

Facilitating openness and learning partnerships in action research

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Abstract

This paper outlines the approach adopted to assist action researchers, at the introductory stage of collaboration (McMorland & Piggot-Irvine, 2000), to develop the sort of high trust and open relationships that enable problems to be discussed and resolved. I have described the latter as an educative process (Piggot-Irvine, 2001) - a process that is underpinned by the values and strategies of productive reasoning (Argyris, 1985, 1990), bilaterality and dialogue.

The general principles of the approach adopted to help action researchers to develop an educative process, the programme itself, the key facilitation skills required, and benefits and issues (cognitive, practical and emotional) in the approach are all discussed.

An evaluation of one action research project that employed the development approach is described. The evaluation indicated positive implementation shifts in values and strategies for four out of the six action researchers. The factors contributing to and limiting the shifts are reported on.

Introduction

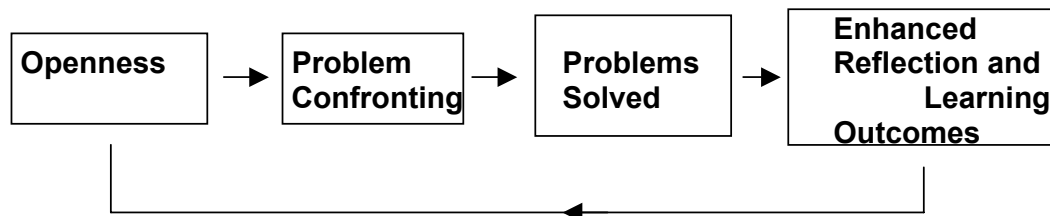
As we all know, action research is fraught and fragile. The ambiguity in definition and design, the complexity of issues associated with its facilitation, the critique of its rigour, and the difficulties associated with reporting progress or “outcomes” are just a few of the multitude of issues contributing to the fraught and fragile descriptor. I have reported on these multiple issues elsewhere (Piggot-Irvine, 2001) but in this paper I want to focus on just one facet, that of helping action researchers to develop open interactions in what I have described as an “educative process” (Piggot-Irvine, 2001:20).

What is an educative process?

Respectful, trust-based and open relationships are at the core of action research effectiveness. In earlier publications (Piggot-Irvine & McMorland, 1997; McMorland & Piggot-Irvine, 2000) Judith McMorland and I have elaborated five deepening levels of collaborative interaction and learning that occur in action research groups. These range from the first introductory and superficial level to the fifth where trust and co-generation predominate. Movement to the fifth level requires group members to engage in honest

interactions that lead to problem confronting and resolution. I have described the causal linkages in the progression to problem resolution as an educative process (Piggot-Irvine, 2001).

Figure 1: Causal Link Diagram Of Educative Process



An educative process begins with openness, dialogue and bilaterality (shared control, shared thinking, shared evidence, shared planning and monitoring) leading to action researchers having more confidence to confront problems if they arise. The confronting of problems, in turn, should lead to problems being solved. Problems solved should mean that action research has improvement outcomes for reflection and learning. This learning, in turn, creates further openness.

I believe that helping participants to develop educative processes has been a key aspect of my role as a facilitator of action research groups. I should qualify this by stating that I do not always take on the role of facilitator, nor encourage that this role is designated. However, in the frantic context of the school environments in which I am frequently encouraging action research this role is often demanded when teachers have limited time, resources or background experience in action research (see Piggot-Irvine, 2002, for a detailed outline of the contextual constraints).

Openness, educative processes and the link to productive reasoning

The approach to creating openness in the educative process is underpinned by the values and strategies of productive reasoning. Productive reasoning has three guiding values and numerous associated strategies. These are summarised by Robinson, Absolum, Cardno, & Steele (1990:2) as:

...a disclosure of our views together with the evidence of logic that led us to those views...to enhance the freedom of others to express differing views and to make uncoerced choices about courses of action, including about how to resolve impasses.

As I have earlier stated (Piggot-Irvine, 2001:85):

Bilaterality, or sometimes multilaterality if more than two people are involved, underpins every facet of the productive reasoning approach. Informed mutual checking of meaning, understanding, perspective and agreement, is central to the success of the approach.

