Evaluation of a Large Group Method in an Educational Institution: The World Café Versus Large Group Facilitation

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Abstract

This article reports on the use of a large group method, the World Café, compared to large group facilitation in an educational institutional setting in Oman. Change is central to many educational institutions as they aspire to ensure quality procedures and processes are implemented and maintained. One of the difficulties of introducing change within this context is the number of stakeholders involved, as well as the inherent hierarchical nature of these settings. Large group methods (LGM) are one such intervention for change that seeks to involve a maximum number of stakeholders and minimise hierarchies, while at the same time encouraging participation and creating engagement. To evaluate LGM within this setting, the study compared two different workshop techniques: one workshop was run using the LGM the World Café, while the other was conducted using large group facilitation (LGF). Results indicated that the World Café was superior to LGF in terms of increases in participant knowledge and understanding. Participants who took part in the LGM were also significantly more likely to indicate that the technique was beneficial to their learning, compared to those who took part in the LGF. Qualitative data in the form of comments also provide support for LGM. Further research is needed to assess the applicability of the findings in educational settings in other countries. Moreover, more stringent research is required to assess over time, changes in behaviours occurring following LGM, to provide further evidence as to their value in facilitating change in institutional settings.

Key Words: Large Group methods, World café, evaluation, educational institution

It seems sensible that an organisation investing money in organisational change would also make an investment of time and money in training to support the change process. Given the failure rate of many organisational change processes this does not appear to be the case (Bolman & Deal, 2007). Educational institutions, particularly those in developing countries such as Oman, face these sorts of challenges in the implementation of change via the introduction of new systems and procedures. This is the more common type of organisational change they will encounter, as they become more

global in their perspectives and face performance-based assessments such as accreditation. In particular, the implementation of a quality management framework for the higher education system is one particular instance where change can be considered essential in promoting the university on a more global scale, through the implementation of high standards and procedures and processes such as quality audits, similar to those in western countries. By doing so, this is likely to promote the institutions and encourage the enrolment of new students.

Crucial to such audit processes are streamlined systems and procedures including the collection of data, which essentially provide proof regarding performance of an organisation and indicate where improvements should be made. Total quality management (TQM) systems are therefore at the centre of such interventions. Research in TQM within higher education institutions, such as that by Kanji, Tambi and William (1999), confirmed nine critical success factors (CSFs) applicable and necessary for success within this setting. Leadership, continuous improvement, prevention, measurement of resources, process improvement, internal and external customer satisfaction people management, and teamwork were all deemed CSFs. Taking this into account, it would therefore make sense that these areas are addressed in both the implementation and evaluation of higher education quality management systems. Given the far-reaching impact of these systems it seems appropriate that methods that promote engagement and enhance large-scale change efforts would be most suited in ensuring these CSFs are met. The use of large group methods (LGMs) to introduce quality management systems in higher education institutions would appear an appropriate way of addressing many of these CSFs.

In simple terms, LGM can be considered a method to involve all stakeholders within an organisation in decision-making related to changes, either systemic or strategic in nature. There are three types of LGM with each having a specific purpose attached to them: planning for the future, designing of work systems or discussion, and decision-making around a particular theme affecting the whole system (Bunker & Alban, 2006). The purpose or outcomes desired from the LGM will dictate the specific one used. For each of the three types there are several different variations that can be used, each slightly different from the other. Future search, the search conference, strategic planning process and the most recently developed — appreciative inquiry, are all variations of LGM used for the purpose of creating and planning a future. To design workplace systems, the conference model, whole scale work design and participative design are more recently developed methods. Discussion and decision-making relating to particular issues are best suited to LGM methods such as Simu-real, Whole scale interactive events, Work out and Open space technology and the newest addition: World Café (Bunker, 2006).

