

PAPER
34

University learning

Dick, Bob (1997) Universities are learning organisations, aren't they? An invited talk given at Southern Cross University, 9 October 1997.

I was given an enticing brief indeed: to talk about my passions. This isn't the venue I'd choose to talk about some of them. But important amongst those I *have* chosen to talk about are learning, action research, and universities. I expect these are passions (or at least interests) that many of you share.

The title of this talk was prompted by an evaluation of an action learning program Cliff Bunning and I carried out not long ago at a university I'll leave anonymous. (It wasn't Southern Cross.) Cliff was interviewing the Dean of Research when the topic of "learning organisations" came up. The Dean said something like "Of course we're a learning organisation — we're a university!"

We knew what people in the action learning teams said about their learning. Almost all of them reported that they learned much more about their work and about the university during the action learning program than they did in the normal course of their work. Many of them identified barriers which discouraged

learning and innovation in their day to day job. For that matter, some of them reported that much of their learning within the program was in spite of the actions of the university.

I think the Dean must have had a view of learning different from the one I hold.

The medium is the message?

Can I invite you to humour me for a while, and imagine that Marshall McLuhan was right when he said: “the medium is the message”. People learn less from *what* is taught than *how* it is taught.

And — if you’ll humour me a little longer — I invite you to join me in a little diagnosis. I’ll name some aspects of university life. You are invited to identify the message about learning that is carried by the process.

If the medium is a typical classroom session what is the message?

If the medium is a typical performance review what is the message?

If the medium is a typical committee meeting what is the message?

If the medium is a typical promotion decision what is the message?

If the medium is typical enterprise bargaining what is the message?

I expect you can identify some other common situations which might be useful for diagnosis.

A learning organisation?

What would a “learning organisation” be like? I’m using the phrase in its current fashionable sense, where it is built on the ideas of people like Peter Senge. Put very simply, a learning organisation is one which is sensitive to, and

responsive to, its environment. As a whole organisation and in its various parts it is capable of adjusting quickly to the demands of the moment.

Such a definition might well remind us that the concept is older than the label. I would guess that there have always been organisations which were responsive: organisations which learned quickly. I expect that even before the times of recorded history there were organisations which depended upon responsiveness for their survival.

In the form “organisational learning”, the label isn’t as new as its fad status might lead you to imagine. Chris Argyris and Don Schön used it as the title for an important book they wrote in 1978 (and substantially revised in 1996). I’ll return to them later.

We can decide later how well universities fare. First let’s consider what “organisational learning” might look like in practice at individual, team and organisational level. We can then ask how an organisation might go about enhancing its individual and collective learning.

Individual

From my experience, it seems to me that there are a number of conditions which seem make it easier for individuals to learn, and to know that they have done so. You might like to examine the following in the light of your personal experience.

Foremost amongst these conditions is that ...

- people can afford to experiment with new ways of doing their work

That is, they *can afford* to take risks and *to make mistakes*. It seems, though, that the learning often remains invisible unless ...

- they are able to find or create time to *reflect* on their experience

This in turn seems to be helped considerably if ...

- they have opportunities to *talk about their experience* with others, and can afford to do so

If these conditions are fulfilled, new learning is potentially available to the organisation. That doesn't necessarily mean that the potential is achieved.

Collective

There are conditions which help individual learning to become collective learning. Again, you are invited to carry out your own diagnosis.

The conditions include ...

- individuals can *talk openly about their mistakes* to their colleagues, including their superiors

That much at least makes the learning public. There is still a question about its use. So it also requires ...

- a culture which encourages *listening* to one's colleagues and *learning* collectively *from* individual and collective *experience*

But even then there are obstacles to actual use. Sometimes it is easier to be first than to be second. So it also seems important that there is ...

- *honour in being* the *second* (or third or thirty-third) to adopt an innovation, and not just the first.

It is often the team which mediates between the individual and the organisation.

The team

The team climate and culture can therefore essentially determine both the amount of individual learning which occurs, and how much of it becomes collective learning.

Transforming existing teams is usually difficult. First, some are teams only in name: people work as individuals, with individual tasks. Second, changing an organisation chart does little to change the leadership and followership styles of the team leader and members. In many teams the culture and climate are historical baggage left over from earlier structures. Third, many team leaders manage only downward. Yet often the effectiveness of the team to the organisation depends upon leaders who manage upward and outwards.

A consequence is that it is often easier to create new structures for particular projects than to convert an existing team. This is what action learning does.

Action learning

When Reg Revans first developed action learning, a learning team usually consisted of senior managers (often CEOs) from different organisations, talking together about their experience in those organisations. It was facilitated initially, to help it get off to a good start. Nowadays it is more likely to be a project team from within the same organisation, working on a collective project. Such teams are usually facilitated, though not always.

Sometimes it may be an intact team seeking to improve its current functioning. More often it is a temporary and special purpose team set up to deal with a particular project. The success of such teams depends upon creating the type of climate I've described above. In a facilitated team this often becomes primarily the facilitator's responsibility.

One way of describing the required climate is as Argyris does. In a 1982 book he describes a more *usual* team climate as observing the following values:

*“Achieve the purposes as the actor perceives them
Maximise winning and minimise losing
Minimise eliciting negative feelings
Be rational and minimise emotionality”*

He makes the point that this produces adversarial and defensive action strategies, poor relationships, and poor learning. He recommends substituting the following values:

*“Valid information
Free and informed choice
Internal commitment to the choice and constant monitoring of the
implementation”*

My own preference is for a team which provides its own facilitation. Action research can then provide a conceptual model and process to help it do so.

Action research

I mentioned before that learning can often be tacit. That’s fine — we all know more than we can explain, and often it is an advantage to be able to act without conscious thought. Innovation and responsiveness, however, are more easily achieved if we can bring our tacit learning to consciousness. Action research provides for this by alternating action with critical reflection.

The critical reflection takes two forms. Before action, it consists of careful planning based on explicit assumptions. Preferably, it involves those affected as part of the planning. After action, it consists of critical review. This leads naturally into the next planning cycle.

Such a cycle also makes easier the task of getting started when you don’t know how to start. Try anything. Observe the results. Plan something better in the light of what happens.

Universities?

I don’t think there is any need to offer you my diagnosis of this university, beyond saying this ... In my experience, universities enhance individual and collective learning about as much as most other organisations. In other words, not

much. As they claim to be in the business of helping people learn, I think that's cause for concern.

In some respects universities have advantages over other organisations. There is more autonomy, for example. (I agree that it is rapidly being eroded.) In other respects they offer fewer advantages. In my judgment there is less team work. I experience them as much more ideological and conservative than they would acknowledge.

My guess is that many of you are critically reflective about the *content* of your work, whether it is research or teaching or something else. I'm less sure about the process. If the medium is even partly the message, it may be important that the processes by which you teach and research and work are subject to the same critical reflection. And, if this is to be a learning organisation, it may be important that you do what you can to help others to do likewise.

Argyris, Chris (1982) *Reasoning, learning and action: individual and organizational*. San Francisco, Ca.: Jossey-Bass.

Argyris, C., and Schön, D.A. (_1978) *Organizational learning: a theory of action perspective*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Argyris, C., and Schön, D.A. (1996) *Organizational learning II: Theory, method and practice*. Reading: Addison-Wesley.

Revans, R. (1980) *Action learning: new techniques for management*. London: Blond & Briggs.
