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MAKING USE OF ACTION LEARNING IN BUSINESS SCHOOLS: THE UK & NEW ZEALAND EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

INTRODUCTION Most business schools originated in the latter half of the twentieth century. Often they were staffed by individuals from the business environment who were not skilled in teaching or research methods. The new academics were required to facilitate the learning of students in an academic environment. Often they adopted a narrowly focused approach to knowledge creation, scientific positivism, because the approach was well accepted in society generally and they believed such an approach was expected of them.

METHOD We provide details from our personal histories, and from the literature, to demonstrate that scientific positivism has often provided an unsuitable base for the development of teaching, learning, and critical thinking skills in business graduates. We are critical of our broad working environment during the last decades of the twentieth century, because it has been dominated by the scientific positivism approach to understanding.

ANALYSIS We argue that any search for universal solutions to problems of learning, as encouraged by scientific positivism, is futile because such universals do not exist. However, much energy is being expended business academics seeking to improve the learning environments in their classrooms. A more accommodating approach to educational research is required.

CONCLUSION Business academics may benefit, from the employment of an action learning methodology.

Introduction

As management education expanded during the 1970s and 1980s the teaching of management skills in the universities was often undertaken by ex-business practitioners who were engaged as experts in their chosen fields. Students 'learned' through access to the knowledge of these experts. As access to Higher Education grew beyond the elite few, the nature of university education changed. For example in the UK the polytechnics (since the early 1990s, the 'new' universities) focused on vocational courses through a model more closely related to schools. Teachers agreed to high class-contact hours, which they were often not well prepared for:

My first encounter with a class [circa 1970]..... Following a half-hour chat with the course leader and a week to prepare some notes, but no guidance whatever regarding exactly how I might go about teaching, I found myself pointed towards a classroom door beyond which I discovered 25 young adults eagerly expecting me to tell them all they needed to know about absorption costing... (Hand, 2001).

There has been some progress since the events described above¹. In many Universities teaching is now recognized as a profession in its own right. The UK now has a Higher Education Academy that brings together teachers and other Higher Education practitioners. In our experience there is now more encouragement for academics, once in post, to develop their teaching skills and to reflect upon their practice; but what models are available to those who wish to do this? Reflective practice is a term that is often used, but rarely described. There is little discussion about (a) precisely what we mean by reflective practice, (b) how we achieve it, and (c) how we know that, or if, it has made any difference. In this paper we discuss the problem faced by teachers who are seeking to determine how best to facilitate learning in our business schools, which will have most relevance and value to their students' developments. We argue for a critical approach to education and the use of the action learning methodology to help to achieve this.

The dominance of scientific positivism

Like many academics currently teaching in Universities we were brought up in the age of scientific positivism. We have witnessed the opening up of

¹ In both the UK & NZ a teaching qualification is still not required in Higher Education.

outer space, the advent of computers, the development of the world-wide-web, genetically modified foods and cloning. However, we argue that the promise of scientific positivism in some areas has not materialized. For example, we can recall being taught the 'certainties' which were being discovered to explain human behaviour, such as the rules that control human behaviour in the workplace. In examinations we reiterated how 'proven' administrative controls should be used to ensure the 'correct' behaviour from workers. Skinner, an eminent professor at Harvard, stated:

The hypothesis that man is not free is essential to the application of scientific method to the study of human behaviour. The free inner man who is held responsible for his behaviour is only a prescientific substitute for the kind of causes which are discovered in the course of scientific analysis (Skinner 1953, p. 477).

Today many would probably disagree with Skinner. Nevertheless education itself is threatened in a current societal environment left over from yesterday. Critical thinkers have had difficulty in being heard in an academic environment dominated by confident positivists. The late twentieth century saw any intellectuals remaining outside positivism excluded from academic debates:

By a set of interlocking self-limitations, positive reason supported the social status quo and promoted the treatment of human beings as things. By its doctrine of evidence it limited evidence to sensory experience. Expressed in the social sciences as behaviourism ... [it] led to a science of public opinion that accepted the givens of the historical moment in lieu of any vision of the potentialities (Young, 1989, p. 19).

