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Stream: Action Learning – Research and Practice


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Introduction

This working paper reports on the progress of a planned evaluation study which has received a UFHRD Research Honoraria, or it will when the research is completed and the outputs produced. The proposed research explores the continued ‘impact’ of a part time masters educational programme from the perspective of practitioners. The purpose of the evaluation is not to establish a cause and effect relationship but to illuminate how practitioners ‘talk-about’ (Lave and Wenger 1991) impact; impact being defined as a: ‘process of investigation leading to new insights effectively shared’ (England, Council et al. 2009:7). The research will contribute to, and build on, conceptual understandings of the impact of HR(D) masters education from a practitioner perspective. This perspective is currently underrepresented in the literature.

The targeted part-time masters educational programme is informed, to some extent, by a critical management education (CME) pedagogy, Critical Action Learning (CAL) and the ideals of critical HRD. These ideals are persuasive and, arguably, timely (Sambrook 2011). There is an emerging literature which illuminates how Critical Action Learning (CAL) can enable CME pedagogy (Rigg and Trehan 2004; Lawless and McQue 2008). However, there is a dearth of empirical research which evaluates the sustainability and transferability of CME and CAL (Trehan and Rigg 2011) or the impact of HRD initiatives beyond the classroom (Holden and Griggs 2011). The proposed research plans to contribute to this gap.

This working paper reports on the initial progress of this evaluation research. The research aims to address the following research questions:

- To what extent can CAL continue to support a CME pedagogy when the educational programme is complete?
- How can the learning from CAL be sustained and transferred to an employing organisation?
- What is the relationship between critical HRD, CME and CAL?

Research context

A Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) accredited Masters of Arts (MA) in Personnel and Development (P&D) provides the context for this research. Twenty-four students have recently completed their dissertations. All students have undertaken research into work-based problems and have produced recommendations to implement aspects of organisational change. Students have received support from an Action Learning set of fellow students and a tutor facilitator, with eight students to a set.

This part time masters educational programme is informed by a critical management education (CME) pedagogy, Critical Action Learning (CAL) and the ideals of Critical HRD. Critical approaches to management education are distinctive in that they strive to connect with the broader social structures of power, rather than the traditional liberal humanist concerns which focus on self awareness and personal tolerance (Grey and Antonacopoulou 2004). It has been argued that the majority of mainstream management theory offers descriptive or prescriptive theories which fail to meet managers real needs (Grey 2005) while critical theory encourages the type of questioning needed to develop questioning insight and learning. Others (Dehler, Welsh, and Lewis 2004) argue that critical management education offers a more appropriate skill set than does the mainstream and prepares managers for complexity, uncertainty, equivocality, and value conflicts by raising their level of ‘complicated understanding’. Management educators who strive to bring a more critical edge to business and management education (Willmott 1997; Rigg and Trehan 2004; McLaughlin and Thorpe 1993; Fenwick 2003) advocate an emancipatory agenda offering a vision of a fairer and more just society. I know that...
the teaching on the module I deliver and the Action Learning Set I facilitate is informed by these persuasive, and arguably timely, ideals (Sambrook 2011). However, I am not sure if these ideals are shared by other tutors and the students. The planned evaluation should shed some light on these issues.

A central concern for critical HRD is the ‘struggle to reconcile the needs of the individual and the needs of the employing organisation, the tension between autonomy and community.’ (Elliott and Turnbull 2003: 457). During my teaching and when facilitating Action Learning Set meetings I have explored these tensions with students. We have discussed the ideal of becoming a community of ‘critically reflective practitioners’ (Reynolds 1998) and have utilised the four characteristics of critical reflection: concerned with questioning assumptions; the focus is social rather than individual; pays particular attention to the analysis of power relations and; is concerned with emancipation; to enable students to focus and structure verbal and written reflective learning accounts. Previous research provides some insight into the how students draw upon critical discourse during and immediately after their masters programme (Lawless, Sambrook, and Stewart forthcoming). The proposed research will explore if this discourse can be sustained and transferred to the employing organisation.

While the ideals of critical theory and critical reflection are persuasive, critical theory can be difficult to access. It has been argued that Action Learning provides a space where the comparatively abstract ideas of critical theory can be mobilised and applied (Rigg and Trehan 2004). Action Learning as ‘ethos and method’, (Pedler 2005; Pedler, Burgoyne, and Brook 2005) supported the implementation of these ideals within the MA programme. Participative learning methods, compatible with a process radical pedagogy, were emphasised throughout the programme and Action Learning Sets were utilised to support the dissertation stage. The proposed research will invite students who have recently completed the MA to attend three additional set meetings to explore the learning which occurred when the MA programme was completed.

### Action learning and critical action learning

Advocates of Action Learning (AL) argue that Action Learning Sets provide a place where ‘comrades in adversity’ rehearse and practice questioning, reflecting on action while becoming ‘tempered radicals’ (Myerson and Scully 1995); tempered radicals rather than ‘shrill protestors’ who: ‘stand together to promote valued social and organisational outcomes,’ (Pedler 2005: 3). However, one needs to draw attention to who has the power and influence to decide if an outcome is valued.

