

Managing the Action/ Reflection Polarity in the OD Classroom: A Path to Transformative Learning

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Abstract

It has been said that “the unexamined life is not worth living” (Socrates). Yet, in the current work and educational climate of increasing pressure to relentlessly produce, a key to success has been all but eliminated. This article examines the design of a graduate course to help students experience and apply their learning in managing the action/reflection tension to team work in organizations across work sectors.

Paradoxes in Organizational Learning

It has been said that “the unexamined life is not worth living” (Socrates). Yet, in the current work and educational climate of increasing pressure to relentlessly produce, a key to success has been all but eliminated. This is the ability to create a space for collective reflection, learning, and ultimately personal, organizational, and potentially social, transformation. Our recent research (Laiken, 2001; Laiken, Edge, Friedman & West, forthcoming) has highlighted a variety of paradoxes in managing organizational learning. Among them, managing the tension of task versus process, or action versus reflection, appears to be an important factor in blocking or conversely, facilitating, transformative learning. The purpose of this paper is to explore more fully that particular paradox and to discuss how the skills to manage it can be developed within the context of a graduate course.

At the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto, graduate students in our Adult Education specialization, “Workplace Learning and Change”, are studying to be organizational change practitioners across work sectors. All of them have an interest in transformative learning, and are using their graduate education to experience and learn about this for themselves and their constituents.

In one of the courses that we offer, entitled: *Developing and Leading High Performing Teams: Theory and Practice* (referred to in this paper as “course 1107”), we are experimenting with a particular design that surfaces the action/reflection paradox for the purpose of learning how to manage this polarity. To this framework, each individual brings personal learning goals, as well as holding the mutual goal of helping work teams of all kinds develop towards high performance.

This paper examines the design of the 1107 learning environment, in an effort to shed light on how it helps learners to manage the action/reflection tension, educationally and

organizationally. It draws on data from both the aforementioned research project, (Laiken, 2001; Laiken et al, forthcoming), and from the writings of recent 1107 students in their final papers for the course.

The Problem

At the organizational level, across work sectors, our students agree with our research findings that whether the product is defined as services or goods, the general tendency is to view time spent on specific task completion as the only legitimate form of work. Divergent thinking, although touted as an organizational value with phrases such as “thinking out of the box”, is in reality only barely tolerated, before convergence towards action (or in Nike’s terms, “just do it”) overrules.

However, decades of experience and research in adult learning (Lewin, 1951; Argyris and Schon, 1978; Kolb, 1984; Mezirow, 1991; Cranton, 1994) have convinced educators that an opportunity to reflect on one’s lived experience is an essential component of learning which results in attitudinal and behavioral change. In our model “learning organizations”, an opportunity for such reflection was found to not only increase productive capacity as well as individual knowledge and skill, but also, in fact, to result in personal and sometimes, organizational learning which is transformative.¹ As

workers engaged in critical, reflective dialogue about the results of a mutual project and their interactions within it, they not only devised improved approaches for further work, they also

explored their own values, assumptions and interpersonal processes. Where an unexamined experience may tend to simply be repeated, a conscious examination of learning from direct experience surfaces distorted assumptions, and has the potential to revise established world views. Although these organizations struggled with legitimizing attention to process, the paradoxical outcome when they engaged was a case of speeding up by slowing down. Decision-making was improved, effectiveness increased, and overall productivity and work satisfaction enhanced through systematically incorporated periods of collective reflection (Laiken, 2001; Laiken et al, forthcoming; Senge et al, 2000; Argyris, 1990).

Nevertheless, the workplace persists in devaluing this activity by using derogatory language such as “mushy” or “touchy-feely”, and through maintaining systems, processes and behaviors that relegate critical reflection to an isolated corner, if it is supported at all. In struggling with the paradox, a team member in one of our research sites (Laiken, 2001, p. 9) noted:

...but it does take work, though, I mean, you think about a team – it doesn’t just happen on its own. It takes its course – and the problem is, people get so caught up with doing the other work they have to do that they don’t take the time to build their team, and so the team work doesn’t get improved.

