to small and large businesses, the history of the organisation can work against the computer division with the assumption that 'this is a guy who got sick of mowing lawns'.

Across the division

It's a catch 22:

If you don't spend on advertising they won't know you're there;

If you stop advertising you won't get the business;

If you don't advertise you don't get enquiries;

If you don't get enquiries you can't sell franchises;

If you don't sell franchises you can't pay for advertising.

Getting other franchisees within the region and the division, and across divisions, to contribute to building the brand is difficult. Those whose business is going well say 'we don't need it'.

They think their approach is working fine, so why try to make it better. But you've got to keep trying, you've got to work to keep things where they need to be. Business will rise for a while then flatten - bad management will bring it down, good management will keep trying to grow it.

Between divisions and at a Divisional/National level, its very hard to get everyone to agree on the same things. If you have a great idea you have to get support from other divisions and the majority rules. There is a lack of cross promotion between divisions. There's also a cost factor - who is going to pay for it? It can be difficult even within the computer division.

It would be good to get help from the national office re advertising, with a national advertising/marketing fund to generate enough funds to do something effective. It's hard to get everyone to agree.

Several people commented that the Sunrise franchise system needs more structure and support. Comparisons were made to bigger franchise businesses such as McDonalds™ and Gloria Jeans™, which are much more prescriptive in their requirements and also provided a great deal more - 'the whole kit and caboodle'.

The duplication of processes was noted, where several people might come up with for instance a design for a flyer.

If there was more sharing of ideas then these things could be developed and purchased together, achieving economies of scale, helping those who lack skills in the area, reducing unit costs and improving consistency in the marketing and brand positioning.

Two franchisees commented that they get phone calls from prospective purchasers of new franchises and they are held up as successful. They expressed concern that this is not strictly true and wondered if these prospects are also given the phone numbers of less successful or less satisfied franchisees, to give the prospects a clear view and understanding of both sides.

At the regional franchiser level, it was seen very much as a business about business opportunities, not about servicing computers. There are opportunities to apply the skills into new contexts – both geographically, with new computer services regions and into new divisions such as catering and home theatre.

Most businesses are pretty much the same, as long as you've got the basics right.

A franchiser said that being a franchiser is just like being a franchisee – you have to generate the work and the franchise sales. Selling a franchise brings in a chunk of money but also is a big chunk of responsibility. There isn't much support for the regional franchisers, though networking across divisions and 'picking their brains' with other franchisers could be useful.

The responsibility rests with the business owner, and a common comment across almost all the franchisees and

franchisers was 'It's not a job, it's a business and in any business you have to make it happen''

Summing up - How are you feeling?

You have to keep going – your best customer could be just round the corner!

In summary, the general sense is that while people are experiencing a lot of challenges, particularly in marketing and securing customers, there is a commitment to keep going and make the businesses successful within the next two years. A selection of closing comments include:

I like the problem solving. I love working with people and teaching them.

I came in with the right attitude - it's a business not a job and I have to make it happen.

I haven't looked at this business being big for the next two years. As we get more advertising out there, people will use us more and they can trust the name. I'm very happy to have bought the franchise.

I feel in a good position. I am confident and my franchisor is keen to make it work. The brand has recognition and its OK for a start up business. If it went on as current I would not expect to do well. I want everyone to succeed – then we all do better and it builds the reputation.

I still really enjoy the business. I just need to make it pay.

Next steps

A workshop for franchisees and associates was held on 28th October and was attended by 14 participants. At the workshop, with agreement from the group at each stage, the facilitator led the group through the following processes.

We developed a list of positives about our Sunrise experience – things that you enjoy, do well, are happy with; then we confirmed the focus question for the workshop. A list of issues and factors that affect the success of the business was generated and then sorted into categories. Then we worked in small groups to further explore and define the issues within each category, we recorded them, then presented them to the larger group and added to them as appropriate. The whole group then prioritized the categories and decided which ones we most wanted to do something about now. Finally, we worked in groups on the area we were most interested in to develop an action plan.

We agreed that if we have good systems and tools, brand awareness and personal skills, then generating revenue would be the outcome. We also decided that identifying and agreeing on common goals was important. We used trigger questions to develop an action plan for each area, presented them to the whole group and recorded who had offered to take on which tasks.

As a result, four action plans were developed in the areas of **Common Goals, Personal Skills, Brand Awareness and Systems and Tools.**

People volunteered to take on tasks of interest to them, with the agreement that they would share the results of their efforts with the group; and the group would support and welcome their contributions. All activities at the workshop

and resulting action plans were agreed by the group at the time however can be modified, changed, abandoned or re-prioritised as appropriate as the work develops.

A document was prepared that recorded the processes and outcomes of this activity, including the action plans and the Franchisee Report that was prepared prior to the workshop based on the interviews. The group agreed that we would continue to work together and separately to progress this work, and that regular meetings would be held on the first Saturday of each month for this purpose.

Conclusions

Most participants have described some degree of challenge in commencing their business, particularly in their marketing efforts and finding customers; and consequently in achieving financial goals for the business. However, they also demonstrate a commitment to continuing their efforts to work together and reach their goals.

As small business owners (albeit in some cases relatively inexperienced ones) each participant has an inherent commitment to finding and actioning solutions to the challenges they face.

The action research process as applied in this case in a small business commercial context offers a means to capture and engage that commitment and to help build ongoing relationships that will survive and develop beyond the involvement of the researcher.

Postscript

This project may be regarded as an instance where action research was not a catalyst for successful change. Due to circumstances beyond this business, the Regional Franchiser who had initially sought the researcher's assistance withdrew from the business a couple of months after the workshop. Subsequently, several of the newer franchisees also moved on and one of the more established and successful franchisees elected to go out on his own, changing the name of his business and taking his established client base with him.

Eighteen months on, a follow up interview with one franchisee reveals that there are only 2 or 3 franchisees left in the system. Following the initial research interviews and workshop, a couple of further meetings were held, however, the process and the relationships it was intended to build had not achieved sufficient momentum to continue without support.

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About the author

Kate Horsey has a varied professional background which has centred on human resources and training in a variety of industry sectors. Following a personal career epiphany she has undertaken study in community development and is now working at Foresters ANA Mutual Society, a

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TQM: An Integration of Systems Theory, System Dynamics and Organisational Learning

- Madhu Ranjan Kumar and
Shankar Sankaran

Abstract

This paper explains Total Quality Management (TQM) in terms of systems theory. It identifies which subsystems of an organisation need to be linked for TQM. It shows how TQM leads to different types of organisational learning. It then develops a model for TQM implementation based on the systemic school of action learning. The model shows how successful TQM implementation using action learning can lead to different types of organisational learning. Therefore, this paper calls for TQM implementation using the experiential process of action learning instead of the current trend of following a set of TQM tools.

Introduction

This paper aims to explain Total Quality Management (TQM) through the integration of systems theory, system dynamics and organisational learning. It then develops a model for TQM implementation using action learning, which is built on this integration. It aims to exploit the cyclical similarity between action research and TQM (Kumar and Sankaran 2005) by merging the different focuses of these two

traditionally different streams. The current focus of TQM is overall organisational excellence (Kumar 2006), which may or may not result in organisational learning. The focus of action research is bringing about change coupled with learning in a specific context. However, overall organisational excellence is not its forte. Further, there is an element of rigour in action research-oriented change which is generally not found in TQM implementation. However, this paper will show that if we appreciate the systemic base of these two streams, it is possible to develop an approach for TQM which coheres with action learning.

Total Quality Management – a systems perspective

A brief history of systems theory is required before TQM can be explained from a systems perspective.

Systems thinking developed in the 1950s as an alternative to traditional management thinking (McElyea 2003, p.59). The systems school grew out of the 'general systems theory' developed by the biologist Bertalanffy (McElyea 2003, Mirvis 1996) and the quantitative techniques – operations research and systems analysis – that were developed during the Second World War. Further, Simon's contributions on 'bounded rationality' and 'satisficing' recognised the complex environment in which post-war managers made decisions (Ehrenberg and Stupak, 1994, p. 77). He pointed out that human beings are only partly rational and, therefore, make satisfactory decisions rather than considering all the alternatives available to make the best possible ones. He used the term 'satisficing' to explain this process. The systems thinking school is aware that traditional management thinking does not have the full picture of situations in organisations. The systems school views organisations as complex interrelationships among input, throughput (process), output, and feedback. From a

systems point of view, an organisation is an open and complex system with varying degrees of process flexibility and many feedback loops which are used adaptively for the organisation's survival. In the context of organisational change, Harrington, Carr and Reid (1999) have explained three interrelated concepts of system, emergent properties and complexity.

A system is a set of different elements, which together, perform a function that the constituent elements cannot do alone. *Emergent properties* are those functions, good or bad, which would not exist except for the operation of the system. *Complexity* is something that is composed of interconnected elements that function as a system to produce emergent properties. Deming (1993) used the analogy of the automobile to describe a system – a collection of wheels, engine and transmission does not make them a system. To become a system it must possess the complexity of having been designed in a particular way and interconnected in a particular way. They then become a system called the automobile, which provides the emergent property of 'transportation' which thereby makes it valuable. Thus, it is the complexity which gives rise to the emergent properties that define a system and make it valuable.

Complexity, however, is also a source of problems. Complexity is on the cusp between stability and chaos and a small amount of perturbation can push the system one way or the other. Systems with an order of complexity as small as three elements with two interconnections per element can produce chaotic behaviour. However, the lack of chaos is not always desirable, as seen by the fact that bankruptcy and death are examples of stable but undesirable states. Thus, the more the complexity, the greater is the chance that the system will degenerate into a chaotic state or a stable but undesirable state.

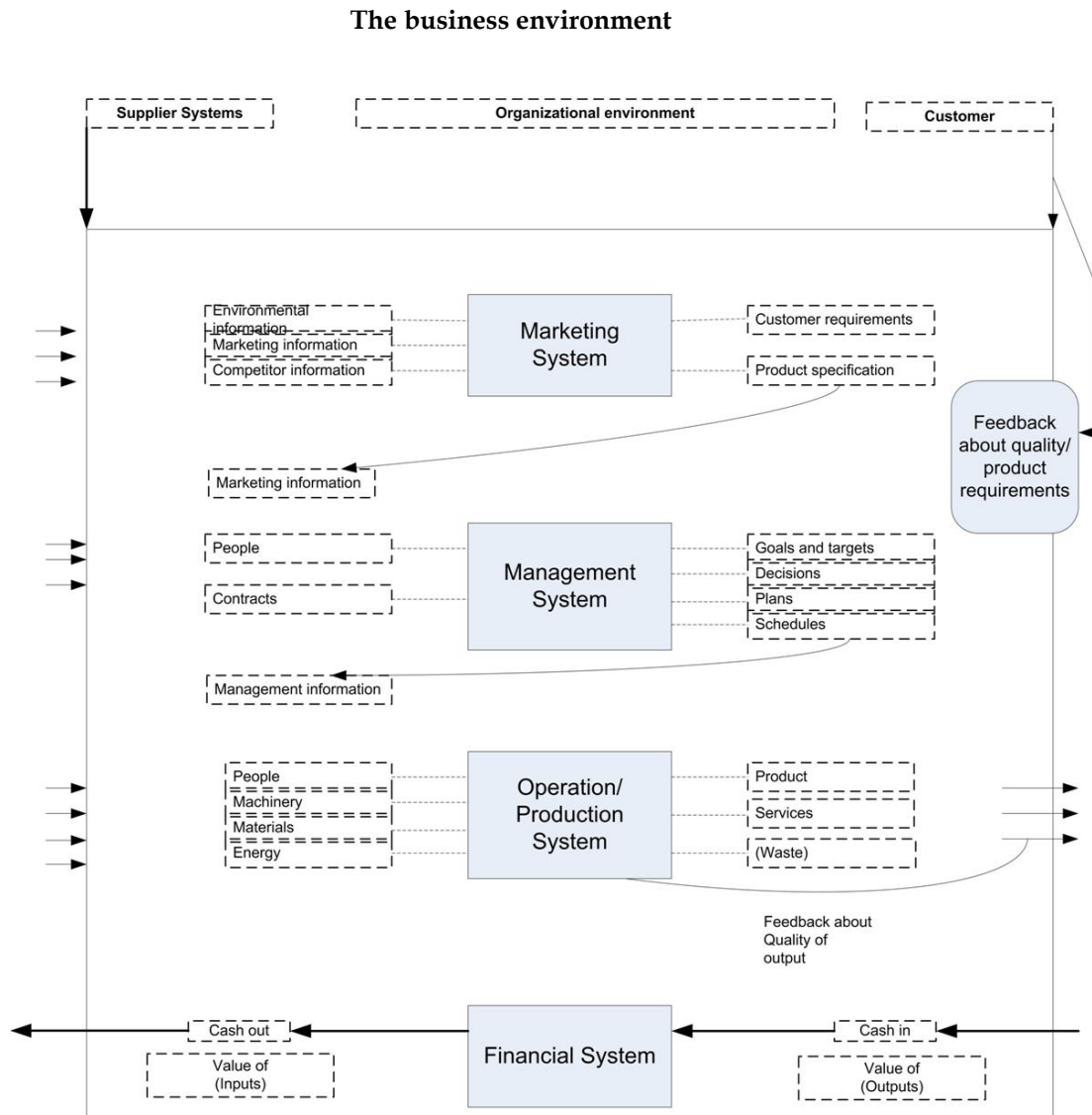
An *interface* is a point where two elements come together and exchange something. Interfaces are a key to designing an effective system. The interface should be clear and defined and should not be complex. A complex interface results in people developing the means to 'work around' the complexity. Thus, in an organisation, a complex interdepartmental interface results in people developing 'a personal relationship' to manage the poor interdepartmental interface. Interfaces that are ambiguous, grey and subject to interpretation will result in variations in behaviour. High inter-element complexity and ill-defined interfaces will result in disaster. An ideal organisation is one in which the elements have a high internal and low external order of complexity. Each element must be as independent as possible.

Most good systems have good *feedback* control mechanisms. Feedback is used to maintain and improve the system. But feedback is also a source of complexity and thus has advantages and risks. A good system is one that manages perturbation and change as a system. If feedback results in a perturbation which does not die out before the next perturbation, the system will result in chaos or a stable but undesirable state.

