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Milano, C, Lawless, A and Eades, E (2015) Insider research as part of a master's programme: opportunities lost and found within action learning sets. Action Learning: research and practice, 12 (3). pp. 317-324. ISSN 1476-7341

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Insider research as part of a Masters programme: Opportunities lost and found within action learning sets

Abstract

This account explores the role of action learning during and after an educational programme. We focus on the final stage of a masters' programme and the insider research that is a key feature in many UK universities. Researching within and on one's own organization should lead to individual and organizational learning. However, there is relatively little published on how, indeed if, this learning occurs.

Our account contributes to this gap and in doing so draws attention to the ethical and political challenges which can arise when undertaking research within one's own organization. We present the tale of two sets, one during and one after an educational programme. In doing so, we highlight the tensions involved in integrating learning with problem solving. We illustrate how learning which seemed initially to be lost was later found through action learning.

Keywords: Insider research, critical reflection, organizing insight, problem solving, learning

Introduction

This account explores the role of action learning during and after an educational programme. In doing so, we draw attention to opportunities for learning which seemed initially to be lost; but were later found. In constructing the account we focus on the insider research conducted by Chloe, in part fulfilment of her masters' qualification in Human Resources (HR). This final stage of her masters' journey was supported by an action learning set which was facilitated by Aileen. On completion of the masters Aileen introduced Chloe to Elaine; at that time Elaine worked in the same organization as Chloe. We all shared an interest in insider research and action learning and were enthused by the opportunity to learn with and from each other.

Insider research is a key aspect of many professional masters and professional doctoral programmes. A distinguishing feature of insider research is that it is conducted within the employing organization and provides an opportunity to bridge the perceived divide between practice and research. However, despite this potential insider research receives scant attention in the published research literature (Coghlan & Brannick, 2010). This account contributes to the identified gap and is one outcome of our collaborative learning. In constructing this account of practice we present two tales, one of learning lost and one of learning found. The first tale draws on Chloe's and Aileen's reflections of the learning that occurred during this masters' programme. The second tale incorporates Elaine's reflections as we three authors continued to learn with and from each other. In doing so, we draw attention to the

ethical and political challenges which arose during Chloe's insider research project and explore how learning appeared to be lost, but was later found, through the process of action learning.

Action learning and the masters programme

See email

During the final stage of the masters' journey students participated in six action learning set meetings to support their individual insider research projects. All students worked as full time HR practitioners and were sponsored by their employing organization. Prior to commencing the action learning sets students had completed a research methods module and successfully submitted a research proposal. In order to pass the proposal students needed to demonstrate they had considered the ethical and access issues involved in completing the proposed research.

As a masters (level 7) programme the research provided an opportunity for students to demonstrate they were able to: *'deal with complex issues both systematically and creatively, make sound judgements in the absence of complete data, and communicate their conclusions clearly to specialist and non-specialist audiences.'* (QAA, 2008:21).

The notion of a 'complex issue' aligns with the focus on 'wicked problems' within action learning. At the first set meeting this QAA level descriptor was discussed and the purpose of the set agreed. Set members wanted the set to be a 'safe place' to discuss the ongoing research process and to practise communicating their emerging understanding of the research problem. In the spirit of action learning all students circulated their marked proposals and began to discuss the support they had from the organization. Students began to question the level of support they actually had and if the organization really wanted the 'use' value of their research (their conclusions and recommendations) or just the 'exchange' value (the level 7 qualification). This triggered a conversation concerning the need for on-going critical reflection about the research process and the ideal that learning could emerge for the individual and the employing organization.

Throughout the programme Aileen had discussed with the students the ideal of academics and practitioners 'becoming' critically reflective practitioners (Lawless & McQue, 2008). Reynolds' four characteristics of critical reflection had provided a framework for reflection during the programme and at the end of each set meeting. Concerned with questioning assumptions, focus is social rather than individual; pays particular attention to the analysis of power relations and is concerned with emancipation (Reynolds, 1998). This explicit focus on critical reflection aligns with critical action learning. In discussing action learning during the programme students had been introduced to the notion of 'organizing insight', Vince (2004). This adds a

further dimension to the well-known equation $L = P + Q$. So within the context of this set action learning was portrayed as $L = P + Q + O$. Vince (2004) argues that organizing insight provides a link between action learning and organizational learning and requires: '*an examination of the politics that surround and inform organizing.*' (Vince, 2004: 74).

