The effectiveness of action research as an organisational change process for improving Indigenous completion rates in mainstream VET

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Abstract

Action research is a collective form of enquiry that is both a recognised research methodology and a change process. As an organisational change process, action research encourages a collective approach to problem definition, action planning, taking action and reflection. In recent times, action research has been enjoying a wave of popularity as a change process in educational institutions and other organisations. This paper draws on a recently completed NCVER funded project that investigated the effectiveness of action research in changing VET provider practices in order to improve Indigenous completion rates. Action research was used over a twelve-month period by a team in each of four TAFE institutes. The experience of action research was new to all team members except for the team facilitators. As a process by which colleagues learn better ways of thinking, interacting and working, the approach implemented in this context proved to have limitations as well as strengths. The paper describes the model, its outcomes, and the factors that impacted on its effectiveness.

Introduction

Action research is a deliberate organisational change process as well as a recognised research methodology. It was originally developed by social psychologist Kurt Lewin in the 1940s and subsequently extended by others in different contexts (McNiff, 1988). Lewin conceptualised action research as a group activity aimed at ameliorating a selected social issue and comprising the four stages of planning, acting, observing and reflecting.

Action research is a well-tried form of collective enquiry into practice undertaken by organisations (e.g., Boshyk, 2000) and in particular, by the education sector (e.g., Arhar, Holly & Kasten 2001, Sagor, 2000, Schmuck, 1998). Action research is fundamentally collaborative. It develops "group reflection, joint inquiry, shared debriefings and cooperative action planning" (Schmuck, 1998, p.31). As an organisational change process, action research encourages a collective approach to problem definition, action planning, taking action and reflection. Any distinctions once made between action learning and action research have now blurred and the terms are used interchangeably in the context of organisational change (Dick, 1997).

This paper focuses on action research as a process of change rather than as a research methodology. It considers the effectiveness of action research as a way of changing organisational practices in four institutes of TAFE, the largest public vocational education and training provider in Australia, in order to improve the completion rates of Indigenous students in mainstream courses. Mainstream courses are defined as non-Indigenous specific courses at an AQF (Australian Qualifications Framework) level.

Effectiveness here is considered in terms of the extent to which the action research team members believed they produced outcomes that met their objective. The paper summarises the outcomes or changes that the action research process achieved and

identifies the factors that impacted on how the action research process unfolded in each of the four organisations. It begins with outlining the study that this paper draws on and because action research can be operationalised in many ways, it then describes the model of action research used.

The study

The NCVER study (Balatti, Gargano, Goldman, Wood & Woodlock, forthcoming) was in response to the increasing need for TAFE institutes to make mainstream courses 'fit' Indigenous students' needs (and vice versa). TAFE institutes have historically enrolled a significant proportion of their total Indigenous student population in courses specifically designed to meet Indigenous needs and aspirations. Some of these have been access type courses and courses not on the AQF, but many others have been AQF courses designed for Indigenous-specific fields of practice e.g., health. In the current climate of resource scarcity and changing student demand, more Indigenous students are enrolling in courses that are part of mainstream TAFE offerings.

Whilst Indigenous engagement with VET has improved significantly in recent years, successful completion rates are lower nationally for Indigenous students when compared with the overall population (NCVER, 2002). Robinson and Hughes (1999) revealed that little or no monitoring of students in mainstream courses was taking place and little attention had been given to developing strategies to improve outcomes and reduce attrition rates. This action research study aimed to further understanding of four TAFEs' responses to the increasing number of Indigenous students in mainstream programs. This paper summarises the findings pertaining to one of the five research questions addressed in the study, namely, "How effective is action research methodology in bringing about changes in practice and policy at the institutional/local level"?

An action research team was formed in each of four TAFE institutes whose respective Indigenous student populations ranged from 6 per cent to 25 per cent of the total institute populations. The Indigenous clientele served by the institutes was very diverse comprising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students ranging in age from school leavers to mature aged students and living in urban, regional, rural and remote settings.

The key research participants were the members of the action research teams. Each team comprised seven to ten core members who were almost always staff members. They included administrators, teachers, support officers, and managers. One team also had a student representative. All four teams included a team facilitator/researcher and an Indigenous Cultural Adviser. Criteria for team composition were diversity and relevance to the team's focus.

