

## The Potential of Action Research

in the

### Sustainable Management of Change

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### **Introduction**

The challenge of change at the beginning of the twenty first century is both multi-levelled and contextual. Change, and its impacts, permeate the all aspects of our social, economic, technological and political fabric of people's lives. Organisations, including schools and education systems, face the complexity of interpreting their operating environments and creating the internal conditions necessary for successful interaction, while simultaneously accommodating the individual reactions to change within their organisations. The challenges inherent in dealing with change means that individuals and organisations are searching for improved ways of dealing with change on an ongoing basis. Action Research is a practical change method that is primarily concerned with creating and understanding change in relation to organisational, social and individual practices. In institutional and theoretical terms it is about bridging the gap between theory, practice and policy. The potential for Action Research to assist in the development of ongoing organisational innovation and knowledge creation is indeed considerable. When Action Research is enacted in a collaborative fashion it the ability of an organisation to purposefully learn from its actions to improve its internal strategic understanding and response to its external environment is enhanced. Collaborative Action Research from within the education sector can provide instructive examples in the sustainable management of change. In doing so it can improve the profile of educators as practitioners and managers of change and enhance the viability of collaborative Action Research as a strategic organisational change technology. The efforts of five schools, who enacted collaborative Action Research within the Innovative Links Project for Teacher Professional Development (ILP) between 1994 and 1997, have been sustained in the period since 1997 and have provided the elements of an experiential, structural and philosophical base for a constructive capacity for undertaking change within these schools.

### **The Innovative Links Project**

The ACIIC (Australian Centre for Innovation and International Competitiveness), University of Sydney, South Coast NSW Roundtable was one of sixteen Roundtables established under the auspices of the Innovative Links Project for Teacher Professional Development (ILP) and Federally funded through the National Professional Development Program (NPDP). The Roundtable was funded to facilitate work organisation research and reform in member schools in an attempt to better understand and improve student learning outcomes. The Roundtable comprised a broad range of education stakeholders; they being

representatives from the NSW Department of School Education (DSE), the independent non-government school sector, the NSW Teachers Federation (NSWTF), the National Schools Network (NSW), together with the Convenor (the author) from ACIIC, University of Sydney.

The Innovative Links Project, which was spawned from work of the National Schools Network, was an important development in the initiation and management of change in Australian education. What was special about the nature and design of the Innovative Links Project was the fact that it was a partnership between employers, unions and government, at one level, and the teaching profession and universities, at another, to provide top-level support for bottom-up change (Ladwig, et.al., 1994). It was an active attempt to create a culture of collaborative inquiry to improve the professional ability of teachers to enhance the learning outcomes of students. The project enhanced the ability of teachers to work together to develop shared professional understandings about the educational capabilities of their students, and the nature of the world into which they would enter as a way of rethinking the organisational, curriculum and resourcing parameters within the school.

The decisions on what to change and how to change were made within the school by practising teachers. The schools, teachers and university partners were guided by the objectives, framework and methodology of the project. The top-level support of the employers, unions and government contributed to give the school-based activities of the Innovative Links Project a sense of legitimacy, as well as the resources to undertake these activities. The derivation of the change project from within the school allowed an immediacy and realness to the project focus. Together with the Roundtable structure of the Innovative Links Project, and the use of its Action Research methodology, participants were able to develop the requisite competence, commitment and ownership to enact change that influenced the quality of teaching and learning in the school.

## **Organisations and Change**

Organisations consist of groups, networks and coalitions of individuals, all acting within a complex of milieu comprising the trajectory of the organisation's history, and the strategic and operational interpretations of the current environmental situation (both internal and external). These factors combine to influence the future potential, shape and direction of the organisation. In an external environment of rapid technological change and increasing global economic activity, organisations face significant challenges in developing, controlling and maintaining strategic and operational direction. Innovation becomes crucial in such an environment. (Nadler, 1992. Tushman and O'Reilly, 1997. Clegg, 1990. Morgan, 1986. Hesselbein, Goldsmith and Beckhard, 1997. Wilpert, 1995. Banathy, 1994. Harvey, 1989. Bolman and Deal, 1991.)

A conventional Taylorist view of organisational activity would lead us to believe that the flow of information and command within the organisation is both hierarchical and top-down in orientation. Such a view relies upon the presumption that those organisational actors at the apex of activity are in a position to accurately interpret and understand the external environment, and are able to effectively coordinate, implement and delegate the necessary responses to help maintain appropriate organisational activity.