Positivism produced undeniable progress in the natural sciences. From this base it was allowed to engulf the social sciences. "Scientists" everywhere created hypotheses, which helped explain the "objective" world. These hypotheses provided publicity to world-views residing in the heads of their perpetrators. Mitroff and Mason (1981) report on an (arguably real) scientist, involved in the Apollo space mission:

X is so committed to the idea that the moon is Q that you could literally take the moon apart piece by piece, ship it back to Earth, reassemble it in X's

backyard ...and X would still continue to believe that the moon is Q. X's belief in Q is unshakeable. He refuses to listen to reason or to evidence (p. 140).

Positivism does not protect the 'truth' from the subjective values of those producing it. In the social sciences narrowly focused positivist enquiries allow holistic value systems to be marginalized. Positivism has prevented the social sciences from developing as they might have done:

Rather than remaining focused on social reform... the social sciences have developed a kind of dialogical routine that permits academic and applied researchers to utilize each other as foils while doing as they please. Each stereotypes the other. Neither reads much of the other's work. Each feels superior to the other. In this division of labour, each needs the other as the "straw man" (Greenwood et al., 1993, p. 189).

Greenwood et al bemoan the academic research community's general infatuation with abstract static models, expert control of research, and lack of commitment to testing ideas through genuine application. They complain that the applied research communities often simplify problems to match them to the modest solutions that are to hand. Such research is generally closed to the participation of the subjects of the research; it does not address relevant issues, or promote ongoing learning. Along similar lines Mitroff (1983) describes the differences between fabricated "exercises" used in classrooms, and natural "problems" confronted in actual social situations:

An exercise is something that typically has a single correct solution and, furthermore, when it is arrived at it is recognised as such by all parties... Problems, in contrast, may have many different solutions because they may be looked at from different, equally valid angles... In an exercise, we can be relatively confident that each party starts from the same set of given, that is the same definition of the exercise to be solved. In a problem... [it] is not the same for all parties because each interprets it from very different grounds, defining the basic problem somewhat differently. Mess is indeed a more appropriate word to use in describing... [many cases,] than the more benign word problem (p. 17).

In actual research situations (including in the classroom) one is far more likely to encounter problems than exercises. It is probable that what constitutes a complex problem will be perceived totally differently by different parties. If research processes are made participatory, the participation of all who will be affected by the outcomes can improve the relevance of research in complex areas. Further, democracy in knowledge production gives the participants a stake in the quality of the results, increasing the reliability of information and the likelihood that results will be put into practice. Unfortunately, positivistic science has dominated social science research methodology and has helped to create a crisis in educational research.

"Instrumental reasoning" has become the preferred reasoning in Western society. It involves itself too much with consideration of the means that are employed to achieve, perhaps ill contemplated, ends², and works within fairly arbitrary divisions of whole environments wherein manageable 'problems' can be identified and 'remedied'. It studies efficiency, often at the expense of effectiveness, or even without consideration of exactly what the effects of an efficient system are. An efficient classroom situation might involve one lecturer teaching a large class worth many "equivalent full time student" points. What is taught, and how well the students are being educated and helped to develop, become secondary considerations

The purposes of a University education

Each individual will have his/her own opinions on this. However, some food for thought is provided by: Gibson, 1986; Kelly, Davey & Haigh, 1999; Postman & Weingartner, 1971; Young, 1989. Academics must attempt to identify any gap which has opened up between the understanding of "education" in the life-world at their University and a historical and perhaps more laudable meaning of "education". In Ancient Greece the most fortunate of young people were given educations to prepare them for political life, "For the classical Greeks, politics implied the cultivation of character and the pursuit of the good and just life" (Gibson, 1986, p. 35). At that time there was no divide between theory and practice, they belonged together, as did facts and values, truth and virtue. There was no separation of means from ends, of ideals from the methods of attaining those ideals.

² See Willmott et al (1993) for a comparison of the "ethics of conviction" with the "ethics of responsibility".

Rationality, goodness, justice, implied one another and each was indissolubly linked with practice. This perspective has not re-emerged with the development of science and technology.