It is this bilaterality that renders the values and strategies of productive reasoning so appropriate for the development of an educative process in the action research context. In bilaterality the following predominate: valuing individuals; using negotiated and joint

approaches; two-way dialogue; providing feedback and judgement that is data based and specific; and creating an environment where weaknesses, problems and gaps can be openly admitted along with their causes.

When challenged with problems however, there is considerable evidence (Cardno, 1994; Robinson *et al*, 1990) to suggest that most of us adopt defensive, control or avoidance, responses. There are many manifestations of defensiveness (see Cardno & Piggot-Irvine, 1997:44-47) but essentially, as Argyris (1990) says, it is an anti-learning process that leads to misunderstandings, distortions and self-fulfilling processes. In action research, it is the non-defensive, productive, approach that is required in order to help participants to establish open, bilateral, trust-based interactions.

An approach to developing openness focusing on individualised examination of action

In the approach to developing openness encouraged in this paper, individuals are helped to examine their own causal reasoning and to take responsibility for both detecting and correcting defensiveness if it exists. Like Argyris, I believe that such individual change is the leverage point for producing organisational change. This individualised approach has a focus on personalised actionable knowledge (Argyris, 1993) - "the skills required to produce a new individual state plus the contextual conditions required to maintain it" (Piggot-Irvine, 2001:90). The approach therefore makes no direct attempt to incorporate the wider organisational cultural, ethnographic, type interventions that Schein (1992) considers to be important, or to change the system dynamics of the organisation in the experimental way advocated by Senge (1990). However, I believe that cultural and systems changes may occur indirectly as a result of the personal change.

The approach is intended to help action researchers to surface their own theories about problem solving and to move beyond this reflection on their "knowledge platform" level to surfacing and reflecting at a practice or "action platform" level (Cardno, 1999:45). Such reflection makes practice "...open to challenging evaluation involving collaborative critique and discovery" (Cardno, 1997:3).

An essential step in surfacing and reflecting upon the action platform is a recognition of the gap between the components of the participant's theories of action (Argyris & Schon, 1974). Cardno (1994:92) describes theories of action as our "theory or professional practice that determines our belief about what constitutes effectiveness in a given situation". Edmondson (1996:583), drawing upon the work of Argyris, summarises the two facets of theories of action, that is, espoused theories and theories-in-use. She describes espoused theories as "...if-then propositions we think lie behind our actions". These are our beliefs, or what we describe as our intentions of effectiveness. Theory-in-use, Edmondson reports as "...if-then propositions an individual actually uses when he or she acts". Theories-in-use govern what we actually do and they are revealed by either directly, or indirectly, observing practice. Dick & Dalmau (1999) interpret these theories in a slightly different way, based on self-awareness. They state that espoused theories are those that we know about: theories-in-use are more likely to be unknown to ourselves.

I have adopted and adapted Argyris' (1990:95) four training stages involved in learning productive reasoning for the development of openness. First of all Argyris suggests that the trainee needs to map out a problem itself and to describe how they are currently dealing with it. Second, they need to diagnose the extent to which they have created and maintained the problem. Third, they need to take productive reasoning from an espoused theory (from a belief state) to a theory-in-use, that is, to implementation. Finally, they need to repeat the learning experience to solve new problems as they arise. These stages are summarised in the following description from Dick & Dalmau (1999:5):

The required processes must first generate the dissonance. Second, they must help the individual to resolve the inconsistency which is the catalyst.

The approach to openness development is intended to produce the double-loop learning outcomes proposed by Argyris (1996a), that is, to help the action researchers to confront and resolve problems. In this double-loop learning, both the problem resolution and the training process itself, are designed to facilitate the action researchers detecting and correcting mismatches or errors in ways that will change their underlying governing values and consequently change their actions, that is their strategies used for solving problems. As such, the approach conforms with Argyris' (1996b) description of scholarly consulting, where not only basic knowledge is produced, but problems are also solved. The following section provides an overview of the four stages to the approach.

The training programme

The four stages to the training approach provide categories for reporting on the programme. These are outlined in an overview diagram (Figure 2) followed by a summary of a typical introductory two-day programme that I have facilitated for action researchers.

