

## ATTENDING TO EXPERIENCE: Reflections on Engaging in Action Research

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As I thought about the invitation to contribute this paper to the inaugural issue of *Action Research*, stories and projects came into my mind, firstly stories about myself and projects where I work with others, both practitioners and academic colleagues. As I attempted to put some order on these reflections the structure suggested by Bill Torbert (1998) and Peter Reason (Reason & Bradbury, 2001) of first, second and third person research and practice seemed to integrate both the experiences on which I was reflecting and the points suggested by the invitation. Accordingly this paper follows that structure.

### **First Person Research**

My approach to this section is first person and focuses on a significant five year period in the early 1970s in which a new world opened up for me. There are four strands to what took place at this period.

In 1971 and subsequent years as was the fashion of the day, I participated in encounter groups. Two things came out of those experiences for me. One was my own personal development for me in my mid-twenties which I name in terms of growth in self-acceptance, particularly acceptance of feelings and friendship, giving and receiving feedback and a validation of my experience and ways of relating to others, particularly through active listening. The second learning developed from the first as I subsequently began to explore the writings of Carl Rogers whose concepts underpinned my encounter group experience. In Rogers' work, particularly his seminal book on client-centered therapy (1951), I discovered a well articulated discussion of the notion of the self and an approach to helping which took as its basis the self-directive nature of the person and the role of the professional helper as one who facilitates the client's self-directedness. Later I read an account of how Rogers developed his approach (Kirschenbaum & Henderson, 1990). After several interviews with a mother who was having problems with her son that showed no signs of improvement, Rogers and she were saying goodbye. As the mother was leaving the room she turned and asked "Do you ever take adults for counselling?" After an affirmative answer from Rogers she came back, sat down and "began to pour out her despair about her marriage, her troubled relationship with her husband, her sense of failure and confusion..." (p. 13). In Rogers words "real therapy" began there. What Rogers learned was that his time with the mother which hitherto had been focusing on how she could deal with her troublesome son with his expert help became less important when she wanted to focus on her own experience and he changed his approach as to how he could be helpful to her. Thus began Rogers' way of working with clients in therapy and the articulation of his approach over the flowing decades grew from his experience (Mearns and McLeod, 1984).

The second strand is my introduction to the work of the Canadian philosopher-theologian, Bernard Lonergan. In his early major work, Lonergan (1957; Tekippe, 1996; Flanagan, 1997) articulates an empirical method which describes the invariant structure of human knowing. He describes the human knower as a subject engaging in three cognitive operations - experiencing, understanding and judging. The person experiences some data in both outer (seeing, hearing, etc.) and inner (consciousness of one's seeing, hearing etc.) contexts. The person then inquires into that experience and seeks an insight into what the experience is (understanding). The insight comes and is followed by reflecting and weighing up the evidence to whether the insight is correct or not (judgement). As there is so much to be known, insights are followed by further insights and so development is possible. A process of self-consciousness occurs through experience, understanding and judgement about one's experience, understanding and judgement.

A similar process for a course of action takes the person through the same set of, a) experiencing the situation, b) using sensitivity, imagination and intelligence to answer the question for understanding as to what possible courses of action might be, c) reflecting on the possible value judgements as to what is the best option and d) deciding to follow through the best value judgement and being responsible for consistency in knowing and doing. There is no guarantee that a person will attend to experience and the search for insight. A person can fly from insight, resist the truth and try to escape responsibility. Hence for Lonergan, authenticity is characterized by four process imperatives. Be attentive. Be intelligent. Be reasonable. Be responsible.

Both Rogers and Lonergan focus on the conscious mind. While Rogers invites us to reflect on our feelings and learn to differentiate them, appropriate them and own them, Lonergan focuses on the operations of the process of knowing and of acting. What I was learning from both of them was an attention to experience and a method of reflection which does not stop at introspection but drives towards meaning and value and ultimately action.

