Beyond common sense: action research and the learning organisation

Bridget Somekh discusses learning organisations, barriers to change and how to carry out participatory action research. This article is based on a plenary talk given at the IATEFL Conference in York in 1995.

Introduction

I want to look at how action research may provide us with a strategy for change which goes beyond simply saying "Gosh, wouldn't it be a good idea if we did x. Let's all do it!" which for some reason, doesn't usually lead to change among human beings as we might have hoped. In my article in the book that came out after TDTR1 (Edge & Richards, 1993), I outlined the following characteristics of action research. Action research is focused on improving social situations and participants collaborate with each other and with outsiders to decide upon a focus for collecting and analysing data. It is about constructing knowledge and producing theories about what you are researching, but it is different from formal research in that those theories -e generated perhaps quite quickly and in a fairly flimsy state and are then fed back into action and tested out in practice, takes place in looking at whether or not changes which you based upon those theories have led to some improvement. For example, when I was a school teacher carrying out action research, the data included photographs of myself standing with my hands on my hips. My focus on improving students' learning included trying to establish warm, informal relationships with them, but my posture in the photographs looked rather aggressive. Upon that I based the theory that there were things I could change in my body language which

might actually reinforce rather than counter my efforts to develop more intimate relationships with my students. So I made those changes and I could then test out whether there did seem to be any improvement in students' relationships with me. This is a very small point, but quite often it is a lot of these small points together that are important in developing theories that have power in bringing about change.

The final step is dissemination of the research. Although action research is about generating knowledge and understanding about a social process - say about a classroom or about organisational structure - which can be used immediately as the basis for change, it is also research and should be publicly reported. This might be through an oral presentation or in a written report.

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The vision of the learning organisation

Three or four years ago, I became interested in looking at the theories developed within management studies about the learning organisation and the excellent company. I wanted to formalise work I was doing into organisational change using action research and see if it fitted with this notion of whole organisational learning. Tom Peters and Robert Waterman in their book *In Search of Excellence* (1982), sought to identify the top ten most excellent American companies and document their significant, characteristic features. In all of them they identified:

- A strong organisational culture, so that people who worked in those organisations knew their mission and what they stood for.

- A strong service orientation: instead of serving the interests of the company and the people who worked in it, they were oriented towards customers' needs (e.g. you didn't gold-plate a product because you thought gold-plating looked good and enabled you to charge more for the product, instead you found out if your customers wanted gold-plated products and took the decision to gold plate or not on that basis).

- An extraordinarily high level of energy amongst employees. They were working long hours and seemed very committed to the company.

A Learning Company is an organisation that facilitates the learning of all its members and continuously transforms itself

Of course probably a lot of you know what happened to the research - ten years later it became clear that a number of those companies that had been identified as excellent were actually in economic trouble and some of them had gone bust. A lot of people rubbished the work and said that the research methodology hadn't been sufficiently rigorous (which by the way it is very easy to do - almost all research, in my experience, can be attacked on the grounds of its methodology if you dislike its findings; research is not an exact science and very little of it is sufficiently precise and so-called objective to stand up to detailed scrutiny by those with a vested interest in finding its flaws). A lot of negative value judgements went into that critique but it is clear that excellent companies may not go on being successful forever, they need to continuously review their performance and respond to changes in the national and global economy. Meanwhile, recent work by people like Mike Pedler, John Burgoyne and Tom Boydell in their book *The Learning Company* (1991) has continued to emphasise the importance of looking at people as the core asset upon which companies build excellence.

The Learning Company is a vision of what might be possible. It is not brought about simply by training individuals; it can only happen as a result of learning at the whole organisational level:

A Learning Company is an organisation that facilitates the learning of all its members and continuously transforms itself.

This is the dream - that we can design and create organisations which are capable of adapting, changing, developing and transforming themselves in response to the needs, wishes and aspirations of people, inside and outside. (Pedler, Burgoyne and Boydell, 1991, p.1)

Notice that in this quotation the Learning Company is described as a vision in the first paragraph and a dream in the third paragraph. This is a vision of what might be possible, not brought about simply by training but by something called "learning at the whole organisational level." According to this theory, in-service training of the workforce, if it is something separate from the day to day process of working in the organisation, may actually have very little impact. People will fill in evaluation forms and say that the training was absolutely excellent, but if you ask them six months later what they actually did to change as a result of this training, they may be unable to give a single example of anything they put into practice. They may just have had a great day which stimulated their thinking for 24-48 hours but it went no further (see e.g. STAC, 1991).