Figure 2: Training Stages

STAGE ONE

Day 1:

Mapping the Problem and How it is Dealt With

- Examining espoused theories via explication of action researcher beliefs about dealing with problems
- Mapping and exposing theories-in-use via causal maps and case writing

STAGE TWO

Diagnosing the Extent of Problem Maintenance

- Individual diagnosis of the gap between espoused theories and theories-in-use
- General group discussion of findings based on comparison of findings with defensive reasoning values and strategies
- Examination of extent to which action researcher was implicated in problems

STAGE THREE

Taking Productive Reasoning from an Espoused Theory to Theory-in-use

- Links made between effective collaboration, espoused theories, and theory of productive reasoning
- Links made between demonstrated theories of action and defensive reasoning
- Importance of double-loop learning emphasised
- Productive dialogue skills outlined and demonstrated
- Discussion of concerns about dialogue process
- Briefing for Day Two (including redesigning of own case)

Day 2:

- Key concepts of selected reading summarised and presented
- Extension of theory introduced
- Consolidation of learning through redevelopment of productive dialogue checklist
- Practice with own redesigned cases

STAGE FOUR

Reinforcing the Practice in New Learning Situations

- Encouragement to continue practice

Stage One: Mapping out the problem and how it is currently dealt with

Before any change in governing values can occur the action research participants need to expose their own defensiveness by examining their espoused theories and theories-in-use. The examination of espoused theories begins with participants explicating their beliefs about dealing with problems. This is usually unproblematic and non-threatening with individuals just recording their beliefs. A typical belief recorded, for example, is “the use of facts when discussing a problem”.

Exposing theories-in-use is more difficult, because participants often have fears associated with revealing what they do. The development of a causal map is the first component of exposing theories-in-use. The causal map takes the form of an initial description of the problem situation, with individuals detailing the conditions that existed when the situation arose. This is followed by an account of the actions that each participant thought they employed to deal with the situation, what they thought the consequences of the use of these actions might have been, and what they thought might be influencing the situation being perpetuated. This mapping stage shows “how each variable feeds back to reinforce the others” (Edmondson, 1996:583). Although this map is designed to expose the two facets of individuals’ theories of action mentioned earlier, it almost always reveals information that is substantially espoused theory only and shows little theory-in-use. Theory-in-use is more accurately revealed in a case writing exercise, or as it is sometimes described, two column analysis.

In case writing the participant recalls and then records a conversation that occurred when trying to discuss a problem with a colleague. The conversation is written in terms of what was said (right hand side) and that which was not said but was thought, or felt, by the participant (left hand side).

Stage Two: Diagnosing the extent to which trainees create and maintain problems

The diagnosis of the gap between espoused theories and theories-in-use is the next component of training. Diagnosis of the written case and causal map occurs against theory and a checklist (see Appendix 1) developed from an analysis of the work of Argyris (1985, 1990), Argyris & Schon (1974, 1996), Cardno (1994), and Robinson (1986, 1992, 1993a). Participants carry out this diagnosis individually and confidentially.

Participants themselves then investigate the linkage and overlaps between the diagnostic list and that of the values and strategies described in defensive reasoning and productive reasoning. They also look at the way that they are implicated in problems, including how they may have been permitting the problems to exist or persist, through bypassing or covering up.

To summarise, the gap recognition used in this stage of the training reveals the dissonance or congruence in the participant’s espoused theory and theory-in-use . It is the determination of the dissonance, or inconsistency, which is designed to motivate or catalyse change for individuals.

Stage Three: Taking productive reasoning from an espoused theory to a theory-in-use

Once catalysed to change, the participants begin moving productive reasoning from an espoused theory to a theory-in-use. Because the participants are novices in this approach, an initial training guide (productive dialogue skills) is used to help them to learn the productive reasoning values and strategies. Such dialogue is described by Robinson (1993b:15) as a conversation that is simultaneously critical and collaborative. Extensive facilitator demonstration and debriefing of each role practice follows.

Following extensive practice, participants are given an opportunity to incorporate extended theory in the redevelopment of the productive dialogue checklist. This is followed by further practice.

Stage Four: Repeating the learning experience to solve new problems as they arise

In keeping with Argyris (1990) suggested fourth stage for training, the participant action researchers repeat their learning experience in new situations. This follow-up occurs in every action research group meeting with peer coaching (Showers & Joyce, 1996) rather than facilitator intervention predominating.

Key facilitation skills required

Facilitating programmes in productive reasoning is often extremely difficult. As Edmondson (1996) suggests, the approach itself takes extraordinary skill and she notes that Argyris himself admitted to a developmental period of several to many years. To enter into the facilitation role without such skill would be disastrous.