The systems view of organisation is shown in Figure 1. The figure shows an organisation in which the main sub-systems are marketing management, operations/production and finance. It is an example of an open system where the customer gives feedback to the marketing subsystem of the organisation about his/her product choice and its quality requirement. It also gives feedback to the operation/production subsystem about the quality of output. The more effective the feedback loops, the 'softer' the system (i.e. the more flexible and responsive to change). According to Cusins (1994) the quality management system

(QMS) can be thought of as the servomechanism for the organisation. It runs in the reverse direction to the operational system. Information on outputs from operations form input to QMS and outputs from QMS form inputs to operations. TQM consists in making effective boundary judgments at every system interface within the organisation and between the organisational system and the user system.

Figure 1: Simplified example of an organisation as a system (Cusins 1994, p. 23).



Thus, from the point of view of system theorists, a quality judgment is made at the boundary between the supplier system and the user system about what passes across it. Further, whether an output is classified as a product or waste is a judgment about its quality. A satisfactory output is a product. An output, which cannot be used by the user system, is a waste. Waste can collect in the production system, or in the user system or both. Nature often becomes the user system of the waste. Cusins further defines 'dynamic' and 'static' quality factors. The dynamic quality factors are individual, unique and situation dependent. Their addition will create an image of high quality. The static quality factors are general and common to all customers. They are not situation dependent. Their absence will create an image of poor quality (Cusins 1994, p. 27).

The systems approach has made a lasting impact on TQM. According to McElyea (2003), the birth of most management models, such as TQM and HPO (High Performance Organisation), stems from a systems view of the organisation. Deming, the father of TQM (Shrader 1995), also developed what he called 'the system of profound knowledge' (Bauer, Reiner and Schamschule 2000, p. 412).

Systems thinking suggests that instead of reductionist approaches to management, a holistic view should be adopted (Taiwo 2001). Taiwo adds that while there is no single model that can capture an organisational situation fully, some of the methodologies which can be used to capture the inter-relationship and intra-relationship of an organisation are classified as 'hard', 'soft', 'cybernetic' or 'emanicipatory' depending on the effectiveness of their feedback loop. These methodologies, if used adequately, complement the customer focus, process improvement and employee involvement principles of TQM.

From the point of view of systems theory, TQM fits within the open and the rational systems perspective. Thus TQM is a system with interactive components. Committing to just one part of the system is unlikely to produce the desired effects. Therefore, from a systems theory point of view, TQM is more than leadership; it is more than culture, or training or teams. It is all of these factors together. Further, successful implementation means that effort and perseverance are required to find the right balance for each organisation. Thus it is desirable that each firm explores its own needs for leadership, education and training, the use of teams, and the culture development to fit its own particular brand of TQM (Reed, Lemak and Mero 2000).

Thus, implementing a complex system such as quality management, with all its serial interactions, is a difficult task and many of the 'TQM failures' can be attributed more to the failure to implement and manage them as a system, than to any inherent weakness or fundamental flaws in the system or its components (Reed, Lemak and Mero 2002).

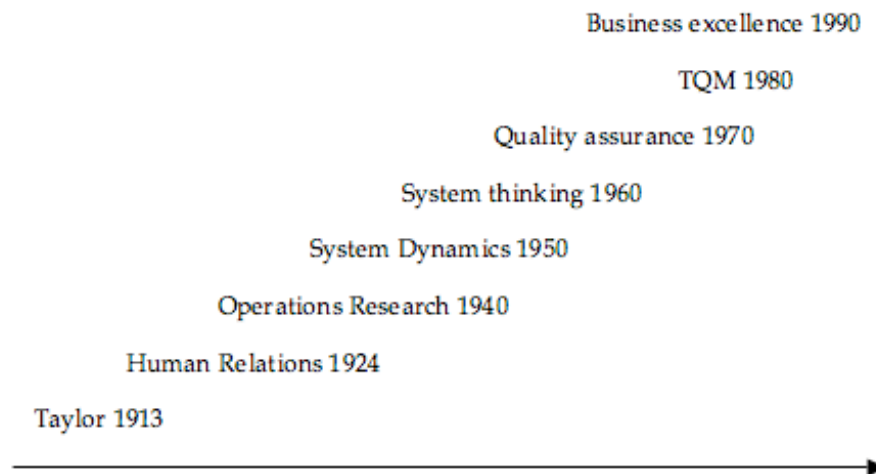


Figure 2: Milestones of organisational roots (Bauer, Reiner and Schamschule 2000)

Bauer, Reiner and Schamschule (2000) parallel the systems thinking with the growth of quality systems as shown in Figures 2 and 3.

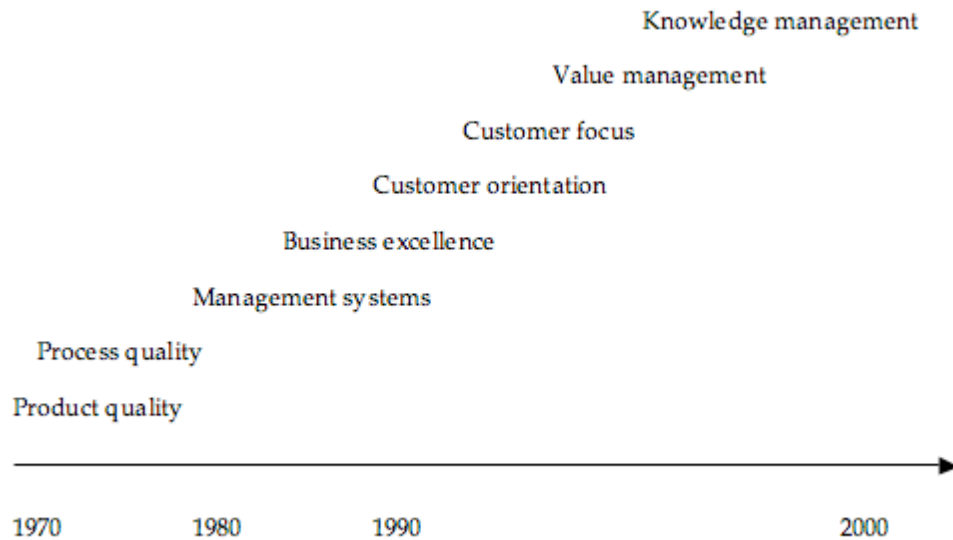


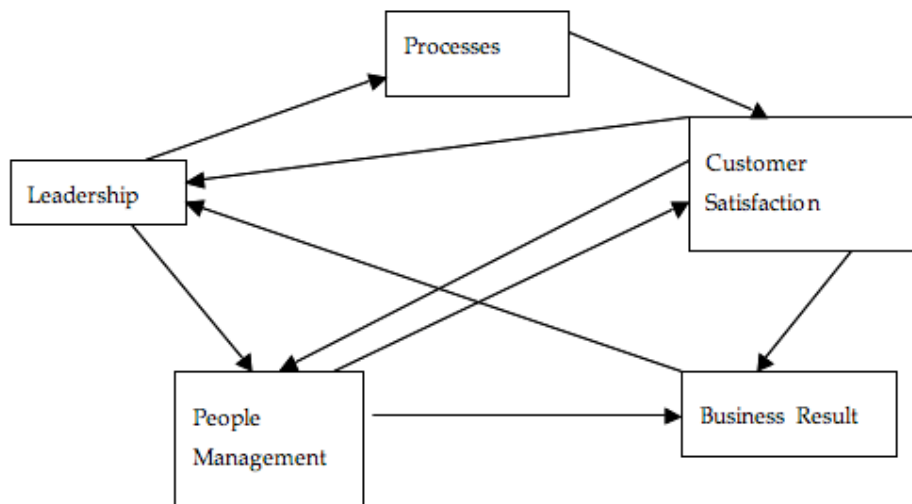
Figure 3: Milestones of quality development (Bauer, Reiner and Schamschule 2000)

A review of the literature (Kumar 2006) shows that what was earlier known as TQM has now morphed into business excellence. All the quality awards are today known as models of business excellence. It really makes the two conceptually the same. Both are dominated by a comprehensive systems approach which includes a systemic control of all resources including social and cultural ones.

TQM and System Dynamics

System dynamics is a tool that can capture the interactions among a range of system variables and predict the implication of each over a period of time (Khanna *et al*, 2003). Khanna *et al* (2002) have quoted a study by Forrester wherein he used system dynamics to investigate how

strategy, decision making, structure and delay influence the growth and stability of organisations. Through the use of system dynamics software, Bauer, Reiner and Schamschule (2000) showed the interdependence of different organisational subsystems for quality (Figure 4).



(The arrows indicate the information flow)

Figure 4: Quality and business results (Bauer, Reiner and Schamschule 2000).

Khanna et al. (2002) have studied the dynamic interactions among TQM subsystems in the Indian automobile sector. Using the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award Model (MBNQA) of the United States, and modifying it to suit Indian socio-cultural conditions, they identified 12 variables that help in implementing the TQM philosophy. They developed causal relationships among the variables and clustered seven of them as enablers and five of them as results. The definitions of the full set of variables are given in Table 1 and Table 2. The tables also link the variables with the emphasis given by the founding fathers of TQM and with the ISO quality management system.

Table 1: Definition of variable for enablers (Khanna et al. 2002, p. 367).

| <i>TQM variables: enablers</i> | | |
|----------------------------------|---|-------------------------------|
| Variables | Definition | Reference |
| Leadership | Senior managers who provide clear vision and values that promote total quality. It is the most important enabler for driving a total quality management culture | Crosby, 1981; Deming, 1993 |
| Strategic planning | Business strategies incorporate long-term and short-term goals based on customer and market expectations | Ishikawa, 1985 |
| Information management | Effective information and communication systems for continuous improvement of all work | Ishikawa, 1985 |
| Human resource focus | Maximise opportunities for all employees to realise their full potential | Juran, 1995 |
| Customer and market focus | Customer (internal and external customer) relationships must be managed to secure clear understanding of requirements | ISO 9000-2000 |
| Supplier focus | Suppliers are treated as partners in the process of improvement | ISO 9000-2000 |
| Process management | Systems approach to quality control of all operations including appropriate use of 'quality tools' | ISO 9000-2000 |

Table 2: Definition of variables for results (Khanna et al. 2002, 368).

| <i>TQM variables: results</i> | | |
|-------------------------------|--|-----------------------|
| Variables | Definition | References |
| Impact on society | Societal responsibilities/environmental management | ISO 14001/OHSAS 18001 |

| | | |
|--|--|----------------------------------|
| Human resource satisfaction | All employees are motivated and dedicated to continuous improvement - feeling empowered and valued | ISO 9000-2000, ISO/TS 16949-2002 |
| Customer satisfaction | Internal and external customers know that their needs are important - and addressed | ISO 9000-2000, ISO/TS 16949-2002 |
| Supplier satisfaction | Suppliers want to do repeat business - as partners | ISO 9000-2000, ISO/TS 16949-2002 |
| Company specific business results | Do the company's results demonstrate effective performance | Mody, 1996 |

TQM and organisational learning

Organisational learning is also rooted in systems theory and is linked to TQM. One definition of organisational learning is that it is the capacity or processes within an organisation to maintain or improve performance based on experience (Nevis, DiBella and Gould 1995, p.73). Since implementing TQM involves substantial organisational change (Ehrenberg and Stupak 1994, p. 81), a TQM organisation has been defined as one that has developed the continuous capacity to adapt and change. Therefore, the quality movement has been considered a forerunner in creating learning organisations (Elkjaer 1999; Senge 1994, p.61; Zhao and Bryar n.d.) and organisational learning has been considered a necessary outcome of a TQM initiative (Barrow 1993, p.39; Sohal and Morrison 1995). A learning organisation adopts TQM commitment to continuous improvement (Garvin 1993, p.78). Within a learning culture, continuous improvement is a natural by-product of people's commitment and empowerment but within a controlling culture, learning is an admission of deficiency (Senge 1994). This brings into focus the aspects of the content and process of organisational learning.

Organisational knowledge creating process

Nonaka (1994) argues that organisational knowledge is created by continuous dialogue between two types of knowledge – tacit and explicit. Explicit knowledge is formal knowledge which is can be codified and transmitted. It is captured in the records of the past such as libraries, databases and archives and is assessed on a sequential basis. Tacit knowledge has a personal quality which makes it hard to formalise and communicate. It involves both cognitive and technical elements. The cognitive element comes from the ‘mental models’ that include schemata, beliefs, and paradigms that help individuals to perceive and define the world. The technical element of tacit knowledge covers skills, concrete know-hows and crafts that apply to specific contexts. Sharing of tacit knowledge involves parallel processing of the complexities of current issues. Organisational knowledge is created, enlarged and enriched by the individuals of an organisation. It is carried out by the interactive amplification of tacit and explicit knowledge held by individuals, organisations and societies in a spiral fashion. The organisation is the forum where the spiral of knowledge creation takes place through socialisation, externalisation, combination and internalisation (SECI). The SECI model is shown in Figure 5.

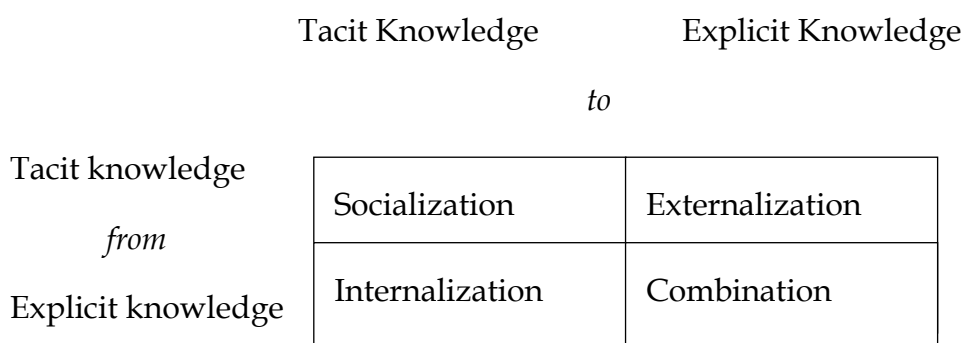


Figure 5: Modes of knowledge creation in an organization (Nonaka 1994).

For parallel processing of knowledge, Nonaka emphasises middle-up-down management where all members work together both horizontally and vertically. He de-emphasises the charismatic role of top management or the entrepreneurial role of lower management. He looks upon the middle managers as the knowledge engineers who synthesise the tacit knowledge of top managers and frontline employees into new knowledge and new learning.

