Reflections on Action Research: Uncovering My Assumptions

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I have engaged in action research for several years in different settings and for different purposes. At the elementary level I have used action research to try to understand my students' view of the culture of our classroom, (presentation, OERC, 1996) and to make a geometry unit come alive (International Reading Association, 1996). At the secondary level, I used Action Research to develop a leadership program (Teachers College Press, 2001) and to help my fellow DICEP members and me understand the functioning of our own research group (Orbit, 1998).

In this phase of our collaborative action research group we, DICEP (Developing Inquiring Communities in Education Project) are being funded by the Spencer Foundation for a specific project. We proposed to include our learners as co-researchers in investigating the activities and conditions that facilitate their learning. In addition to providing learning experiences that meet curricular or organizational goals, we planned to help our learners develop valuable assessment and metacognitive skills.

Throughout my research endeavors, and generally in my teaching, I have had a sense of when I thought things were working, when the teaching and learning was exciting and felt authentic, and when I believed that the learners were truly engaged and growing. During my recent work with post secondary teachers and administrators, I have been working towards making explicit my implicit learning theory. I have been asking myself questions such as "What are my goals for my learners?", "How do I decide what to plan for a particular group?" "How do I know if my plan is working?"

To investigate these questions, I am using the inquiry principles of the action research cycle--*plan, act, reflect, change* -- to lead to understanding and change within my practice. (Dick, 1997). For the purposes of this paper, I will be focusing on the reflection stage, following Donald Schön's (1987) belief that we all learn best through reflection on our practice. A strong theoretical foundation for our work in DICEP is socio-cultural theory, in particular the work of L S. Vygotsky (Wertsch, 1985). For the purposes of this study, I was particularly interested in two aspects of Vygotsky's work: his emphasis on social activity in problem solving and the role of language in learning. In addition, I considered Judith Newman's (1987,1990,1991) work on reflection and uncovering our assumptions as teachers.

In addition to reflecting on my practice, I will be investigating how the strategies I have been using allow the learners to engage in the components of the action research cycle as they pursue their learning tasks. In this way, they become co-researchers of their learning event.

I have looked closely at three learning events that I recently facilitated for post-secondary educators and administrators and have gleaned eight principles I see at work that I assume contribute to authentic engagement and learning. All three were one-day events with open-ended and future-oriented themes. The goals for all three were to generate and discuss ideas and to propose action plans to enact them. The themes were phrased in the form of questions: "How can we foster and enhance a creative and innovative climate in the classroom and throughout the college?", "How can we promote leadership development in our colleges?" and "Where to from here?"

In all three cases, the answer to the questions was not known by anyone. My role was to work with the sponsor of each event to discern her goals and to translate them into the theme question before the event. On the day of the event, I needed to create an environment that would enable the participants to engage with the subject matter and each other to create a mutually satisfactory future direction. For these three sessions, I used a facilitation technique called Open Space Technology (Owen, 1992). For this technique, participants begin in a large circle and together create the agenda before breaking off into self-selected working groups.

The eight principles that I have gleaned from this work, and which also apply to the work I have done elsewhere in education, follow.

1. Learners need to be involved in planning.

I believe that learners need to be involved in planning the learning event, and be invited to make decisions regarding their participation in it. There needs to be a mechanism for learners to express their goals, perceptions and needs regarding the topic. This is done, of course within the "givens" of the learning experience. For example there may be curriculum content requirements, or budgetary limits or other constraining elements. Once these are clearly defined, there is always room for creativity and input from the learners.

The "Where to from here?" group of college educators and administrators initiated their learning day in response to a government cut to their budgets as well as other changes they were facing. One of the "givens" for this group was that they needed to find ways to manage with less government money. I assumed that one of the working groups that the participants would propose would concern revenue generation, and indeed there was one session on that, but most of the day was spent on other topics within the theme. Because the participants were given the opportunity to plan their topics for the day, a much wider range of issues was discussed. The participants felt that staff recruitment and retention, the need for updated perceptions of students and their needs, the need for more progressive teaching techniques, collaboration between colleges, and staff motivation were at least as important to their future as revenue issues.

