

Cross-Cultural Multi-Theory Perspectives in Research: Dialogue Based on Theory and Data from the US and the Netherlands on Action Learning Programs

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This innovative session consists of a panel discussion on different approaches to researching and understanding action-learning programs, based on collaborative empirical work. Panel members compare their use of a critical-pragmatist approach and an actor-network approach. These different but complementary approaches are compared regarding their focus on managers vs. shop floor employees, the role of the set facilitator, implementation and continuation of learning following the program, and the integration of work and (self-directed) learning.

Keywords: Action Learning, Cross-cultural Comparison, Dutch-US Collaboration

The idea for this innovative session emerged at a prior AHRD conference where several papers on action learning were presented. Talking about the differences and commonalities among the perspectives, two US researchers and a Dutch researcher decided to conduct a joint collaborative study into their respective approaches to organizing action-learning programs. For this study, the Dutch researcher re-analyzed a US-based action-learning program case for which data were collected previously by the US researchers. In turn, the US researchers re-analyzed Dutch action-learning program cases for which data were initially gathered by the Dutch researcher. While the US researchers refer to their own perspective as a critical-pragmatist one (Yorks, O'Neil, & Marsick, 1999; Yorks, 2003), the Dutch researcher operates from an actor-network perspective on action learning (Poell & Van der Krogt, 2003). The researchers used their respective theoretical frameworks in this collaborative project to explore to what extent they could make sense of action-learning data gathered previously by the other party. These are elaborated upon below.

The Actor-Network Perspective on Action Learning

The actor-network perspective gives central stage to organizational actors operating in a learning network. Actors can be regarded as individuals or collectives of people who act on the basis of their views and interests, such as, employees, supervisors, managers, trainers, HRD professionals, work preparation staff, professional associations, trade unions, and so forth. Learning programs are created by interactions among actors, in the context of an existing work and learning structure. Although this context influences the actions taken by actors, they do not necessarily act completely in line with existing structures. Their actions are influenced by individual and collective views and interests of other actors, too. This line of thinking was developed by Van der Krogt (1998), who translated Mintzberg's (1989) ideas about work organization to the various ways in which learning is organized.

Core activities in any learning program include orientation, learning and optimizing, and continuation. First, the orientation phase comprises mobilizing all parties concerned, analyzing the core tenets of the learning theme, placing the learning program in the context of the broader learning and work context of the organization, and drawing up a (psychological-social) learning contract. Second, the learning and optimizing phase is where the key learning activities take place, are coordinated by the various participants, and are connected to their every-day learning activities. During the execution of the program, attempts can be made to optimize the way it is running. These efforts are targeted at tuning the emerging program to the learning views as well as the work views of the participants and at ensuring it remains relevant to the developments occurring in the work of the learners. Third, in the continuation phase individual learners resume their every-day learning activities and the learning system of the organizations gets updated with the 'learning knowledge' developed in the program (Poell & Van der Krogt, 2003).

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There are at least four ideal typical ways in which these phases can be organized. These are referred to as the liberal-contractual, vertical-regulated, horizontal-organic, and external-collegial type, respectively.

1. The individual responsibility of learners is core to a liberal-contractual learning program. This type is very much informed by the self-directed learning ability of individual group members (Brookfield, 1986). Each individual member uses the team context to facilitate and enrich their own learning process, for which they are self-responsible (Candy, 1991).

2. The vertical-regulated learning program sees educators and other experts, in consultation with line managers, play a crucial role in the preparation, execution, and evaluation of the activities of the learning group. This type is evident in the training-for-impact approach taken by Robinson and Robinson (1989) and the notions about structured on-the-job training of Jacobs and Jones (1995).

3. In the horizontal-organic learning program, learners work together as a relatively autonomous team, assisted by a process supervisor, in solving complex work-related problems to which there is no standard approach. This type has the early work on organizational learning by Argyris and Schön (1978) as a key reference point. More recently, literature on communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) seems to draw rather heavily on this type of learning.

4. The external-collegial learning program has a learning group of professionals allow themselves to be inspired by innovative insights and new methodologies developed within their own professional branch but outside their own individual organizations. This type assumes that professionals are reflective learners (Schön, 1983), in need of continual expertise development within their professional peer group (Daley, 1999).

The actual way in which the key elements of a learning program (orientation, learning and optimizing, and continuation) take shape, somewhere in between the four ideal types, depends partly on work characteristics and partly on actor characteristics. Actors can always deliberately create a learning program that deviates from the 'normal' organizational routine. Nevertheless, the actor-network perspective postulates particular relationships between the organization of work and learning programs. The comparative cross-cultural research project that is central to the current session brings this particular perspective to the work of Yorks, Marsick, and their colleagues.

