

Introduction to the Action Learning Project

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The Action Learning Project grew out of some initial experiences employing action research as a mode of educational development in the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. These were started as an attempt to deal with particular curriculum and teaching issues which were of concern to academics in a range of departments. Action research was chosen as framework because it explicitly seeks to bring about change and improvement. Carr and Kemmis (1986, pp.165-166) give the following definition of action research.

It can be argued that three conditions are individually necessary and jointly sufficient for action research to be said to exist: firstly, a project takes as its subject-matter a social practice, regarding it as a form of strategic action susceptible of improvement; secondly, the project proceeds through a spiral of cycles of planning, acting, observing and reflecting, with each of these activities being systematically and self-critically implemented and interrelated; thirdly, the project involves those responsible for the practice in each of the moments of the activity, widening participation in the project gradually to include others affected by the practice, and maintaining collaborative control of the process.

The first condition is essentially re-stating the reason for adopting action research. Education is a social practice and the human element is a major factor which must be dealt with. There is a recognition that strategic action is needed to deal with the identified issue. This statement implied moving beyond the prevailing practice of educational development through generic workshops, towards acceptance that significant curriculum reform rarely comes about just because teachers are told what to do. It needs a strategic action over a period of time to implement the revised practices in a manner which is sensitive to the particular context.

The final aspect of the first condition is that the action aims for improvement. There is, therefore, a vehicle for addressing issues identified as problematic by teachers themselves. It can also be characterised as a mode of quality enhancement in learning and teaching, which is important at a time when high quality is on the agenda.

The definition of action research specifies a cyclical mechanism of planning, acting, observing and reflecting, for the strategic action. The four steps within a cycle constitute a logical means of implementing change consistent with processes of development and testing practised in technical fields. The cyclical aspect yields a mechanism for fine-tuning. Lessons from the initial cycle can be incorporated into the second and subsequent cycles, so iterative development takes place.

The third condition implies ownership of projects by those involved; in this context, by the teachers. In this sense the quality of mechanism can be characterised as a bottom-up quality enhancement process concentrating upon issues of interest and concern to the teachers themselves. It differs, therefore, from

the more quality assurance procedures which are mandated from the top and have an imposed focus and agenda.

The widening involvement element of the third condition is alluring to those involved in educational development, as it promises a mechanism for spreading engagement beyond a core of committed activists to a wider circle. This might be the one aspect of the three conditions which is somewhat idealistic as it is unrealistic to expect significant expansion in involvement in all projects.

Taken together the three conditions for action research provide both a characterisation of the mode of teaching quality enhancement and a justification for its employment. In this sense the Action Learning Project was unusual in that it was based upon an explicit theoretical framework (Kember, & Gow, 1992; Kember, & Kelly, 1993; Kember, & McKay, 1996; Kember, 2000). Webb (1992; 1996) has argued that approaches to educational development have not commonly made explicit any theoretical models or research evidence on which they are based.

Into Practice on a Large Scale

The opportunity to put theory into practice on a large scale came about through the University Grants Committee of Hong Kong (UGC) making available substantial funds to teaching development initiatives through processes of competitive grant applications. Two grants were obtained to fund the two phases of the project from what has become known as the Teaching Development Grant (TDG) scheme.

The initial grant application was based upon previous experience developed in supporting a number of action research projects mainly in the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. This experience had:

- shown that action research provided a suitable framework for teaching quality enhancement;
- given insights into some types of projects which could work effectively;
- provided experience and eventually expertise in supporting projects;
- meant that examples could be cited.

Collaboration

The original call for grant applications under the TDG scheme stressed the desirability of collaborative projects. Hence, the first application was put forward by a group from three universities, most of whom had been involved in previous rather loose collaborations, mainly focussing upon projects concerned with students' approaches to learning. When the grant came through the collaborators took the adventurous line of expanding the ambit to include all the seven institutions funded by the UGC. Using their present names these were: Chinese University of Hong Kong, City University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong Baptist University, Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU), Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, Lingnan University and the University of Hong Kong. By the time the second grant was awarded, the Hong Kong Institute of Education had come under the UGC so it also was included.