When personality or work-style differences (Kolb, 1984) surface in a team meeting, the pressure to move to task closure reinforces convergent work approaches. The assimilative thinkers who could encourage deeper analysis, or the divergent thinkers who might help expand the possibilities, often play second fiddle to an action orientation, which is reinforced by work pressures to make a decision and move on. What is lost in this process is the potential for

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learning that could both inform future action and expand personal consciousness.

Our graduate students have similarly struggled with this tension; Helen reflects on her own attitude towards process at the start of the 1107 course:

I personally viewed the frequent "time outs" as being selfish and unproductive to the class goal ... I recognized the time that a team project would take, and feared that if we continued to stop and look at our team process, we would run out of time. As a working parent taking two courses, I valued the task time, and was resistant to seeing value in the process.

Additionally, when one considers the fact that the skills involved in critical reflection are

not as valued, and therefore taught or practiced minimally in the action-oriented workplace, it is not surprising that these skills are generally under-developed among workers, regardless of personal style differences. Thus, although the need for balance between "task" and "process" is sometimes recognized, the implementation is fraught with difficulties.

One of the key barriers is a disinclination to engage in open dialogue that holds the potential for conflict. Inevitably, as a group of people begins to examine together a shared work experience, the differences that define their uniqueness will surface. In an earlier study (Laiken, 1993) conducted with senior managers, team leaders and members from two private-sector organizations, we found that "an intellectual understanding does not appear to be sufficient. No matter how much it is accepted

that surfacing and managing conflict is a normal, healthy productive process in a team's life, most team members and leaders appear to be frightened of the outcomes and disinclined to engage" (p.33).

Thus, workplace norms which devalue reflection, lack of skill, work-style differences and fear of the conflict which can surface in reflective dialogue, all mitigate against attention to this important aspect of organizational and individual learning.

A Graduate Course Response to the Challenge

How then do we, as adult educators, enable reflective opportunities that have potential learning outcomes to be incorporated into productivity-oriented workplace settings? And how do we personally learn the skills required to engage in such reflection, so that we may teach them to others? These are key questions which have surfaced in course 1107 over the years. Each group of Adult Education graduate students engages in this inquiry experientially, through a course design which unfolds during seven full-day sessions over a period of thirteen alternate weeks.

The first day is devoted to orienting the learners to the course design, beginning to build the group of twelve people as a team, and introducing Hersey and Blanchard's Situational Leadership Model (1988) as a skeletal framework for understanding team leadership in relation to the predictable phases of group development. At the end of the first meeting, the students form co-facilitating pairs for each of the remaining six days, and proceed in the following course design.

In the mornings, theory is introduced experientially, covering such areas as the phases of team development; team goal-setting, problem-solving, decision-making, communication and conflict management; managing difference; and dealing with intractable problems as polarities. These pieces

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are initially introduced and taught by the instructor. However, as a result of the afternoon team discussions, the content is eventually determined by the interests and learning needs of all class participants.

The afternoon session is divided into two components. The first is an hour and three-quarter meeting of the class group as a working “team”, led by the co-facilitating pairs of

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students self-selected during the first class. The task, process and facilitation of these meetings are entirely decided by the group. Students are challenged to assess the learning goals of individual members and together agree upon and implement learning activities that will allow the team to achieve these goals. Their methods usually involve such approaches as

case studies, role plays and simulations, films, site visits, readings, discussions and guest lectures.

The team is also asked to assess its progress in meeting mutual learning goals by identifying appropriate criteria and a method for evaluating the team’s performance. The outcome of this evaluation is worth 50% of each student’s grade, and is often divided into a self-assessed component based on personal learning goals, and a team component, which addresses group performance based on various criteria from the literature on high performing teams. Researching these criteria, deciding which ones to use and how to assess their team in these areas is an important part of the overall learning process.

The instructor serves as a “coach” to the student co-facilitators prior to and during the team sessions, when needed. As the team

members become increasingly adept at managing their own process, the instructor’s interventions decrease in frequency, to the point where she mainly acts as an observer, collecting data to help with the next segment.

The final hour of the day, in the form of a team “debrief” is the most critical component of the course, as it is the one in which the skills for reflection are conscientiously developed. Consistent with the leadership approach used throughout the course, this meeting is initially facilitated by the instructor, and eventually co- led by all team members. This segment is intended to provide a structured reflective opportunity to examine the team’s behavior and provide individual feedback to members and co-facilitators. The observations about “team life” are intentionally related back, with the help of the instructor, to the theoretical concepts introduced in the morning sessions.