Within the broad scope of improving Indigenous completion rates in mainstream courses, each action research team chose its own focus. Three of the four teams chose specific programs while a fourth chose the general area of student support. The foci chosen by the teams were: Team 1: to improve residential block training delivered for Sports and Recreation students of whom 90% were Indigenous; Team 2: to improve support services to Indigenous mainstream students on campus; Team 3: to pilot and monitor the delivery of a pre-vocational construction course with integrated literacy on a remote Aboriginal community and to improve on campus delivery of the Language Literacy and Numeracy

program to Centrelink clients; and Team 4: to monitor and improve block training delivery to carpentry apprentices in the Torres Strait. Funding was provided to the teams to assist with their activities.

The four primary sources of data were: tapes, agendas and minutes of the meetings of the action research teams; journals kept by the action research team facilitators; monthly teleconferences and WEBBOARD discussion amongst the action research team facilitators; and two sets of semi-structured interviews (70 interviews in total). The interviews were conducted half way through and toward the end of the project with members of the action research teams and key TAFE personnel such as Directors and managers who were not members of the teams. Interviews included questions about the nature and effectiveness of the action research process.

Model of action research used

The design of the action research project aimed to establish action research teams that would develop as learning communities. The key features of the action research approach used in this study drew on three sources of literature—the action research literature (e.g., Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988) the literature on communities of practice and learning communities (e.g., Wenger, 1998) and the literature on social capital building in adult learning (e.g., Falk & Kilpatrick, 2000).

Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) identified four "moments" in the action research approach to addressing a common concern by a group of stakeholders. Group members *plan action* together, *act and observe* individually or collectively, *reflect* together and then *reformulate more critically informed plans* deliberately together. This cycle is repeated the necessary number of times for the group's common concern to be adequately addressed.

Wenger's (1998) work on communities of practice and learning communities stresses the importance of the social nature of learning. Learning is about participation in social communities and because learning changes who we are and what we can do, it is ultimately to do with transformation of identity. Given that learning is about identity transformation, for learning to occur, *a place* for that new identity to develop is as important as the processes of transformation. In this context the "place" was the action research team.

Falk and Kilpatrick (2000) identify the role of social capital (networks, norms and trust) in adult learning and adult learning communities. They explain that through interaction the learning experience draws on the identity and knowledge resources of the participants involved while at the same time adding to those identity and knowledge resources. The significance of bonding and bridging ties in social capital building and hence in learning is also noted.

In summary, this literature led to at least four important elements to the approach used in this study. Firstly, the change agent was the multi-disciplinary action research team whose core members were also members of the organisation in which the change was to take place. Secondly, the focus and scope of each team were dictated by the team members themselves. Thirdly, through regular meetings each action research team aimed

to come to a deeper understanding of identified issues(s) before implementing carefully monitored interventions. Lastly, the effectiveness of the process was measured by the extent to which the participants in the process considered their common concern had been addressed.

Another important element in the establishment of each action research team was identifying and utilising the best channels of communication between it and the rest of the institute specifically the Director, relevant line managers, and the Indigenous Units. Setting up protocols for communication was considered critical for ensuring exchange between the team and the organisation in which it was located.

Guidelines for the conduct of the action research project were workshopped over two days by the four team facilitators and the external university based researcher. The role of the external researcher was to assist the facilitators as well as to guide the research. TAFE directors endorsed the projects at the project proposal stage and the study conformed to James Cook University ethics guidelines. Funding was provided to each action research team to assist in the project. A timeframe of twelve months was allocated to the action research teams. Prior to the commencement of the twelve-month period, the team facilitators had three months to organise a team around a common area of concern.

Results

Two sets of results are reported here. The first summarises the outcomes of the action research experience that, in the view of the participants would impact positively on the training experienced by Indigenous students in mainstream programs and hence on their results. The second lists the challenges encountered by the action research teams.