As facilitator of the programme I am under the microscope at all times, with participants eager to see whether I do, or of more interest, do not, demonstrate the skills that they are being challenged to develop. I have progressively (because it was learnt from sometimes bitter consequences) found the most beneficial learning outcomes to occur when I am a “credible advocate” (Robinson, 1992:352). This involves demonstrating an absolute commitment to the approach, but not in such an extreme way as to be seen as overly persuading or manipulative. It also involves being explicit about the normative position that I adopt, so that participants are aware of my thinking concerning the material covered.

I need to be genuinely able to demonstrate that I walk the talk with all elements of productive reasoning, in all aspects of my life, a factor that is critical because I live in the community that I am often facilitating in. I need a willingness to acknowledge when I do not know the answers and an ability to help participants to critically reflect upon their own practice, rather than providing the answers for them. Clarity in terms of my own theoretical understanding, and the ability to package this into a well sequenced learning approach, is another requirement. This requires challenging of participant assumptions and actions, but in a way which on the one hand is not avoidance, but on the other supportive and respectful of the fragile learner.

An immediate astuteness in recognising either defensive or productive values and strategies, that is, to be able to reflect in action (Schon, 1993), and to action this reflection, is another essential skill. Finally, I need to demonstrate my own skills as a double-loop learner - a point raised also by Cardno (1999). None of these skills or

attributes required in teaching this approach are easy to implement. It is a highly demanding approach, which more often than not leaves me not only exhausted, but also extremely self-critical and self-doubting. Like everyone, I am fallible and it is helpful for me to be very honest with participants about the difficulties I have had, and still have, in learning to close the gap between my own espoused theory and theory-in-use.

Issues in the approach

There are several issues associated with the approach to developing openness. I have categorised these as cognitive, practical and emotional but overall, as Edmondson (1996:585) states, employing productive reasoning "...in interpersonal interactions requires profound attentiveness and skill for human beings..." because we are socialised in a defensive world.

The theory underpinning the approach is cognitively difficult and there is every potential for an ensuing superficial understanding that could either mislead participants, or be misconstrued. One way to attend to this issue is to include readings as a component of the training in order to expand and deepen understanding.

Along with the cognitive difficulty linked with the approach is the practical difficulty of implementation, a point emphasised also by Dick & Dalmau (1999). Part of this practical difficulty is associated with the issue often raised by some participants about the amount of time that this openness approach takes. Some suggest that making unilateral decisions would take a lot less time. On each occasion that such an issue has been raised, other participants in the group themselves have given examples of where unilateral decision making ultimately did not work, primarily because their respondent lacked ownership.

The combined behaviour and value shifting required in the approach also has an attendant high level of emotional difficulty. It requires self-honesty, which Dick & Dalmau (1999:4) suggest is "not readily available without substantial life experience and psychological maturity". The emotional difficulty associated with this honesty is so intense for some participants that either they resign to avoid employing the skills and to continue with their status quo interactions, or they reinterpret the productive reasoning to employ the behaviour changes without changing underlying values. A problem in my early facilitation of the approach was to exacerbate an emphasis on behavioural change by focusing too strongly on the productive dialogue skills. This resulted in some participants seeing the approach as predominantly a set of process skills that, in turn, led them to minimise the importance of examining their own causal maps, confronting their espoused and theory-in-use gap, and the double-loop learning associated with value changing in movement to productive reasoning. Reducing the emphasis on the dialogue skills and enhancing the emphasis on the underlying values has helped to shift the focus.

Another emotional difficulty is highlighted by Argyris who reports (1990:95) that many people are very embarrassed and perhaps threatened about practising a new theory-in-use. I have experienced the latter when a minority of the participants in almost every group I have facilitated (about five percent) distance themselves from actively participating in the practice or, less frequently, try to sabotage the process. Sabotage of the process can occur in several ways, including ridiculing the approach and deliberately

making a feeble attempt at the dialogue skills (often defensive responses). I have found that this can be overcome if I gently confront the sabotage, reporting factually to the individual what was observed and then inquiring into the reasons for their actions. My confronting statement followed by asking participants for their response to the observation. The key here is that every attempt is made to ensure that the latter is done in a most supportive way.