In discussing the learning (L) initially lost we highlight how expert knowledge (P), questioning insight (Q) and organizing insight (O) emerged within the set. However, as the set progressed, expert knowledge (P) was prioritized to the detriment of Q and O. We have focused on Chloe's insider research to illustrate how an unexpected ethical dilemma provided an opportunity for learning. However, this opportunity was not fully realised and additional time and space was needed for the learning to be re-found. Chloe (as the student) and Aileen (as the set facilitator) have constructed this account of the learning lost during the masters programme. We have drawn on our individual reflective notes which were written after each set meeting. This is the sense we have made of an emerging ethical dilemma and the learning which was lost during the action learning on this masters' programme.

The Insider Research

Chloe's research explored female academics' perceptions of asymmetrical institutional male and female power-relations on female career progression. During this time she was employed, as a HR professional, by the university where she conducted the research. Her research was supported and sponsored by her employer and they expected recommendations which would inform the organization's gender equality plan. She believed that her role would allow her to achieve sufficient access to female academic colleagues. Her initial focus question was: 'Does being female impact career progression at this UK University?' Over a nine month period Chloe utilised her position in HR to gain access to participants, engaged in informal conversations and arranged interviews with a range of female academics.

An emerging dilemma

During an early set meeting Chloe reported how delighted she was with the amount of data she was getting. She stated that her interviews worked well, discussion flowed and there was rarely a need to prompt for further detail. The interviewees universally expressed their support for her research and were keen to recommend HR-lead initiatives which could address the various issues raised by them. The set discussed the 'increased trust' afforded to insiders and concluded that it was this trust (vital in a HR role) which had led to increased openness.

However, in a subsequent set meeting Chloe reported a troubling quote:

'I'd appreciate it if you didn't report this particular example'

This left her with a dilemma: to quote or not to quote? She explained how she had heard versions of the above phrase repeated in several interviews, often in relation to detailed disclosure of fascinating and sensitive information.

Learning lost

Chloe's dilemma was discussed during a set meeting and this resulted in a lively discussion regarding the role of the researcher (as a HR professional) and research ethics. The students concluded that it was vital that Chloe (and other set members) retained the trust of participants and respected their request not to be quoted. The need to protect participants by ensuring anonymity was considered essential for the insider (HR) researcher to maintain professional credibility.

The focus of the set was on completing the research in order to achieve the masters' qualification. The set questioned Chloe on the aim of her research which she articulated as: 'to identify common barriers to female career progression and to recommend supportive initiatives.' The set members concluded that the inclusion of particular sensitive examples was non-essential to address this research aim.

Chloe successfully submitted her research project and achieved her masters' qualification. Her project resulted in recommendations which informed her university's gender equality plan. Arguably the problem had been resolved but to what extent had learning occurred at this stage of the masters' journey?

Action Learning beyond the masters programme

An espoused outcome of this masters' programme was to enable academics and students to 'become' critically reflective practitioners. Action learning as ethos and method appeared to support this outcome and action learning sets were fundamental to the programme design. A questioning of taken-for-granted assumptions is central to the ideals of critically reflective practice and Reynolds (1998) emphasises the social aspect of this questioning. To some extent Aileen, as the set facilitator, encouraged the students to confront the social and political forces which provided the context of their work. However, the focus on completing the research on time, in order to achieve the masters' qualification, detracted from this learning.

Pedler (2005:5) cautions:

the critical view is at its best in pointing out what is wrong, and less strong on the urgent concern with how best to go on. What right do we have to criticise without the honest intention and heart felt commitment to join in to make things better?

Elaine and Aileen are aware of this criticism and having previously worked in the same institution, teaching on this masters' programme, we have had the opportunity to write about some of our concerns (Corley & Eades, 2006). We have also tried to practice what we preach and within the programme design we included a final

'cathartic' set meeting for students when they submit the dissertation. It was during this final set that Chloe began to question if the omissions had impacted on the weight of evidence to support her recommendations. At that time Elaine no longer worked in the same institution as Aileen but they had continued to research together. Indeed, Elaine and Chloe now worked in the same university and both had an interest in female careers; Elaine, as a female academic, could have been one of Chloe's participants. It was this common interest in insider research and action learning which brought us together as we focused on the 'wicked problem' of Chloe being asked not to quote.

Learning found

We meet several times and worked as an un-facilitated set, questioning some of the taken-for-granted assumptions which had remained unquestioned during the masters' programme. In particular, we questioned the power relations between the researcher and the researched focusing on Chloe's particular research context. What follows is an account of our joint sense making and all three authors (Chloe, Aileen & Elaine) have contributed to constructing this account of the learning found within this set.