Outcomes of the action research experience
Of the four action research teams that were set up, three met regularly over the year and described their experience as having been worthwhile. The fourth one stopped meeting as a team after six months with the departure of the team facilitator from the organisation being the primary reason for the team's early demise. The outcomes of each team are described in the report (Balatti et al, forthcoming). To different degrees, all teams achieved the following six outcomes: the establishment of a grass-roots group concerned with Indigenous completion rates; the deprivatisation of practice; a concerted effort in seeking Indigenous student feedback; critical reflection on one's own practice; professional development; and a critique of organisational practices.

1. Formation of a group concerned about Indigenous completion rates: The action research project was the catalyst for cross-departmental groups to form that had Indigenous completion rates as their focus. This was a new experience in all four institutes:

> We have so many issues here that need to be discussed and we never come together as a group to discuss these things. (Indigenous teacher)

The aspirations that action research team members had for their projects provide an indication of their interest in improving Indigenous completion rates and their belief that many of the issues were organisational. These were reported approximately five months

after the commencement of the study in response to the question, "What would you like your team to achieve by the end of the year"? Their responses included a desire to develop new working relationships and to improve the collective understanding of the impact that current teaching, administrative and managerial practices were having on Indigenous student performance.

2. Deprivatisation of practice: The cross-departmental composition of the teams provided opportunities to listen to and better understand points of view that were not like one's own. Boundaries between different sections of the campus were sometimes successfully crossed as team members discussed rationales for specific actions, reached compromises and created mutual understandings. For a literacy teacher the action research team provided opportunities to develop professional relationships with trade teachers:

> I find this action research project where I am actually part of a team has been a fantastic way of breaking into an existing team and becoming part of it and central to everything that happens in that team rather than being the outside person that floats around the edges without any real input.

For a member of the Indigenous unit at one of the institutes, participating in the action research project meant a broadening of outlook:

> We have some very big and important issues that we value strongly and should be addressed. They are all high priorities to us. But I think it is also important to take a step away from that and look at the organisation as a whole and see that there are other priorities as well that are outside of Indigenous programs. So we have to look at the strategies for getting our priorities met that fit in with the rest of what the organisation is doing.

3. Student feedback: The action research teams quickly ascertained that there was very limited information available at the institutional level on Indigenous student perceptions about their TAFE experiences and the reasons why they withdraw. Team members therefore trialled, with varying degrees of success, different ways of collecting quality data on students' experiences. These approaches were new to the members who offered to undertake the tasks. Some of the methods used included home visits, social functions, videoconferences, and focus group interviews.

4. Critical reflection on practice: The team meetings provided opportunities to constructively reflect on the practices around delivering mainstream programs to Indigenous students. This was a new experience for almost all participants and met with varying degrees of acceptance. Many of the members did welcome the opportunity as the following statements suggest:

> The real strength of the action research team is a sort of accountability … where people have to justify their thinking more clearly.

> The mixture of people has us question what we do more. I expect other people to give me feedback because that's how I grow and learn.

> One advantage of the team is that it provides a sounding board that is culturally appropriate.

5. Action research process as professional growth: Many of the participants in the action research project reported that their participation in the project had provided opportunities for professional growth and development. Learnings included better understanding of literacy by vocational teachers and of vocational requirements by the literacy teachers; increased confidence in speaking to colleagues outside the immediate team; and the opportunity to exercise leadership.

6. Critique of organisational practices: Discussion around the issue of Indigenous completion rates and attempts to make changes caused the teams to critique organisational practices from this perspective. In so doing, each team identified areas of improvement required within its organisation. In many cases, the action research team did not have the resources or the authority to make changes other than to bring the issues to the attention of directors or managers. Not all action research teams identified the same issues. Below are seven of the major issues identified:

1. Pressure to recruit students to meet class size requirements was conflicting with giving appropriate course guidance and counseling.
2. Information about why Indigenous students were not completing courses was not being collected.
3. Management was not adequately responding to the stresses that teachers sometimes encountered in working with predominantly Indigenous groups.
4. The institute was not contributing to finding solutions to the childcare and transport problems that many Indigenous students were experiencing.
5. Cultural awareness training was not being provided to staff.
6. The literacy needs of Indigenous students were not being adequately met.
7. There was no coordinated effort to bring together pockets of expertise from various faculties that was relevant to delivery on Indigenous communities.