Many university courses in Business have captured the tensions between the technical and the conceptual aspects of the core curriculum. However, even where academics have wished to emphasise more fully the ambiguous and conceptual nature of the Management area, they have sometimes been constrained by professional bodies that expect a technical minimum content within the curriculum. A related tension is that some students appear to perceive education as involving little more than the rote learning and regurgitation of 'true' facts. We argue that academics should require their courses to go much further than the technical, by preparing students for a post-graduation world of rapid change in which they must be prepared to take a critical, pro-active role in enriching and managing their environments.

A university education should not be concerned simply with the inculcation of specialized skills. Academics are charged with valuing a society in which people are able: to think and act independently, to exercise freedom of choice after rational reflection, and to conduct their own lives without having their minds made up by others. Independent learning must therefore be promoted at the University as part of a much broader duty of care to individuals and to the community. If Universities do not foster independent thinking and learning, then who will? Set against this exhortation there can be little doubt that Western education has problems.

The best schools in the West have turned themselves from ivory towers into service organizations subject to the same disciplines of supply and demand they teach to their students (Syrett, 1993, p. 46).

There is perhaps a crisis in education at a fundamental level:

Crisis is an appropriate term, because the present struggle... is a struggle about the moral foundations of education, about its relation to the freedom of the individual and the purpose of the state... It has provoked a situation, especially in universities, where many responsible commentators are beginning to fear for the life of these institutions (Young, 1989, p. 3).

Something that young Greek people are reputed to have met in their educations may be missing from contemporary educations. While some people within Universities and business schools throughout the Western world may not acknowledge the crisis in business education, we argue that change is necessary, and has been slow to come.

The Concise Oxford Dictionary defines educate (in its first of four usages) as, "give intellectual, moral and social instruction". This suggests that in some quarters the old Greek meaning retains validity. Political decision-making was an holistic concept to the Greeks. It concerned itself with the life-world and how best to develop that world. There may not be an equivalent holistic concept today to describe an active interest in social issues and resource allocations within communities. Much 'education' no longer concerns itself with the pursuit of, "the good and just life". We believe a Critical Theory approach to educational developments could improve matters.

Critical theory and the action-learning methodology³

Critical Theory involves committed reason. Reason is applied in circumstances where truth and goodness are necessarily linked. The common instrumental rationality that treats men, women and nature as mere objects is challenged through the process of self reflection, which critical thinking demands. Critical Theory is a mode of thought which never loses sight of the question "what is it for?". It acknowledges values, moral problems and consequences, in human conduct and the study of that conduct.

Education becomes a process that proposes a way of understanding the social world, and is committed to the improvement of that world. That is not to say that it is impossible to contemplate a society where citizens are content despite a poor understanding of their world. Some contemporary citizens are happy in a world that they choose not to think about⁴. In

³ Lewin is credited with the naming of Action Research (Lewin, 1952), but it was not much used until towards the end of the 20th century. A major use has area has been in education, where the term "Action Learning" has evolved in relation to action research in education.

⁴ Examples are perhaps not necessary because everyone must know such people. Consider the man who has switched to the music programme every morning because the news depresses him, and the woman who has cancelled all papers for similar reasons. Both individuals, known to the authors, appear to maintain happy lives.

Huxley's Brave New World citizens are content, but only because they have been prevented from developing certain desires. These desires cannot be satisfied within the framework of their present societal position. Academics today should perhaps consider if they are players in a Huxley-like plot.

Within Higher Education the path to enlightened research has broadened since Carr and Kemmis (1986) suggested that most contemporary textbooks assume questions about the aims and methods of educational research can be answered by reference to the aims and methods of the established sciences. With the decline in the dominance of "scientific positivism" in academia, other approaches to knowledge creation are being accepted. Academics are gaining the confidence to adopt a variety of research approaches better suited to the eclectic nature of their fields.

Some business educators have begun to move away from the traditional empirical study of pedagogical issues towards a classroom-based research methodology better to understand the learning that is taking place in their own teaching settings. We recommend the adoption of an action learning methodology in pursuit of this aim. McNiff (1988) provides a concise definition:

An approach to improving education, by encouraging teachers to be aware of their own practice, to be critical of that practice, and to be prepared to change it. It is participatory, in that it involves the teacher in his (sic) own enquiry... It is research WITH, rather than research ON (p. 4).