2. Learners need to take responsibility for their learning and have opportunities to take leadership roles.

When using Open Space Technology, participants do not merely throw out ideas for consideration, as in a brainstorming exercise. If a participant wants an idea discussed, he or she needs to take the responsibility for posting the idea on the wall and choosing a time and a place

for the discussion from a matrix of possibilities. Furthermore, the person needs to take on the leadership role of meeting with the people who choose to join the discussion and ensuring that notes are taken. This has the effect of ensuring that people think seriously about their topic suggestions, and have a personal stake in seeing any action plans completed.

This part of the process can highlight leadership abilities in a group that may not have been recognized in the past. It is not the formal leaders who are asked to lead, but those who have a passion for a topic within the theme. At the "creativity" learning day, the president of the college, as well as heads of departments were present along with teachers and administrators. The creativity group had been in operation for some time within the college with little support from administration. However, when the president witnessed the range of topics, creative ideas and the level of responsibility that individual members of staff were willing to take, he agreed to fund a creativity centre for the college.

3. Learners need the freedom to self-select aspects of a theme on which to work, modes of learning and recording, and their co-workers, at least some of the time.

Once participants have posted the topics for which they have a passion and are ready to lead a discussion, and have chosen a time and place for each discussion to take place, the whole group is then invited to decide which discussions to join throughout the day. This takes advantage of peoples' interests and passions at the time. They are not restricted to topics that are in keeping with their position or duties at the college. This is unlike a traditional conference in which the sessions and the speakers are decided upon ahead of time, and in which the participants must sign up for sessions ahead of time.

The use of this method can result in discussions that are led and attended by people who would not normally have the opportunity to engage in a particular subject matter. During the "leadership promotion" learning day, a discussion that drew a large number of the group was one on spirituality. It was not led or attended by people from chaplaincy or even professional development, but by participants from across their college faculties and administrations who felt that their leadership development depended on their personal spiritual development. The following excerpt from the notes of this working group describe what they feel their colleges could be doing to promote this:

- encourage us to be a whole person
- honour our need to be who we are
- institutional acceptance of religion and experiential knowledge
- develop a sense of community

4. Learners need to need to identify what they see as the problem/issue/topic and describe what they already know.

This is a fairly traditional aspect of group work. The group collectively outlines the problem, or reframes it if they feel that is needed, and combines their existing knowledge and experience. Sometimes the combined knowledge and experience of the group can immediately solve the

problem or enable them to make a detailed plan to address the problem. In most cases, this is still an early stage in the process.

Sometimes there can be surprising twists, however. The topic as stated by the participant who posted it in the morning circle can develop into something much different than one would expect. During the "where to from here" day, the topic "Motivating faculty to do more with less" was posted. One might expect the discussion to be about economizing in the face of budget cuts. The group notes, however, reveal that the discussion was in fact about providing support to the faculty in difficult times. Their description of their issue included the following:

- build in a mentoring system for new faculty
- find people's passion and help support that
- keep supporting the support system that is required to motivate faculty
- incentives for extra work could be equal time off
- acknowledgment and recognition such as being asked to attend a conference and report back, or asked to give a presentation to the Board
- part time secondments working in teams to provide mutual support
- professional development activities with concrete results
- co-ordinating efforts from a variety of college areas

5. Learners need to identify what resources they need and what actions need to be performed in order to deal with the task at hand.

Resources may already be within the group, or the source may be outside the group but known, or more research may be needed. If the resource needed requires funds beyond existing budgets, the group is encouraged to find ways to raise the funds they need.

6. Learners need to prioritize their topics and needs and make specific action plans.

Usually there are more issues within the topic than can be dealt with in a reasonable amount of time. If the group has decided that they would like to asses the progress of their plans in 3 weeks or 3 months, they need to decide how much they can reasonably accomplish in the time allotted. The plans they make may include roles for each group member, timelines, future meetings, budgets if applicable, and times to report back to the whole group. This level of detail is usually achieved when there is a second day or half day to pursue the topics.