The overall purpose of this design is to help students learn the skills of successfully achieving task goals through action, while maintaining an effective team process through reflection. The ultimate intention of this approach is to help learners begin to incorporate process interventions more naturally into their task discussions, so that eventually a specifically designed process discussion will be unnecessary. However, initially, the separation helps learners to understand clearly the difference between “task” and “process”, to experience the direct impact which attention to process can have on the effectiveness of the team in their task, and to learn and practice reflective skills.

Sarah comments on this part of the course design, using her learning about leadership style as an example:

The debrief for this session offered many insights into appropriate leadership for this stage. For example, the co-facilitators had prepared an agenda but had realized just before the session that

it was too structured, so discarded it. This was a good decision, because it allowed the group members to have more control over the session, thereby sharing the power... Because the co-facilitators adjusted their leadership style to be less directive, the group was able to air our differences and work through our issues. (Final paper, 1107, 2001)

The path to this kind of awareness is a dialogic approach. Learners practice the skills required to engage successfully in dialogue, including advocating their own views, as well as inquiring into the views of others, with the intention of promoting understanding of differences (Elinor and Gerard, 1998; Isaacs, 1993; Brenegan, 2000). They are introduced to such concepts as “the ladder of inference” (Senge, 1990, Argyris and Schon, 1978), to help them manage the tendency to leap from observed behavior to undiscussed interpretations and assumptions. They practice the skills of self-disclosure and giving and receiving feedback on observable behavior (Luft, 1970), and are encouraged to see conflict and expression of difference as a rich opportunity for learning (Laiken, 1994).

The face to face interaction in class is supported by several additional vehicles for reflection, which help reinforce the experiential learning approach. These include a course requirement that each student maintain a personal reflective journal of his or her experience; a learning partnership which is formed early in the course and used in any way the learners choose; and a web-site (Web Knowledge Forum) which is available for on-line conversations between classes. The next section of this paper explores in more detail how students incorporate the above-outlined skills in learning how to reflect on their lived experience in course 1107.

Learning to Become a “Reflective Practitioner”

Bandura's (1974) behavioral theory model provides a framework for understanding the various stages of learning through which an individual or group might progress, to enable the kind of collective reflection described in the last section. Quotes from final course papers in 1107 illustrate this model in action, and may provide a roadmap for those wishing to help manage the action/reflection polarity in learning and work.

The stages are as follows:

1. *Lack of awareness* (unconscious incompetence): *in which differences in ideas, styles, approaches, commitment, etc. may cause discomfort, but there is no expectation that it is possible to address this within the work/learning context.*

Although the learners in 1107 tend to be experienced professionals in their own right, they inevitably encounter challenges in the course of their team work. Initially, they, like teams in the workplace, feel the tensions but are not prepared to act on them. In her final course paper, Evelyn describes this phase within a community service team with which she has worked:

... There are conflicts between some professional groups about roles, and team members have

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reacted to these and other issues through absenteeism and a general lack of enthusiasm for the task at hand.

Eventually, as the pressure of unresolved conflict increases, team members find release in discussing the issues outside of the team environment, leading to the second phase.

2. *Awareness without action* (conscious incompetence): *in which there is an awareness of issues needing to be discussed more openly, but neither the willingness nor the ability to make these discussible in the work/learning context.*

At this point, the tensions are often acknowledged outside of the team in “hallway conversations” *about* others who are not present.

Sharon describes this stage in her class team:

The first barrier to effective team functioning occurred after our fourth team meeting. Following the session, half of the team met at a restaurant across the street from the school. Emotions ran high. Some of the team members were deeply disturbed by our team’s performance. Several individuals who were not present were labeled as “disruptive to our team process” and identified as barriers to achieving our expected team outcomes.

During class periods in this phase, members are being encouraged to use the debriefing sessions to begin surfacing the issues which are causing tension. Initially, this is accomplished through written, anonymous “post-meeting reaction sheets” which the instructor collates and feeds back to the team.

Eventually team members learn to provide such data face to face, which leads to phase 3.