In a period of "hyperturbulent" (Meyer, Goes and Brooks in Huber and Glick (eds) 1993.) environmental change, such as that which characterises the late twentieth century, it is highly questionable that such a model of organisational activity can maintain strategic accuracy and operational responsiveness. Especially where responding to, harnessing and creating change become a primary organisational function (Kanter, Stein and Jick, 1992).

It is perhaps more appropriate that organisations are viewed as consisting of multiple stakeholders that interact with their internal and external environments in both an individual and overlapping fashion. In such a way Kanter, Stein and Jick (1992) have conceptualised organisations as "bundles of activities with common elements that allow activities and people to be grouped and treated as an entity." This action oriented view of the organisation still operates within a hierarchical framework where actors are seen as either change strategists, implementors or recipients, where the challenge is to gain agreement and overcome resistance to change in order for timely and appropriate interaction with the organisation's external environment to occur.

The introduction of Action Research methodologies and the development of Learning Organisations would seem to offer much in the creation of dynamic, interdependent information and activity flows within organisations. In doing so the acknowledgment of the mutual legitimacy of multiple stakeholders within organisations and their role in shaping the appropriate environmental responses allows organisations to effectively innovate to sustain themselves and their activities into the future.

### **Learning Organisations and Organisational Learning**

As organisations struggle in their attempts to sustain their relevance and viability in the face of discontinuous waves of social, economic and technological change, there has been an upswelling of interest in the development of Learning Organisations (LOs) to create internal structures and systems better suited to new external environmental conditions (Dodgson, 1993). The development of the LO, organisations that purposefully develop structures, policy and practices to enhance organisational learning (OL) has emerged from the pioneering work of Argyris and Schon (1978). While interest in LOs began in the 1980s through the influence of management theorists such as Peters and Waterman (1982) and Kanter (1989), it was the work of Senge (1992) that captured attention and popularised the term.

A LO, for Senge, is an organisation that continually expands its capacity to create its future. It is able to learn both adaptively from existing conditions and generatively through the strategic endeavour. In OL terms, Argyris and Schon (1978) believe that professional practice is informed by experiences that enrich and challenge so as to provoke personal reflection and conceptual generalisation, which they term 'theories-of-action'. Such theories, when operationalised, become 'theories-in-use'. It is the effort to recognise the gap between that which is espoused and that which is real, and to close such a gap that allows for learning to occur. Distinction is drawn between learning that results from actions to maintain homeostasis within existing organisational parameters (single-loop learning) and from the learning that emerges from the conflict between external environmental conditions and existing internal norms, policies/practices and theories-in-use. (double-loop learning). Such research into organisational change that emerges from this improvement in congruence forms the basis of the branch of Action Research, termed as Action Science (Argyris et. al., 1985). Appelbaum and Goransson (1997) have contributed to this perspective by distinguishing between single and double loop learning in terms of strategic orientation. In their view, single-loop learning is seen as adaptive, while double-loop learning is viewed as transformative. This distinction assists in further clarifying the subtle differences between organisational learning and the goals inherent in the creation of LOs. The conscious development of LOs is a social construction of organisational learning that is both adaptive and transformative.

Clegg et. al. (1996) suggest that conscious development of organisational learning involves the improvement of outcomes and processes in terms defined by stakeholders. They link such learning with the development of an innovation capability; learning with clients, stakeholders, colleagues and the development of specific mechanisms for knowledge

capture and dissemination. They consider that innovation in existing production processes can be learned but question whether this can be applied to product innovation. The discontinuous nature of innovation radically alters technologies, occupational definitions and power relations within existing organisational dimensions. This would seem to be consistent with the view of Argyris and Schon in the difficulty in instituting double-loop learning, and is significant to the aims of this thesis where Action Research is postulated to allow transformative learning to occur.

Dosi and Malerba (1996) view the sustainability of organisations in terms of their abilities to accumulate and develop skill competencies. Competences and knowledge are embodied in specific processes, products and services. Such competences, are reflected in applicable problem solving procedures and are identified by three dimensions; tacitness, specificity and complexity. Learning is at the base of such competences and the challenge exists for organisations in making specific, complex and tacitly held knowledge explicit, understandable, and replicable for organisation-wide benefit.