Further, in the context of learning, Reason (2001, p.185) has identified four levels of knowledge:

- *Experiential knowing* is through direct face-to-face encounter with person, place or thing; it is knowing through empathy and resonance, and is almost impossible to put in words.
- *Presentational knowing* emerges from experiential knowing, and provides its first expression through forms of imagery such as poetry, drawing, sculpture, movement, dance and so on.
- *Practical knowing* is knowing 'how to' do something and is expressed in a skill, knack or competence.
- *Propositional knowing* is knowledge 'about' something and is expressed through ideas and theories. It is expressed in abstract language or mathematics.

Bawden (1991, p.17) has considered these four dimensions of learning as opposites yet integrated to each other as shown in Figure 6.

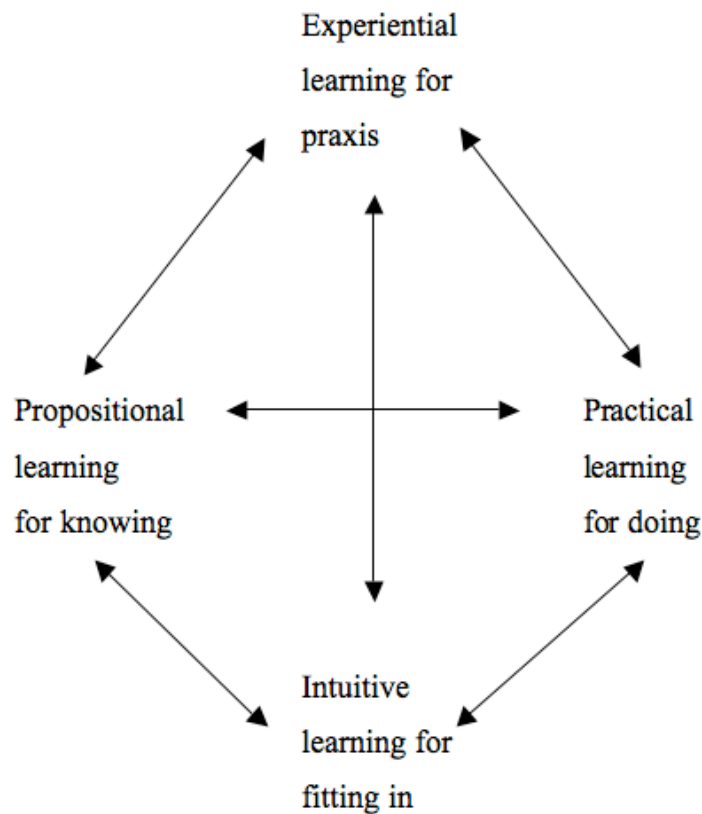


Figure 6: The four types of learning as polar opposites (Bawden 1991).

TQM as integration of systems theory, systems dynamics and action learning

How it is possible to integrate different types of learning for TQM implementation through action learning? Action learning postulates that people learn most effectively when working on real-time problems occurring in their own setting (Raelin 1997, p.21). Argyris and Schön have described organisational learning as a theory of action (Elkhaer 1999, p.79). Zimmer (2001) says that using a systemic action-learning cycle at the level of second-order cybernetics, it is possible to reduce conflict in the organisation and maintain autonomy. According to Zimmer, first-order cybernetics is about the first-order feedback system, where 'I plan and do, I

sense and I check'. Second-order cybernetics is about the second-order feedback system, where 'I share my reflection and feedback with those from another person - you'. Zimmer further says that respect for autonomy is a powerful tool to manage complexity. It lets mutually supportive order emerge.

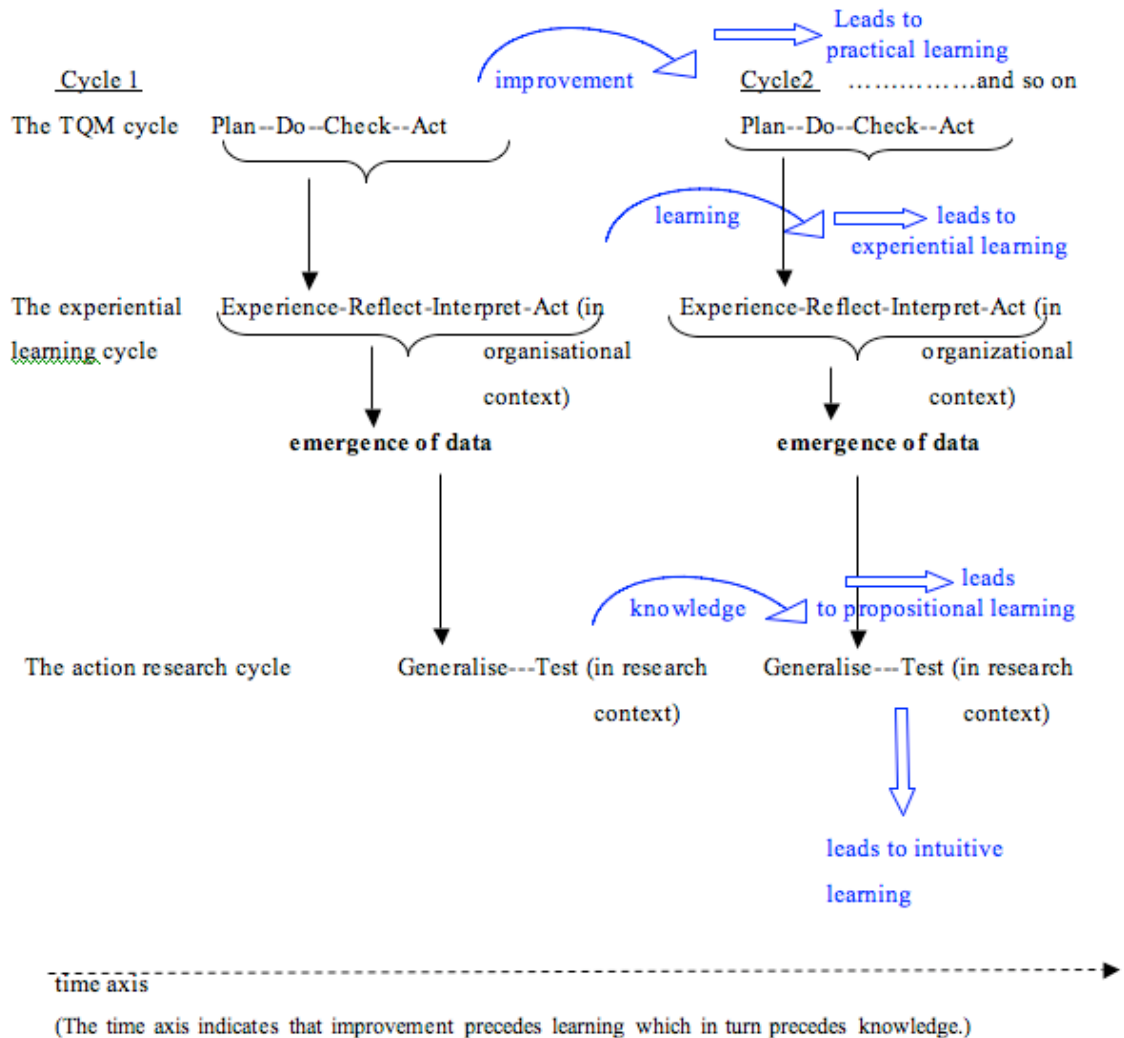


Figure 7: Development of different types of learning from TQM via action learning.

However, the systemic action learning approach suggested above does not show how TQM can lead to different types of learning. Herein comes the need to integrate the systems

theory and organisational learning for an organisation. Thus this paper builds a model to merge TQM learning with the action learning school of systems theory leading to different types of organisational learning as shown in Figure 7.

Figure 7 blends the different types of learning shown in Figure 6 with the PDCA (plan-do-check-act) cycle in the context of TQM. It shows that each cycle of PDCA brings about an improvement (or change) which can then become the basis for planning the next cycle of improvement (or change). This thus gives rise to practical learning. From the PDCA cycle the improvement emerges. In the context of learning, at the individual or group level, the experience of undergoing the PDCA cycle makes the individual/group reflect on their experience. They draw on theories and constructs to make sense of their experience. That is, the theories and constructs known to them until then are used to interpret and find answers to the questions posed in the reflection. These answers are the new learning for the individual/group. This gives rise to experiential learning. As a result, the individual/group learn(s) to act differently in the organisation. Thus in the next cycle (cycle 2), this new learning is part of their theories and constructs which, in turn, moderates their experience, reflection and interpretation. However, the experiential learning arrived at cannot be elevated to the status of knowledge unless it can be generalised and then verified to be correct.

This is done in the action research cycle. Here, the learning which emerges during reflection and its interpretation need to be generalised and tested. This then gives rise to propositional learning. The interplay of these three types of learning finally gives rise to intuitive learning which is akin to developing a different gut reaction. Development of different kinds of gut reaction changes the culture of the organisation and makes it more quality oriented. This way,

by building the elements of action learning into TQM implementation, it is possible to use the SECI model shown in Figure 5 and make different kinds of learning a necessary outcome of the TQM initiative.

So far, this paper has shown that cyclic learning is the common theme between TQM and action research, systemic approach is their common assumption and systems dynamics is the common tool which can link the interactions between different systemic variables of TQM and action learning. Figure 7 shows that intuitive learning is the final outcome of these learning processes. This intuitive knowledge is conceptually akin to what Scharmer calls 'not-yet-embodied knowledge' or 'self-transcending knowledge' (2001). According to Scharmer (2001, p. 145), this knowledge comes from the formation of 'common will' which, in turn, develops from interaction between shared action and shared reflection.

In the context of TQM implementation, this paper now argues that continuous improvement can become the shared will – the community of intention – which can emerge from the interaction between shared action (say, ISO 9000/ISO 14000 certification) – the community of practice – and shared reflection – the communities of reflection. However, this requires moving away from conventional 'reflection-in-action' or 'reflective dialogue' to a conversational quality 'which taps into the sources of emerging reality' (Scharmer 2001, p.147) and can help us intuit what our next action should be.

TQM via action learning: an Indian context

Let us look at the organisational culture necessary for effective TQM implementation using action research in an Indian context.

The first aspect is the importance of symbolism which goes beyond the importance of dialogue. Developing the right kind of dialogue for action research has been considered important by different schools of action research (see, for example, Scharmer 2001; Zimmer 2001). However, in social systems where nonverbal communications dominate, it is difficult to make language the vehicle of change. Thus in an Indian organisation, it is difficult for the participants to enter into a dialogical exercise which could give rise to even type II learning, let alone the type III learning Scharmer (2001) and Zimmer (2001) describe. However, the symbolism of 'action in tune with the "espoused" dialogue' (Kumar & Sankaran 2005) was found to be a better precursor to the development of 'shared will'.

The second aspect is the importance of introspection after an understanding of symbolism. Indians have a strong introspective personality (Ronald 1988). Thus, it is possible that change gets propelled by shared introspection instead of shared reflection. In the literature on organisational learning, action and judgment have been considered as elements of wisdom and experience, while spirituality and passion have been considered as the path to wisdom (Bierly III, Kessler & Christensen 2000). But while the learning literature has recognised the importance of action and experience, spirituality has generally been ignored. Only a few TQM implementations have been attempted by invoking the spiritual aspect (see, for example, Schmidt-Wilk 2003). However, a common spiritual journey is necessary for development of shared introspection. For example, in the Indian context, the nuances of action science was explained to a group of more than 200 illiterate employees not by getting them to understand the subtle differences between first-order and second-order learning but by relating these to them through the Indian epic, the Mahabharat (Kumar & Sankaran 2006).

Thirdly, although the action research literature generally emphasises playing down the hierarchical barriers, at least in the Indian context, there need not be a deliberate attempt to bring down the hierarchy for effective action learning. In fact, a deliberate attempt for egalitarianism can often be construed as a sign of weakness by the co-action researchers in the Indian context.

Conclusion

In TQM, there are five interdependent organisational subsystems as per system dynamics – process, business results, leadership, people management and customer satisfaction (see Figure 4). The model in Figure 7 links the improvement in the processes of an organisation (cycle 1) to customer satisfaction which, in turn, leads to better business result. The aspect of leadership and people management becomes operational in the experiential learning cycle. Thus, beginning from TQM, this model links system dynamics with action research leading to different types of organisational learning which, as indicated in section 4, should be an outcome of TQM. This provides the theoretical underpinning for using an action research-based approach in TQM implementation. In this scheme of things, continuous improvement can emerge as the natural shared will of an organisation through the interaction between the shared experience of, say ISO certification, and shared reflection thereon. Therefore, it is not surprising that Roth and Senge (1996, p. 98) consider Deming's approach of continuous improvement to be in line with the action research traditions of Lewin and Kolb. However, notwithstanding this theoretical underpinning, TQM implementations via action research are few and far between. This is largely because TQM implementation has been looked upon as an improvement-oriented management system consisting of values, methodologies and tools (Eriksson 2004) and not as an experiential process.

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Using an Indigenous worldview for action learning and action research to create equity in education - Frances Wyld

Abstract

Education is broadly acknowledged as among the keys to providing equitable social and economic outcomes for Indigenous People. Good teaching however is built on students' prior knowledge, and effective learners use their worldview to cognitively adopt new knowledge through highly individualised neurodevelopment systems. But whose knowledge has currency in contemporary education? How does the learner make critical choices about what they need to know, when their prior knowledge and core epistemology remain unrecognised? Indigenous cultural knowledge is undervalued in Australia and this contributes to the ongoing marginalisation of Indigenous worldviews within the education system. Yet Indigenous worldviews are ethical, reciprocal and sustainable: all values central to Western educational ideals and practices. This paper uses pedagogical examples drawn from a range of educational experiences, in an attempt to demystify the learning process in Indigenous contexts, and support action learning and action research as means to extend understandings of how an Indigenous worldview can be used to enhance equity in education for Indigenous Australians.

Introduction

When writing as an Indigenous academic it is important to introduce yourself, and to acknowledge that Indigenous Australians are not one homogenous group, so that one person does not speak for all. I am an Indigenous woman; my mother is part of the Stolen Generations and grew up in Sister Kate's home in West Australia. I work as a lecturer for the David Unaipon College of Indigenous Education and Research. It is the resilience of my foremothers and the mentorship of our College Elders that guides my pathway. I write this paper during a difficult time in Australian history for Indigenous people and the guidance from mentors and Elders is invaluable.

