Leadership and Management Development: An Action Research Project

Chris Booth* and Michael Segon**

This paper discusses the nature of contemporary action research approaches to developing practice and considers how this methodology has been applied to a recent education research project on a tertiary award program. The program was initiated using a co-operative inquiry approach to leadership and management practice development under an action research methodology (Heron 1996, Heron & Reason, 2001). A group of 25 program participants used reflection towards research and understanding of their current practice and action towards trialling new concepts, tools and techniques discovered and learned during the program to develop their practice. The paper discusses the use of co-operative inquiry and action research processes as well as the outcomes from the program.

Field of Research: Action Research, Co-operative Inquiry, Leadership and Management development.

1.0 Action Research applied to Education Research

Within the area of education research there has been and continues to be a significant stream of research into educational processes and teaching practices applying action research as a key methodological approach (Dick. 2004; McNiff, 2002; McNiff & Whitehead, 2002; Zuber-Skerritt, 1991a, 1991b). The "living theory" approach under action research in the past decade has gained momentum in education research based on a focus practitioner's or teacher's own practice, (McNiff & Whitehead, 2002, p. 22). More recently the co-operative inquiry approach of Heron (1996; Heron and Reason, 2001) has gained traction as a research approach particularly in management education research (Reason & McArdle, 2004).

The current paper considers how a tertiary award based program was initiated using a cooperative inquiry approach to leadership and management practice development under an action research methodology.

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*Mr Chris Booth, Lecturer and Course Coordinator, Graduate School of Business, RMIT University. Email chris.booth@rmit.edu.au
**Dr Michael Segon, Senior Lecturer and Course Coordinator, Graduate School of Business, RMIT University. Email michael.segon@rmit.edu.au

The purpose of this research was to understand the nature of leadership and management development for participants and the researcher facilitator in applying a co-operative inquiry approach that supported the following:

1. Greater decision making of course content processes and context by program participants
2. Application of reflection on practice as a key assessment and development characteristic of the program
3. Development of soft skills to support leadership and management practices

A group of 25 program participants used reflection towards researching (understanding) their current leadership and management practice and action (change) towards trial of new concepts and techniques discovered and learned during the program to develop their practice. Key theory and practice approaches from action research, co-operative inquiry, action inquiry and action science were delivered as part of the academic program. Against a background of knowledge and insight from these approaches, participants developed their leadership and management practice through processes of reflection journaling, and individual and group based learning presentations on awareness and changes in practice. These processes in particular underpinned the co-operative inquiry method of co-research, in which the facilitator and participants jointly researched leadership and management practice at the participant level and shared level within group interactions. The program processes also acted to support individual leadership and management capability development through action and reflection on and in action (Schön, 1983; 1987).

The paper explores the field of action research relevant to a contemporary approach to action research in the leadership and management education, making note of the key contributions as well a links to leadership and management development literature. The paper further considers a brief description of the methodology and research design for the three action research cycles that comprised the research project, then discussion of findings stemming from each action research cycle of the research project. Finally the paper presents a series of conclusions drawn from the three action research cycles commenting on the action research approaches that provided a basis for change in leadership and management practice for participants.

2.0   Literature Review

2.1   Contemporary strategies of action research practice

Reason (2001) indicates three broad strategies of action research practice. These are:

A first person action research/practice which involves skills and approaches to develop an inquiry into the researcher's own life, in order to act with awareness and choice and also assess the effects within the outside world whilst acting.

A second person action research/practice which involves inquiry into issues of mutual concern is face-to-face with others. It is focused on improving our personal and professional practice ass well as creating a community of

inquiry. Finally, there is a third-person action research/practice aims to create a wider community of inquiry involving persons who, because they cannot be known to each other face-to-face (say, in a large, geographically dispersed corporation), have an impersonal quality. Reason has adapted his three strategies research/person strategies largely from the work of Torbert and his theory of Action Inquiry (Torbert, 2001, 2004, 2006).