This explicit focus on power relations is a central feature of Critical Action Learning (CAL). Therefore: ‘CAL is not only on the ‘empowerment’ of the individual learner but also on the ways in which learning is supported, avoided and prevented within Sets and in organizations through relations of power’. (Vince 2012, 1). This questioning of taken-for-granted assumptions is central to the ideals of critically reflective practice. Reynolds (1998) emphasises the social aspect of this questioning and the need to encourage participants to confront the social and political forces which provided the context of their work. AL is founded in the wisdom of peers and it is argued that a sufficient variety of value systems can be found in the set to enable such questioning. However, Pedler (2005) acknowledges that this is a high ideal and questions if this can be realised, especially in AL sets convened within a single organisation. Reynolds and Trehan (2001) suggest that this is possible and discuss how the classroom can reflect the real world. However, the MA which is the focus of this research is a relatively homogeneous group.

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evaluates the sustainability and transferability of CME and CAL (Trehan and Rigg 2011) or the impact of HRD initiatives beyond the classroom (Holden and Griggs 2011). This research will contribute to this perceived gap.

**Proposed Methodology**

Twenty four students have recently completed the MA; all students have undertaken research into work based problems and have produced recommendations to implement organisational change. Students have received support from an action learning set of fellow students and a tutor facilitator; three sets of eight students. These students will be invited to attend three additional set meetings with their current set to extend dissertation research. At the time of writing the invitations had been delayed due to a delay in filling out the University's research ethics form.

Set meetings will be recorded and transcribed. Transcripts will be analysed in two ways. First WMmatrix software will be used. This software enables the researcher to count and analyse words, phrases and concepts used. Significant key words are compared against standard profiles from corpora of spoken English. Results are shown as deviations from a standard frequency. This analysis will highlight where a deeper analysis is warranted. A comparison will then be made of the ‘talk’ which emerged during the nine set meetings, three meetings with three sets. The basic theoretical thrust of discourse analysis is that people’s talk fulfils many functions and has varying effects. Statements are therefore interpreted as saying something about norms for expression and attention is given to the effects produced. The process of analysis will involve searching for patterns in the data by exploring variability and consistency within the different accounts which have been produced by action learners during the set meetings.

**Ethical issues**

At the research proposal stage I thought I was very clear on ethical research and how I would obtain the ‘informed consent’ of my participants. However, the ‘inequality and potentially treacherous’ (Stacey 1988, 21-27) nature of the relationship between researcher and those being researched and the potential for exploitation became uncomfortably clear during the process of producing the research ethics form required by my university. The process of writing this paper is helping me to clarify and articulate these concerns. A number of these issues seem of particular relevance to those who research their own practice, at-home ethnographers (Alvesson 2009).

In obtaining the consent of my ex-students I thought I would be informed by Fine’s (1980), ‘explicit cover’ strategy by making explicit to each participant the goals of my research at the point of recruitment and again, at the start of each action learning set. However, in producing a participant briefing sheet I realised that the research questions I had produced for the UFHRD Research Honoraria (as outlined in the introduction to this paper) would not make sense to my ex-students, or encourage them to participate. The language of CME and CAL are familiar to me but I was concerned that this (academic) language would discourage students from participating in the research. My participant briefing sheet states:

The purpose of this evaluation study is to explore the learning which occurs when an MA programme is complete. The research aims to address the following questions:

- To explore if the learning which occurred during the MA action learning sets can be sustained when the educational programme is complete?
- To examine how, indeed if, this learning can be transferred to an employing organisation?
The research will focus on how you implemented, adjusted, or failed to implement dissertation recommendations arising from your MA in Personnel & Development. You will be invited to participate in three action learning set meetings and the ‘problem’ we will explore is:

- Who benefited from your MA research?
- What, if anything, changed?
- What learning can we draw from this and what action can we take?

I will leave it with others to judge if I am being sufficiently explicit about my research goals and welcome discussion on this issue. In my defence I can see the very clear potential for influencing my participants towards my desired outcomes if I were more explicit in my research questions and if I had included fuller details of relevant literature. However, my participants are aware of CME and CAL and possibly I should have given them the full research proposal.

As an at-home ethnographer the issues around ‘informed consent’ and ‘no harm’ seem of particular importance. As a HRD researcher and lecturer it is vital that I demonstrate understanding and sensitivity around these issues. As an at-home ethnographer I will continue to work within the organisation I am researching and will continue to meet the participants of this research who share many of my professional networks. Indeed in undertaking the research my ex-students may share information about my colleagues, some of this may be detrimental or complimentary. I therefore see the issues of obtaining informed consent as precarious and a particular challenge for at-home ethnographers who will be required to demonstrate greater judgement in communicating their findings than outsider-ethnographers who have the advantage of disappearing from view on completion of their research.

**What next?**

At the time of writing this paper I have yet to receive ethical approval from my university. The form I had to fill in was relatively helpful but also problematic. The ethics committee insisted on an interview schedule, so to avoid delay in approval I have provided the following:

**Interview Questions/ Framing questions for set meetings.**

The research will focus on how you implemented, adjusted, or failed to implement dissertation recommendations arising from your MA in Personnel & Development. You will be invited to participate in three action learning set meetings and the ‘problem’ we will explore is:

1. Who benefited from your MA research?
2. What, if anything, changed?
3. What learning can we draw from this and what action can we take?

This seemed easier than trying to provide a long explanation of the AL process and how the agenda arose from set members. Am I being ethical?

By the time I present this paper I will have some feedback from the research ethics committee and will have further reflected on the issues involved. I welcome feedback on this work in progress and look forward to discussing my emerging ideas at the conference.
References