The Critical-Pragmatist Perspective on Action Learning

The critical-pragmatist perspective refers to a lens for theorizing about adult learning that combines elements of both critical theory and pragmatism. The approach taken here reflects Jack Mezirow's (1991) seminal writing on the transformative dimensions of adult learning. Mezirow draws on elements of Dewey's pragmatism and its emphasis on learning from experience, and the critical social theory of Habermas, particularly the role of critical reflection in emancipatory learning. Mezirow's work was foundational for the development of an empirically based taxonomy of action learning program models (Yorks, O'Neil, and Marsick, 1999).

The Yorks, O'Neil, and Marsick taxonomy classifies action learning programs as incidental, scientific, experiential, and critically reflective based on the assumptions about learning that underlie the program and makes statements about both the kind of learning that is most likely fostered and the impact on the organization.

1. Action learning programs that fit the general description of the tacit school assume that significant learning will result if program participants are carefully selected, some team building is done at the beginning of the program, and information regarding the project or challenges the group is addressing.

2. The scientific school places a strong emphasis on problem setting as well as problem solving, is highly rational applying the scientific model to social and workplace problems. Consequently this approach involves a cautious data-driven centered on reformulating the problem. A secondary hoped for outcome is incidental learning around how to continue to learn from work and experience. Placing importance on learning from peers, a learning coach initially plays a minimalist role in helping the group learn the process.

3. The experiential school is strongly influenced by the experiential learning cycle as developed by theorists such as Kolb (1984) and Mumford (1993). An emphasis is placed on the role of reflection as an important part of the learning process, with a learning coach actively designing practices to this end. In addition to working on the presenting problem participants also work on personal developmental learning goals using the action-learning project as a vehicle for this learning.

4. The critical reflection school focuses on experiential learning, taking reflection to a deeper level by focusing on the premises that underlie the thinking and behavior of participants. Mezirow refers to this as process as critical reflection.

The taxonomy is useful to making judgments about the feasibility of a particular approach for different organizational settings and as basis for researching these kinds of programs. The basis for the taxonomy is labeled a critical-pragmatism approach because it uses critical reflective approaches to experiential learning as the lens for examining the approach and focus on informal and formal learning experiences. Recently Yorks (2003) has extended

the taxonomy to include forms of communities of practice. This comparative cross-cultural research project brings this lens to the studies carried out by Poell and his colleagues.

Session Description and Content

The session is designed as a panel discussion about the core themes that emerged from the comparison of the two perspectives. These include: focusing on action-learning programs of managers vs. shop floor employees, the role of the action-learning set facilitator, the attention paid to implementation and continuation of learning following the program, and the extent to which work and (self-directed) learning are integrated. Scholars who are interested in action learning and in applying a cross-cultural perspective are cordially invited to join in this session and debate with the panelists about the implications of this US-Dutch collaborative work.

Presenters/Panelists

The panel will consist of Lyle Yorks, Victoria Marsick, and Rob Poell, who are all researchers in the field of action learning. The discussion will be led by Jean Woodall, an expert in cross-cultural research.

Purpose

The purpose of the discussion is to find out to what extent the critical-pragmatist approach of the US researchers and the actor-network approach of the Dutch researcher are different and complementary. By doing so, the session aims to encourage critical thinking among the audience about the different perspectives one can apply to action learning.

Goals

1. Participants understand the core elements of the critical-pragmatist and actor-network approaches to action learning, their differences, and their complementarities.
2. Participants challenge their own thinking about action learning by confronting it with at least these two different perspectives.
3. Creation of an outline of a framework for conducting and assessing the value of participating in collaborative data analysis from alternative perspectives useful for researchers interested in pursuing this kind of inquiry.

Format, Style, and Timetable

The panel discussion will be interactive in nature. Depending on the number of participants in the session, the panel discussion may continue into small groups during the session. The style of the interaction will thus be open and personal. The audience will be provided with sample vignettes and short excerpts from interview transcripts to illustrate tensions or multicultural issues that could be used as a springboard for discussion. These will be handed out at the beginning of the session so attendees can read them over and scan them during the panel introduction. Examples will also be brought into the overview presentations.

The timeframe is as follows: the panelists each present their approach to action learning and some of the discussion points that emerged from the cross-cultural data comparison (15 minutes). The discussant raises some further issues from her reading of the US-Dutch collaboration, using a cross-cultural framework (10 minutes). At least four themes (mentioned under Session Description and Content) are then discussed with the audience, moderated by the discussant (or by all presenters if the session splits into small groups) (50 minutes). The final part of the discussion is devoted to the question of what merit there is in using different perspectives on action learning, both for the audience and for further development of theory and research in that area (15 minutes). Ideas that emerge from the discussion will be captured on easel sheets for distribution to those attending, providing a record of the conversation.

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