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Action Learning



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ACTION LEARNING

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CONTENTS

Foreword

08 Part 1 Presentation of a method

- 10 Chapter 1
Action Learning
 - 10 Presentation of a method
 - 12 Five phases
 - 14 What type of knowledge is developed in the course
of an action learning process
 - 16 Summary
- 17 Chapter 2
Teachers' Learning – An Overview
 - 17 What comprises teacher expertise?
 - 20 How does teacher expertise develop?
 - 26 Teachers' learning through action learning processes
 - 28 Summary

30 Part 2 Implementing Action Learning processes

- 32 Chapter 3
Finding a Focus – Formulating a Problem Definition
 - 32 Problem definitions
 - 35 Clarification of central concepts and of the problem definition
 - 38 Summary

39	Chapter 4
	Initiating Actions – Experiments in Teaching
39	Definition of actions
40	A genuinely investigative process – with actions and hypotheses
41	Examples of actions
42	Selection of actions
45	Summary
46	Chapter 5
	Observing Actions in practice – Data Collection
46	Spotting what’s happening
48	Observational record and analysis of ‘Life at the Poles’
63	Analysis of observational records
72	Quantitative and qualitative data
73	Experiences from observing actions
76	Summary
77	Chapter 6
	Talking about Teaching with Colleagues
	– the Didactic Conversation
78	Stage 1: The teacher’s intentions and experiences
80	Stage 2: General aspects concerning the problem definition and actions
82	Stage 3: Summary and practical arrangements
83	Challenges in the didactic conversation
86	Summary

87	Chapter 7
	Analysis – Learning from experiences
91	What can an analysis encompass?
96	Summary

98 Part 3

Experiences from Action Learning Processes

100	Chapter 8
	Teachers' learning
100	How can one investigate and draw conclusions regarding teachers' learning?
101	What do teachers indicate they have learnt from action learning?
111	Summary
112	Chapter 9
	Didactic Points from Action Learning Processes
113	Explicit intentions
116	The indicative of X
118	The double intention
120	With a foundation in the pupils' abilities and learning
124	References
128	Appendix
133	About the authors
134	Index

FOREWORD

In this book, we present action learning. Action learning is a method which has gradually gained some degree of acceptance in various programmes of basic training and further education within the pedagogical field, but - to the best of our knowledge - the method has yet to be adequately presented in a Danish context. This book should atone for that. It is our intention that the book can be used as a practical guide by practitioners and others interested in generating learning within knowledge-based pedagogical practice and, as such, the book includes a detailed description of how action learning processes can be conducted, as well as presenting teachers' experiences with the implementation of action learning processes. In this way, we aim to provide the reader with a broad insight into the possibilities and limitations of action learning.

During the period 2003 – 2004, a collaborative development project was carried out by the School of Education, University of Aarhus, N. Zahle's College of Education and KLEO, which is a Research and Development Centre under the umbrella of University College UCC. The purpose of the project was to study and develop teachers' workplace learning using action research¹. This project provided the foundations for the development of the approach to action learning presented here. Since then, the method has been further developed by staff at KLEO. In our experience, action learning is a method which, by its very nature, continues to be subject to further development. Several of the teachers who have participated in the action learning

1) We have previously presented the results of this project in the Danish language book **Læreres læring – aktionsforskning i folkeskolen** (Bayer et al. 2004).

processes described will therefore probably discover that new elements have since been added to the method and previous ways of approaching particular elements of the method have been changed.

The book is aimed at schoolteachers, teachers at teacher training colleges and university colleges of education, student teachers, pedagogical consultants and anyone interested in the development of pedagogical practice. Although our experiences with conducting action learning are from Danish state schools, the book can provide inspiration to other professional groups.

This book would not have been possible without the teachers who have helped hone our experiences in conducting action learning processes and thereby contributed to the development of the method. We would therefore like to thank the teachers at Fuglsanggårdsskolen, Skolen på Duevej, and the teachers within the municipality of Roskilde who have taken part in action learning processes. We would also like to thank the teachers who have provided empirical material for this book, both by participating in interviews and by allowing us to observe them in their classrooms.

Copenhagen, April 2008

Helle Plauborg, Jytte Vinther Andersen and Martin Bayer

PART 1

Presentation of a method

Presentation
of a method

In this first part of the book, we focus initially upon presenting action learning as a method. First and foremost, this involves pinpointing and defining what action learning is and what is meant by the terms action and learning respectively. In this first chapter, we will also discuss what type of knowledge can be developed when working with action learning. The following chapter (chapter 2) is centred upon characterising teachers' competencies and describing how they are developed. This takes the form of a brief review of Danish and international research on teachers' learning. The chapter concludes with a description of the perspective on teachers' learning upon which work with action learning is founded.