Zuber-Skerritt (1992b) describes action learning as:

A process by which groups of people... work on real issues or problems, carrying real responsibility in real conditions. The solutions they come up with may require changes to be made in the organisation, and they often pose challenges to senior management, but the benefits are great because people actually own their own problems and their own solutions (p. 48).

Gibson (1986) criticises the gap between theory and practice that opened up in the twentieth century:

In the traditional view [of education], 'theory' has been applied to 'practice'... The insights and concepts of, for example, psychology or sociology have

been drawn upon to explain, inform or direct practice. Both action research and critical theory challenge this approach as they urge the fundamental indivisibility of theory and practice. Theory is in all practice, is grounded in it (p. 162).

The action learning perspective can reveal different images concerning curricula, different suggestions concerning who is best placed to develop curricula, and different ideas concerning the role of course controllers. Action learning avoids the opening of the theory/practice gap, because theory and practice are developed together and in unison. Action learning advocates maintain that, "there is nothing so practical as a good theory" (Greenwood et al., 1993, p. 187). Carr and Kemmis (1986) suggests that action learning provides an excellent educational research methodology because, "The purpose of educational research is to develop theories that are grounded in the problems and perspectives of educational practice (rather than the problems and perspectives of some social scientific practice)" (p. 122).

Action learning involves seeking-out and implementing changes that have the greatest support from the individuals concerned, and are acceptable to all, "Two of the ideas which were crucial in Lewin's work were the ideas of group decisions and commitment to improvement" (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988, p. 6). Carr and Kemmis (1986) offer five reasons for adopting action learning in education:

1. Educational theory must reject positivist notions of rationality, objectivity and truth.
2. Educational theory must be rooted in the self-understandings of educational practitioners.
3. Education theory must distinguish ideologically distorted interpretations of practises and overcome them.
4. Education theory must expose those aspects of the existing social order that frustrate the pursuit of rational goals.
5. Educational theory must recognise that it has to relate to practice.

(Extracted from chapter 5)

Ledford and Mohran (1993) point out that one of the central issues in action learning is the recognition that socially active participants create and define their own realities. Creating realities demands action. The substance of action learning is action, and every action learning project must recognise this. Action learning is not simply an interpretivist methodology, because participants are challenged to go beyond an understanding of what "is" to an investigation of what "might become", and to create this. The broader the participants can cast their minds in determining what might become, potentially the better can be the results. Action learning fits well with a critical perspective. Although the principles used in action learning vary in their emphasis between the many people who have used and write about the methodology, most advocates would probably agree with the claims that high quality action learning in business schools:

- has a pedagogic aim, which embodies an educational ideal. The practitioner uses research into her/his own practice to realise these ideals. The individual practitioner is thus central to the research. McNiff (1988, p 37) cites Jack Whitehead who stresses the 'I' in action-learning in keeping the teacher/practitioner at the centre of the research. The teacher's concern is with the greater educational good of the students. The ideals are about students but the teacher has a key influence on the achievement of the ideals, so the teacher is at the centre of the research.
- is about change. This is not research merely for understanding, but for improvement through changing practice. The fundamental aim of action learning is to improve practice.
- brings together teaching and research into one activity. As Zuber-Skerritt (1992a, p. 11) explains "Action and practical experience may be the foundations of educational research, and research may inform practice and lead to action".
- gathers evidence about teaching and learning from different points of view, and by different methods - 'triangulation'. It recognises the significance of the viewpoints of all participants in the educational process, and of the need for rigour in gathering evidence from a number of sources.

- is often claimed to be (1) collaborative, by involving all participants in the educational process, and (2) democratic in allowing the focus of research to emerge from the agenda of the key players rather than being imposed by external parties.

Several models have been suggested to provide the stages of an action learning project. Most of these incorporate: acting, reflecting, and evidence gathering in some form (see for example Elliott, 1991, pp. 69-71, or Zuber-Skerritt, 1992b, p.120).

It may appear that such models are little different from the one that all professional educators adopt as a matter of course when designing and delivering courses. Surely we are all engaged in this kind of process quite routinely? What is it that turns this process into action learning? We suggest that at least two differences stand out.