The third strand grows out of my Christian faith, within the Roman Catholic tradition and Ignatian spirituality in particular. So called, "Ignatian" spirituality, derives from the life and work of the sixteenth century Ignatius of Loyola (Londsdale, 1990). In its essence the Ignatian approach to spirituality views God as one who is active in the world and who invites individuals to, a) seek and find God in the experience of their own lives and of the world and b) respond in action. Ignatius articulated a methodology of an interaction of prayer and action. Lonergan was deeply influenced by Ignatius and his empirical method has integral links to spirituality. Spirituality in Lonergan's thought is an integration of head and heart about using head and heart to touch ordinary living and about religious transcendence to heal the ills of the world (Dunne, 1985).

For me formed through Ignatian approach, my life is about my being in the world, acknowledging my own sin and the evil of social and structural sin of the world, knowing how I am forgiven and that I am desirous to respond to Jesus Christ who calls me to collaborate with him. I believe that God has hopes and desires for me and my lifeworld. My lifeworld in academic life finds me perched

me on the boundaries of applied behavioural science and a sense of religious ministry in that life (Sorensen & Yaeger, 1997). Accordingly in terms of both Ignatius and Lonergan, I try to attend to how my spiritual development occurs in the events of everyday life as I attempt to attend to experience, make judgements and take responsibility for my actions, which take place within the context of a growing conversion to God's loving action in the world.

The fourth strand is my introduction to organisation development (OD), particularly the writings of Ed Schein and Dick Beckhard in the 1969 volumes of the seminal Addison-Wesley OD series. In Schein I found an approach to inquiry into organisational dynamics which echoed Rogers' client-centred approach and which aimed at helping clients manage change in their organisations (Schein, 1999). Latterly, Schein (1987, 1995, 2001; Quick & Garvin, 2000) made explicit links and distinctions between process consultation and action research and formulated his notion of clinical inquiry.

In Beckhard I discovered a framework for working with large systems which posed questions about the kinds of issues leaders and facilitators of large systems change need to address. This framework and subsequent variations are now well-established in the organisation development (OD) literature, and include inquiry into why change is required, what the system's desired future is, whose support is essential for change to take place, how the transition is to be managed and so on. These issues form a structure for leaders and members of organisations to inquire into how their system might change and so enables the development of key analytic and diagnostic frames of reference to form the basis for action. Beckhard's approach is grounded in action research, where he approaches his work as an OD consultant whose role is to enable the internal experts to lead and manage the change (Beckhard, 1997).

As I moved into graduate studies I discovered Lewin and the action research OD tradition which flowed from his life and work. For Lewin, it was not enough to try to explain things; one also had to try to change them. It was clear to Lewin and others that working at changing human systems often involved variables that could not be controlled by traditional research methods, developed in the physical sciences. These insights led to the development of action research and the powerful notion that human systems could only be understood and changed if one involved the members of the system in the inquiry process itself. So the tradition of involving the members of an organization in the change process which is the hallmark of OD originated in a scientific premise that this is the way a) to get better data and b) to effect change (Coghlan, 2002a). For me, critical to engaging in organisational change involves some form of educational interventions which facilitate members of the systems with which I'm working to reflect on their experience and try to learn from them. Approaches such as action learning complement action research. So while I am attempting to enable my clients to engage in learning in action, I am always trying to do action research.

This five year period, from about 1970 to 1975, was very formative for me. It was only later, when I was more active in academic life, that I fitted the pieces together and reflected on how my formation was grounded in working from

experience and in a way of being which both inquired into experience and attended to the process of inquiry.

Lonergan's epistemology and methodology form the basis for attending to a) my own cognitive and acting operations, b) working with individuals' cognitive and acting operations and c) seeking to enquire into how groups, communities and organisations create meaning and act within those meanings, a perspective which is informed by Schein's work on organisational culture (Schein, 1992).

## Second Person Research

A critical aspect of action research work is how one engages with others in learning-in-action. Accordingly, my second person research focus is on how I engage in action research with others. In my view this encapsulates the themes of the operationalization, design, conduct and support of my action research work. As an academic in a university A good deal of my second person action research work typically focuses on working with practitioners in the context of postgraduate executive education. It is this activity that I'm attending to particularly in this article.

