



The Use of Action Learning Strategies for Cooperative Education or Work-integrated Learning Projects

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Introduction

This case study briefly outlines the theoretical basis of action learning and illustrates how this approach can be integrated into projects undertaken as part of cooperative education or work-integrated learning experiences.

The key aim of cooperative education or work-integrated learning experiences at tertiary level is to apply and integrate theoretical concepts to the work environment (Rainsbury *et al.*, 2002). The involvement in a 'real life' project, as distinct from undertaking more random tasks, within a cooperative education experience is recognised as a particularly valuable learning strategy that enhances student learning (Eakins, 2000). This case study briefly outlines the theoretical basis of action learning and illustrates how this approach can be integrated into projects undertaken as part of cooperative education or work-integrated learning experiences.

Action learning

Revans (1980; 1982; 1998) is credited as the first to develop action learning as an educational process whereby learning takes place by combining doing and reflection. 'Action learning tackles problems through a process of first asking questions to clarify the exact nature of the problem, reflecting and identifying possible solutions, and moving ... toward consideration of strategies and possible action' (Marquardt, 2004, p.28).

Action learning can be described as a sub-set of action research; however, a distinction exists between the two in relation to the utilisation and extension of theory. Action learning, in contrast to action research, focuses on localised learning and does not require the extension of new knowledge in a theoretical sense (Cardno, 2003; Coghlan & Brannick, 2001). Action learning is also collaborative in nature, which is consistent with the aims of cooperative education. Through a collaborative approach '... participants select issues, examine them, make plans, take action and reflect on that

action' (Coghlan & Brannick, 2001, p.11).

Context

The context for the case study is the cooperative education program for the Bachelor of Sport and Recreation (BSR) at AUT University, New Zealand. The BSR is a three-year degree designed to prepare students for careers in the areas of sport and recreation management, exercise science, coaching, physical activity and health, physical education or outdoor education. During their final year the BSR students complete 600 hours of cooperative education through partnerships between the University, the student and a sport or recreation organisation.

The cooperative education component constitutes half of the students' total workload for the academic year. The cooperative education courses (Cooperative 1 and Cooperative 2) are structured so that students spend the equivalent of two days a week during the two fifteen-week semesters of the academic year within one organisation. This allows flexibility for students to experience a range of different learning activities that occur across a year, catering for the seasonal nature of the sport and recreation industry (Fleming & Eames, 2005).

Action learning phases

The action learning approach utilised for projects undertaken within the sport cooperative education projects consists of four phases.

Phase 1: initially, the BSR student in collaboration with both industry and academic supervisors identifies an issue or problem within the context of the organisation where they are undertaking their cooperative experience. This phase is undertaken during the first 6 weeks of the placement and the duration in this phase is variable.

Phase 2: the student then develops a proposal for the intervention or action. This involves reviewing and reflecting on current practice, examining theory learnt in class, reviewing literature as well as talking to and asking questions of industry personnel and gaining feedback from academic and industry supervisors. This stage is completed by the end of the first 15-week semester.

Phase 3: the intervention or action is then undertaken during the second semester and the length of this phase is dependent on the nature of the action or intervention. This phase may include the use of 'mini cycles' where the student will reflect, review, evaluate, modify and redesign the intervention or action.

Phase 4: the final step in the process is the evaluation of the intervention and an extensive critical reflection on the overall experience. A detailed report summarising all phases of the project (including reflection on the learning experience) is then submitted for assessment at

the end of the second 15-week semester.

Projects undertaken using the action learning approach include: a new physical activity programme for a community group; improving the nutrition of adolescent athletes in a sports institute; an event planning kit for a sports organisation; improving sport training programmes in schools.

Discussion

Action learning as a method of inquiry provides a tool for cooperative education programs to further involve research and theory in the workplace setting. The requirement to identify a problem, integrate theory, determine action, implement the action and evaluate the outcome, challenges the students to draw on a range of resources available to them. Learning not only involves the integration of current workplace knowledge and practice, but alternative options identified through reviewing relevant literature and available theory.

The process of reflection transforms experience and theory into knowledge and enhances the transfer of learning (Van Gyn, 1996). Therefore, integrating an action learning approach into a cooperative education experience encourages and facilitates reflection and allows the student to develop more effective skills so that the learning from the experience can be enhanced.

The student reflective reports have highlighted that significant learning

is achieved through undertaking an action learning project and that they have developed transferable skills such as oral and written communication, the ability to solve problems using initiative and the development of confidence. The students also reported that they could apply knowledge and theory in a practical situation to bring about a change (Ferkins & Fleming, 2007).

Not all student projects are successful in terms of creating significant outcomes for the organisation. The level of academic supervision is critical to the success of this approach, as is the willingness of the placement organisations to engage with the students. The student also needs to be able to effectively negotiate with the industry organisation and lead the project process. Certainly, the professional capabilities required are not exhibited by all students at this level.

Summary

The case study presented has outlined how the integration of action learning within student cooperative education projects is possible. Action learning provides the student with a problem-solving tool that specifically seeks to integrate theory and practice and create positive change. Engaging an action learning approach facilitates reflection and this combined with an emphasis on collaboration encourages students and industry personnel to actively engage in the learning process.

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