This paper acknowledges the theories that have guided me in my development as a teacher and researcher for equity and social justice. I unashamedly cite theorists who have a foot in popular culture, because solutions to learning problems should be accessible for all – and even those who may not have had access to formal education, are familiar with everyday cultural ideas and references. Most of the theorists mentioned in the following discussion are my heroes for their commitment to equity in education, and for promoting approaches that can be shown to parallel Indigenous ways of being, knowing and doing.

Indigenous learners are the most disadvantaged in Australia. The current education system remains in denial about the pervasive influence of white privilege and the institutional barriers it sets up for Indigenous learners. Action learning: pedagogy which foregrounds the learning process as it proceeds, can overcome disadvantage – but only when social, cultural and institutional inequities are acknowledged. Action research and action learning together: theorising practice, and simultaneously testing all hypotheses, can help promote change. This combination lets

in Indigenous knowledge: shows where and how it is valuable, and so restores an experiential foundation to learning for Indigenous participants. With so many more doors needing to be opened for Indigenous people to achieve positions of influence both in and through education, being able to share their life-knowledge during their own education models and validates the work they will be doing in their turn, to educate and advocate for their communities.

Embedding the learning process in lived experience and familiar paradigms is in no way however to diminish the educational challenge. I have come to believe that an individual can achieve their full potential only through becoming a metacognitive learner: one able to see past specific instances and examples, to a complete epistemology, underlying the systems through which s/he is organising her access to “new knowledge”. Only by understanding learning pathways, do we prevent ourselves from having to walk them again, and again – and only then can we guide others, who may or may not share the specifics of our own insights.

As an Indigenous woman I want to help create positive experiences for primary and secondary school learners, by educating their future teachers in this richer, more holistic way. I want to help create these advanced pathways for higher education students, by researching and demystifying the learning process. While the terms in which I am speaking here are those of Western-trained academics, for me these roles are primarily informed by an ethical framework based on praxis: one which both asserts and re-centres understandings from Indigenous ways of learning, and being.

Shifting paradigms

What does it mean to introduce a focus on cultural practice into the process of learning, when those under instruction are teacher-education students? Gawith considers that “the purpose of action learning is to give control of the learning process to the learner” (1991, p.14). Certainly, it is important to see the learner as an individual. Giving a learner control over their learning enables them to become not only a metacognitive learner; one who must think through what they are attempting to learn, and how, and why; but also a learner who must attend to their own strengths and weaknesses, and “know” the directions of their own pre-dispositions towards various modes of learning. In this paradigm, self-knowledge comes first – for without an initial self-assessment, no learning task can be positioned to suit the individual learner’s strengths or needs.

Any learner is influenced by both social and psychological factors – but beneath these, lie physiological elements: the taken-for-granted of the education system. A good educator has strategies to encompass the individual learner’s neurodevelopment and cognitive systems, and the socialising influences which have channelled them. When these elements are not structured in ways which are recognised within the education system they have entered, then learners have the ‘double whammy’ disadvantage: a learning program which will position itself in ways which cannot contact and engage their prior knowledge, or accommodate its learning processes to the metacognitive pathways developed in the learner’s cultural epistemology. Nor, in the context of this paper, will it provide “useful” skills or knowledge to return to the teacher trainee’s community, for passing to future generations of learners. A disadvantaged learner for the purpose of this paper confronts from the outset issues explained in the disciplines of education, physiology, psychology, philosophy and

sociology – and yet also already known in the worldview of the Indigenous communities. While the Indigenous learners confronting the concepts, terminology, explanations and practices of a formal teacher-education course are grappling with new ways of understanding what education does, and why, they are simultaneously aware of two other referent framings: one drawn from experience of Indigenous instructional practices and paradigms, and another structured around their own previous encounters with formalised mainstream Australian schooling. By definition, theirs must be a comparative, and so metacognitive, experience, one which grapples with three simultaneous paradigms.

Understanding minds, understanding lives

In a perfect world, when a child entered formal schooling the teacher would be able to develop a personalised profile that developed a shared understanding of both their mind and life. Starting with the basics; checking hearing and sight, and finding ways to develop and regulate the urge towards regular physical movement and spontaneous expressiveness, the ideal teacher would slowly induct the child into the world of formalised learning – with all its attendant disciplining, interactivity, and ritualised procedures.

Western education understands this need, and has many ways of explaining it. Each of them however departs from and consolidates culturally specific ways of understanding and acting, which produce a system designed to meet modern, urban, and industrial social and economic demands – too often without ever making such intentions clear. Levine for instance compares human minds to “tool chests... filled with these delicate instruments, neurodevelopment functions, the various implements for learning and for applying what’s learned” (2002, p.28). He breaks this

functional apparatus into eight systems; “attention control system, memory system, language system, spatial ordering system, sequential ordering system, motor system, higher thinking system and social thinking system” (Levine 2002, p.31). But Levine’s is a rationalist, mechanistic, Modernist world: one to which such metaphors seem natural, discursively positioned as they have been, deep in the collectively schooled psyche. In a mass-community, industrialised world which needs different kinds of minds suited to different activities, differentiation among learners - and so success or failure within the eight systems - is the major concern. A learner’s strengths and weaknesses as tested against these categories - or variations of them - “stream” him or her towards a distinctive life future: command his or her interests, demarking “talents” and “capacities” and ultimately, educational and life success, or otherwise. But what of those whose understanding of human capacities is not organised within a rationalist/Modernist/mechanistic paradigm? Whose origins and life destinations are not pre-disposed towards individualised pathways, or attaining distinctive and “personal” lives? While Indigenous communities may have accommodated with flair to the practical uses of a machine culture, acceptance of such a mechanistic model of human intelligence is altogether another matter. Living a “partial” life: one selected from a range of possibilities, may seem dangerously constrictive, unbalanced, and even nonsensical, to a cultural philosophy and a human psychology founded on older, deeper, and more socially-cohesive paradigms.

Western educational philosophy does of course have far broader and more accommodating explanations of how learning might proceed. Here, for instance, we can start to see links with the Howard Gardner (1983) model of multiple intelligences. Goleman (1995, p.94) comments on the value of using the work of Howard Gardner:

The strategy used in many of the schools that are putting Gardner's model of multiple intelligences into practice revolves around identifying a child's profile of natural competencies and playing to the strengths as well as trying to shore up the weaknesses.

In such a system, teachers can for instance administer multiple intelligence tests to a class of children through verbal or written questioning. The model recognises differential neurodevelopment maturation, and that the physiological-neurological nexus, which allows an individual to function in the world in which they develop, produces variable combinations of cognitive abilities.

Currently, such modelling is mainly used in restricted, "remedial" ways. If, for instance, a teacher is concerned about a learner's neurodevelopment function they may talk to parents, who in turn may decide to see their medical centre and be referred to a paediatrician, for medical or psychological intervention. To that extent, this is applied as a "corrective" processing: a technique for bringing aberrant individuals back into line with all others. Levine however, himself a paediatrician, also talks about the neurodevelopment profile, where he sees us as starting to include connections to sociological development. Levine states that this profile is influenced by "genes, family life and stress level, cultural factors, friends, health, emotions and education experience" (Levine 2002, p.38). What begins as a system saturated with a unitary hyper-rationalist and mechanistic discourse, is beginning to accommodate the possibility of difference.

When a child begins school they enter having been already not just influenced, but formed by socialising agents as action learners. As Partington (2001, p.111) describes it:

Socialisation can be both conscious and unconscious. Informal learning is considered to occur without conscious instruction. The child learns from events as they take place, without providing formal instruction and usually without the child being aware of what is being learned.

It was previously considered that a learner had the neurodevelopment system that they were born with, and a profile influenced by mostly social factors - documented for instance by Partington as “interaction with parents and other caregivers, the media, church and wider society” (2001, p.110). The formula looks strangely outmoded, excluding the far richer socio-cultural mix and (mediated) multi-cultural exposure of contemporary life – even in remote Indigenous communities. But it also disregards the “depth” dimension of socio-cultural formation: the relative intensities of modern/post-modern “fragmentary” influences, and those of a total-immersion, holistic culture, stressing continuity and connectedness. Indigeneity as a cultural factor is not entirely absent from Partingtonian formulae – but it is still severely marginal in its inclusion.

An analysis of exclusion: what are the causes?

Individual knowledge, while admitted into the equation, still has varying currency within the mainstream Australian education system.

Children who are brought up in families which support the values, knowledge and skills valued and utilised by the school will obviously be at an advantage compared with children who learn alternative knowledge (Partington 2001, p.113).

Thomson (2002, p.4) uses the work of Bourdieu and the notion of a ‘virtual schoolbag’ to explain this currency or value-system operating within education: “Bourdieu

suggests that the curriculum can be thought of as ‘cultural capital’ – the knowledges that are valued”.

“The virtual schoolbag”, coined by Thomson, carries those unseen knowledges that a learner brings to school. A good teacher will have strategies to gain insight into these knowledges and will use them in the classroom, just as they would make use of multiple intelligences and varying neurodevelopmental strengths, without advantaging or disadvantaging one learner over another. However, to take up within this inclusivity a full admission of cultural difference, at the level of epistemological systems and taxonomies and social practices, is impossible. Neither the time frames, nor the operating contexts of classroom designs, allocation of staff, curriculum materials or support resources permit the sorts of totally tailored learning-in-depth for which each culture hopes. Instead, learners must put back into their virtual schoolbags those elements of the offered instruction which connect with their pre-dispositions, and serve their specific needs.

By helping learners to understand this: to assess and “know” their own cognitive functions and cultural needs is to encourage them to mediate their learning, and so become metacognitive learners. They can use existing or parallel-developed knowledges to scaffold incoming information, strengthening their control over it and making sense of it. A socially just teacher is empathetic to a student’s learning profile and existing knowledge. He/she will give them the opportunity and encouragement to learn using their existing knowledge - even when it is viewed as alternative, or outside, standardised curriculum.

Within the current Australian education system, at all levels, alternative knowledge cannot only be disregarded: it can be,

and is, “denigrated” (Partington 2001). Aboriginal people and their knowledge are among the most disadvantaged and most actively denigrated in schools. Aboriginal learners enter school “with a body of knowledge, acquired informally and sometimes formally, that is rich and varied; yet it has no currency in the school” (Partington 2001, p.114). Malin (1997, p.140) gives examples from her research into the education experiences of Aboriginal learners in which “the skills and characteristics of the Aboriginal students which were positively valued, or simply considered normal, at home became irrelevant or disabling in school.”

One way of confronting educators with the facts of this cultural suppression has been to include, in their own professional education, materials which they will find new, unfamiliar, uncomfortable – even shocking. Texts and interpretations of inter-cultural confrontation which have not before been admitted into mainstream Australian education – or social consideration more generally – can be used to introduce the same sorts of disjunctive response which Indigenous learners encounter within mainstream education. Tannoch-Bland (1998), for instance, has been used as a reading in teacher education, confronting learners with examples such as these, of how the history of their own social rise to dominance can be represented and understood:

White people’s race privilege in this country is based on past acts. All white Australians live here because of past actions of murder, massacres, poisoning, torture, dispossession, internment, enslavement and genocide. These acts were committed against Indigenous people on the basis of race. They were racist acts. ... White privilege is invisible, unearned, denied, systemic, undesirable, and confers dominance (1998, p.33).

This is confronting material. Those pre-service teachers to whom it is presented are entering the profession to help

students, and the wider society. They believe that they are ethical people, and would hotly deny that they are racist, or race-privileged. Nor do many believe that they carry any responsibility for past acts.

By opening their own “virtual schoolbags”, and talking about what Bourdieu would term their (white) “cultural capital” and how it was conferred, they enter a dialogue about the socialised benefits they have unknowingly received, as learners and as members of a society. They find, just as Tannoch-Bland did, that “through the news media, the curriculum, TV, the economic system, daily life, I receive signals that my people count” (1998, p.38).

Tannoch-Bland goes on to compare her own position of privilege to counter-case evidence conveyed through the disempowered voice of Indigenous people. Lester Irabinna Rigney, Aboriginal man and academic, describes his own experience of being educated in this racist environment:

I began to worry about the words, which rang so clearly in my head, ‘you don’t have to worry about that Nunga knowledge, that’s not true knowledge.’ And so as a child I was very bitter and confused. I started to reject school and rebelled as so many Nungas did in those days (Rigney 1995, p.6).

He too goes on to say explicitly that “schools are sites for reproductions of inequity and oppression” (*ibid*), connecting with Freire’s classic explanations of the privilege of those who colonise and oppress another people, and then later deny any such actions.

The oppressors do not perceive their monopoly of having more as a privilege which dehumanises others and themselves. They cannot see that, in the egoistic pursuit of having as a possessing class, they suffocate in their own possessions and no longer are;

they merely have. For them, having more is an alienable right, a right they acquired through their own 'effort', with their 'courage to take risks' (Freire 1972, p.35).

The dehumanising of Indigenous people has long been an invisible part of the curriculum in Australian schools, along with the celebration of white pioneers, a cultural orientation first to Europe and then to America, and the wholesale importation of epistemologies and practices not produced within or designed for a local context. Pre-service teachers, like all other trainee professionals, must be exposed to intensified experience of how white privilege within Australia reproduces inequity and sustains racism. They must be given the option to be agents for social justice. Pedagogies such as Freire's problem-posing education can help overcome the oppressiveness of past education practices, replacing them with techniques in which "... men [sic] develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world" (1972, p.56). Freire's definition of problem posing or critical pedagogy is echoed in Gawith (1991, p.14), who sees that:

the learner is not a blank sheet, an empty vessel waiting to be filled with knowledge, but an active partner creating knowledge using action learning as a framework and guide.

Action learning, inclusive of the recognition of past inequities, can be socially just. Gawith uses learner assessments to create metacognitive learners, linking them back to the specific experiences and epistemologies which produced the understanding minds they bring to new learning tasks. How might these tools, designed for helping disadvantaged learners, be adapted to the task of helping Aboriginal learners? This paper will argue that Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing not only have the potential to adopt an "action learning" model, but that in

doing so they can provide a further, distinctive framework to help all other learners.