## Insider Action Research

I facilitate practitioners to reflect on their experiences of their own organisations and work with them to lead change. Such work ranges across sectors, from industry to health care. Building on some core themes from clinical inquiry, these practitioners engage in learning to diagnose and treat organisational dysfunctions and pathologies, through, in depth observation of crucial cases of learning and change, studying the effects of interventions, focusing on pathologies and post-mortems as a way of building a theory of organisational health, focusing on puzzles and anomalies that are difficult to explain, building theory and empirical knowledge through developing concepts which capture the real dynamics of the organisation and focusing on the characteristic of systems and systemic dynamics (Schein, 1997). A particular focus for attention is how individuals, teams, the interdepartmental group and the organisation influence each other (Rashford & Coghlan, 1994). This is a fruitful basis for inquiry into experience as it reflects a central element of individuals' experience of the complexity of organisations (Coghlan, 2002b).

Lonergan's focus on questions and the heuristic process of searching for understanding, weighing evidence and seeing what further questions need to be asked in order to make a reasonable judgement and take responsible action is the basis for working with practitioners. I draw on Schein's (1999) typology of inquiry and intervention to enable engagement in the process of knowing, deciding and acting (Coghlan & Brannick, 2001). Schein's typology comprises three forms of inquiry.

- *Pure inquiry* whereby I prompt the elicitation of the story and attempt to listen carefully. So I ask, "what happened?" and then attempt to follow the story and inquire into the presentation of the events which the practitioner wishes to recount.

- *Exploratory/Diagnostic inquiry* is where I go beyond the narrative of the story and inquire into how the practitioner has experienced and understood the events of the story. So I may inquire into the practitioner's a) reasoning processes ("What do you think about this? What do you think was going on? How do you understand what has happened?"), b) emotional processes ("How do you feel?") and c) actions ("What do you intend to do?").
- *Confrontive inquiry* is where I may intervene with my own perspective and ideas content and process. ("Have you thought about...? Maybe you might consider...")

### Third Person Research

Third person research, in its most common form, is the dissemination of the research to the impersonal world. Its most authentic form is where it emerges from the explicit accounts of first and second practice. The two key third person expressions of my work with practitioners doing action research in their own organisations are, firstly dissemination of their work and secondly dissemination of my reflections on the issues and challenges of engaging in insider action research. I'm currently engaging in work in progress with several practitioners who have engaged in insider action research and we are aiming to publish these works over the coming few years.

The area of insider action research is not well developed in the literature and so I have engaged in reflecting on its dynamics (Coghlan, 2001; Coghlan & Brannick, 2001; Coghlan & Casey, 2001). The issues of using one's preunderstanding, dealing with role duality and managing organisational politics are serious challenges for those who undertake action research in their own organisational systems. With regard to third person insider action research work with practitioners, that itself is an ongoing action research project in the manner suggested by Kaplan (1998) in his notion of "innovation action research". Kaplan presents an action research cycle of i) observing and documenting practice, ii) teaching and speaking about it, iii) writing articles and books, iv) implementing the concept and iv) moving to advanced implementation. In this manner I am moving towards advanced implementation.

### Concluding Remarks

In this paper by means of first person inquiry, I have reflected on the philosophical tenets which guide my action research work. The influence of Rogers, Ignatius, Lonergan, Schein and Beckhard on my thinking at a formative stage of my life was later deepened through introduction to Lewin and the early OD people who developed the action research approach in OD. First person practice involves an inward attention to my own cognitive operations and learning about myself and an outward focus on the dynamics of myself in action. Through second person practice I have described how I work with practitioners. With Lonergan's four process imperatives - be attentive, be intelligent, be reasonable

and be responsible in my mind I utilize Schein's intervention typology as a mechanisms for working with practitioners to facilitate their reflection on their experience of attempting to change their own organisations. In each instance there is an effort to disseminate experience and learning to third party audiences and readership in third person practice.

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