While several interviewees described the interview process as 'cathartic' and likened it to a 'counselling session' we questioned whether this increased trust and disclosure is a double-edged sword. In requesting not to be quoted the female academics Chloe was interviewing created an ethical and a political dilemma for the researcher. Was this deliberate? Chloe's HR role is different to the academics interviewed, though arguably they have similarities. But are they on equal terms? In one sense Chloe is in a position of some power and influence, particularly in respect of which aspects of the research she chooses to include or exclude. In another sense, though, she is in a weaker position. Chloe has to 'sell' her proposals at a later date to her superiors, and she has to produce a 'professional' report which will be valued by her employer. An academic (being interviewed) who identifies a major issue and then requests this is not used in the report leaves this 'monkey' on Chloe's back; how is she to resolve it? In Corley and Eades (2006) we describe our concerns that as academics and researchers, in relation to our Masters students, (who are assessed by us) it is hard to claim that in any sense there is an equality of position and status that puts us 'on equal terms'. The potential inequality in Chloe's case is we believe far more complex.

The set after the masters provided Chloe with a 'safe space' to explore the role ambiguity she had faced. On the one hand, as a HR professional, feeling such matters should be reported (at least to members of the HR team) in order for the situation to improve for participants. On the other hand, as an insider researcher feeling compelled to ensure participants' requests were respected not only to ensure their protection but to maintain personal and professional credibility. We discussed the implications of participants perceiving a breach of trust and how this would have

a negative impact on Chloe's career. In particular, given that Chloe worked in a university context where research outputs would be read.

Elsewhere we have reported fuller detail on the learning that was found (Roberts et al. 2012). The focus of this account of practice is to draw attention to the insights into action learning we have gained and the lessons we would like to share.

Insights Gained: the learning equation

Our account of two action learning sets, during and after a masters' education programme, draws attention to the complexities inherent within the learning equation: $L=P+Q+O$.

Despite a focus on critical reflection during the masters educational programme questioning insight (Q) was limited. The ethical dilemma that arose during Chloe's insider research was viewed as a problem to be solved. This led to an over reliance on expert knowledge (P), and a simplified view of research ethics. This hampered development of organizing insight (O) within this set. It is for this reason that we believe learning was lost and we would represent the learning with this set as: $L=P+q+o$, the lower case (q and o) representing the subversion of these processes within this particular set.

The programme design enabled the students to participate in a further set and this account of practice illustrates how Chloe extended her opportunity for action learning beyond the masters' programme. In re-visiting the ethical dilemma that arose during Chloe's insider research we (the authors of this account of practice) created a 'safe place' to further question (Q) Chloe's research. We were less constrained by time pressures and had an opportunity to explore future expert knowledge (P), while examining the politics involved in 'doing' this insider research. It is for this reason that we believe learning was found and we would represent the learning with this set as: $L=P+Q+O$, the upper case representing the equal value of these processes within this particular set.

Lessons learnt and conclusions

Our account draws attention to the integral relationship between problem solving and learning (Rigg, 2015). We highlight how time pressures to complete an educational programme can lead to an over focus on problem solving and students over relying on expert knowledge (P) to the detriment of learning.

Time pressures within education are clearly evidenced by university performance targets which focus on measuring the time taken to complete an educational programme. This focus on the destination of learning, rather than the journey for learning undermines the potential of action learning; inevitably this focus will result in learning being lost. In addition, Trehan identifies renewed pressures within the UK to: *'educate students for management/development practice as opposed to educate*

them about management and what it does'. (Trehan 2014: 1). She argues for more reflexive approaches and a synthesis of theory and practice.

So what does our account suggest as a way forward with this pressurised educational context? Revans viewed the set as central to action learning and regarded sets as part of wider networks of sets in organizations, not as stand-alone entities. Our account of practice highlights how learning was found after the educational programme was completed. We believe that is the enduring contribution of action learning, once found it is never truly lost.

Notes on Contributors

Chloe Milano is an experienced HR professional within the UK Higher Education sector. She has recently participating in the Aurora Leadership programme which aims to encourage a wide range of women in academic and professional roles to think of themselves as leaders, to develop leadership skills, and to help institutions maximise the potential of these women.

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Elaine Eades is Director of MBA Programmes, University of Liverpool management School.

Acknowledgement: Dr Frank Worthington, Newcastle University who provided us with expert knowledge (P) and additional questioning (Q) which enabled us to further develop organizing insight (O) and learning (L).

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