LGMs are a relatively new branch of the research literature in the area of organisational psychology and change management. Many organisational development (OD) consultants have been using these techniques for some time to facilitate change efforts within an organisation, but it was not until the 1980–1990s that these methods started to take form as a distinctive methodology. According to Kotter (1997), of the two key reasons why the implementation of change fails within an organisation, the first is

due to a lack of urgency in implementation, or slow pace at which the change is implemented. Secondly, many organisations fail to integrate the changes into the culture, such as reinforcement of 'new behaviours'. LGMs assist in promoting change as they take into account the systemic nature of what happens when change is introduced. The participative approach enables many stakeholders to have their say, thus creating engagement in the outcomes and stronger commitment, similar to having behaviour reinforced. Further to this, LGMs provide an avenue for change to occur at a much faster pace than normal, given the involvement of all stakeholders in the one location at the one time (Manning & Binzagr, 1996).

At the core of LGM are a number of common characteristics that set them apart from other intervention methods used in developing and changing aspects of an organisation. Firstly, the methods allow for conflict to be managed. Conflict may be noted and acknowledged, but it is not specifically addressed as a part of the workshop. Secondly, related to this, there is a focus on common ground rather than on differences. This means that participants are encouraged to use common ground to come to an agreement on outcomes. Finally, the LGM also promotes a flat hierarchy, as working together and having all participants take responsibility is encouraged. A flat hierarchy means that participants can come from a variety of stakeholder groups and each is encouraged to have a say and interact with each other. This is a particularly important aspect when implementing strategic planning within organisations, given the scope of its impact. When people are involved in creating their future, they are more likely to be engaged in the change thus increasing the possibility of it being sustainable (Bryson & Anderson, 2000). Given the diverse range of stakeholders and the hierarchical nature of many educational institutions, but particularly in a developing country such as Oman, LGM seems well-suited as an intervention method to facilitate a change in procedures and processes used.

What is evident in the review of literature on LGM is the lack of evaluative studies that examine the effectiveness of the methods in practical settings. Quite often it can be difficult to convince executives and managers about the potential benefits of such methods, thus it is crucial that researchers continue to address gaps in the research and provide evaluative data as 'proof' of effectiveness. While there are some indications of the success of LGM within organisational settings, these tend to be based on case studies, qualitative in nature (Axelrod, 1992; Grubbs, 2002; Polanyi, 2002), or theoretical underpinnings of the methods (Garcia, 2007; White, 2002) rather than quantitative data or even comparative data on outcomes of a longitudinal nature. Accordingly, there is also a lack of research that examines its applicability and success in institutional settings, particularly in non-western cultures. This is a particularly important in Arabic countries such as Oman where a hierarchical culture plays a significant part in many work settings, including educational institutions. Given the propensity of hierarchical structures within this setting, it seemed an ideal place in which to employ LGM, not just to for strategic planning purposes, but as a means of introducing a more participative method of working together within the quality assurance department and between the colleges, seen as pertinent to the future success of the institution and the quality management framework being implemented. Specifically, The World Café is a newly developed LGM that

encourages conversations. The format sees participants seated at tables in a café-like setting, thus encouraging and promoting conversations between participants around a particular theme. Often a world café is used to set the scene for action planning, which occurs following the session (Brown & Isaacs, 2005). The technique can be used from a half day up to 2 or 3 days and there are no limits on numbers. Tables are covered with butcher's paper and the format consists of rounds lasting 20 to 30 minutes, after each round one person remains on the table to greet the new members, creating a cross-pollination of ideas. This format continues and reporting to the group occurs at intervals to encourage new thinking and insights (Bunker & Alban, 2006). This participative approach was chosen for the current study as it encourages information sharing and working together among participants.

Currently, the Ministry of Manpower, Quality Assurance Department (QAD) have engaged in a collaborative relationship with Deakin University aimed at increasing capability and promoting a quality management framework to ensure consistent standards throughout QAD and through to the educational colleges. Ultimately, the QAD's role is to assist the educational colleges in preparation for an accreditation audit, conducted by the Oman Accreditation Council. Through this collaborative work in Oman, the current study attempts to provide insight into the use of one of the more recently developed LGM techniques 'The World Café' (Brown & Isaacs, 2005) in an institutional setting. We sought to compare this technique to large group facilitation (LGF) and to see which was most effective, using the same evaluation survey for both workshops. It is expected that participants from the LGM workshop would provide higher evaluation ratings for items relating to teaching methodology and understanding of content in comparison to those who attended the LGF workshop.