Every effort was made ensure that the Action Learning Project was a genuine collaborative venture. It was formally managed by an inter-institutional management committee with representatives from each of the seven or eight participating institutions. Most of these representatives were from the institution's

educational development unit, which acted as gateways to their university. The PolyU was nominated by the UGC as the coordinating institution, which meant that it assumed financial responsibility. The establishment of the management committee, chaired by a member of the PolyU, enabled it to discharge this responsibility while at the same time giving the project a degree of autonomy so that it could assume the form of a genuine collaborative venture.

There were conscious efforts to establish a presence in each participating university. The coordinating staff met with each project team on their home territory. In the first round the coordinating staff were dispersed among the institutions. The dissemination activities were shared among the venues, and held in conjunction with appropriate departments.

Projects

The large majority of the funds received were used to award grants to support projects in the universities. In the first phase 50 projects were supported, and 40 in the second. Each project was an action research initiative to address an issue, identified by the project team, in courses they taught. Many involved the introduction of innovative forms of teaching and learning.

The projects were selected through a relatively conventional grant awarding mechanism. There were calls for proposals, which were accompanied by seminars discussing the nature of action research and the proposal requirements. Feedback on draft proposals could be sought from nominated contacts, as the format and type of research were new to most applicants.

In proposals there had to be a convincing educational rationale for the issue to be tackled, and a clear explanation of how the proposed action or innovation would address the issue. A plan for carrying out the project was needed, and this had to specify how observation and evaluation would be conducted. Support from the head of department was needed as an assurance that the project could be carried out and would be owned by the department.

Selections were made by a sub-group of the management committee with expertise in educational development and action research. A formative stance was taken with proposals which contained the germ of a good idea, but had some limitations. For example, a number of proposals addressed a valid issue in a logical way, but did not have a suitable evaluation design. In such cases the proposers were invited to re-submit, with guidance as to what needed rectification.

The management committee were surprised by the number of proposals for the first round. There had been very little time to promote the venture and the call for proposals as the award of the first overall grant was announced in April 1994 and the projects needed to start at the beginning of the next academic year in September or October of the same year. More significantly, only two of the seven institutions had any history of educational development through action research and the whole concept was new to most sectors of the Hong Kong academic community.

In spite of the doubts there were numerous applications, requesting in total far more than the money available. This suggests that there were many academics, interested in their teaching, with latent concerns or ideas, waiting for such a scheme to catalyse the potential into action.

The 90 projects supported over the two rounds show a rich diversity in the types of projects, the variety of issues addressed and the nature of the innovations which were introduced. The variety can only be diminished by attempts to classify projects so the reader is invited to gain a picture of the diversity by leafing through the remainder of this volume and the earlier companion (Kember, Lam, Yan, Yum, & Liu, 1997). The projects represent most of the major discipline areas, including those which routinely employ radically different research paradigms. The first round had a somewhat distorted distribution of projects by university, no doubt reflecting previous action research initiatives and the strength of educational development units. By the second round, though, the action research approach was better accepted and the Action Learning Project was a well-established identity so the distribution of projects approximates well to what would be expected based on the size of institutions.

The projects were expected to be implemented over a period of two academic years, with additional time for analysis of data and writing the report. This period normally permitted two cycles as innovations were applied to courses lasting one semester or an academic year. There was, therefore normally an opportunity for iterative development. Some projects involving multimedia development needed most of the first year to develop the materials, but even these had an opportunity for full implementation and thorough evaluation.

Support

Previous experience had suggested that projects needed a supporting infrastructure if they were to be successful, particularly since so many participants were venturing into action research for the first time. Accordingly the Action Learning Project had a small coordinating team, who supported projects and provided an organisational infrastructure.

The coordinating team needed to determine how to perform their role of contributing support for projects in the inter-institutional venture. There was little on which to draw in determining how such a role should be conducted so this was one aspect of the coordinating team's action research into how to support action research projects. There was a desire for the project teams to retain ownership of their projects and to conduct all aspects themselves. The participants would therefore be motivated and would learn from the experience. At the same time, though, sufficient assistance, advice and support needed to be provided to ensure that the projects were successfully conducted and achieved their aims.