2.1.1 Action Inquiry and strategies for developing practice

Action Inquiry (AI) provides a particularly strong link of action research with leadership and management development. Torbert (2004) argues that only through inquiry of our actions and a more conscious way of approaching our moment-to-moment way of being can leaders develop an authentic transformative leadership approach.

> "Action Inquiry becomes a moment-to-moment way of living whereby we attune ourselves through inquiry to acting in an increasingly timely and wise fashion for the overall development of the families, teams, and organizations in which we participate" (Torbert, 2004, pp.1-2).

Torbert identifies the inquiry process at three distinct levels intrapersonal, interpersonal and communal/organisational. First-person research/practice involves widening our self-awareness and situation awareness to consider possible incongruities amongst our intentions, our strategy or approach and then our actual performance, and our effects within a situation (Torbert, 2006). Second-person research/practice occurs within interpersonal events such as conversations or meetings It involves "speaking in ways that encourage mutual inquiry and mutual influence" (2006, p. 207). Third-person research/practice involves "revisioning the collective's future, transforming strategies to meet the emerging era, or recrafting members' practices and existing assessment procedures." (2006, p. 207).

First-person research/practice (Torbert, 2004) involves attention, heightening attributes. These include, *Intending* which focuses our attention on the purpose of the action in which we are engaging, *Thinking/Feeling* which surfaces the logic and emotions predicating the action, *Sensing/Behaving* which involves attending to the performed action, and *Effecting/Perceiving* which involves reflecting upon the action for deeper understanding and meaning of the behaviour and its impacts.

According to Torbert (2004, p.38) the attributes above all relate to achieving attentiveness to one self and one's environment in order to develop the presence of mind "to begin noticing the relationship among our own intuitive sense of purpose, thoughts, behaviours and effects."

With regard to second-person research/practice under action inquiry, Torbert, (2004) argues that there are four territories that act as parts of speech in interpersonal interactions. These are, *Framing* which is defined as declaring a potential shared vision or intent, *Advocating* which involves establishing a strategy or setting a goal, *Illustrating* which is defined as offering a concrete picture of the situation and *Inquiring* which involves inviting feedback or

contribution from others (Torbert, 2001, 2006). Torbert considers the quintessential second-person research/practice as "speaking-and-listening-with-others" (2001, p. 253).

Finally third-person research/practice under Action Inquiry (Torbert, 2006) focuses on attributes of organising. Namely *Visioning* which deals with the origin, mission and purpose of the organization or community, *Strategizing,* which involves integration and communication of origins and desired outcomes, *Performing* in which energy, resistance and enlightened intelligence lead to change, and *Assessing* in which the external world of "all things observed, measured and evaluated" scrutinises outcomes (p.208).

The focus of AI on inquiry in the moment of action can be seen to have a connection to the concepts of 'reflection on action' and importantly 'reflection in action' as articulated by Schön (1983, 1987). Schön describes the reflection in action process in the following manner;

> The practitioner allows himself to experience surprise, puzzlement, or confusion in a situation which he finds uncertain or unique. He reflects on the phenomenon before him, and on the prior understandings which have been implicit in his behaviour. He carries out an experiment which serves to generate both a new understanding of the phenomenon and a change in the situation. (Schön 1983, p. 68)

There is a clear link between Schön's concept of reflection in action involving the practitioner reflecting on the phenomenon before him and Torbert's notion of action inquiry in the moment and a more conscious and aware process of being. Both rely on a higher awareness and consciousness whilst doing construct that becomes a subsumed practice.

Reflection on action involves reflection on experiences after the event in order to identify new ways to deal with events and issues. Reflection in action involves reflecting on potential new approaches in the moment of action, recognising the present situation and past behaviours and attempting new experimental responses to more effectively deal with the issue or problem. It is about attempting to move practice forward to a more effective level as opposed to remaining stagnant and ineffectual.