But what does "learning at the whole organisational level" look like? How does a whole organisation learn? "A learning company is an organisation that facilitates the learning of all its members and continuously transforms itself." If this is the dream, how do we achieve it? Is it possible that action research methodology provides us with a mechanism which can begin to realise this vision of the learning company? Certainly, there is a lot of evidence that just because a company decides to call itself a learning company, and maybe to implement certain procedures, it doesn't necessarily become a continuously transforming organisation or exhibit a dramatic improvement towards "excellence".

Barriers to change in organisations

I don't know if you have had as much opportunity as I have to go into people's organisations and have a look at them. You get something of the same effect when you are new in an organisation. I have recently changed job and I have had virgin territory that I could explore for the last two months. Organisations are extraordinarily interesting and very complex. They can be wonderful places to work: they can also be so destructive to the people working in them that the negative impact is as bad as going through a divorce. I want to talk about a number of common characteristics of organisations that make them fascinating as the focus for research, and also make them very difficult places in which to bring about change.

There are always differences in values among all the individuals who make up the organisation. These include personal values, values springing from professional roots, values from childhood and life history. As a result individuals have very different goals and make different assumptions because they have come from different backgrounds. This is why decisions in organisations often appear to be made irrationally - what is rational for one person is often not rational for another.

Our goals and assumptions are always closely related to our function in an organisation. For example, some of us see ourselves primarily as teachers, others primarily as administrators or managers. Unavoidably our aims and goals will be different depending on what we are putting our main energy into day to day. It will be hard for me to understand that the managers aren't thinking that my teaching of this particular group on Friday afternoon is the core business of the organisation. It just seems crazy that anybody should not understand the primary importance of my teaching when I am putting so much energy into it. Likewise, if you are a manager and you want to make the business succeed, it seems crazy that teachers won't do things which would obviously make the

I would guess that there is a tension for you in whether the main aim of your organisation is to succeed as a school or as a business

business thrive financially. You ably ask yourself daily - why are they so obstructive?

Habits and routines of behaviour lock us into the system. We are also locked into informal roles. We soon become known as the person who is awkward, or the one who will always do the washing up, or the person you can rely on to go on that trip to the local architectural curiosity that no-one else likes going to. These roles extend to patterns of relationships: there are people who will help each other and people who, because of some obscure happening in the past, are slightly nervous of each other or implacably opposed. It is very difficult to break out of these patterns once they are established.

In all organisations there is some kind of hierarchy which accords differential power to individuals. In many organisations this hierarchy has a number of negative effects. It often prevents people from passing up useful advice to the managers above - they will say things like, "Why should I tell him? Why should I help? He is paid to do that job, too bad if that is going wrong." The corollary of that is that managers in an organisation are often sensitive about letting people below them see that they don't always know what to do. They feel the need always to be seen to be right. There develops a sensitivity about status and about being perceived as having lost control, which is nurtured by those lower in the hierarchy saying "He's paid to do that job and I'm not going to help." You get secrecy resulting from caution and defensiveness amongst manager - it is so much easier not to tell people about problems just in case they are upset and the unions become involved. The hierarchy separates us one from another, so that often we develop unrealistic expectations of what the other can achieve. Managers don't realise that if they ask you to teach another class you

will be practically on your knees. Teachers often don't realise - because they don't have access to all the necessary information - that it is beyond the power of managers to take a particular course of action. If you cannot get discussion going about changes which are being suggested from above, many of us are very good, just as good as kids are, at developing resistance strategies: e.g. we know how to divert the course of a meeting so that we never get to that particular item on the agenda.

The very language we use, in Foucault's terms (1972, p.31), is an instrument of this power play. So the club culture which is an important part of your organisation, the in-jokes, the shared references that give a sense of solidarity, of belonging, can actually exclude one group from another within the organisation so that certain jokes will only be open to certain people and others are made to feel isolated. There are often assumptions of shared meanings because you use the same terminology. Sometimes you can all be lulled into thinking that everybody has the same values, and it is only when two people try to work much closely together that you realise that they actually mean slightly different things by the same words. In all organisations there are things that can be said and things that cannot be said. Nias and colleagues in their case studies of primary schools, identified topics that they called "black holes." These were things that could never be mentioned because they would upset people; everyone knew about them, but as soon as the conversation started to move in the direction of that topic it was expertly steered away again. Do you see how dangerous that is? If you cannot admit the things that are most tension-making, if you can't address them, if you can't have dialogue about them, then there isn't a possibility to unpack them and relieve that tension

to bring about change.