Firstly, that the reflection and evidence gathering are structured and rigorously conducted in an action inquiry. The practitioner seeks evidence from a variety of sources in order to clarify what is problematic about current practice. If, for example, our handling of seminars is the subject of an action-learning study, we will probably require evidence from sources such as: written notes or diary entries (by ourselves and the students) made during or shortly after the seminars, student interviews, work records from the seminar, or tape recordings. Following from the structured evidence gathering, comes a period of critical reflection when that evidence is considered and changes may be considered (or fresh evidence sought). There is also a role for critical friends who may be able to offer other perspectives and support (see, for example, Ovens, 1989 or Dadds, 1993).

A second aspect of the model that distinguishes action learning from normal good practice is the dissemination of the research output. There is, in this action learning model, an expectation that theorisation of improvements and of the ideals are part of the sharing with fellow-professionals. In one sense it may appear that action learning is a highly personal research model and unique to the individual practitioner. However, without dissemination to peer groups, and to other participants in the educational process, the research cycle is incomplete.

Unlike other forms of research, an action inquiry is unlikely to have generalisable conclusions, and will always be context-specific and localised. Plainly put this means that what has been discovered about our own students, our own learning-teaching situation, our own assessment practices and so on, can only be claimed to be about that situation. However, the research does become part of the wider academic dialogue if others use reported research outputs as a starting point for reflection on their own projects. It follows that action learning reports must clear in reporting the context, the nature of the evidence, the constraints, the participants and the circumstances of the research. Other practitioners must take care when using published findings within their own context.

Using the action learning methodology, the teacher-as-researcher is at the centre of the inquiry, and there is a fusion between theory and practice as one informs the other. Those employing action learning go through a process of: problem identification, gathering evidence, making changes, gathering further evidence about the changes, reflection, and proposing further improvements. Although the findings are disseminated, there is no attempt to generalise from specific cases. Rather, as the educational setting is variable, it is for other practitioners to consider ways in which published results may inform their own practices. By researching their own practices, business educators can discover ways of making improvements, and of progressing towards their own pedagogic ideals. In the best of action learning environments, the projects become collaborative exercises.

The transition from teacher to teacher-researcher

Stenhouse encapsulates the emergence of practitioner-research in education when discussing action learning as an alternative to traditional educational research paradigms. At his inaugural lecture at the University of East Anglia in the UK Stenhouse remarked:

An alternative [to the traditional research paradigm] is to treat education itself as the subject of the research and this way we can begin to integrate educational practice and research more fully and we can see that educational practitioners have much to offer from their own actions, experiences, and reflections. This is, of course, where action-research begins to emerge, as teachers build up an understanding of their own practice by doing research into it (Stenhouse, 1979).

Since the introduction in 1992 of the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) in UK universities there has been debate on the validity of research by teachers into their own practice. Many calls have been made for the RAE to include research into academic teaching, and the RAE panels now appear to be taking the matter seriously. As Stephen Rowland stated in an open letter to John Rogers (Higher Education Funding Council RAE manager):

In the light of the emphasis on teaching and learning expressed by the Dearing Report of 1997, and the interest this has stimulated in improving quality of teaching in HE, we feel that it is important that these developments are underpinned by appropriate research into the curriculum and educational practices which inform teaching (University of Sheffield, 1999).

If what we do is educate then, by conducting research into the matters that are central to our practice, we can enhance the professionalism of our work and provide firm evidence for proposed changes. Such research into teaching and learning will provide a firmer base for resisting changes, which may be suggested by external agencies and ill-informed government policies.

Criticisms of Action Learning

Anyone considering the use of action learning within their own practice should be prepared for the criticisms levelled at it. As with other forms of qualitative research, action learners have been accused of being unscientific. Rather than being value neutral, action learning involves the identification and selection of problems to solve, and such problems are part of current practice. Action learning is concerned with humanist values. McKernan (1991) notes that action learning is expressly political because it seeks continuous change in the environment being studied, it:

is seen as a politically empowering process for participants; the struggle is for more rational, just and democratic forms of education..... As a theoretical activity it invites..... practitioners to consider... the totality of relationships within the social system and structure of the society in which they live and work (p. 27).