3. *The ability to act on awareness, with effort* (conscious competence): *in which a team is able, usually with facilitative help, to surface and expose assumptions in order to more openly explore differences.*

The work in this phase involves helping learners to invite feedback on the impact of their behavior on others; helping them explore the assumptions that are driving this behavior; and helping them be open to having these assumptions questioned by others who bring a different perspective to the table. The impact of this type of engagement is to prevent trips up the previously mentioned “ladder of inference” (Senge et al, 1994):

- from observable data gleaned from experiences with each other
- to “data” that we select from what we observe
- to personal and cultural meanings that we add
- to assumptions we make based on those meanings
- to conclusions we draw rooted in our assumptions
- to beliefs we adopt or generalizations that we make
- to actions we take based on those beliefs.

In this phase learners become more aware of their own thinking and reasoning through critical reflection, and begin to engage with each other in quality conversations through dialogue. This involves slowing down their thought

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processes so that they avoid moving quickly from the concrete data of direct observation to a generalization that is not tested. Participants learn to spot these leaps because they often cause confusion and tension in a conversation. At this point, rather than ignoring the tension, they learn to acknowledge the leap, and examine it by testing their understandings against the experience of others.

Reflecting on her engagement with this process in 1107, Tess says:

During our fifth meeting a team member declared: "I don't look forward to coming to this class and I don't know why." That moment held an indescribable intensity in the team... As the conversation continued, conflicting views and feelings surfaced. I felt the energy begin to shift. The team allowed the space for working through internal and interpersonal conflicts. The collective strength and vulnerabilities of the team began to surface, as individuals shared responsibility for leadership on specific issues. In these moments I began to feel part of a dialogue – with myself and in the group.

Once the differences have surfaced and are understood clearly by all, the last phase of the model becomes relevant.

4. *The ability to hold the polarities, and maintain the communication (unconscious competence): which involves the ability to interact with others who have qualitatively different views, styles, backgrounds, etc. in a way that values the other individuals and their ideas, while simultaneously maintaining the integrity of one's own beliefs, and allowing oneself to be influenced by the differences.*

As is almost always the case in complex interactions, the issues on the table here are not problems to solve, but polarities to manage. It is likely that a variety of viewpoints will all be potentially credible, while at the same time seeming contradictory. It is in creating a container to hold these differences, and through them to clarify and revise one's own thinking, that the potential for transformation occurs.

In her final paper, Sharon describes how her course team progressed from their initial "hallway conversation" in a restaurant to a productive face to face dialogue in class:

As a group, we eventually realized that we were responsible for creating the barrier to our team functioning. What could be more damaging to our team development than holding this "gripe" session, labeling team members and raising conflict issues with only half of the team present? We recognized that the only way this barrier could be broken was to address the areas of conflict with the group as a whole at our next team meeting.

Most significantly, the outcome of this conversation was a commitment to call for a "time out" to examine the group's process whenever a member was experiencing any tension in the team. Thus the group eventually was able to successfully manage the action/reflection polarity by incorporating moments of reflection into the team's on-going task activities, and the structured debriefing sessions became increasingly less necessary.

Conclusion

In our 1107 course, as in the "learning organizations" of our research (Laiken et al, forthcoming), learners and workers have struggled in their own way with the action/reflection paradox. The class teams and

organizations that have been able to actually balance their task and process activities, and include reflective opportunities in the course of a work/learning day, are beginning to demonstrate the ability to manage difference in new ways. In the end, I believe it is this notion of learning in the moment, through sustained attention to process intermingled with task, which holds a promise of creating truly dynamic learning organizations. Our graduate students are becoming skillful, through courses like 1107, in helping to create such work environments.

As I read the transcripts from the taping of class six, I could see how the class used honesty, balance between task and process, respect for each other, and effective communication (our class norms) to become unstuck and accept the diversity in the class. The synergy and enthusiasm within the class was positive and inclusive. We had valued and celebrated both sides of the poles of task and process, and it felt great. (Helen, final paper, course 1107, 2001)

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¹ Transformative learning is defined by Patricia Cranton (1994) as "the development of revised assumptions, premises, ways of interpreting experience, or perspectives on the world by means of critical self-reflection" (p. xii).

² The names in the text have been changed to pseudonyms to protect confidentiality

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