Evaluation of the development approach

During the 1999 to 2002 period I have carried out an end-course evaluation (before closure on the second day of the course) on every programme that I have facilitated using the approach discussed in this paper. Participants (167 from eight courses) completed the end-course evaluation comprising a questionnaire seeking feedback covering the quality of the presentation, appropriateness, depth and usefulness of content, strengths, weaknesses and suggestions for further improvement. All anonymously completed questionnaires were issued and collated by an independent third party. Over 92% of the evaluation responses were positive for all aspects of the questionnaire. One course received an award for being only the second course ever conducted in a large, busy, professional development centre to receive a totally positive response from participants. Such warm congratulatory responses are ego boosting to receive but usually leave me with a sense that I've created a "feel good" course that has little long-term impact.

In order to alleviate my latter concern I also decided to conduct a more detailed evaluation of the impact of the programme with one of the action research groups that I have facilitated. The detailed evaluation results have been reported in Piggot-Irvine, 2001, but in summary the results led me to conclude that for four of the six action researchers a considerable positive shift in implementation of productive dialogue had occurred.

The results also indicated factors that both limited and contributed to the shift. Limitations included low ownership, reduced collaboration and restricted time. Factors contributing to the shift in implementation included participant commitment to improvement, the use of data-based reflection, consciousness-raising associated with exposure of the espousal-practice gap in change implementation, the employment of mutually informing theory and practice, narrowing the theory-practice gap, the provision of extended support, and the opportunity to repeat learning.

Conclusion

The following quote from a participant in one of the action research groups that has been involved in the training described in this paper probably sums up most effectively the impact of the training. This school principal illuminates the difficulty associated with learning to be open with colleagues.

Our senior management team initially attended a 2 day "Positively Dealing with Conflict" course with Eileen, following an earlier year long management contract. This contract had also briefly touched on strategies for overcoming defensive interactions with staff. We tried out some of these strategies over the next year, but it wasn't until Eileen came in to do an evaluation of my

performance that the reality of the extent of my avoidance and controlling strategies when dealing with staff problems became painfully clear.

I was totally devastated! I was so distraught that I took two days leave. Every time I looked at comments from staff I would see myself as a “bad manager”. This would lead to another bout of self-recrimination. I guess the really depressing part of it all was that I really believed that the way that I was dealing with staff issues was okay. The sudden realisation that I wasn’t really shattered the idealistic view I had of myself. After four days of intensive reflection, self-doubt, and self-loathing, I returned to the school feeling very scared. I was also really determined to deal with these problems I had.

This principal’s determination led her to become a participant in an action research group that engaged in openness development as their focus for action research. She continues:

All of this has led to Eileen and I now constantly re-examining the way that I manage and appraise staff. I am recording the interactions. We then critique this against my summarised criteria, and I re-practise more effective (Argyris’ term “productive”) ways of interacting. I am focusing on developing shared control, and genuine openness to learning with staff.

The judgement on whether this has worked is left to one of the staff working with this principal. He noted:

Unbelievable advances/changes in just one year.... This was the main area needing development. Very few niggles this year.

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Appendix 1

Analysis of the Case

In effect the case writing becomes the artefact through which you can examine your own thinking; a window to your values and actions. Check off (as a tally) whether you used any of the following in your right hand column. If you did the reverse of any of these, record an "R" beside the appropriate strategy.

- Started with positives or assurances (often called 'easing in')
- With-held information
- Failed to state your position, where you were coming from
- Made judgements or assumptions without testing them
- Failed to check what your colleague thought about the information you provided
- Used persuasion
- Gave false reassurances - to cloud your message
- Gave mixed messages or confused the message in an effort to be nice
- Tried to keep things comfortable
- Decided on the outcome before the conversation
- Decided to hold back in order to protect your colleague from embarrassment or threat
- Name dropped to support your argument
- Ignored or downplayed information provided by your colleague

- Made statements without illustration, evidence, or explanation
- Used questioning in order to disguise your own view
- Concentrated on the argument and ignored the feelings of your colleague
- Avoided disclosing your own feelings
- Avoided disclosing information that may have upset your colleague, or weakened your position
- Provided your own solutions to any problem with the colleague
- Took responsibility for following up any problems yourself
- Failed to plan for any improvement where problems might have been raised
- As a last resort decided to 'give it to them straight'.

- List any other strategies you revealed in your case writing:
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Author notes

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