The final barrier to change on my list is the demand and constraints imposed upon the organisation from outside. These may derive from the political situation in the country or from the imposition of local or national policies. I tried this idea out on somebody over supper. The person I talked to could quite quickly come up with an example of an apparent lack of student interest in materials she used in one of her lessons which, on investigation, turned out to result from the group's anxiety that there was a police informer among them. Now that is within the last 20 years in a European country, so there are all sorts of strange ways in which the external political situation of the country that you are working in may constrain what you do.

Some speculations about tensions in TEFL organisations

I have tried to imagine what might be some specially difficult features of working in TEFL organisations.

I would guess that there is a tension for you in whether the main aim of your organisation is to succeed as a school or to succeed as a business. Not everyone will feel this but I would guess that in some form most of you feel this tension. For instance, do the students come first? That means small classes, low fees. Or is it essential that the business makes money? Must that come first? If so, large classes, high fees. Is staff training a high priority or a low priority, interestingly it could be either for either case. You could have people who think it is mainly a school and put no priority on staff training, or people who think it is mainly a business and won't pay the money. It depends on how those values pan out. But there is likely to be some bias there which influences whether or

action research

not to pay for people like yourselves to come to a conference like this, for instance.

I would guess there is a tension in your TEFL organisation about its cultural identity. If I were to visit your organisation would I feel that I was looking at 'little England' - I'm talking now mainly to the people working overseas - or would I feel that I was coming into an organisation which was part of the local culture. The tension must surely be there as to whether you are importing culture from English speaking countries or you are part of the culture of the land where your school or organisation is located. As soon as you talk about English medium teaching, you may be bringing little England in and yet there are so many advantages to English medium teaching versus local language. What about gender equality? What do you do if you are working in a country where gender equality is not the norm? Do you go along with that? Do you import your own cultural values? When these topics come up in class, how do you address them? What about racial equality? If you are working in a country where different racial groups are not given the same status - because many countries have a multi-national population - is your school seen as politically radical or politically conservative? Are you trying to sit on the fence and not take any political line? Can you in fact do that if suddenly the government wants to sponsor a lot of students in your school?

Participatory action research: towards organisational transformation

If action research is to be effective in bringing about organisational change, it is clear that we are going to have to look at it in slightly different forms. I have found out in the work I have been doing for the past ten years that the nice, tight, rigorous structured action research process that I could do if I was working by myself, in my own classroom, had to change to a considerable extent if I wanted to work more broadly across the whole organisation. I have become very interested in participatory action research as a means of overcoming barriers to change.

In participatory action research the roles of researchers and participants are intentionally blurred: one or two people, or perhaps a small group, know that they are promoting participatory action research, but they conceive of their action research as a collaborative endeavour with the participants in the organisation - with colleagues that means and with people who are not such close colleagues, with students as well and perhaps with parents, or with businesses who sponsor students. The aim of this little core group, who know that they have an intention to bring about action research, is to encourage participation in the action research. The participation is itself a strategy for bringing about improvement and development: if you can involve people in just a small way in collecting data and analysing it, they will develop ownership of the ideas in a different way from anything that would be possible if you produced a report at the end of two years work and said, "Bingo, look what I've found out!" So participatory action research is about bringing people in, even in very small ways and to different degrees. It's back to the old saying, "slowly slowly catchee monkey." You are putting out incentives and encouraging involvement, encouraging participation.

To be this kind of action researcher, promoting participatory action research you have to understand that the more successful you are at bringing about participation from colleagues the less control you are going to have over the focus of the research and its outcomes. As colleagues become more involved and move from being participants and informants towards being researchers, they will begin to make an input into the analysis and interpretation of the data you have collected. They will have their suggestions about what it might be most interesting to do next

and to that extent you lose control. You get much more powerful opportunities for change but a loss of control over the direction of the change - which I find very exhilarating and a very interesting way of working - but it has to be said that you have to judge it, there may be certain things which, if you are in a senior management role, you may feel you cannot afford to let slip; perhaps you just have to say what those are and that becomes part of the data in your participatory action research.

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Suggested strategies for participatory
action research

Most of these strategies are suitable for any level of participatory
tion research. Very importantly they all need to be carried out
within a clear framework of written guidelines which set out who is
going to have access to information and how it is going to be used.
This is particularly important when participants have differential
power within the organisation. All of these strategies are about
building trust with colleagues in order to promote much greater
openness and honesty; this has to begin with confidential sharing of
experience and the decision about how to report to colleagues on
your work needs to be taken later as a separate step.