Challenges encountered by action research teams
Two sources of challenges confronted the action research team members over the twelve-month period. The first stemmed from outside the team. These challenges resulted from existing conditions and/or changes that were occurring within the organisation. The second set of challenges originated from within the action research team itself.

Challenges from outside the team: Commitment to the action research team competed with existing responsibilities. Even though all directors and line managers were supportive of the project no allowance was made for the time that the commitment would take. The funding that each team received to conduct the project was not spent on buying time. Most teams had members who worked off-campus and this made suitable meeting times even more difficult to arrange. Only one institute had time for organisational learning formally structured into its schedule. Action research meetings therefore occurred in the "learning corridor" time while in the remaining sites they took place at lunch time.

Organisational culture impacted on the functioning of the action research team. In a negative sense it was evident in the unwillingness that some team members seemed to exhibit in taking responsibility or action. In one site, a member explained it in the following way:

> There seems to be a reluctance to make something happen. There's a shared helplessness, wanting to take the position of being helpless, about being battered all the time. "This group of people are doing this to us. And we're only teachers," or "We're only admin officers". "Tell us what to do". This is anti-action research.

Organisational changes such as restructuring had an effect. In one site the facilitator's role became markedly more difficult as a consequence. She noted in a journal entry:

> The changes to the institute Indigenous programs and staffing and the subsequent flow-on effect to the campus Indigenous Unit has been bad for morale of team members. These factors have contributed to worker overload and less flexibility. It has set up some mistrust for institute and campus management. However the team has provided a sound confidential forum where feelings and frustrations can be aired and possible solutions to problems talked about.

Challenges from within the team: Unfamiliarity with the action research process was the main source of difficulties in the initial stages. Almost all members had no knowledge of action research. In response, the facilitators spent time in explaining the process and developing activities that encouraged people to reflect on the issues associated with Indigenous completion rates.

As with other teams, the team building processes of forming, storming, norming and performing applied to the action research team. In some cases, the differences in position the team members held outside the action research group made the processes more difficult. While the goal was for all members to be first and foremost "learners", the existing hierarchical relationships sometimes interfered and made trust building difficult.

The same team diversity that was highly valued by all participants also caused challenges within the team. Developing a common language that could be used by teachers, support officers, administrative staff, and managers alike was one of the challenges faced in forming team cohesion. It was often difficult for an administrative officer to challenge a teacher. One of the Indigenous field officers reflected on her discomfort and reluctance to express herself freely in the absence of open communication:

> I have a lot of ideas but they never leave me as I don't want to say anything because I don't know how to say it sometimes. When I go to these meetings I get frustrated because I don't understand the philosophy side. I can only bring my own personal opinions into it.

Developing cohesion between teaching teams and other members of the action research group proved challenging for at least two of the teams. A contributing factor was the peripheral involvement that some members had with the student cohort involved. For example in one team, the Indigenous Student Support Officer and the Indigenous cultural adviser had no previous connection with the students or with the teaching team. One facilitator's reflection of a team meeting toward the end of the twelve-month period illustrates the fragility of the team cohesion that had been developed:

> In that last meeting I got a sense of them *(the teaching team)* being a closed shop which I thought we had broken down a bit. It's almost as if we pushed a little bit and now they're pulling back and not allowing those boundaries to be crossed. People are isolated in their own pockets, in their own areas. And that makes it really hard.

Discussion

Nature of the outcomes of the action research process
The table below summarises the four types of changes or outcomes that occurred to different degrees across all four teams as the result of the action research process. "Changes in student performance" is the most obvious set of changes that is missing from the table. The time frame given to the project was not sufficient to observe any flow-on effects from the changes produced by the action research teams to actual student performance.

