

CREATING OPPORTUNITIES FOR CONTINUOUS DEVELOPMENT: ACTION LEARNING PRINCIPLES MAY SHOW THE WAY

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ABSTRACT

Faced with strong competition for government research funds to enable its survival and growth, the School of Business at Swinburne University set in place a number of strategies aimed at changing the old consulting culture into a thriving research and publishing culture. Successful in initiating strategies that have effectively promoted and supported teachers' initial research efforts, it is now time to vigorously engage the academic staff in a process of continuous development as published researchers. It is posited that the conscious application of action learning principles may show the way.

INTRODUCTION

It is posited that action learning is a useful process whereby academic staff may engage in their continuous development as published researchers. Due to the Government's economic rationalist approach to tertiary education, since the early 1990s business schools such as that in new universities like Swinburne, have had to expand their teaching and consulting cultures to incorporate research. Many took up the challenge. For all their success, more needs to be done. It is now time to take the next step and focus on a continuous and visible process of professional, and personal, development of academic staff as published researchers.

A Change of Culture

In the case in point the School of Business academics had always shared a vision of themselves as excellent vocational teachers and consultants to industry in their particular areas of expertise. Those "mavericks" who did challenge the rules, in the days before Swinburne became a University, by completing PhD's and writing research-based articles, found that their efforts were ignored, or openly derided. With the promulgation of Swinburne as a University in its own right, however, the way became open for a change in leadership to tackle the problem of changing the embedded anti-research culture to a positive culture where research could flourish, researchers could thrive, and the School of Business could prosper. Management hoped that by developing strategies for the management of research activity and quantum within the School, the culture would stretch to include research as a legitimate and valued activity [2].

It would appear, however, that having achieved considerable success in moving from near zero research output in 1997, to more than 100 publications in 2002 [4] across the School, the academic staff, most particularly the non-professorial staff that is, appear to have settled comfortably into their individual routines, successfully incorporating into their workload sufficient research to satisfy at least the Head of School's minimum yearly research output requirement of one approved publication per annum. Recently, however, management has felt the need to shift the focus of academics from simply meeting the Head's minimum requirement, to a commitment to continuous development as published researchers. However, apart from a couple of private declarations between co-researchers to take further

action, known to the authors here, there has not been any visible, public, commitment by the non-professorial academics generally, at the time of writing, to do so. The authors here, however, are convinced of the need for themselves, in particular, and the academic staff generally, to develop their professional research and publication skills, and posit that the conscious application of action learning principles may provide real opportunities for this growth to occur.

Action Learning, or Learning by Doing

The methodology that informs this research is focussed on action learning, or 'learning by doing'. As such, the researchers (and authors here), are subjects of the research, and their learnings constitute the data to be analysed for this paper. Learning by doing, or 'action learning', is 'a powerful and very cost effective ... approach to learning by using personal experience and reflection, group discussion and analysis, trial and error discovery, and learning from one another' [3, p.58].

When the people in the system are open to change in the environment, change tends to come about. The process of knowing about the system is also a part of the system, and people use their knowledge to make decisions and to act. Arguably, it is the academic's personal reflections on the experience of doing research and being published, that will best influence the system in which they work and becomes a source of change within it.

Applying Action Research Techniques

With a change of leadership at the top imminent, this would seem the ideal moment, then, to emulate other successful businesses that 'take a proactive rather than a reactive approach ... and ... strive to influence, anticipate, and initiate rather than just respond to events' [1, p.22]. The authors, having engaged with the process of learning-by-doing from the initial movement of the School towards becoming a research culture, and finding the process to have helped in their own early development as researchers, chose to use the method again to come to some understanding of where the social system that is the School of Business, is at now. It can be said, for instance, that the School has successfully stretched its old teaching and consulting culture, to incorporate research. It has done this by the addition of research active staff, growing almost all other staff into a research role, increasing publications, strengthening its grant program, and so on.[5]. However, analysis of the School of Business Research Output Database (2002) [4] reveals that more than one-third of the non-professorial academics, having solved the problem of how to meet their minimum yearly research requirement, feel fairly comfortable and settled, and see no further reason to do more. (The authors themselves fall within the top 18%, substantially exceeding the required minimum research output).

Reflecting on their own experiences of the last five years, the authors realised that although they had clearly made use of action learning techniques to develop their individual, and joint (they have published many papers together), research strategies, they had stopped short of systematically following through with the latter steps in the learning-by-doing process. That is, they had not given sufficient time and space overall (with the exception of a one-off, very small focus group event) to making sure that the social system that is the School received full feedback on the new actions that had worked -such as networks, and informal mentoring systems, and collaboration across disciplines - in helping stretch the culture to include research. Space for new questions to be raised and discussed may also have been inadequate to date. There was also the realisation that the action learning process itself, was intimidating to some, as it has the capacity to raise the unpleasant and negative, as well as the positive and exciting, and therefore makes some people feel acutely uncomfortable. This may also mean that the less confident researchers feel exposed to their colleagues - another uncomfortable place to be. These feelings may then contribute to any lack of enthusiasm to do more than just meet the minimum requirement. The use of the process may also be misunderstood. This became apparent to the authors who were told, on one occasion, that they were simply using their colleagues as research subjects. This attitude resulted in a number of people deliberately absenting themselves from certain workshops/seminars. Reflection has also led to the realisation that there does not appear to be any real incentive for the staff generally to do more than they must to meet their minimum requirement, let

alone engage with a process such as action learning. The authors hypothesise that those who have progressed as researchers most probably would have done so regardless, whereas those who were basically disinterested, or scared of involvement at the start, have remained so.

What meaning may be derived from these reflections? On the one hand, these reflections have helped the researchers here understand that they have fallen short of implementing the full learning-by-doing process, and by so doing have failed to make available to the School knowledge that may have proved to be helpful to others. On the other hand, a number of gaps in present knowledge about 'where the School is at now' have been identified. These gaps present an opportunity to ask the academics, and in particular, perhaps, the non-professorial staff, whether or not they would like to improve their research practice, and if so, what would they like to see provided, that would help them. A question about their perceptions of action learning as a continuous development method could also be asked. By studying the responses a clearer way forward may be identified.

Summary and Conclusion

It is clear that the School of Business at the centre of this research has indeed successfully stretched its old teaching and consulting culture to incorporate research, and it has done so across the board and in different aspects. The external and internal context to which the School is subject strongly suggests that it should not only continue to grow its research activities, but that it needs to create continuous opportunities for the professional and personal development of its academic staff. Suffice it to say, however, that vigorous involvement in a process of action learning can be a very useful tool for change for vocational teachers learning, by necessity, to become published researchers. However, without a commitment to the process that is on-going, and critical, further interest in research and development as researchers, may come to a standstill, predetermining a level of research output that may yet see the School succumb to the internal and external pressures to which it is subject.

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