Method

Participants

Fifty-three participants of a total of 89 delegates from the Strategic Planning Workshop and 49 participants from the Data Analysis Workshop completed an evaluation survey at the conclusion of each workshop. To ensure participant anonymity, no demographic data was collected.

Procedure

A workshop informing participants how to undertake strategic planning was held at the Oman Tourism College on the 15 and 16th January, 2008. Participants in the workshop were senior staff members and leaders from the Ministry of Manpower Directorate General of Technical Education. The aim of the workshop was to clarify future expectations of strategic planning in light of past experiences. The format of the strategic planning workshop took on the large group method 'The World Café', where participants sat at café-style tables and took part in a number of 'rounds' of discussions before moving to another table, while one person always remained at the previous table to continue the discussion with new members each round.

A second workshop was held on the 4 and 5th May, 2008 with college staff at the Oman Tourism College, with the aim of informing participants about data analysis and reporting of statistics, as well as communicating those statistics to others. This workshop took the form of non-participatory large group facilitation, but did not follow a specific LGM. Both workshops were developed and conducted by the author Palermo.

At the conclusion of both workshops, participants were asked to fill in an evaluation survey based on their involvement in the workshop they had just attended. To ensure anonymity and increase the likelihood of honest responses, no identifying information was requested from respondents.

Instruments

The evaluative tool adapted for use in this study was developed by Carroll and Palermo (2006) and was initially also used in an educational context in Oman to evaluate module workshops relating to the development of a National Quality Training Program. The evaluation consists of 16 questions. Questions 1 to 9 were responded to on a scale of 1(*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Questions 10 and 11, which asked a question about pre and post workshop understanding gained in the workshop topic, were responded to on a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 = *no understanding* and 5 = *high level of understanding*. The remaining four questions provided participants with a chance to provide a written response to questions.

Results

Table 1 presents the mean scores for questions 1 to 11. Due to violations of normality assumptions, a non-parametric alternative to the *t* test was used to test for significant differences between the LGM and LGF groups. A Mann-Whitney U test indicated significant differences between the two groups for several questions. Specifically, knowledge and understanding of participants was significantly higher for those in the LGM (Mean rank = 58.75, *n* = 53) compared to those who attended the LGF (Mean rank = 43.65, *n* = 49), U = 914, *z* = -2.88, *p* = .004, two-tailed, with a medium effect size (*r* = .29). Further significant results were attained in comparing the two workshops relating to *provision of resources that are useful and relevant (U* = 1020, *z* = -2.03, *p* =.042, two-tailed, *r* = .20*). The significant finding for *group work techniques beneficial to learning* (U = 987.5, *z* = -2.21, *p* = .026, two-tailed, r = .22) suggests that participants found the LGM, in comparison to the LGF workshop, to be a useful tool for learning. Significantly higher results were also found for the following questions where again the LGM workshop was rated higher compared to the LGF workshop; *recommendation of workshop to others (U* = 972.5, *z* = -2.38, *p* = .017, two-tailed, *r* = .24*) and *understanding of content after the workshop (U* = 972.5, *z* = -2.41, two-tailed, *r* = .24*). Each of these questions attained a small to medium effect size according to Cohen's (1980) descriptions where: *r* = .1 is a small effect size, *r* = .3 is medium and *r* = .5 is considered large.