2.1.2   Co-operative inquiry for practice development

Co-operative Inquiry (Heron, 1996; Reason and Heron, 2001) as an approach to action research was a key influence on the processes of individual and group interaction and learning in the three action research cycles of the research project. Heron (1996) defines *Co-operative Inquiry* as follows:

> Co-operative inquiry involves two or more people researching a topic through their own experience of it, using a series of cycles in which they move between this experience and reflecting together on it. Each person is co-subject in the experience phases and co-researcher in the reflection phases (p. 1).

According to Heron and Reason (2006, p. 149), co-operative inquiry relies upon an "extended epistemology" involving a hierarchy of four interrelated ways of knowing. *Experiential knowing* involves direct personal encounters with people, places and objects (Heron & Reason, 2006). *Presentational knowing* extends from experiential knowing and "provides the first form of expressing meaning and significance through imagery" in presentational arts such as music, dance, drawing, stories, theatre and the like (Heron & Reason, 2001, p. 183). *Propositional knowing* is knowledge developed through theories and ideas (Heron & Reason, 2006). *Practical knowing* involves knowing how to perform some "skill or competence" (Heron & Reason, 2006, p. 149).

Heron and Reason (2006) proposed several validity procedures within co-operative inquiry to support approaches under an extended epistemology. These procedures include; *Research Cycling, Authentic Collaboration,* and *Research and Action,* (Heron and Reason, 2006; Reason, 1999)*.*

Research Cycling involves iterations of inquiry moving between action and reflection to consider "experience from different angles, developing different ideas, trying different ways of behaving" (Reason, 1999. p.6). *Authentic collaboration* is a key requirement to ensure all voices and insights to practice are heard in the inquiry process and engagement in processes serving the inquiry, are encouraged. Balance of *Action* and *Reflection* to ensure present practice is reviewed current insights are challenged new theories of practice applied and insights reviewed in a continuing application of action as change and reflection as understanding.

These validity processes are intended to free the inquiry process and its extended forms of knowing from the "distortion of uncritical subjectivity" (Heron & Reason, 2006, p. 150).

Reason and Heron (1999) argued that these ways of knowing provided an integrated approach to achieve validity. Where knowledge accrued through the four ways of knowing is congruent validity of that knowledge is established.

> In co-operative inquiry we say that knowing will be more valid if these four ways of knowing are congruent with each other: if our knowing is grounded in our experience, expressed through our stories and images, understood through theories which make sense to us, and expressed in worthwhile action in our lives (p. 212).

Co-operative inquiry, as proposed by Heron (1996) and supported by Reason (1999) presents an extended epistemology under action research, Co-operative inquiry employs a number of inquiry skills and validity processes within a dynamic group inquiry approach. The succeeding section considers literature on group dynamic processes relevant to the action research project.

2.0   Methodology and Research Design

A "data driven" research methodology was applied to the project focusing on "the research situation and the people in it" (Dick, 2002, p. 160). The action research cycles follow the journey and insights from learning situations in the program. This learning journey includes participant reflections on action and research on practice going through the program, discoveries for program improvement through each action research (AR) cycle of program, as well as interviews with participants undertaken at program completion to confirm any changes to leadership and management practice stemming from the program.

An iterative data collection and comparative analysis process was employed (Dick, 1991. 1999b, 2000). The three participant intakes of the program represented the three core action research cycles of the project. Each intake undertook the four courses of the program and these acted as iterative cycles within cycles as described by Dick (1999b, 2000). Data from each of these cycles within cycles confirmed research (understanding) and informed action (changes) in succeeding cycles and provided insights for changes to processes, content or context to be applied into the succeeding cycle for a new participant intake.

A process of "thick description" of events and experiences of the program participants was captured in participant reflection reports and presentations which formed part of the action research data gathering and analysis (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p.15). These thick descriptions together with supporting diarised records of learning sessions, participant and researcher conversations and emails, informed the dialectic process and provided evidentiary support for the changes in leadership and management practice experienced by participants during the program.