Aboriginal ways of knowing, doing and being

It needs to be acknowledged that there is no homogenous or single-paradigm learning style in relation to Aboriginal learners. The term “worldview” as used in this paper relates to spiritual and cultural aspects of Indigeneity, and does not seek to offer a single set of instructional models for all purposes. While an Aboriginal epistemology includes an understanding of the idea of metanarrative, this is not a unitary or unfaltering single theory. Hughes and More (2004) use this summarisation by Muir (1987) and provided by Christie (1984):

The Aboriginal universe is basically one in which physical, scientific qualities are irrelevant and the world takes on meaning through the qualities, relationships and laws laid down in ‘the dreaming’. There are a number of striking differences: The Aboriginal world is not constrained by time or space – the land is still inhabited by the same beings which were involved in its creation – the spirits of dead people are constantly present – ceremonies not only re-enact the activities of ancient heroes but also recreate them. English words are inadequate to describe this historic and contemporary world. The value of things lies in their quality and relatedness. In a world made up of objects related through their spiritual essences, rather than their physical properties, counting is irrelevant. Aboriginal languages contain very few numbers and have few terms for the objective contrasting and comparison of physical objects. Aboriginal society makes an individual’s sense of worth depend upon where he or she can fit in – cooperation rather than competition is valued and fostered (Hughes and More 2004, pp.253- 254).

Martin (2001) sees the Aboriginal worldview as an ontology, or system of operability, which is expressed differently by different groups within Australia, but which systematically

holds to and commands social behaviours and so cultural rituals and relations. Arising within this is a distinctive epistemology, whose taxonomies depend less on materialist objectivity and rationalist ordering than on metaphysical connection and so holistic identification. In an Aboriginal world order, an individual is charged not with constructing a role to optimise their own position, but with finding and acceding to the role the system opens for them.

Martin sees that in such a system it is important to include the work of other Indigenous academics and elders. Kaurna Elder, Lewis O'Brien, has much to say on the subject of Indigenous learning styles and Aboriginal philosophy:

I think it is important for this philosophy to be passed on, otherwise it will be lost. We need to pass the wisdom of Elders on to our kids, so that one day they will have the wisdom and strength to cope with the many and varied challenges that they will face. When I was a kid on the mission, for example, I learnt to listen and when I asked questions the Elders would say, tut, tut, tut. Then they would walk away. So I soon learn to shut up and listen carefully, and not to interrupt. This I believe is the first step needed in accelerated learning (O'Brien 2007, p.98).

This "passed down" wisdom is an instance of the processing metanarrative, and of what happens when people interact with the concept of "Country". O'Brien's reminiscence, stressing as it does human interactivity and direct oral instruction, connecting generation to generation, is also explicitly situated within Country - even if Country already re-occupied by Western agents. "Country" includes "ancestral lands and elements of waterways, skies, climate and spiritual systems of Aboriginal groups" (Martin 2001, p.4). O'Brien's story places his own instruction inside the physicality of the relation with the Elders, who "walk away" - displacing his demand for the epistemological "short-cut" of a Western Question-and-Answer (teacherly) relation, into a learning in which he must himself observe, concentrate,

and come to understand: “So I soon learn to shut up and listen carefully, and not to interrupt.” Even the shift into narrative present tense is important in this anecdote, extending its personal historicity into a general admonition. In this story, in that place, “the Elders” walk away from each of us, opening up a silence which speaks volumes.

In reproducing this move towards “learnerly” knowledge by passing it on to the next generation as a technique rather than a bundle of content, Aboriginal people are reproducing an entire epistemology (Martin 2001). As Rigney found in the quote earlier, such knowledge is invisible to Western systems; its subtleties contained not in formalised institutions or transmitted in artefacts such as documents, but carried in the positioning of individuals into optimal “learnerly” relations with Elders and Country. Its connectedness and environmental sensitivity, much-needed qualities in a disintegrating late industrial West, intersect in interesting ways with those of action learning.

Using an Aboriginal worldview for teaching and learning

Martin (2005, p.30) uses the idea of connectedness to describe young Aboriginal learners whose ability to learn within their own culture has been denied by Western frameworks:

The child engages and experiences the world in ever-increasing sets of relatedness that are guided by other people and ... elements, particularly the spirits.

While the progression of this sense of relatedness then informs ways of being in the Indigenous world, its application to an action learning model within formalised Western or mainstream Australian schooling should not be

overlooked. There too, learning progresses cumulatively, with each instructional layer building onwards to another. Its presentation and representation however is rarely opened to learners in such ways. While teachers and academics are party to the fully developed paradigms through which education proceeds and to which ends it is directed, for learners, ideas and information come in pre-arranged packages, siloed into “subjects” or “disciplines” or “today’s lesson” or “the year six science curriculum”. Further, they too often ignore, or actively suppress, the social and relational: the ways in which learning can be supported by people in non-School contexts, and is ultimately directed towards their support, in turn. Not only are older siblings, parents, extended family or community members significant figures in learning pre-dispositions; they are its ultimate beneficiaries. We learn to participate. It is a socially integrative service – and needs in its turn to be socially integrated.

Such “relational” and situated ways of knowing and being inform Aboriginal ways of doing - in western philosophy understood as “praxis”, or theorised and socially relevant and “meaningful” practice. An ethical praxis is informed by knowing and being within the cultural framework, as instanced and reproduced “in our languages, art, imagery, traditions and ceremonies [as] a synthesis and an articulation of our Ways of Knowing and Ways of Being” (Martin 2005, p.4). Also stressed here are notions of reciprocation and the sharing of resources. This is a holistic system, in which every thought and action finds its (cultural) space.

Within such a system all actions, statements and thoughts are equally real and meaningful. Activities have not been cut away from polity or economy: they have not been relegated to something called “learning”, dominated by a social segregation of space, by simulated activities disengaged

from 'the real world", or by daily separation of families, age cohorts, or single-task focus. An Indigenous learning is an integrated one, happening within and as part of daily living.

Children are charged with responsibility for regulating their own behaviour, filling their own needs and building and reciprocating relatedness to others. Children are not viewed as helpless, useless or powerless (Martin 2005, p.30).

Malin (1997, p.149) clearly observes and records these characteristics during her classroom observations.

The self-reliance of the Aboriginal students in this class was evident in the practical ability that they demonstrated and which was greatly appreciated and capitalised upon by other members of the class.

Aboriginal children, socialised differently from mainstream Australians, are action learners in their own right. They are encouraged to observe and then to try for themselves. They problem-solve as they progress. Malin's observed teacher, Mrs Evers, could have learned a lot from her students. For her, however, the difficulty was the mis-match she perceived between the processing taking place in the minds of her Aboriginal students, each on a personal needs basis, and the paced, structured, and document-driven curriculum to which her own understandings of "learning" were bound. What was for her students, necessary, useful, timely, and so meaningful learning, appeared to her random, spasmodic, unregulated, and out of control: effectively, no learning at all.

Reg Revans is the attributed inventor of action learning; his thinking is paraphrased by Dick (online, 1997, para 2):

Action learning can be defined as a process in which a group of people come together more or less regularly to help each other to learn from their experience.

Kaurna Elder, Lewis O'Brien, gives an example of this in a "cross-over" experience in which Aboriginal shared learning succeeded within – or perhaps at the edges of – mainstream Australian schooling:

...with some other kids in the class, I worked out a homework scheme that turned out to be really terrific. At one stage there were a number of us who caught the train to school, so we used to swap notes while we travelled... Word got around, and everyone wanted to join our homework group, so we started to arrive early at school to help each other before class started (O'Brien 2007, pp.121-122).

He goes on to relate how these actions were neither appreciated nor celebrated by the classroom teachers. Once again, Indigenous ways of learning are inadmissible – or invisible. Teacher education then, an important factor for all learner success, needs to find ways to quite simply "see" these alternative learning modes, and so begin to accommodate them. Educating pre-service teachers in Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing is a crucial first step – not least because it challenges educators themselves to take up the "needs based" and "just-in-time" focus of Aboriginal learning, turning them into what Western paradigms and theories would recognise as "lifelong learners" and "action researchers".

It has been said that "action learning and action research are closely related processes" (Dick, online 1997, para 1). If Aboriginal philosophies fit well with action learning, it follows that they could be used with action research in conjunction with a paradigm shift. du Toit and van Petegem

(2005) make the connection between lifelong learning and action research within the field of teacher education, citing Lewis-Beck, Bryman and Liao (2004) who encourages the use of experimental and diversified content in teacher education.

A new paradigm in the first place expects scholars to rethink their ontological and epistemological viewpoints about the applicable reality they study. For scholarly practitioners in teacher education, one of the realities they should study is innovative learning in teacher education per se (du Toit and van Petegem 2005, p.59).

Again, the recommendation favours Aboriginal ways of proceeding: ways which prioritise a quietly thoughtful and analytical focus, as learners question the motives and meanings behind doing things this way or that way, developing skills and understandings side by side, and slowly adding layers of knowledge and explanation, as and when they become available. Patience, trust, and integrational emphases replace pressured learning, risk taking, and fragmentary curriculum “specialisation”. The social advantages - the ultimate purpose of all education - are clear.

Examples of using Aboriginal philosophy and action research to achieve outcomes for Aboriginal learners

The current education system, driven exclusively by western pedagogies and white cultural capital, has disadvantaged Aboriginal learners - as well as other groups, similarly alienated from its pre-suppositions and standardised practices. Action research, both as part of the repertoire of all teachers, and within associated research projects, is as suited to Aboriginal cultural predispositions as action learning. This paper uses two examples, *Getting started with*

Essential Learnings (2003) and *Indigenous Vocational Education and Training (VET) at a glance* (2005) to illustrate this.

Action research has been described as “the application of fact-finding to practical problem-solving in a social situation with a view to improving the quality of action within it” (Burns 2000:443). Nofke and Somekh acknowledge that action research itself has identified

...different approaches to action research and groups them in three dimensions: the professional, the personal and the political. The first focuses on improving what is offered to clients in professional settings, the second is concerned with social action to combat oppression. The third, the personal, not necessarily separated from either of the others, is concerned with factors such as developing ‘greater self-knowledge’ (Nofke and Somekh 2005, p.90).

Action research is a preferred methodology when a researcher sets out to achieve a practical outcome, within an ethical framework. If we think of action research as a paradigm, and a paradigm as the gestalt of the ontology, epistemology and praxis in and through which it arises (Lehman 2007), then we can see how these three elements reflect Aboriginal ways of being, knowing and doing.

The title for the following action research project funded by the Department of Education Science and Training (DEST), the Government of South Australia and the Department of Education and Children’s Services provides an insight into why it is chosen as an example for this paper. In *Getting started with Essential Learning: Essential Learnings – Aboriginal learners – all learners* (Stevenson and Barnett 2003), the focus learner population from Hampstead Primary School, worked in partnership with their home community to improve outcomes for Aboriginal learners. While the curriculum

comes from the South Australian Curriculum, Standards and Accountability (SACSA) Framework, the programming and content are produced within purpose-specific brainstorming sessions. This is “needs” based, not “one-size fits all”. It is localised, not standardised system-wide. The unit of work used for this paper is focused upon on ‘self’, with a unified and sustained theory of identity worked across the curriculum. Not only is the project a good example of action research method, but also the unit of work produced is a strong example of using culture, socialisation, reciprocity and action learning to produce a socially just pedagogy, able to connect in ways familiar to Aboriginal learners.

Hampstead Primary School has a diverse student population, and teachers Eileen Wanganeen and Ann Wilkins used the Wongarendi Club, an already established group designed to strengthen Indigenous culture in the school, as a focus for essential learnings and for Indigenous student learners. Wanganeen and Wilkins worked with researchers from the University of South Australia to develop the publication that tracks the learning journey, and reveals the ways in which it was fostered and produced. In reflecting on the programming of learning used, the teachers realised that

what made it challenging to assess and report the *Essential Learnings* was that they tended to emphasise the knowledge, experiences and skills individuals had. I was aware that these were not always valued by the community, nor the school, nor by me as the classroom teacher (Stevenson and Barnett 2003, p.31).

Wanganeen and Wilkins had embraced an action learning pedagogy, which allowed learners to build onward from the skills and knowledge they already had. Rather than assuming that the learner was brought unformed to the

educational task, they encouraged and acknowledged the expression and application of existing learning. The difference was immediate: “If you could bottle what happened to those students in the project, you would make millions and a difference to millions of students” (Stevenson and Barnett 2003, p.21).

But what can also be seen from this project is that the basic skills needed to move successfully through school and into a vocation could similarly be integrated into culturally sensitive and cognitively diverse curriculum planning. This integration was complex, but the teachers were able both to understand and use it, by themselves actively improving their delivery through participation and teamwork – the same sorts of renewed and “Indigenous” practice centring the learning processes. The title of the report thus includes ‘all learners’, from the classroom to the community to the teaching profession – and on outwards to those researchers who undertake action research projects.

While identity was a major theme of the program, because of its foundation in Aboriginality interdependence was also highlighted, stressing the need to acknowledge and develop a social being, part of the community. Just as in the earlier example of Uncle Lewis’s creation of a homework group, the connectedness of the group “made sense” of the tasks undertaken. The researchers’ documentation gives examples of students becoming more involved with both their learning and their community, and beginning to see that the skills they were learning would help them in “developing the strength of character they ... would need to manage multiple possible futures” (Stevenson and Barnett 2003, p.35).

This theme of identity is carried through into the second example of action research and action learning within

education, this time centred upon vocational and workforce preparation.

Training needs to reaffirm students' own identities, cultures and histories to provide the appropriate space in which people can acquire skills for employment, community development and self-determination (O'Callaghan 2005, p.8).

This publication comes from a five-year strategy developed by the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) called *Partners in a learning culture*. The strategy finished in 2005 - as did ANTA, whose responsibilities have now been taken up by the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST). The research was undertaken in partnership with the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER).

The researchers consulted with Indigenous people and communities and include seven key factors within their observations on what will or will not produce vocational training success for Aboriginal Australians. These key factors, in speaking of collaborations with community that will produce better outcomes, support an action learning and action research method, evident in one of the key messages:

Building strong rapport with Indigenous students and communities, and sharing knowledges between Indigenous and Western cultures, leads to positive outcomes. A responsive and culturally-affirming learning environment is created by negotiating all aspects of training with students and community and family members in an informal, collaborative manner (O'Callaghan 2005, p.1).

The approach includes flexibility in relation to learning and assessment methods, producing learning patterns similar to those used in *Getting started with Essential Learnings*. Both

reports see a need to include community engagement and flexibility, so that the tasks and knowledges undertaken within training modules are of direct relevance, and do not alienate learners from their own social and cultural contexts.