Table 1: Types of changes produced by participation in the action research project

Types of changes	Examples
Changes in individual practice and beliefs	Increased understanding of the different perspectives that exist in an organisation about ways of best servicing Indigenous clientele
Changes in team practice	Increased discussion of one's teaching practices
Changes in interdepartmental practice	More effective collaboration between literacy teacher and vocational training team
Changes at a campus level	Changes in ways that data are collected about Indigenous students training experiences
Changes at a whole-of-institute level	Increased knowledge about organisational factors impacting on Indigenous completion rates

Factors influencing effectiveness
The experience of the four action research teams suggests that, once the focus of the team has been identified and management support has been given, there are at least six other factors that impact of the effectiveness of action research as an organisational change process for improving Indigenous completion rates. These are the composition of the team, the team facilitator, the legitimacy of the action research activity, continuity, accountability and the organisational environment overall.

Composition of the team: Effective action research teams have a diverse membership that is committed to the purpose of the team and has the capacity in terms of skills and time to contribute what is necessary. Major strengths of the action research teams in this study was their diverse and relevant membership and their capacity to discuss an issue from a number of different perspectives:

> Having people outside the delivery team in the action research group is a real benefit. These guys see things that we don't.

Team facilitator: The team facilitator is one of the most important elements of the action research project. The facilitator's prior relevant experience, standing and credibility within the team and within the organisation impact heavily on the team's capacity to work effectively. A high level of skills in team building, organising, delegation,

communication and facilitation is essential. Knowledge about action research is important and can be provided with professional development. From the team members' perspective in this study, the impartiality of the facilitator is one of the most valued attributes:

> We have a facilitator who has worked closely with Indigenous programs but she is able to take a step back from that and be an independent person.

Legitimising action research activity: Organisational support for the project requires legitimising the action research project as valued work. In this study facilitators included their activity in the performance management plans; line managers endorsed their staff members' participation in the project; facilitators kept management including directors informed by distributing minutes and having meetings with the relevant directors and managers; directors accepted invitations to attend meetings; and the institute or campus was informed about the establishment of the action research team. Notwithstanding these measures, some team members did not perceive their action research activity as having the same importance as their other duties and responsibilities. It was seen as an add-on task.

Continuity: Turnover in team membership reduces the effectiveness of the action research team. In particular, changing facilitators jeopardises the continuation of the action research project as do long absences from the workplace by key members. Continuity requires regular meetings. In this project, one team changed from monthly meetings to fortnightly meetings to maintain momentum.

Accountability: It is important to establish to whom in the institute the action research team is accountable. The issue of accountability was not successfully resolved for any of the teams in this study. Accountability to the team itself was not sufficient to ensure that all team members "pulled their weight". Most team facilitators did not feel they had the authority to follow up people who did not fulfil their commitments. Furthermore, the lack of clear lines of accountability diminished the legitimacy of the action research team activity from the participants' perspectives and from their superiors. Factors that may have complicated the accountability issue included the cross-disciplinary nature of the focus of some of the teams and the diverse team membership that included teachers, managers, administrative and support staff from different departments. An increased participation level was reported for one team when the director responsible for the teaching and support staff in the team joined the team as a very active member.

Organisational environment: The action research team is subject to the environment of the organisation in which it is located. For example, in organisations that are undergoing change at a rapid rate in terms of priorities and subsequent restructurings, the focus of an action research project can become derailed, trivialised or redundant. The ongoing relevance of an action research project is in many respects determined relative to other emerging priorities. For example, the sense of purpose of one action research team in the study fragmented when the Indigenous unit in the institute was heavily downsized.

Conclusion

This paper explored the effectiveness of action research as a change process in four TAFE institutes for the purposes of improving Indigenous completion rates in mainstream courses. The study showed that the action research approach used had the capacity to bring about positive change in the practices of institute personnel. The effectiveness of the process can be measured in terms of the desired changes in practices at the individual, team, interdepartmental, campus and whole-of-institute levels.

However, the time constraint of one year under which the action research took place meant that it is not known whether any of the learnings experienced through the action research process will lead to sustainable changes in practice over the long term. The time constraint also precluded the opportunity to confirm that the changes that did occur would in fact lead to improved completion rates.

This study showed that the effectiveness of action research as an organisational change process in improving Indigenous completion rates is dependent on many factors. These include the scope of the problem being addressed; the organisational environment; the composition of the team and its dynamics; the relationship between the team and the rest of the organisation especially management; and the resources (e.g., social resources, time, finance, skills, knowledge) made available to it.

Acknowledgements

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