Depending on the topic and the needs of the group, the plans may be very detailed or non-existent. For the "creativity" group, all of whom were members of the same college, they had a concrete plan in mind- the creation of a creativity centre within the school. Therefore, their plan was very detailed for a one day event and included:

- work as creativity consultants throughout the college
- collect and develop curriculum on innovation and creativity
- house creativity resources such as books and videos
- rotate co-ordinatorship of the centre through time release

- offer a course for faculty and staff
- offer a student course

In contrast, the "leadership" learning day was composed of people from many colleges across North America. Rather than plan specific programs, their goal was to have more theoretical discussions and plant seeds that they could then take back to their home colleges to develop and implement. One of the topics on this day was "Everyone in the college needs to be a leader. How do we do that?" They concluded that an action plan for their discussion was not appropriate. They listed their future action as. "N/A a good conversation among 4 interesting folks!"

7. Throughout the learning experience, the learners need to take a metacognitive stance.

This stage is key for me in all my teaching, but during this phase of our DICEP research I was particularly interested in encouraging the learners to take a metacognitive stance to their learning, which we are all endeavoring to accomplish by inviting our learners to be co-researchers.

During the opening circle for all three groups, I encouraged the participants to be aware of, and to evaluate, their own learning. I suggested that they continually ask themselves, "am I learning from and/or contributing to this discussion?" If the answer was "no", I told them that they had the freedom and the responsibility to move to a situation where one or both were happening. In traditional conferences or meetings, one often finds that the topic is not as personally interesting or relevant as one had hoped. However, most of us stay until the end out of politeness and use the time to daydream or make to-do lists in our heads. This is, of course, a waste of time and energy for the unengaged person, and is a drain on the rest of the group.

When using this technique, the ideal situation is one in which all the people attending a working group are actively engaged in the topic. Others are moving from group to group until they find a discussion they are passionate about, or a place for personal reflection on the theme.

The "creativity" group took my suggestion one step further. One member proposed and convened a working group on the topic, "What are we learning using Open Space, and what are the possible ways we can use it in our classrooms?" Their description of their issue included reflections on the learning they were experiencing:

..we are experiencing an opening up of possibilities, a freedom to speak that is not always there with a more structured agenda, permission to talk about the items that interest us the most, freedom to move to another topic, having group members initiate the topics is empowering and creates ownership.

After reflecting on their own learning process, this group asked themselves a series of questions about how they could use the process with their students:

- How do we make sense of this strategy and how might we build on the possibilities in the college?

- How can it be used with large groups?
- Could it be used as a follow-up to a President's Forum with the entire college community?
- Could students in the classroom generate the possible topics for their class projects or presentations?
- Could we invite students to participate in a mid-semester check-in about any unanswered questions or areas they need help with?

8. Throughout the learning experience, time needs to be given for group reflection on the content and process of the learning

In addition to each individual having a metacognitive stance toward his or her learning, I believe an opportunity needs to be given for the group to reflect as a whole. After the groups had met to discuss the topics they had chosen and to make any action plans that were applicable, including times to continue working in the future, the whole group met again in a circle.

At all three learning days, I reminded the groups that we did not need a "report back" of the work they had done as this had been captured in the notes they had taken which would later be photocopied and disseminated to all participants. What I did ask the participants to do was to pass a "talking stick" or other object around the circle. As each person received the object they had the option of sharing with the group a reflection on their learning or of the group learning process. The role of those without the object was to listen respectfully.

The goal of this exercise was to allow the participants to get a sense of the experience of the whole group. Comments at all three closing circles were very similar to the reflections of the "creativity" working group when they reflected on the process. Participants felt excited and energized about working with each other in a creative, productive, and respectful way. Many expressed a wish to work this way in the future, both as professional development and with their students.

I finished each closing circle by encouraging the group to use the reflections and action plans of each working group, as well as the reflections during the closing circle to continually re-shape their learning to match their emerging needs and goals as they moved forward in their learning experience.

The participants in these three learning days had engaged in the components of the action research cycle. They had planned their learning, they had acted on their topics by hosting discussions and making action plans, they had reflected on their learning, and the action plans they proposed reflected a commitment to changing the way they work together. I encouraged them to continue to work through the cycle of plan, act, reflect and change as they worked towards greater understanding and positive change in their post secondary environments.

In keeping with socio-cultural theory, the positive learning environment that I believe existed for all three learning days was enhanced by the social activity of the learners, and the way in which they used language. In his paper, "A Sociocultural Approach To Mind: Some Theoretical Considerations" (Wertsch, 1989), James Wertsch identifies central themes in Vygotsky's writing.