3.0   Discussion of Findings

The co-operative inquiry model of collaborative research was employed in the leadership and management development program as the tools and techniques of the approach had a sound fit with the learning aims and adult learning approach of the program. Core concepts of co-operative inquiry were used to ensure group dialogue interactions, feedback and individual and collective action and research was authentic and focused on developing practice. In particular co-operative inquiry techniques such as Apollonian (Rational, convergent, systematic processes) and Dionysian (Imaginal, divergent, expressive processes) inquiry were used to explore issues in leadership and management practice (Heron, 1996). 'Apollonian' inquiry processes aided in discussion of the constructs in leadership and management framework models from theorists. 'Dionysian' inquiry was helpful in surfacing assumptions and applications of these same leadership and management frameworks, tools and techniques. 'Dionysian' inquiry was also highly useful in assisting to liberate participants to explore their practice through imagery, role-play, presentations and dialogues of the relationships between theory and practice.

According to Heron and Reason (2001, p.184) participants need to be "present and open" and thus fully involved in the co-operative inquiry. The leadership and management development program was very much predicated on an adult self-directed learning approach based upon co-facilitation and co-research into development of practice. The inquiry groups in each program intake set key ground rules themselves for group interactions to facilitate full involvement and openness in dialogues on practice. Furthermore, there was no pressure on my part for participants to attend sessions. Participants confirmed their commitment to a collaborative inquiry process by their level of session attendance, which was very high.

The first two intakes had no attrition and the final program a low level of participants exiting the program due to health and life demands. Commitment to the one year inquiry process on leadership and management practice analysis and change was solid consistent with the requirements of a co-operative inquiry (Heron, 1996). Participants during the inquiry displayed "emotional competence" to effectively identify and manage their emotions and recognise and deal with the emotions of others (Heron & Reason, 2001, p.184).

As the program was designed to develop leadership and management practice a number of theories, concepts and tools that were part of the program content also proved useful as tools to facilitate the action research project. Senge's (1990) concept of mental models was presented and discussed to assist in surfacing their own prevailing mental models. This helped the inquiry groups to be aware of assumptions and the trap of short cuts in thinking based on un-queried and untested mental models. Similarly, the inquiry groups were introduced to the 'ladder of inference' a theoretical construct which draws attention back to basic facts (Argyris, 1985, 1993). The ladder of inference presents a theoretical model that displays how biases drive attitudes and behaviours to escalate from basic observable facts through drawing selective data, adding meanings, drawing conclusions to adopting beliefs and finally taking actions based on these skewed perceptions (Argyris, 1990; 1993).

Groups were also introduced to the concept of 'left hand column' technique (Argyris, 1991; Senge, 1990). This technique allows a person to surface the lack of congruence between what that person says and what they think and believe. I also introduced the concept of 'organisational defensive routines' (Argyris & Schön, 1978, 1996). Defensive routines relate to the self-deception and defensive behaviours organisational members engage in when challenged. I found that the ladder of inference, left hand column technique and awareness of defensive routines, proved useful to support authentic collaboration and dialogue within the group sessions. Finally, the concept of 'espoused theory' and 'theory in use' was introduced to the inquiry groups (Argyris & Schön, 1978, 1996). This concept identifies the disconnection between what we say we do and what we actually do. This assisted participants in testing the governing values supporting their beliefs and behaviours in their current leadership and management practice.

All the above tools aided in developing unfettered thinking and authentic inquiry and dialogue. They were consistent with concepts under co-operative inquiry aimed at ensuring a critical and reflexive approach to an inquiry aimed at developing practice (Heron, 1996). Furthermore the tools and concepts not only aided the action and research at the macro level of the project they also served the action and research at the micro level of each individual in developing and refining their leadership and management practice.

The above tools and techniques were also consistent with constructs under Action Inquiry particularly regarding reflection on self and reflection on relationships wit others. As such Action Inquiry approaches were used to analyse the changes to practice being reported by participants in their reflections, presentations and in the larger group inquiry sessions (Torbert, 2001, 2004). First person research practice was evident in individual reflective journals on practice as well as individual presentations on practice. Second person research practice was evident in the dialogues amongst participants in inquiry sessions and the small group reflection presentations on key group based learning and insights to practice. Finally third person research practice was evident in individual reflections, group inquiry sessions and group presentations as organisational processes were challenged and new personal leadership and management practices impacting on these processes were discussed and considered.