O'Callaghan reports, for instance, that successful outcomes can be achieved through mentoring; while participants in the research comment on the social aspects of the training process. By integrating Indigenous community connection into the program, it becomes possible to see training in mainstream vocational skills as also directed towards and integrating into Aboriginal community needs and cultural pathways.

Training is also a way of building pride in Indigenous culture, sharing traditional learning styles, creating role models and fostering motivation and resilience (O'Callaghan 2001, p.1).

Key words here include “role models” and “resilience” part of the way forward precisely because they acknowledge the techniques of the past. Action research and action learning, with their task orientation and their capacity to “read” and assimilate to the learning needs of the learner’s context, sit alongside Aboriginal culture, as a child should with an Elder. They listen. They emulate. They practise. They adapt.

Education pathways

To make a difference, Indigenous people need to be educated within both their own and western pedagogies. They need to make it into higher education, where they can start to make a difference at a policy level, and to provide professional services back to communities, in more culturally acceptable ways. But are the pathways to higher education strong enough – and are the programs encountered there any more sensitised to Indigenous learning styles than those

already encountered? We need to adapt to Indigenous learner preferences and needs across all sectors of education and training. Yet, as action methods hold, the answer will not be precisely the same at each step.

Certainly, Indigenous learners achieve once they recognise that their cultural knowledge and self knowledge are seen to be important, and begin to feel that as learners they belong in a new learning environment. The participants in the *Essential Learners* project were an example of this. While most mainstream Australian schools will continue to use a western framework, by creating metacognitive learners and making learning processes explicit there is greater chance for success for non-mainstream participants. Active learning encourages Indigenous students to be aware of what they want to achieve, in the short and long term: what are their goals, and where do they want to be? There are options when considering a pathway. Parents and caregivers can choose a school with a good track record of working with Indigenous learners - and they can replicate close community role-modelling by being involved in their children's learning. Older students can choose a delivery mode that suits them, builds on their prior skills and knowledge, and adapts to their learning pre-dispositions. University entry and higher studies can be flexible, as can VET studies. Key points in O'Callaghan's report included "flexibility in course design, content and delivery and student support services" (2005, p.1). Student support now provides a range of services, from tutoring to mentoring and scholarships. Higher education delivery too, has adapted to a wider range of needs. An Indigenous person living in a remote community can study externally through distance education and be strengthened by the support of family as they study. Young people have the Indigenous Youth Mobility Program to offer living support while they study away from home. Metacognitive learners take responsibility

not only for their institutionalised learning, but also for the learning pathway they select, understanding all the options available to them, and recognising which will best fit their needs. Uncle Lewis O'Brien comments that strengthening students in these ways lets us "... give kids hope for the future and encourage them to move beyond being victims within an unjust system" (O'Brien 2007, p.179).

Conclusion

Action research is a framework that is conducive to an Indigenous worldview. It has already been used to achieve better outcomes in teaching and learning for Indigenous students, at all educational levels. Through action learning students can become metacognitive learners, continuing the use of their own worldview as they strengthen their cognitive abilities. The learning process however needs to be demystified at all levels; shifted from the compartmentalised and de-contextualised "simulation" exercises of Western rationalist paradigms, to admit a "community engaged" learning practice, which parallels Aboriginal cultural techniques. Freire (1972, p.57) states that we are all learners in problem-posing education, and that, in a similar vein to an Indigenous worldview, "men do not exist apart from the world". To move beyond inequity, teachers, researchers and learners need to work together, respecting all knowledge, and ideally exchanging learning, admitting the value inherent in all ways of being, knowing and doing. Freire (*ibid*) summarises the problem by reminding us that, "to do this authentically they [we] must perceive their state not as fated and unalterable, but merely as limiting - and therefore challenging".

Or, as Uncle Lewis O'Brien ends all of his acknowledgments: "padniadlu wadu" - "Let's walk together, in harmony".

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Participatory practices: on being our field together

- Susan Goff

Abstract

Action research and learning are forms of participation that reflect “knowledge generating” traditions. A scan of the global field of “participation” shows that participatory approaches are being developed in many more domains of activity than “knowledge generation”. The promise of participatory approaches to address the world’s difficulties is diminished by the fragmentation of a potent, participatory field. Drawing on literature, practice reflections and collegial recognition, the author proposes a framework with which to recognise participatory practitioners’ origins and forms of practice. Through recognition we cohere and embody the global participatory field within which practitioners, including action researchers, belong.

Context

Looking back over 18 years of freelance work as a participatory practitioner in Australia, I am aware of some significant shifts in our field.

While many others hold a story of its development that reaches to the early 1970’s, my own is relatively short. Even so, I have seen a disturbing loss of visibility in practice orientations, practitioner and co-participant collaboration, and the on-going emergence and evolution of what we might call a “participatory field” in Australia.

Most noticeably I understand our field to have gone underground, to have dissipated throughout work place practices, absorbed by a persistent and predominant instrumentalist approach. Practitioners might recognise this construction when we perceive or give expression to action research as a “tool”, or an “applied method”. The nomenclature and syntax are crucially important, and in this case, both these articulations have the instrumentalist paradigm embedded within them:

Instrumentalism:

The distinctive application of that label within the philosophy of science is to positions that regard scientific theories not as literal and/or accurate descriptions of the natural world, but instead as mere tools or “instruments” for making empirical predictions and achieving other practical ends (Stanford, 2003).

As Stanford illustrates, when we see our actions, including research actions, as “tools” we can make the error of seeing them as somehow separate from the world. If they are not of the world, what *are* they of? Moreover we can see them as inanimate without our hand “implementing” them. In reality, nothing can be separated from the world if it is of human construction. To suggest that something is creates a fictitious “gap” which, without the benefit of critical review, can remain a dangerous, fragmenting disregard for difficult matters that should be included in our practice if it is to be whole.

Lurking invisibly beneath these ideas about the value of instrumental approaches is the idea that when a thing is ascribed with such “objectivity” it is somehow endemically valid and worthy of informing and underpinning political decisions. In their turn, decisions informed with this kind of knowledge carry out more instrumental activity: leveraging, predicting, rolling out, generalising. We forget or become

impatient with the reality that nothing of human construction can be outside the world, outside of relationship with it, or beyond responsibility for that relationship.

When we see research methods as “instruments” we give preference to this idea because we assert that the world is unscientific, unmanageable perhaps, without our application of such tools. To hold such a belief about the world seems, at least, a stance worthy of critique: worthy of challenging an idea of science that sets itself up in such opposition to its own origins, lacking in reverence for our world and so enamoured with distrust. Is it at all surprising that we find ourselves in the state we are in given that this form of knowledge continues to be our default position?

By hiding these questions (starving them of the status of relevance, and thus time and language in our articulations of knowledge) instrumentalism hides many other questions in the foregone conclusion that “application” is of itself inscrutably valid: (we are familiar with the ultimate criterion of “does it *work*?”).

I don't think I would be alone when I admit that I find myself wanting to be “useful” in my life - that is - to be successfully *used by* some other person or power. The satisfaction I feel when I am successfully used is an indication to me of how sub-conscious and culturally invisible this idea of instrumentalism is. When I default to this way of feeling and being I transgress action research principles: - for example the responsibility of questioning assumptions, making the invisible visible, the affected effective, and as my thesis proposes, embracing the human right and responsibility to actively *co-create* ontology rather

than unknowingly or unthinkingly buy into pre-existing ones and their inscrutable biases.

In particular, also as my thesis discusses, these dark gaps, arbitrary boundaries and rushed over densities that “real world” pragmatism vaporises actively misrepresents the seamless, flowing interconnections between all things (Rayner, 1997). When we sensitise to such connectivity, we experience different qualities of energy, speak with a different syntax, perceive kinetic systems and give rise to different kinds of practice. Indeed the very notion of “action” changes. Thus, as I reason, the fragmentation of the action research and participatory field that I experience is likely to be a *natural* consequence of this unnatural state of affairs and more over prone to breaking through it.

My interest is to embrace this fragmented reality, which I acknowledge is still deeply a part of my practice even though I have worked through years of self reflexive practice to try to sensitise myself to it. I want to find a way to let us see ourselves in practice with each other without attempting to colonise such a sighting with a new orthodoxy of my or anyone else’s making. To do so would add to the fragmentation of the participatory field, like putting a post into a swirling river and watching the waters divide around it. My challenge was to find a way for us to see that we belonged to a homeland without putting it on a map. I wrote the following tangential haiku verse to express this liminal, co-existent quality:

Holding our world in each grain of sand
The rain sleeps in the river
Like a forgotten child.

My interest is to articulate recognisable aspects of a dynamic field, comprised of all and any framework, narrative, stance and experience of participation, in a way that allows us to integrate and transform into a broader field. I have designed the framework so that it provokes questions of ontology and epistemology in its apprehension. Each element of the frame and as a whole entity is opaque with this regard, enabling individual interpretation and participation within these qualities of knowing.

It is almost self referencing - but not quite. If you engage with it you will see what I mean. It invites an active relationship with you almost in a second person sense - as if it has a dynamic within it. It doesn't look this way on the face of it - as a framework it appears simple, practical and obvious.

I want to make this framework, which is so obvious it cannot be regarded as of my authorship, available to our field so that as practitioners we can collaborate more deeply with each other. We need to be with ourselves more reflexively so we may hold our constructions more lightly, co-generate the energies and leaps more fleetingly, and travel with them beyond anything we can predict or even imagine, being inevitably *of* Earth's need as we/they are.

Transformation

In the settings that I travel, when people ask about AR, the starting point for the conversation nearly always begins at "plan, act, observe, reflect". I have had this experience this year in two communities of practice that I am supporting. This starting explanation references 1980's models, linear and instrumentalist as they were thought to be nearly three decades ago. *I* do this - even though I know we have moved on so far from this idea. I find myself resorting to this

orthodoxy of our field because in the dissipation of AR and the suppression of dialogue about it, more contemporary methodological developments such as are described in Reason and Bradbury's 2001 "Handbook of Action Research" feel too great a leap to make in a starting statement. How could I begin with, "it is about the flourishing of human kind", the "more-than-human world" being included within our research practices, "science as spirituality", the "quality of action spaces" ... complicated, academically elite and unrelated to these difficult environments. We are still trapped in a so-called "real world" of "keep it simple", tangible and outcome-focussed bounded entities (projects, programs, units, sectors etc) for these starting points.

It has become an almost political act to name an approach as "AR": the word "research" seems to ghetto a conversation into an elitist, academic corner instead of liberating our exchanges into inquiry as an everyday event, indeed, as Torbert (2001) proposes, inquiry as living with a daily understanding that *all* action is "inquiry".

I don't use the language of research as a first moment in a conversation anymore. I see myself as a "participatory practitioner" more than an Action Researcher because I work within three primary modes of practice: action research (AR), participatory evaluation (PE) and action learning (AL). Each is distinctive from, while also integral to, the other. All are concerned with conscious forms of social change, at multiple levels of engagement, for broad public wellbeing. All understand such change to originate in an idea we call "practice". It depends on the nature of a contract, as to which mode (AR, PE or AL) I emphasise. The nature of the contract depends on multiple influences: the sector and specific disciplinary fields I am working with, the professional development strategy of the commissioning body, even the

very particular characteristics of the primary decision maker on the selection committee. I imagine that this is true for most practitioners.

Rather than seeing each of these influences as horses for courses, or say, pot luck, I now see them as part of a broad developmental flow that is moving through how “we do” (policy, services, training, personal development, community engagement etc) in Australia - in the world. I see that what I do and the choices I make about this are part of this flow - both being nourished by it and contributing to it.

In this sense, my practice choices, conscious and unconscious, are more than merely pragmatic, or opportunistic. They carry with them very significant responsibilities to the emergence of a dynamic field of potential action, with particular characteristics, through which we all grow, and grow our contexts with us. This is also true for me with regard to the choices that others make. Thus, my practice (our practice) choices become “systemic”, and potentially “transformational” if we see them this way.

The quest

I wanted to find a way to understand this possibility, which became the focus of my doctoral research. It needed to be much more than simply my way of doing, even though it also needed to be true to my way. I wanted to let my practice become some kind of energy portal through which co-practitioners could come to recognise themselves with me as “participatory practitioners”. I wanted this to come about in ways that were very intimate to their own sense making, life stories and say, for example, their values in the same way as it was intimate to mine. My wish was that in sensing ourselves this way we might knowingly *be* a self-reflexive field of participatory action - of us and through us - a field

which we are creating by doing this work individually and collectively. Just the mere fact that we are all doing “it”, means that the dynamic of transformation is in existence through our bodily and conceptual frames, in the relationships between us, and far beyond the inquiry community that (in my experience at least) made up the doctoral research entity.

The questions of how to know

At issue was: what is “it”? What is this “field” that I experience and refer to as “participatory practice”? How do I know it? That is, what forms of knowing am I/we manifesting in knowing it? And, who am I, who are we, when we refer to ourselves as “participatory practitioners” - practicing the knowing of this field? What comes about through us as we work towards these ideas?

These are tricky questions. As soon as you try to nail them down, all kinds of exceptions make of rules, boundaries and criteria little more than an opportunity for more divergence in an ever-fragmenting field.

As a contribution to our field, and beyond that, the multiple contexts that our field co-creates, I proposed a framework drawn from the literature review. I propose this overtly instrumental starting place as a means by which we can recognise both our heritage and our personal life journeys into participatory work. It can also work as a critically reflexive metaphor to do more than recognise ourselves and each other. I wanted us to grow with each other and augment the participatory field in the process. Action research and learning is too limited a way of seeing participation - when participatory approaches are invading so many more modes of action than simply research, learning and evaluation. For example, I discovered the

following array of engagement with participatory approaches in my research¹:

Environmental management, Environmental assessment, Power dynamics, Health, Land use, Transportation, Democracy, Democratization, Dialogue, Deliberation, Waste management, Housing, Food biotechnology, Population studies, Journalism, Agriculture (including water and irrigation), Management, Justice, Gender, Arts, Parliamentary affairs, Ethics, Mapping technologies, Statistics, Safety, Climate, Consumer advocacy, Information technology, Risk assessment, Power dynamics, Energy, Wildlife, Forestry, Fisheries...

Whether in the realms of deliberative democracy –

A new participatory space had been recognized and legitimated North, South, East and West. The idea of politics had begun to shift. No longer was the State the focus of all social action; political parties were no longer the only vehicle for such action. Social organization of all kinds, values and beliefs were recognised as having a valid place within the imaginary of political life (Pearce, 2005, p. 5).