Table 1
Mean Scores for Evaluation Questions Comparing Workshop Type

Question	Mean LGM	Mean LGF
1. My knowledge and understanding about strategic planning/data analysis has increased as a result of this workshop	4.06*	3.53
2. Topic and content were intellectually stimulating	3.74	3.84
3. Teaching methods used in the workshop helped me to learn	4.13	3.80
4. I can see ways of incorporating some of the learning from this workshop into my work	4.17	4.06
5. The overall standard of presentation was high	3.94	4.00
6. The resources provided throughout the workshop are useful and relevant	4.34*	3.98
7. Group work techniques used were beneficial to my learning in this workshop	4.11*	3.61
8. I would recommend this workshop to others	4.36*	3.98
9. Overall, how would you rate the workshop?	3.75	3.71
10. My understanding of the content before this workshop	2.91	2.69
11. My understanding of the content after this workshop	4.00*	3.63

Note. Responses ranged from 1 to 5; LGM = Large group Method workshop; Non-LGM = Non large group method workshop.
* Significant $p < .05$

Discussion

The results of this study suggest that the LGM method the World Café was superior to the method of LGF used within the educational institutional context. Significant differences between the workshops relating to knowledge and understanding of the topic suggests that LGM has potentially contributed to this. This finding should, however, be interpreted with caution, given that the two workshops contained different content. It is possible that the content was more difficult for participants to understand in the data analysis workshop, compared to the strategic planning workshop. Having said that, question 8 specifically asked participants to indicate whether group work techniques were beneficial to learning. The results show that the mean score for the LGM workshop was significantly higher than for those participants who took part in the LGF workshop. This finding provides more specific evidence that the LGM technique was, in fact, a contributor to participant learning more so than LGF. Further to this, several qualitative comments also provide support for the LGM technique. For example:

> Group discussion and participatory solution finding techniques are the most attractive concept. (Participant number 398, Strategic Planning Workshop)

> Working in small groups, brainstorming and sharing ideas', was the most positive aspect. (Participant number 395, Strategic Planning Workshop)

Initial proof of behavioural change effects and the transfer of knowledge from the LGM workshop to the workplace was suggested by several comments that participants would use the same formats when working with their staff back at their colleges. The

comments also suggest that the workshop created a sense of engagement and sense of participation in the decision-making process. For example:

> Planning to implement a similar workshop with staff, so they feel as if they have participated to'. (Participant number 394, Strategic Planning Workshop)

An increase in participant understanding of content at the conclusion of the workshop was demonstrated for both groups; however the LGM group had a significantly higher mean score compared to the LGF group at the conclusion of the workshops, which suggests that again the LGM was superior in enhancing the learning of participants in this group. It is plausible to suggest that using an LGM to facilitate the data analysis workshop may have improved the evaluation scores provided by participants. For example, the use of the LGM real-time strategic change may have provided a myriad of ways for the conduct of auditing processes and reporting formats within the necessary audit guidelines, and subsequently increased engagement with the process and understanding of the content.

There are some limitations that should be recognised in the current research. Firstly, the data provide preliminary evidence for the success of LGM in strategic planning in institutional settings. Secondly, the data is based on a specific case study in Oman and therefore its applicability to other educational institutions from other countries, needs to be tested and validated. Thirdly, although the workshops were conducted by the same facilitator, they did differ in relation to content. Therefore it is difficult to disentangle the effects of the facilitation method from the learning reactions by participants to differing content. Further research that compares repeat workshops using different facilitation methods would clearly be an improvement on the design utilised in this study. The sample size used in the current study is also small, so a study that incorporates a larger sample size as a part of evaluation would also increase validity.

Conclusion

To build on the current study, it is intended that further data be collected and analysed according to the Fitzpatick (1977) model of evaluation. A subsequent study will use these results, along with further quantitative and qualitative data, to assess the effectiveness of specific types of LGM in an institutional setting.

While the current study has presented a new approach to assessing the effectiveness of LGM, undoubtedly future research should focus on providing stringent evaluative evidence of the usefulness of different methods of LGM in educational institutions. To do this it is necessary to assess the behavioural changes in participants at different time periods following the workshops to determine whether behavioural changes have occurred (qualitative and quantitative) and identify potential barriers to behavioural change (qualitative). Taken together, the qualitative and quantitative approach would provide a rich source of information for practitioners using LGM and a potential model for implementing strategy within other educational institutions. Ultimately, it may provide the evidence required to assess whether behavioural changes,

which subsequently impact on culture, are an outcome of LGM and if so, are there certain techniques more apt at doing this in educational settings.

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