At the start of each round, the Coordinator and one of the Associate Coordinators held an initial meeting with each sub-project team to negotiate the level and type of involvement and assistance needed. The level and nature of the involvement of the coordinating team therefore varied from project to project. Defining the supporting role was an evolving process with multiple facets needed to cater for the differing needs. Among the more common elements of assistance provided were: advice on project design, acting as a sounding board for reflection, consultation on teaching and curriculum design, advice

and assistance with evaluation strategies, help with resource provision, prompting to meet deadlines and putting participants in touch with others working in the same area.

It was clearly necessary to develop a rapport with the participants so that there could be an on-going exchange. To establish clear lines of communication and help in establishing relationships, one of the Associate Coordinators was designated as the liaison person for each project. There needed to be flexibility in dealing with the teams and an appropriate orientation. The stance adopted came to be described as that of a 'critical friend'. This orientation and the multi-faceted nature of the support role has been described in more detail in Kember, Ha, Lam, Lee, Ng, Yan, and Yum (1997) and in Kember (2000).

Dissemination

Dissemination was an integral part of the initiative, the aim being to ensure that lessons learnt could be passed on and applied in other suitable contexts. The dissemination activities also aimed to promote the culture of classroom research and establish its legitimacy as a scholarly activity.

Interest groups were formed as it was found that participants were interested in finding out about other projects trying similar initiatives or from the same discipline. The interest group meetings were used as a way of ensuring that project teams learnt from the experiences of others in related areas. By opening these meetings to all academics they also provided an opportunity for others to benefit as well. They were normally held in conjunction with an appropriate department to broaden participation.

Early in the first round there was a seminar series about research into teaching and learning in Hong Kong universities to familiarise participants with relevant local work. In both rounds there were workshops on evaluation techniques, as many participants and hired research assistants were unfamiliar with the methods they needed to employ.

All projects were expected to produce a report at the end of the two year time period allocated for completion of projects. A conference was held at the end of each round to give the project teams the opportunity to present and discuss these reports. These conferences were open to all academic staff so as to disseminate widely the findings from the projects. Over 300 registered for the first conference and nearly 600 for the second. The papers from each round were then refereed and edited. This volume comprises the edited collection from the second round. There is a similar volume from the first (Kember, Lam, Yan, Yum, & Liu, 1997).

Participants in the projects have also reported on their activities in seminars, papers, articles and conferences other than those commissioned by the Action Learning Project. Through these reporting activities the participants make a major contribution to dissemination within their own universities and to academics in other universities.

The Action Learning Project has developed a web-site. The site includes information about conducting action research and educational evaluation techniques. It has information about projects supported in

both the first and second rounds of the Action Learning Project. The web-site has had a substantial number of visits from Hong Kong and overseas. The address of the web-site is <http://alp.polyu.edu.hk>

Action Research into Action Research

On one level, the Action Learning Project consisted of 90 action research projects. At a meta-level it was also an action research project into the effectiveness of action research for educational development and the optimum means of providing an organisational and supporting infrastructure for such ventures. As such it was unusual in being a quality enhancement or assurance programme which was thoroughly evaluated.

A three level multiple voice and multiple method evaluation design was employed. The project teams were responsible for evaluating their own projects, with advice from the coordinating team, and used a wide variety of methods to do this. The coordinating team contributed to the evaluation of the overall project through reflections upon their involvement with the initiative. They gathered data through a survey of participants and interviews with a sample of project teams. An independent panel made an evaluation of the overall project, concentrating upon effectiveness. They had access to all data from the other two evaluation levels and gathered additional data themselves.

The outcome has generated insights into how to conduct action research, as a mode of quality enhancement in teaching and learning, at the individual project and multiple project levels. It has led to expertise in how to support projects and how to provide an organisational infrastructure for multiple projects. The overall venture provided considerable evidence for the effectiveness of action research and suggested that it may be more cost effective to switch resources from conventional quality assurance schemes to the support of action research projects once resources devoted to assurance schemes reaches appreciable levels. A full discussion of these insights and outcomes is provided in Kember (2000).

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