Urban planning –

This kind of planning work, involving dialogue and negotiation across the gulf of cultural difference, requires its practitioners to be fluent in a range of ways of knowing and communicating, from storytelling to listening to interpreting visual and body language. It would seem to be a model that is very relevant to the new complexities of community development in multicultural societies. A more democratic and culturally inclusive planning model not only draws on many different

¹ I gratefully acknowledge IAP2 for funding this research.

ways of knowing and acting, but also has to develop a sensibility able to discern which ways are most useful in what circumstances (Sandercock, 2004, p. 139).

Community development or Corporate Social Responsibility-

Our Zamzama gas project in Pakistan is located in the district of Dadu, which lies approximately 500 kilometres north of the coastal city of Karachi in Sindh Province. The area suffers from very low rainfall, lacks basic infrastructure and has limited educational facilities or opportunities. Our community development program is aiming to facilitate the empowerment process and improve the quality of life for the poor and the vulnerable people living in the areas where we operate. Education is considered to be a vital part of this process ... (BHP Billiton, 2003, online).

Nursing practice -

The concept of reflective practice has gained momentum in recent times particularly in nursing. It is considered an essential component of undergraduate curricula. Taylor (2000) ... explains reflective practice as throwing oneself back to thoughts and memories using thinking, contemplation, meditation and any other forms of cognitive strategies to make changes if they are required (Alliex and McCarthy, 2005).

Art -

Participatory practices in art are developed fundamentally as a result of dissatisfaction with the status quo. Whatever artists are dissatisfied with is followed by a characteristic offering of participation and enabling the participants a degree of self-determination. Participation can be based on the equality of rights and competencies and can be distributed in the sense of the allocation of social capital (knowledge, skills) to real or presumed underprivileged groups (Rollig, 2000).

or Environment –

Since the beginning of the modern environmental movement, the campaigns against nuclear power, to save ancient forests, to achieve a global ban on high-seas drift net fishing and end ocean dumping all have incorporated significant direct action components (The Ruckus Society 2003, p. 1).

... within and across fields, disciplines, multi and trans- each field calling what we are doing by its own disciplinary nomenclature when we are working through the same constraints to act with collective self-determination in the public interest for future wellbeing. Were there shared generic qualities to our exploits regardless of our differences?

In my review I could see there were four distinctive traditions to participatory approaches, each complementing the other, of which Action Research is a family member. I could see that we exhibit learned approaches from one, or more of these traditions without being aware that we are doing so. As a result we remain cut off from each other, when we could embrace each other within our own practice narratives and approaches.

The people who are using these forms of participation reflect a vast array of economic activity: educators, micro-credit organisations, philanthropists, neo-corporates, grass roots colleges, academics, civic square participants and self help groups to name a few. They are not geographically limited either - but rather like the spread of AR, reflect strong manifestation North, South, East and West, and ranging in structural scope from one-off pilot projects, to academic schools of thought, and legal structures such as the British Columbia's Citizen Electoral Assembly and the outstanding participatory budgeting system that the Brazilian

community of Porto Alegre has innovated and which is now taking off world wide.

Ways of seeing

How to present a way of seeing all this, so that as practitioners we could see that we belong to a vast, global vein of life-giving hope and practical achievement, rather than hiding behind our invisibility cloaks, speaking code and watching what we do diminish to the odd tool in our practitioners' back pack when we can get away with it?

As I read the texts I could see a very simple pattern emerging, arising largely from the sector-origins of the impulse to participate:

Table 1: the four constituents of participatory practice

| | | | | |
|-------------------|------------|-------------|----------|----------|
| The constituents: | Governance | Development | Learning | Activism |
|-------------------|------------|-------------|----------|----------|

I refer to these distinctions as “constituents” because together they “constitute” a potential “whole”. Each reflects a long history or origin, including democracy and philosophy as the Ancient Greeks saw them, and more recent developments such as human rights movements (emancipatory traditions) and co-operation in the meeting of local community need. I worked on the various details through the texts and determined the following criteria to flesh out the differences:

Table 2: The Constituents and their Distinctions

| | Governance | Development | Learning | Activism |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|---------------------|--------------------|
| Distinctions | | | | |
| Participatory emphasis | Being accountable | Meeting needs | Extending potential | Asserting rights |
| Participatory action | Decision-making | Problem solving | Inquiring | Resisting |
| Language for participation | Consultation | Facilitation | Praxis | Non-violent action |
| Participatory intention | Democratising | Capacity building | Transforming | Perturbing |
| Location | Institutions | Communities | Schools of thought | Social movements |

People have asked me to demonstrate how I have come up with grid. I didn't use a computerised system of tracking themes and patterns and counting recurrences. I didn't search for greater authority than me to say what I wanted to say so I could lean on their prestige. I didn't critique it from different ideological or epistemological frameworks because I wanted it to be of this diversity in a whole sense, not broken up into bits by it. As I stated before, my thesis is not about being anchored to any one form of validity, it is about provoking questions of validity and ways of knowing as being core to participatory practice.

It is simply a felt pattern that seems to ring true. If the reader is interested in seeing the list of references for this table they can search IAP2's website for the "Knowledge Network" link and note the great variety of subjects and disciplines

that are represented there (www.iap2.org) - though you may need to become a member to view it.

The value of this construction is in its recognisability - when practitioners encounter it they recognise their practice - or gaps of practice - in some aspect of it. I am hopeful that in so doing, they can recognise others.

We have recognition of this way of thinking about participation in our area of AR. For example, our own Ernie Stringer has made a definition of Community Based Action Research, which resonates with this construction very comfortably:

Community-based Action Research is always enacted through an explicit set of social values. In modern, democratic social contexts, it is seen as a process of inquiry that has the following characteristics:

- It is democratic, enabling the participation of all people
- It is equitable, acknowledging people's equality of worth
- It is liberating, providing freedom from oppressive, debilitating conditions
- It is life enhancing, enabling the expression of people's full human potential (Stringer 1999, p.10).

My scan of the field of participation was not limited to "Action Research" but is about "participatory practices"; however Stringer's distinctions, drawn from community development, education and indigenous ways of working in Australia, seem to fit my own broader scan with ease.

The following table illustrates the easy flow between Stringer's propositions and my own:

Table 3: Stringer’s CBAR distinctions and the broader participatory field

| | | | | |
|--|--|---|--|--|
| Stringer’s distinctions for Community Action Research | It is democratic, enabling the participation of all people | It is equitable, acknowledging people’s equality of worth | It is life enhancing, enabling the expression of people’s full human potential | It is liberating, providing freedom from oppressive, debilitating conditions |
| The constituents | Governance | Development | Learning | Activism |

Working with the frame

The framework suggests that each of us in the participatory realm can trace our life story into it through one (or more) of these windows. We may have worked in the public sector, or as a community developer, an educator of any kind, formal and informal, or an activist. Now as our practice matures, we can draw on each of these elements to strengthen what we do - as sources of practice information that we might not consider using, and as principles or qualities of practice that we might not be aware we are using, or may need to attend to.

In my own experience, as an example, the constituents of Development and Learning are perhaps my strongest areas of competence while Activism is more intuitive. Governance is limited to the basics of project management. If I was to critically appraise this almost accidental pattern to my practice, born as it is on my life story, I might better understand the value of Governance in my practice, become more self-aware regarding my Activism and that of so many others, and better integrate my competencies with my Learning edges.

This orientation could extend beyond an individual practitioner's range of skills and stances to be incorporated into a whole sector. Those practices that are establishing in the "public participation" arena of Governance could consider the extent to which they embrace Development, Learning and Activism responsibilities of participation in all that they do. This question might change an approach to public participation so that it:

- more robustly takes into account multiple forms of knowing and learning in the interests of cross-cultural inclusion in policy decisions (Learning constituent),
- includes due consideration of the sometimes deeply divisive interactions that can take place in public meetings with regard to community cohesion and development (Development), and
- acknowledges the democratic value of resistance and opposition in the midst of compliancy requirements (Activism). Such an approach would necessitate a multi-vocal and critical stance in what is often limited to a purely instrumental one.

Another example could be participatory approaches to say, determining how a public health initiative deals with a local health concern like tuberculosis. An approach using this framework might:

- consider a broader range of institutional accountabilities for a health issue (Governance),
- challenge the dominance of western medical constructions of a health threat and develops/uses other frames (Activism),
- shift an educative approach to one which generates a complex of experiences and integrates them into new living constructions of the health threat (Learning), and
- use such constructions to underpin community cultural responses, where institutions and community

members transform through the problem
(Development).

In gatherings of action researchers, such approaches feel commonplace, but outside of this realm, they are unfamiliar and in many instances, against the assumed “grain” of how to do, how to know, who knows, and what/who knowledge is for.

In some instances the participatory field has generated innovations that seamlessly integrate all four constituents. For example: formal methods such as Open Space Technology (OST) (Owen 1992, 1995) and the Constellations method (Hellinger 1999), and whole ontologies such as Freire’s “humanizing pedagogy” (1993, 1994). This is also true of whole organisations and public systems, such as the Porto Alegre participatory budgeting system that is influencing so many movements and communities worldwide.

In conclusion

So it seems that this framework can tell us of our journey in, and construction of, a form of practice that is participatory, freeing it from the few modes of practice that our life story could attach us to. My suggestion is that while we may be familiar with one, two or three of these modes of action, it is not until we consciously integrate all four that what we do becomes “participatory”. Thus a person might be a committed activist, but it is when they braid into their activist practices due consideration of governance, development and learning that activism can be considered “participatory”.

There is no orthodoxy as to how this is done because the framework does not stipulate a specific method, word view or means. It is not clear how it came about so I cannot argue for validity on the basis of methodological rigour. It is innocuously obvious and unoriginal, conveniently avoiding any hubris of authorship. It is mysteriously interactive challenging the appeal to inert virtues of instrumentalist tools. It is transdisciplinary in nature: it is able to feedback into inter-disciplinary approaches and also departs from them, offering its own resource base for transformative experience/work to come into being. The choice of balance and emphasis is the practitioner's to make, depending on their life story, talents, learning needs, context of work and all the other fine nuances that make for good practice.

It can be used to design our quality of presence, tactics, strategies and worldviews, with a largess of approach that our complex environments demand. If we work to these four areas in our practice, they provide the means by which whole systems of relationship, thought, practice and structure can manifest in such a way as to allow for multiplicity and complexity in an ordered manner.

Most exciting, and this is what I found in the doctoral research, is that this albeit instrumental device, when drawn into practice as a pattern more than a tool, provides a robust foundation for people to recognise each other in non-competitive ways, so they can make the leap to finding their own truths with each other in public experiences of change. This is a kind of leadership which I believe we will be seeing much more of, and for which we will need a particular quality of thought and practice to enable us to know what we are doing in demanding situations.

There are many more dynamics at work in the proposition, but for now I will leave the proposition here, in the hope that you will pick it up and work with it in your own ways. I finish with the final word from William Torbert:

Virtually all organizations and states today are dominated by relatively non-voluntary, non-mutual, unilateral power relations even though there may be pockets and occasional democratic occasions of more mutual organizing. ... Over the past 50 years however, most action research communities have been virtually allergic to "power" assuming that exercises of power are inherently unilateral and therefore contrary to visions of voluntary, mutual decision-making (In Reason and Bradbury 2001, p.256).

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About the author

Susan has worked as the Director of her own consultancy, Cultureshift Pty Ltd, specialising for fifteen years in

participatory action research, evaluation and learning in social responsibility sectors. Following three years of fulltime doctoral research at the Centre for Cultural Research at the University of Western Sydney exploring the participatory sector, Susan is currently building a regional community engagement system for the Cancer Council New South Wales. She is President of the Action Learning and Action Research Association and is on the teaching staff of the University of Western Sydney's School of Sociology.

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Susan also acknowledges the Gundungurra people, whose country offered the spirit with which the doctoral research is imbued.

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Community noticeboard

ALARA National Conference 2008: Call for Expressions of Interest

Following this year's highly successful National Conference in South Australia, *Moving Forward Together*, ALARA's Management Committee invites financial members to submit *Expressions of Interest* to host the 2008 ALARA National Conference.

Individual members as well as organisations formally affiliated with ALARA are encouraged to consider this exciting project.

ALARA offers project and conference management support as well as financial assistance to mount an event that progresses our organisation's vision:

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.

Past National Conferences have been hosted in Brisbane, Sydney, Darwin and Adelaide. They have included academic, community, business and public sectors exploring thematic interests to our field that attract a broad, multi-disciplinary engagement.

Please consider this invitation if you think your region, discipline or sector is doing great things in action learning and action research, or would benefit from a conference that draws attention to these practices.

If you are an individual member we can form a National Conference Special Interest Group around your project, chaired by our National Vice President, Iain Govan (iaing@bigpond.com) and supported by our Special Interest Group Coordinator, Ted Sandercock (sanderwt@westnet.com.au). If you are representing an affiliated organisation (our affiliates are listed on our website at www.alara.net.au) or wish your organisation to become an affiliate by mounting our conference, we negotiate a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to secure your venture. National Conference Guidelines and the generic MOU are also available on our website.

The National Conference is scheduled to coincide with our next AGM, sometime between July and September 2008, in accordance with our Association's rules.

Your *Expression of Interest* should indicate your ability to meet the following selection criteria:

- experience with project and/or conference management including budgeting, marketing, and minuting decisions;
- capacity to carry the conference project to conclusion (evaluation and project auditing by our administrator);
- access to conference facilities and accommodation for an estimated 100 participants;
- experience in creating events that are consistent with action learning, action research and process management principles; and
- a theme and approach that recognises and progresses Australian experience in our field.

If your *Expression of Interest* represents an affiliated organisation, ALARA will select with the following *additional* criteria:

- evidence that the hosting organisation has access to financial resources with which to adequately seed the National Conference in partnership with ALARA and also offer subsidised participation for an agreed number of low-income attendees;
- alignment of the hosting organisation to ALARA's vision; and
- evidence that the hosting organisation is an incorporated body and has legal standing to enter into formal partnerships and receive funding.

Additional requirements

ALARA will work with the successful bidder to:

- exchange managerial representation with ALARA to ensure transparent, regular reporting, financial management, and decision making in accordance with an agreed timetable of deliverables;
- deliver a carbon neutral National Conference; and
- co-mentor the hosting organisation for the 2009 National Conference with the ALARA Management Committee.