Mainstream research into societal phenomena generally involves one set of people (the researchers) studying another set of people (the subjects). There are a number of reasons why the chance of such research having practical outcomes, of optimal use to the researched, is small (Bartholomew, 1972). The principal complication is caused when the problem being researched is different to that recognised by the subjects. Action learning makes educational research an integral part of educational practice, thereby improving the chances of the outcomes being relevant to the practice of education. The action learning methodology is more 'realistic' than many other research methodologies because it is based at the local level where the people involved are able to talk about, "real"⁵ problems. It necessitates talking with the people who are living their normal lives in the environment being researched, here the classroom. It involves bringing these people and their ideas into the research project.

The action learning methodology does not attempt to build grand theories. Its aim is to build transient local theories to help individuals better to understand, control and profit from their environment. The measures of 'understanding', 'control' and 'profit' are made by the individuals in the classroom, not by researchers in distant offices.

Many orthodox social science researchers are not pleased with the advent of action learning; and attempt to discredit it because, "It challenges the 'expert' authority of academic educational researchers... (and) challenges bureaucratic authority in its notion of participatory control" (Carr and Kemmis, 1986, p. 210). "Orthodox researchers respond to the challenge of action-research to their hegemony by stating that they do 'science' while action-researchers merely 'tell stories' (Greenwood et al., 1993). However, the narrative dimensions of supposedly "objective" social scientific accounts have been successfully demonstrated elsewhere: Bourdieu, 1984; Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Habermas, 1984; Mitroff and Mason, 1981.

Action learning is sometimes criticised for 'obvious' bias because it involves the researcher in analysing his/her own practices. Such criticism implies that there is a 'neutral, value-free' point from which 'proper' research can be

⁵ "Real" in the sense that the problems have meaning in the decision making models of the people involved, concerning how they organise their lives.

conducted, whereas any such point is illusory, "There is no objective knowledge of reality... reality can only be known through our constructions which are subject to constant revision; we do not have direct access to an interpretation-free reality" (Zuber-Skerritt, 1992b, p. 56). Narratives emanating from action learning environments provide vicarious learning experiences for their readers. However, it must be recognised that researchers bring their own biases to models that they create in attempting to understand and describe their environments. These biases will influence the researchers' 'skeletal'⁶ generalisations concerning their reality within their environments. Nevertheless, the skeletal generalisations can provide useful insights to others with similar interests.

Action learning treats the actors as both the 'bearers' and the 'victims' of ideologies. It recognises the actors' ability to change the world. The collaborative nature of action learning can offer an approach to overcoming those aspects of the existing social order which frustrate rational change. Action learning is, "The expression of individual self-reflection which contributes to community self-reflection both by extending and by challenging the formation of common practices, theories and institutional structures" (Carr and Kemmis, (1986, p. 205).

It is because of action learning's power in challenging current assumptions that it is potentially so useful in reshaping current practices in tertiary education, thereby providing the opportunity for greater productivity in learning. Action learning requires the active participation of those who have to carry out the work that they identify and anticipate. The people in the research environment must agree as to how progress will be monitored. There are some obvious problems with the introduction of such an approach into a structured educational environment, but none that is insurmountable. Academics must maintain flexibility in responding to societal pressures. Adoption of the action learning methodology does not assist people to implement pre-designed fixed systems, rather it involves people remaining open to surprises, being responsive to opportunities, and examining new practices to compare them with previous practices. Whatever current

⁶ 'skeletal' signals the incompleteness of any general theory. The skeletal framework can be fleshed out within chosen empirical research locations but 'whole beings' thus created must be considered to have no more than local meaning (Laughlin, 1995).

practice is adopted it must be subjected to ongoing critical assessment, and to change when appropriate.

Conclusion

In today's Universities there is increasing recognition of the place of research into teaching and learning, and an increasing focus on the study of and reflection about teaching practices. Action learning, we argue, provides practitioners with a model for aiding development at both a personal and a professional level. The model may also help academics to respond to many of the pressures exerted by external agencies.

We do not argue that action learning should replace scientific positivism as a 'better' methodology for knowledge generation. Rather we argue that, in social sciences research, action learning may sometimes produce better results than would scientific positivism. Action learning should be allowed to co-exist with other research methodologies. Knowledge outputs from action learning studies should be accorded equal respect to other knowledge outputs, by readers who must be aware that all methodologies may be abused on occasions.

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