The key changes learned from intake 1 instituted into intake 2 from the co-operative inquiry action research cycle findings were the following:
- A wider selection of critical theory based readings
- Greater autonomy for participants to control adult learning issues of content and processes earlier in the program
- Capacity to self select learning sets at an earlier stage
- Less interference by University administration in the program

The key changes learned from intake 2 instituted into intake 3 from the co-operative inquiry action research cycle findings were the following:
- A greater desire for more weekend workshops
- Confirmed greater autonomy for participants to control adult learning issues of content and processes earlier in the program
- Less interference by University administration in the program

The key changes learned from intake 3 from the co-operative inquiry action research cycle findings were the following:
- Confirmed desire for more weekend workshops
- Confirmed frustration with participants who lacked commitment and finally left (Intake 3 had attrition. Intakes 1 & 2 had none)
- Confirmed greater autonomy for participants to control adult learning issues of content and processes
- Less interference by University administration in the program

Validity in the Co-operative Inquiry settings was achieved through the inquiry settings establishing *Research Cycling* in three distinct groups, of differing contexts and different times yet dealing with similar practice concerns.

Authentic collaboration was achieved through the learning group sessions, reflection journaling and presentations where participants openly discussed their practice challenges, changes and considerations. A balance of *Action* and *Reflection* was maintained throughout the three cycles as participants researched and challenge facets of their practice. Post program interviews following the program surfacing development of practice and anecdotes and evidence of career and personal progress attributed to facets of the program

3.0 Conclusion

The critical features of co-operative inquiry as outlined by Heron and Reason (Heron, 1996; Heron & Reason, 1997, 2001; Reason, 1988, 1994, 1999) had a natural fit to the research project. In particular, co-operative inquiry related well to the learning processes in the program in terms of self direction required for critical reflection, change of practice and development of new understanding and knowledge. The processes and techniques of co-operative inquiry suited an aim of collaborative research on leadership and management practice with facilitator and participants as co-researchers on that practice. The following definition of co-operative inquiry accurately reflects the approach to a collaborative learning environment to develop leadership and management practice taken in the GCOL program:

> Co-operative inquiry involves two or more people researching a topic through their own experience of it, using a series of cycles in which they move between this experience and reflecting together on it. Each person is co-subject in the experience phases and co-researcher in the reflection phases. (Heron, 1996, p.1)

In applying Co-operative inquiry processes to develop leadership and management practices, a number of key theories and insights on participatory inquiry and practice proved critical to the development of the action research cycles and project as a whole. Firstly, the theory and practices of co-operative inquiry were very important for each of the AR cycles (Heron & Reason, 2001). Each participant group were active co-researchers into the practice of leadership and management with both an informative process about practice and transformative process of practice demonstrated during the program and reflected upon following the program through the post program interviews.

Secondly, the program achieved a successful outcome for the University. A key measurement of success of the program was its ranking in the top decile of programs for student satisfaction in a University Course Experience Survey undertaken at the time of intakes 1 and 2. Further to this a series of post program interviews with 20 of the 25 participants undertaken a year to eighteen months following the program revealed the following:
- Sustained high levels of satisfaction with the leadership and management program
- Evidence through anecdote and in vivo code of transcripts of developed levels of leadership and management practice

- Over 60% of participants achieving promotions or satisfying new roles and citing the program as a key contributor

Finally, the Co-operative inquiry based leadership and management program provided a solid basis upon which the practicing managers in each intake could move through cycles of action and reflection to review their practice individually and collectively and institute changes to that practice (Heron, 1996; Heron & Reason, 2006). The program processes of interaction and assessment through reflection reporting and individual and group learning presentations enabled insights on practice to be shared regarding changes within a co-subject and co-researcher framed learning environment (Heron, 1996; Marshall, 2001; Marshall & Reason, 1993; Reason, 1999). This brought developed an authentic and valued learning environment for participants to challenge and change their practice.

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