Submitting an Expression of Interest

Expressions of Interest responding to the criteria above should be submitted in electronic format and not exceed 1000 words. This invited document is not an agreement, project plan or detailed submission; it is an indication of capacity to carry the National Conference.

Expressions of Interest should be sent as an email attachment to:

Administrative Secretary
ALARA Inc
admin@alara.net.au

Please include a covering letter with contact details to progress further communications.

All submissions will be acknowledged on receipt, and treated with confidentiality until ALARA publishes the successful bidder. Unsuccessful bids will not be made available to any party external to the ALARA Management Committee or for any other purpose than the 2008 National Conference. The full ALARA Management Committee using processes of consensus decision-making in reference to national conference guidelines will make the selection. Following private confirmation by the ALARA Executive the successful bid will be published in the April 2008 ALARA Journal (ALARj) and on the ALARA Website (www.alara.net.au).

Deadline: COB, Eastern Summer Time, January 25th 2008 (late submissions will not be considered).

ALARA World Congress 2009: Call for Expressions of Interest

ALARA's Management Committee invites interested parties to submit *Expressions of Interest* to host the next World Congress in 2009.

Since 1990, ALARA has supported the gathering of international practitioners, participants, theorists and commissioners of action research, action learning and process management approaches to social change at these significant meetings.

Consistent with past congresses, the 2009 World Congress will be the 8th ALARA World Congress hosted in partnership with the 12th PAR Congress.

Past congresses have been hosted in Australia, the United Kingdom, Colombia, South Africa and the Netherlands. They have included academic, community, business and public sector organisations, and chosen thematic interests that attract a broad, multi-disciplinary engagement.

Expressions of Interest should respond to each of the following Selection Criteria demonstrating evidence:

- that the hosting organisation is an incorporated organisation with legitimate authority to enter into legal and financial transactions;
- of the hosting organisation's respected standing in international action research, action learning and process management networks;
- of the hosting organisation's experience in creating significant events that are congruent with the values

and principles of action learning, action research, participatory action research and related processes;

- that the hosting organisation has current and guaranteed future capacity to design, resource, manage and evaluate the 8th World and 12th PAR Congress;
- that the hosting organisation has access to a secure, accessible and adequately equipped facility and accommodation for an estimated 500 local and international participants; and
- that the hosting organisation has access to financial resources with which to adequately seed the World Congress in partnership with ALARA and also offer subsidised participation for an agreed number of low-income attendees.

Quality of the hosting organisation's past and ongoing contribution to ALARA's vision:

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.

Additional requirements

ALARA will work with the successful body to:

- exchange managerial representation with ALARA to ensure transparent, regular reporting, financial management and decision making in accordance with an agreed timetable of deliverables;
- deliver a carbon neutral World Congress; and
- co-mentor the hosting organisation for the 9th World and 13th PAR Congress (2012) with the ALARA Management Committee.

Submitting an Expression of Interest

Expressions of Interest are invited from any nation, organisation, individual or sector grouping that can meet the selection criteria listed below.

Expressions of Interest should be submitted in electronic format and should not exceed 2000 words. This document is not an agreement, project plan or detailed submission: it is an indication of capacity to carry the Congress and quality of AL- AR field leadership.

Expressions of Interest should be sent as an email attachment to:

Administrative Secretary
ALARA Inc
admin@alara.net.au

Please include a covering letter with contact details to progress further communications.

Inquiries may be directed to our International Vice President Stewart Hase (shase@scu.edu.au).

Deadline: Midnight, Australian Eastern Summer Time, January 25th 2008. Check a World Clock for timely delivery (late submissions will not be considered).

ALARA Membership Information and Subscription Forms

ALARA individual membership

The ALAR Journal can be obtained by joining the Action Learning, Action Research (ALAR) Association. Your membership subscription entitles you to copies of the ALAR Journal (2 issues per year).

ALARA membership also provides information on special interest email networks, discounts on conference/seminar registrations, and a membership directory. The directory gives details of members in over twenty countries with information about interests and projects as well as contact details. The ALARA membership application form is below.

ALARA organisational membership

ALARA is also keen to make the connections between people and activities in all the strands, streams and variants associated with our paradigm – including action learning, action research, process management, collaborative inquiry facilitation, systems thinking, organisational learning and development, for example, and with people who are working in any kind of organisational, community, workplace or other practice setting; and at all levels.

To this end we now have the capacity to invite organisational memberships – as Affiliates or Associates of ALARA. We are currently trailing this new form of

membership with some innovative ideas which we hope your organisation will find attractive.

Affiliate and associate organisations

Affiliate and Associate organisations pay the same modest membership subscription as an individual member and for that they will receive:

- The voting rights of a single member; Member discounts for one person (probably a hard-working office-bearer);
- One hard copy of the journal and the directory (which can be circulated and read by all members, office holders and people attending meetings);
- The right to a link from the ALARA website <<http://www.alara.net.au>> to your website if you have one. Our new website allows your organisation to write its own descriptive paragraph to go with its link;
- Occasional emails from ALARA about events or activities or resources that you may like to send on to your whole membership.
- Members of organisations who become ALARA Affiliates or Associates may also chose to become an individual member of ALARA for 40% the normal cost (so they can still belong to other more local and specialist professional organisations also). We believe this provides an attractive cost and labour free benefit that your organisation can offer to its own members;
- And, if 10 or more of your members join ALARA, your own organisational membership will be waived;
- Members of ALARA Affiliates or Associates who join ALARA individually will receive full individual membership and voting rights, world congress and annual conference discounts (all they need to do is

name the ALARA Affiliate or Associate organisation/network on their membership form).

Please note: members of ALARA Affiliates or Associates who become discount individual ALARA members receive an electronic version of the journal and membership directory rather than a hard copy.

ALAR Journal subscription

A subscription to the ALAR Journal alone, without membership entitlements, is available to individuals at a reduced rate. Subscription for libraries and tertiary institutions are also invited. The ALAR Journal subscription form follows the individual and organisational ALARA membership application forms.

For more information about ALARA and its activities please contact us on:

ALARA Inc
PO Box 1748
Toowong Qld 4066
Australia

Email: admin@alara.net.au

Fax: +61 7 3342 1669

INDIVIDUAL MEMBER SUBSCRIPTION FORM

I wish to apply for membership of the Action Learning, Action Research Association (ALARA) Inc.

Personal Details

| | | |
|---|--------------|--------------------|
| <i>Mr/Ms/Mrs/Miss/Dr</i> | | |
| <i>given names (underline preferred name)</i> | | <i>family name</i> |
| <i>Home address</i> | | |
| | | <i>Postcode</i> |
| <i>Town / City</i> | <i>State</i> | <i>Nation</i> |
| <i>Home contact numbers</i> | <i>Phone</i> | <i>Fax</i> |
| <i>Email</i> | | <i>Mobile</i> |

Please send mail to: *Home* *Work*

Current Employment

| | | |
|-----------------------------|--------------|---------------------|
| <i>Position / Job Title</i> | | <i>Organisation</i> |
| <i>Address</i> | | |
| | | <i>Postcode</i> |
| <i>Town / City</i> | <i>State</i> | <i>Nation</i> |
| <i>Work contact numbers</i> | <i>Phone</i> | <i>Fax</i> |
| <i>Email</i> | | <i>Mobile</i> |

My interests/projects relating to action learning and action research are:

| | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Action Learning | <input type="checkbox"/> Manager & Leadership Dev |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Action Research | <input type="checkbox"/> Methodology/Methods |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Community Action/Dev | <input type="checkbox"/> Org Change & Dev |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Education/Schools | <input type="checkbox"/> PAR |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Environment/Sustainability | <input type="checkbox"/> Process Management |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Evaluation | <input type="checkbox"/> Quality Management |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Facilitation of AR, AL, etc. | <input type="checkbox"/> Rural/Agriculture |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Gender Issues | <input type="checkbox"/> Social Justice/Social Change |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Government | <input type="checkbox"/> Systems Approaches |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Higher Education | <input type="checkbox"/> Teacher Development |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Human Services (Health) | <input type="checkbox"/> Team Learning & Dev |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Learning Organisations | <input type="checkbox"/> Vocational Education/HR |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other | |
| <i>Please specify</i> | |

Do you wish to be linked with a world network of people with similar interests and have your information included in our database and appear in our annual networking directory?

Yes *No*

Please complete payment details overleaf...

To apply for ALARA individual membership, which includes ALAR Journal subscription, please complete the information requested overleaf and the payment details below. You do not need to complete the ALAR Journal subscription form as well.

Payment Details

Category of subscription (all rates include GST)

\$93.50 AUD **Mailing address within Australia**
Full membership for people with mailing address *within* Aus

\$104.50 AUD **Mailing Address outside Australia**
Full membership for people with mailing address *outside* Aus

\$49.50 AUD **Concessional membership within or outside Australia**
Concessional membership for people with a mailing address within or outside Australia. The concessional membership is intended to assist people, who for financial reasons, would be unable to afford the full rate (eg. full-time students, unwaged and underemployed people).

Method of payment: Cheque/Bank Draft Money Order
 Visa/Bankcard/Mastercard (*please circle card type*)

Card No:

Cardholder's Name:

Cardholder's Signature: _____ Expiry Date: / /

Cheques, bank drafts or money orders must be made payable to ALAR Association Inc. in Australian dollars. Please return application with payment details to:

ALARA INC.

PO Box 1748, Toowong Qld 4066, Australia

Fax: (61-7) 3342 1669

Email: admin@alara.net.au

ORGANISATIONAL MEMBER SUBSCRIPTION FORM

We wish to apply for membership of the Action Learning, Action Research Association Inc.

- As an Affiliate Organisation (with primary purposes being action research, action learning, systems methodologies or a related methodology)
- As an Associate Organisation (with primary purposes that are not specifically one of these methodologies)

Organisational Details

| | | |
|----------------------------|--------------|------------------------|
| <i>Organisation name</i> | | <i>If incorporated</i> |
| <i>Contact address</i> | | |
| | | <i>Postcode</i> |
| <i>Town / City</i> | <i>State</i> | <i>Nation</i> |
| <i>A/H contact numbers</i> | <i>Phone</i> | <i>Fax</i> |
| <i>Email</i> | | <i>Mobile</i> |

Contact person / Please send mail attention to: _____

Nature of Organisation

| | |
|--|--|
| <i>Please say if your organisation is an Association, Society, Group, Network, Collective, Informal/Community, Set, Department, Business, Institute, Centre, Library or other configuration.</i> | |
| <i>How many members (approximately) does your organisation have?</i> | <i>Do you know how many are ALARA members? Is so how many?</i> |

What are your organisation's interests/projects relating to action learning and action research?

| | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Action Learning <input type="checkbox"/> Action Research <input type="checkbox"/> Community Action/Dev <input type="checkbox"/> Education/Schools <input type="checkbox"/> Environment/Sustainability <input type="checkbox"/> Evaluation <input type="checkbox"/> Facilitation of AR, AL, etc. <input type="checkbox"/> Gender Issues <input type="checkbox"/> Government <input type="checkbox"/> Higher Education <input type="checkbox"/> Human Services (Health) <input type="checkbox"/> Learning Organisations <input type="checkbox"/> Other | <input type="checkbox"/> Manager & Leadership Dev <input type="checkbox"/> Methodology/Methods <input type="checkbox"/> Org Change & Dev <input type="checkbox"/> PAR <input type="checkbox"/> Process Management <input type="checkbox"/> Quality Management <input type="checkbox"/> Rural/Agriculture <input type="checkbox"/> Social Justice/Social Change <input type="checkbox"/> Systems Approaches <input type="checkbox"/> Teacher Development <input type="checkbox"/> Team Learning & Dev <input type="checkbox"/> Vocational Education/HR |
| <i>Please specify</i> | |

Do you wish to be linked with a world network of people with similar interests and have your information included in our database and appear in our annual networking directory?

- Yes No

Please complete payment details overleaf...

To apply for ALARA organisational membership, which includes ALAR Journal subscription (2 issues per year), please complete the information requested overleaf and the payment details below. You do not need to complete the ALAR Journal subscription form as well.

Please note that the cost of organisational membership (affiliate and associate) is the same as for individual full membership. There is no concessional membership fee, but if an organisation has 10 or more individual members of ALARA (or 10 or more who would like to be electronic -only members) then organisational membership is free.

Payment Details

Category of subscription (all rates include GST)

\$93.50 AUD **Mailing address within Australia**
Full membership for organisations with mailing address *within* Australia

\$104.50 AUD **Mailing Address outside Australia**
Full membership for organisations with mailing address *outside* Australia

Method of payment: Cheque/Bank Draft Money Order
 Visa/Bankcard/Mastercard (*please circle card type*)

Card No:

Cardholder's Name:

Cardholder's Signature: _____ Expiry Date: / /

Cheques, bank drafts or money orders must be in Australian dollars and made payable to ALAR Association Inc. Please return completed application with payment details to:

ALARA INC.
PO Box 1748, Toowong Qld 4066, Australia
Fax: (61-7) 3342 1669
Email: admin@alara.net.au

ALAR JOURNAL SUBSCRIPTION FORM

Address Details

| | | |
|-------------------|-------------|-------------|
| Mr/Ms/Mrs/Miss/Dr | | |
| Contact Name | given names | family name |
| Organisation | | |
| Address | | |
| | | Postcode |
| Town / City | State | Nation |
| Contact numbers | Phone | Fax |
| Email | | |

Payment Details

ALAR Journal subscription (2 issues per year) does not include ALARA membership entitlements (all rates include GST).

ALAR Journal Subscription rate for private individuals

- \$ 71.50 AUD for individuals with a mailing address *within* Aus
- \$ 82.50 AUD for individuals with a mailing address *outside* Aus

ALAR Journal Subscription rate for libraries and tertiary institutions

- \$ 93.50 AUD for institutions with a mailing address *within* Aus
- \$104.50 AUD for institutions with a mailing address *outside* Aus

Method of payment: Cheque/Bank Draft Money Order
 Visa/Bankcard/Mastercard (*please circle card type*)

Card No:

Cardholder's Name:

Cardholder's Signature: _____ Expiry Date: / /

Cheques, bank drafts or money orders must be made payable to ALARA Inc. in Australian dollars. Please return completed application with payment details to:

ALARA INC.
 PO Box 1748, Toowong Qld 4066, Australia
 Admin: Donna Alleman
 Fax: (61-7) 3342 1669
 Email: admin@alara.net.au