The perspective of Lave and Wenger (1991) is that learning is grounded in forms of social co-participation, rather than the acquisition of propositional knowledge, and the development of cognitive processes and conceptual structures. They emphasise the distributed nature of learning among co-participants, and between 'experts and apprentices'. The organisation of the learning community is reproduced through the cultural processes that embed the learning and not solely through a fixed body of knowledge. Their cultural device of the community of practice is integral to the development, interpretation and transmission of knowledge. The challenge would seem to be to rethink action within the organisation so that structure, process, mental representation and skilful activity profoundly interrelate.

### Action Research

Action Research is an inclusive 'broad church' of methodologies that variously go by names such as Action Research, Action Learning, Action Science, Participatory Action Research, Practitioner Research and Collaborative Action Research.

Action Research (AR) seeks to integrate research and practice (action) and to address the persistent inability of research in the social sciences to effect on-going improvements in performance and practice (Somekh, 1995). It is carried out by the people directly involved in the situation under investigation, often with external facilitation, and is grounded in the issues that emerge from the workplace.

AR directly aims to create lasting change through influencing work and professional practice. It is complex and contextual; exploring the multiple dimensions of actions and interpersonal relationships to give participants a deeper understanding of the nature of their situational reality and the basis of current and future action. AR aims for practical outcomes and insights derived from a continuous cyclical process of problem formation, investigation, data collection, analysis and interpretation, reflection, action and evaluation.

The insights/understandings/outcomes of the AR process may be communicated to stakeholders at various stages of the process, and in a variety of forms. Validation of the research is not solely reliant upon the publication of the findings, as its primary aim is to make a difference in the working lives of participants and their organisations. The pragmatic nature of the research has methodological and operational consequences. The integral involvement of practitioners occurs in an arena of competing time demands and acceptance of the fact that participants may well have had limited research experience.

AR is immersed in the culture and values of participants and researchers, while it is practically focused, it assists in reflection upon the nature of both individual and organisational values and their interrelationships with organisational issues. AR also raises ethical issues in the nature of the structure and conduct of the research. Primarily, this has to do with the subjective nature of the methodology and the 'insider' status of the researchers. Therefore, AR should be enacted democratically, with the assistance of guiding principles to assist in the conduct and reporting of research, so as to ensure the quality of data and the subsequent analysis.

A wide variety of authors have commented upon the ability of AR to contribute to both organisational learning and/or individual professional development. (Lewin, 1946. Revans, 1980. Argyris et. al., 1985. Grundy, 1995. Whyte, 1991. Argyris, 1993. Oja and Smulyan, 1989. Stringer, 1996. Toulmin and Gustavson, 1996. Grundy and Kemmis, 1981. Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988. Schon, 1987. Carr, 1987. Schratz and Walker, 1995. Nias and Groundwater-Smith, 1988. Rudduck and Hopkins, 1985. Carr and Kemmis, 1983. Hammersley, 1993. Yeatman and Sachs, 1995. Sachs, 1997.) However much of the AR literature is located within discipline of education and is more closely associated with the individual professional development perspective, rather than holistic learning across the organisation. Additionally, some of the above authors, while advocating the use of AR, display differences in the depth of their insight into the use of AR. Those from a Management perspective do not display the depth of understanding of the potential and practicalities of AR that seems attributable to the academic educationalists.

### **The Work of the ILP South Coast Roundtable**

The Action Research element of the ILP was one of its crucial defining features. The objectives of the project called for the development of "schools as learning communities where research, rethinking and renewal are regarded as normal and essential work practices." (Yeatman and Sachs, 1995, p71) Action Research in the ILP aimed to develop a shared understanding of the issues impacting upon school effectiveness to enhance both teacher competence and the learning of all students.

The development of such an research base in the ILP, and the teaching profession as a whole, is important not only to the development of the education, but to Australia as a nation. The development of teachers well versed in working together to investigate the influence of school policy and organisation upon student learning will hopefully lead to schools that better meet the learning needs of students. Students who have achieved better learning outcomes enhance the total level of skill and knowledge within the community and contribute to the vitality of Australian society and its economy. This is crucial as Australians grapple with the nature of change within our society and internationally.

The ILP Roundtable operated through a process of 'innovating together' in an attempt to jointly create the future of educational practice within the member schools. The convenor played the role of 'critical friend', supporting, listening, questioning and clarifying relevant issues with the school-based colleagues. Schools determined their research thrust and the process was jointly shaped to fit the needs of the school communities. This policy of mutual respect and consensus was used to display confidence in teacher professionalism. Such confidence was rewarded many times over in the efforts and insights generated both within the schools and at the Roundtable level by the school-based colleagues.