CHAPTER 1

Action Learning

In this chapter, the focus is primarily upon the presentation of a method – action learning. The chapter therefore begins by clarifying what action learning is. This is followed by a description of the five phases which feature in an action learning process. The chapter concludes with a characterisation of the type of knowledge which can be cultivated and developed when working with action learning.

PRESENTATION OF A METHOD

The primary objective of action learning is to bring about the development of teaching through the ongoing experimentation with, observation of and reflection on concrete educational settings. The basic approach is that the team explores the educational setting together and in this way acquires knowledge and experience of how the setting unfolds and how it can be developed. The central focus of action learning is therefore the creation of practice-based knowledge about and the development of teaching.

Characteristic for action learning as a method is that it involves teachers *studying* and *experimenting with practice* in order to *refine* their practice and make it more *knowledge-based*, thereby furthering *teachers' learning*. To elaborate upon this definition of action learning: *studying* refers to an inquisitive and explorative approach, questioning one's practice, which is one of the cornerstones of action learning. Action is another word for *experiment* and, due to the great learning potential involved in attempting to break with bodily anchored routines and patterns of conduct, the initiation of experiments can be considered another cornerstone of action learning. Teachers possess a valuable and multifaceted body of knowledge. At the same time, however, it has been documented by a large number of development projects and much research that the competencies drawn upon by teachers are by and large situated, complex and tacit, as well as both dependent upon and bound

to the particular context within which they are to operate and be put into practice (Lortie 1975). *Knowledge-based* draws attention to the fact that action learning also involves a co-operative effort to articulate this valuable knowledge and to put it into perspective and develop it through the exchange of experiences with colleagues. As such, professional development is based among teachers themselves and forms a starting point for the refinement and development of pedagogical practice. Therefore, it is an underlying assumption within action learning that teachers become more aware of what they are doing by putting it into words, and that this increasing awareness of what they are doing can ultimately result in a *refinement* and development of practice (Plauborg 2006). *Teachers' learning* represents the main focal point for action learning processes. Briefly stated, the aim is that teachers learn something about practice through collaboration on experiments and the study of the results of the experiments they initiate, and through working together to articulate the logics tacitly embedded in practice. Teachers' learning during action learning processes is further elaborated in chapter 2.

As is apparent, it is the practice-based reality which is of interest within action learning, and the method therefore involves both the knowledge and prowess which teachers already possess with regards to teaching, and teachers' ways of working and learning. So what are the differences between teachers' everyday workplace learning at the school and teachers' learning in conjunction with the implementation of action learning processes? The differences are partly that, during action learning processes, teachers carry out consciously selected actions which they systematically observe; and partly that teachers work together in an attempt to analyse and interpret their experiences with the explicit goal of establishing and refining a knowledge-based practice.

In this book, we deal with action learning as a method for ongoing experimentation with and analysis of crucial aspects of teaching. However, action learning processes do not necessarily have to be centred on teaching. Circumstances involving, for example, school-home cooperation, collegial collaboration, or something else entirely could likewise provide the focus for an action learning process. As such, the fact that this book concentrates on teaching is due to our experiences working with action learning all stemming from teaching contexts.

FIVE PHASES

Analytically speaking, an action learning process can be divided into five phases which intermesh during the process. These five phases are described in detail in the second part of this book. For now, we will therefore merely provide a brief outline of the phases so that the reader is able to form an impression of the method to keep in mind when reading the rest of this first part of the book.

The first phase in an action learning process involves the formulation of a problem definition which can function as a basis for studying and experimenting with practice. It therefore has to be a problem which can be acted upon. In chapter 3, we detail what is meant by formulating a problem definition. In addition, the chapter contains concrete examples of problem definitions as well as including several important considerations when formulating such a problem definition.

The second phase of the process has to do with the initiation of actions. Actions are, as previously stated, another term for experiments and can be acts initiated in order to investigate the problem in question more closely, or experiments established with the aim of discovering a more appropriate way of acting in relation to the problem. In chapter 4, various examples are provided of what an action can entail and the chapter also includes descriptions of the challenges which can be involved in identifying and initiating actions.

In the third phase, the focus is upon the observation of the actions that have been initiated. That is to say, during this phase colleagues from the team systematically observe each other's teaching with the aim of spotting the result of the action. Inter-collegial observation of teaching is something many teachers are not used to, but it nevertheless constitutes a vital source of learning. In chapter 5, attention is therefore turned to how to tackle the observation of colleagues' teaching. In addition, the chapter contains an example of an observational record and an analysis of this record in order to provide the reader with an idea of how one goes about such systematic observation – including an awareness of the sensitivity of the situation. The fourth phase of an action learning process is a didactic conversation, which is a structured conversation within the team regarding the findings of both the observer and the observed. This conversation also includes discussions of future actions. In chapter 6, the description of this didactic conversation is elaborated upon and examples are given of how it can be structured and organised.