• Set up some multi-level action research led by at least two
partners, one teacher, one manager, so that when you run into the
need for administrative or structural change you have a partner
who can help you bring it about.

• Focus explicitly both on teaching and on good business
management, so that you bring that tension between the school as
chool and the school as a business out into the open -
acknowledging that it is not going to be a good school unless it
functions as a business, and it certainly is not going to be a good
business if it is not selling good education and good language
learning.

• Start a cyclical process of action research.

• Initiate consultation very early on with colleagues, perhaps
getting some action research commissioned by the whole staff or
commissioned by the Principal; if people feel you are working on
their behalf, there will be much more likelihood of their interest
and eventual participation.

Aim for gradually increasing participation of colleagues which
will mean a shift of control away from you, the initiator. You
have to learn that you may not like this - it is your baby, you
started it, you had your plans.

• Establish critical friend partnerships. Perhaps two teachers form a
partnership and start working in each other's classrooms
sometimes - even if it is only once a fortnight. They watch each
other teach and discuss it afterwards. Equally you can have
ical friend partnerships between two managers, a principal and
vice-principal, working together to improve their effectiveness in
their management role.

• Use interviews to raise awareness as well as to gather information.
For instance, when you find quite strong mismatches of
perception (e.g. some people are very anger about something
which others think is a really good idea), you can interview
representatives from both groups and use the opportunity to feed
back information as well as asking them questions. For example,
you might say to the Principal, "I know you think the proposed
open access learning centre is very important for the development
of the school. Did you know some people are rather unhappy
about it? I wonder if you could say something about why that
might be so and how they might be reassured."

• You can then produce cards on which you have written the
different points you got from the interviews. These cards can be
used to consult colleagues by asking them to construct a graphic
representation of the issues. For instance, ask if you can use
fifteen minutes of the staff meeting and say to colleagues, "Here

are all the different ideas I got from you all about the open access
learning centre. Please work in groups to prioritise these by
arranging them in a diamond shape with the most important one
at the top and the least at the bottom." This draws people into the
analytic process by feeding them back data and getting them
involved in thinking about the data analysing it.

• Set up safe observations, e.g. an observation of a meeting between
a group of staff. It is always interesting to feed back to those
present an analysis of how much time various people spent
speaking. This can be quite difficult data for people to accept - if,
for instance, it has been recorded that they spoke for 45% of the
time and someone else only spoke for 3%. If the analysis only
goes to the small number who were present at the meeting it is
easier to handle it.

• Keep field notes in which you record both factual information and
your thoughts and interpretations of events. Leave margins at the
right hand side of your notebook because it is often very
powerful to revisit the perceptions you had at the time and make
further notes with the benefit of hindsight and other data.

• Use photography. You can gather photographic data by taking a
frame every sixty seconds. If you have a fifty minute event and
take a photograph every minute you get an excellent record of
what happened; and you also have a focus for discussion which
stimulates people to talk in detail about what they were doing.

• Produce data summaries for discussion, thereby getting
colleagues to participate in analysis and interpretation of the data.

• Organise seminars at which colleagues, or you yourself, present
key ideas from recent reading. You cannot generate all the
knowledge and understanding you need from action research, so
don't waste the good ideas someone else has already thought of.
Then you can also have other seminars in which people put
forward the theories that are coming out of the action research
that is being done in your organisation

• Report back to colleagues through a seminar of this kind or in an
interim report to get responses to your interpretations, and then
incorporate their ideas into the final report so that it is no longer
just your document but colleagues have some ownership of it as
well.

• Perhaps try out some experimental reporting, e.g. involving
colleagues in drama to present a key idea, perhaps with alternative
endings to suggest different ways of addressing the same
problem. Use this again, as a means of drawing people into a
dialogue, whether as actor or audience.

The key thing is to keep people informed and build on their ideas in
order to increase their participation, to stop people from seeing
those of us who are action researchers as rather crazy people who
are beavering away by ourselves doing something esoteric and
strange. Otherwise the organisation will actually start to thrust you
out; it will begin to grow a skin around you and allow you to be a
little pearl sealed away and isolated so that you work can have no
impact. The aim of all these techniques is to make the exploration
very active, so that it is truly action research, with a strong
emphasis on both generating knowledge and promoting change
which is well-informed.