Practitioner inquiry through Action Research produced new knowledge about educational conditions within schools, and in doing so built confidence and acceptance among teachers for positive action to improve these conditions. It was a tonic to the reactive intensity of daily life in Roundtable schools where the opportunities for teachers to meet to research,

converse and reflect were highly prized moments that informed and guided teachers as they relentlessly prepared to teach their next class. As such, it is the development of the ability to integrate such insights as a basis for future action, both individually and organisationally, in an intense environment that appears the hallmark of a new or enhanced teacher professionalism.

The ability of individual roundtable schools to sustain the AR induced changes in the period since 1997 and the end of the ILP is the subject of ongoing research by this author. The three years since the cessation of the ILP brought with it an end to the small, annual project budget allocation that afforded the five member schools the time, facilitative support and the formal reason to engage in the AR and school-based change process. One might expect that in the interim that the achievements that were the hallmark of the ILP to be eroded and unrecognisable with the passage of time and the accumulation of other changes within the schools. This has not been the case.

Ongoing investigation in the five schools that comprised the Roundtable indicate that significant elements of the changes mediated through the use of AR remain. The changes that have remained vary across all sites vary in their shape and intensity, yet they are immediately recognisable as the changes that were instituted during the ILP. These include changes in organisational structures (class arrangements, sub-schools, learning programs), work organisation practices (teaming, collaborative management,), and the relationship between professional practice and knowledge production (collaborative AR, team writing and presentations). The sustaining of these changes in structure, organisation and practice indicate the power of the collaborative AR to create shared learning and knowledge as a foundation of ongoing improvements in practice and organisational outcomes.

Giddens (1984) theory of structuration details the importance of structures and social practices in the development of social systems. He outlines inter-relationships between rules, resources and the creation of meaning within organisations. The ILP aligned the permission to create change through AR with the provision of resources. The AR activities within the project gave individual teachers and their schools the opportunity to create new structures, together with shared meanings and perspectives as a way to improve their professional knowledge and the learning of their students. The elements that have persisted in the period post-1997 are testimony to the power of the way the collaborative AR process was enacted to produce learning through change.

The potential for the AR efforts of teachers to create a new form of practice in education is real, yet it is a form of professional behaviour that remains rather unusual in the majority of Australian schools. Systematic collaborative inquiry by teachers is not often a part of the normal work in schools, and as such the insights offered by teacher research may not always be taken seriously by other professionals in the education industry (practitioners, academics and policymakers). Teachers are capable of conducting worthwhile investigation, however, the fact remains that teachers are generally unpractised in research. In a normal school there is most often not the time or resources to carry out research. However, the use of collaborative inquiry when afforded time and resources, in a supportive school culture, offers much in assisting teachers to cope with the demands placed upon them. This is demonstrated very strongly in the ACIIC/South Coast NSW Roundtable schools. Research, as carried out by these teachers, created change that directly related to the central activity of the school; teaching and learning.

## **Conclusion**

The work of the ILP and the Roundtable offered a range of different experiences in enacting change, yet these experiences were made common through the framework and

methodology of the project. This strength partly lay in the combination of the AR methodology as a way of encouraging both change and reflection, and the innovation of the Roundtable as a technology. Together they stimulated thinking, and supported action through the problems of change investigation and implementation. They simultaneously encouraged inquiry and reflection. The combination of these two technologies has helped to initiate and sustain change in a culture that encouraged debate, questioning, inclusion and open-ended searching. It remains seemingly the antithesis of much other policy-induced change in education that seeks to measure results before the change has been implemented, understood and accepted within the patterns of relationships that are the school.

The complexity and interrelatedness of issues, coupled with the rapidity of change in the late twentieth century, mean that it is difficult for any one person or group to have a monopoly on the truth. The development of collaborative inquiry offers a way of allowing all organisations, including schools, an effective way of aligning their internal values, philosophies, structures and operations through an aggregated perception of what constitutes external reality. The methodology of teacher research within the Innovative Links Project offered a working example of how this can be carried out to enhance both the effectiveness of the school and the professionalism of teachers. In undertaking this they created an improved ability in their schools to serve their communities. What we may learn from them offers a considerable opportunity for guidance in the search for what it is to be a professional in a complex and rapidly changing world.

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