An action learning process is completed with an analysis of the experience and knowledge which have been gained as a result of the process. This analysis constitutes the fifth and final phase and is subject to a more detailed description in chapter 7, where an example can likewise be found of how experiences can be accumulated and analysed.

As was stated in the introduction to this chapter, the five phases intermesh in the course of an action learning process. This is first and foremost because the initiation of actions, the observation of these actions and the didactic conversation all constitute an ongoing process. The observations and the reflections they bring about result in the initiation of new actions, either as a follow-up to the initial action or because observations have made it apparent that something else needs to be tried. The initiation of new actions leads to new observations, which in turn lead to new

didactic conversations. In addition, in the course of an action learning process, many teachers adjust and more precisely define the problem as their knowledge increases, and so this first phase is also subject to ongoing re-evaluation. To summarise, the five phases of an action learning process are as follows:

Phase 1: Formulating a problem definition

Phase 2: Initiation of actions

Phase 3: Observation of actions

Phase 4: The didactic conversation

Phase 5: Analysis of experiences

The duration of an action learning process varies considerably. At some schools, the processes are organised in such a way that participating teachers work with action learning over an intensive period during the autumn and/or spring. At other schools, the processes are more protracted. As such, it is not the aim that teachers - on the basis of a problem definition - initiate actions, observe each other's teaching nor hold didactic conversations throughout an entire school year; the aim is rather that work with action learning is ongoing in the sense that the exchange and qualification of experiences becomes established as a cornerstone of team collaboration and that teachers continue to be inspired by action learning such that didactic issues constitute a vital component of the content of team collaboration.

WHAT TYPE OF KNOWLEDGE IS DEVELOPED IN THE COURSE OF AN ACTION LEARNING PROCESS?

The approach to action learning which we present here is inspired by action research. Action research is the collective designation for a range of change-oriented and often critical research methodologies linked by the common goal of producing knowledge about and improving practice through the collaboration between researchers

and practitioners intervening in and investigating practice. The reason this book is about action learning and not action research is that the emphasis is placed upon the concepts *action* and *learning*, and as such, it is of lesser importance in this context to deal with the question of whether or not action learning can be considered research. However, this choice of course means that it is necessary to account for what type of knowledge teachers generate through action learning. In this regard, distinguishing between three different knowledge forms, i.e. scientific knowledge, professional knowledge and practical knowledge, can be beneficial. How these three knowledge forms are to be characterised has long been, and continues to be, a matter of some debate, and as such, a widely accepted and clearly defined division does not exist. It is outside the scope of this book to enter into such a discussion here. In the following, we will instead provide a tentative sketch of a possible division in order to clarify what type of knowledge can be produced in the course of an action learning process.

One of the characteristics of scientific knowledge is the systematic nature of its production; among other things, this entails a grounding in systematic methods which, in principle, enable critical verification. As previously stated, action learning processes do not contribute to this type of knowledge production. Instead, action learning processes lead primarily to the development of professional knowledge. Professional knowledge can be characterised as comprising our knowledge of what teachers can and should do, and what constitutes successful pedagogical practice. This type of knowledge can be informed by theory - and indeed it often is - but, unlike in the case of scientific research, the goal is not to produce systematic knowledge which meets the stipulations of the scientific knowledge form. Professional knowledge differs from, but also builds upon practical knowledge; that is to say, teachers' intuitive, personal and figurative knowledge - which is difficult to articulate and difficult to localise - and is therefore often referred to as teachers' tacit knowledge.

In addition, it is characteristic of this practical knowledge that it is founded in routines and reflexes and tied to unspoken values, norms and attitudes. This does not mean that practical knowledge is not both valuable and meaningful, far from it. Furthermore, as already stated, practical knowledge also forms a significant part of the foundation for the development of professional knowledge. Teachers' ways of dealing with and acting in practice draw upon different forms of knowledge, both professional knowledge and practical knowledge. In action learning the focus is upon the development of professional knowledge. In other words, it is not an attempt to subject teachers' practice to scientism.

SUMMARY

Action learning is a method centred upon the development of teaching through experimentation and reflection in regard to observations of concrete educational settings. An action learning process consists of five phases: formulating a problem definition, initiating actions, observing actions, conducting didactic conversations, and analysing experiences. The type of knowledge generated through action learning processes is primarily professional knowledge.