The first that is relevant to this study is, "the claim that higher mental functioning in the individual has its origins in social activitiy." (pg. 141) Vygotsky believed that individuals need to be given the opportunity to act on ideas and problems with others in order to construct individual understanding. The self-selected working groups that my learners engaged in were opportunities for just such joint activity for group and, ultimately, individual problem solving.

The use of the Open Space approach necessitates an extensive use of language to explore issues, make plans, and solve problems. Vygotsky identified the essential role played by technical and psychological tools, chief of which is language. (Wertsch, 1985). He believed that the mediating role played by language is of supreme importance in the development of higher mental functions.

In a way similar to what I have attempted to do, Judith Newman (1987, 1990, 1991) examines her assumptions about teaching and reflects on what is and isn't working in her classrooms and why. Many of our assumptions are compatible. In her edited collection, *Finding Our Own Way: Teachers Exploring Their Assumptions* (1990), Newman asserts that, "One of my current beliefs is that learning is a collaborative enterprise. People don't learn in isolation. They learn by being members of a learning community." (pg. 8) In the work I have described in this paper, I set the stage for the learners to create their own learning community for the day, with the hope that they will continue to learn together until their issue is resolved.

Newman also believes in, "the crucial role risk taking plays in learning"(pg. 8). She argues that in order for students to be willing to take the risks necessary for learning, they need to feel some control over their situation and "The best way to exercise some control is to be involved in making decisions." (pg. 9) My learners took the big risks of posting issues that mattered to them and of leading the discussions of those issues. They made plans to resolve their issues, including personal commitments. I believe the choices they had regarding the topics they discussed, the people they worked with, and the manner in which they wished to proceed, led to the risk-taking behaviour that I witnessed.

In her work *Interwoven Conversations: Learning and Teaching Through Critical Reflection* (1991), Newman reflects on the importance of having a "fluid daily agenda"(pg. 344) during a writing institute she taught. She had a global picture of what she wanted to achieve, but she allowed the students' suggestions and questions to influence what actually took place. The consequence of this was that she was able to "let go" in a way that "allowed problems and issues to surface naturally and together the teachers and I were able to explore them"(pg. 344). In a similar way, I, in consultation with the sponsor of each event, set the theme for the learning events but allowed the participants to propose working topics within the theme.

I find that my current work with educational practitioners, as well as my work with adults in non-education environments, has many parallels with the work I did as a classroom teacher. As both a consultant and a classroom teacher, I faced a set of "givens" or non-negotiables. As a teacher, this took the form of the curriculum as well as school policies. As a consultant, this may be the strategic plan of the organization, the budget, or a pre-set departmental goal. In both roles, I develop my goals for my learners within the set of givens. In both cases, they include both social and content goals. I want my learners of all ages to engage in collaborative, mutually supportive learning, as well as acquiring the skills and/or knowledge required by the givens.

As a teacher and consultant, I prepare for a learning event by familiarizing myself with the topic and the resources available, and by creating an appropriate structure to support the learning. For the three learning events that I examined in this paper, I designed a structure that gave the learners the message that I believed in their abilities to take leadership roles and to learn collaboratively. I gave an opportunity for whole group work, self-selected small group work, and finally whole group reflection. The recording sheet I provided gave the learners reminders to build on their existing knowledge, identify needs, and to plan for the future. This is very similar to the way that I would structure a unit in a classroom.

The main difference that I see in the consulting work under consideration is that I did not have on-going contact with my learners. In these one day learning events, I didn't have the opportunity to create a culture of co-research across the community and throughout the year as I would have as a classroom teacher. Fortunately, I do have occasion to return to organizations several times, or to have longer contracts with them that enable me to work towards a culture of co-research.

In this paper I have been reflecting on eight principles I believe are embodied in my recent work that I assume have led to authentic learning. I have also argued that the strategies I have used have allowed and encouraged the learners to engage in the action research cycle and become co-researchers into their learning. This is a snapshot of my current work and my current thinking about my work. I expect and hope that I will continue to wonder and question and try to define for myself what I am doing with my learners, how effective I am, and what I might try next.

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