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Practice based learning: stories that reveal and influence

Track: Knowledge and learning

Abstract

We are curious as to how leaders can become more understanding and reflexive (Cunliffe 2004; Hibbert & Cunliffe 2015) of their own practice and how this might be facilitated in meaningful ways. How leaders do their job is increasingly important and difficult because our world is becoming more uncertain and erratic. Yet through this, leaders need to be able to understand, involve others and make reasoned choices, often with incomplete knowledge. It is within this challenge that we explore practice based learning (PBL), by this we mean developing the ability to understand, involve others and make reasoned choices, often with incomplete and hazy knowledge. In this sense, practice development is a social process. This paper presents an agenda for research into PBL . The insights generated will influence further learning about leadership as an iterative process of research. We briefly consider the social and individual nature of such learning, making clear that both are a reflection of the other. Within an action research methodology we seek to use a blend of action learning and story (Gabriel 2000) to understand and apply learning in the challenging contexts leaders find themselves in.

Introduction and context

We are curious as to how leaders can become more understanding and reflexive (Cunliffe 2004; Hibbert & Cunliffe 2015) of their own practice and how this might be facilitated in meaningful ways. How leaders do their job is increasingly important and difficult. It is more difficult because our world is becoming more uncertain and erratic; there is climate change, political upheaval in Western democracies, there are the impact of new technologies and artificial intelligence to name a few. Yet through this leaders need to be able to understand, involve others and make reasoned choices, often with incomplete knowledge. It is within this challenge that we explore practice based learning (PBL), by this we mean developing the ability to understand, involve others and make reasoned choices, often with incomplete and hazy knowledge; in this sense, practice development is a social process.

In this situation the well-established methods of knowledge creation, which assume a steady or reliable context, become less dependable (Baumard 1999; Letiche & Statler 2005). Given this it is our contention that we should pay greater attention to the process of knowledge formation, context and its evolution as a practical form of knowledge (Flyvbjerg et al. 2012). It is this that we wish to explore.

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Exploring practice based learning

Within an action research methodology (Reason & Bradbury 2006) we are proposing to explore PBL with a combination of story development and usage within an action learning context.

Development of story.

One of the researchers obtained funding to collect a number of stories about people's experience of trust in organisations (Donaldson & Warwick 2016). There were three forms: a conversation between the researcher and the participant; a narrative; and, an insight on trust literature. These were 500-1,000 words in length and written in a process of collaboration with the participant that provided anonymity yet some context that enabled an exploration of that particular facet of trust.

These stories were used in a number of workshops to enable people to explore their experience of trust. Participants were asked to choose one which resonated with their experience and then to work in small groups to explore the nature of trust and how to build trusting relationships at work. What was striking was the way that these stories enabled participants to talk about what mattered to them and the actions that they could have practically taken. These workshops facilitated storytelling and interpretation of participants' own experience of trust; several including recent raw experiences where the dust had yet to settle (Boje 2001).

We are therefore not only interested in people's stories of PBL, but we are also in how these stories themselves can come to influence the further development of practice. As for context, we are particularly interested in those difficult, shifting and hazy situations where people need to make reasoned choices with incomplete knowledge.

Use of story within action learning

Having explained the opportunity for stories in PBL we propose their use in action learning sets as a forum for exploration and practice development. Action learning (Pedler 2011; Pedler 1997; Tosey & Marshall 2017) is a process of group support, challenge and coaching where learning is facilitated by questions from the group that enables the participant to contextualise their own knowledge from different perspectives from which decisions can be made (Revans 1980). Brook and Milner (Brook & Milner 2014) describe the application of several creative approaches in action learning sets, one of these being storytelling. Adapting Morgan and Denelly's (Morgan & Dennehy 1997) framework of setting, build up, crisis, learning from experience and resulting new awareness, they note how storytelling is useful in a group for sharing culturally and educationally diverse experiences (Brook & Milner 2014, p132). Brook and Milner's paper does not report specifically on the benefits or otherwise of storytelling in their study. However, it has encouraged us to pursue the approach further to support leader development.

To support leader development participants will be interviewed after taking part in an action learning set meeting to write up their stories. This will be an iterative process between the writer and the participant until both have settled on an agreed draft. They will typically be a 500-1,000 words in length and will describe a broad context and problem that the person is dealing with. The stories will: 1) act as a record of real time problems encountered; and, 2) used as a means to facilitate further learning by action learning set members.

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Participants will also be interviewed about their experiences of the process of practice based learning focusing on both themselves and the wider organisational impact (Warwick et al. 2017). From these stories and interviews we aim to give life to the contexts, the contemporary sensemaking (Weick 1995) and issues of power as participants learn and make their next steps in their practice development.

Conceptual background

In the following section we present concepts that inform understanding of PBL. Here we consider the interaction between the social and individual nature of practice knowledge recognising that they are features of the same process (Stacey & Griffin 2005, p27). It establishes an initial landscape for an exploration of practice based learning.

Processes that emphasise the individual

Antonio Strati (Strati 2007), being influenced by the late nineteenth century German sociologist Georg Simmel and a long established interest in aesthetics, provides several characteristics of practice based learning. These are that:

- whilst knowledge becomes apparent in situated organisational contexts it is connected with wider global patterns of knowing;
- it requires organisational action involving people and non-people in explicit, tacit and aesthetic forms; and,
- there is an interaction with collective normative codes, cultures and physical space; and, organisational learning is routed in socialisation of practice.

For Strati practice based learning is inextricably linked with how we sense the world through sight, sound, touch and so on in what he calls 'sensible knowledge'. This sensing becomes social through a dialectic connection with action that each of us experiences differently in a process of collective negotiation and a construction of what can be seen as legitimate. This process involves aesthetics, emotion and logic: in other words, our entire selves in a process with others.

Processes that emphasise the social

Here we explore social capital (Stolle 2003; Nahapiet 1998; Pedler & Attwood 2011) to understand the means by which the practice and knowledge are developed and shared. In his book, *Bowling Alone*, on the changing nature of social structures in the US the political theorist Robert Putnam (2000) traced the development of the concept of social capital, the earliest strand of which took him to the work of the educationalist LJ Hanifan in 1916 (Hanifan 1916). Hanifan was interested in the connection between education and development of society in ways that the South American Paulo Freire (Freire 1996) would recognise some fifty years later. In common with Strati's later observation (Strati 2007) of practice based learning Hanifan explained that the development of social capital was difficult to plan for and where the researcher and developer were as much part of the process as everyone else. Hanifan also stressed the multiple nature of initiatives from informal get togethers and picnics, children's schooling, community meetings, adult educational sessions and particularly storytelling dwelling on community history to the current day. Social capital is a highly networked process whereby small change interventions have the potential to create significant impact.

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Connections and questions

So what brings these together as an agenda for an action research (Reason & Bradbury 2006) inquiry? Practice based learning is not solely an intellectual pursuit; we bring our entire selves to our learning both in terms of how we sense the world and the logic and emotion from which we come to understand. The process of learning connects both the detail of what we are doing in front of us, but also wider patterns in society as a way of influencing what is of value and worth the effort with limited resource within that culture. As such, it is a process of negotiation and construction as learning occurs, action is taken and how this reflects in personal and societal good. There is a complexity to the nature of learning, it is serendipitous but this is constrained and enabled by conditions that are themselves subject to change. These are increasingly common in our complex and uncertain world.

Concluding thoughts for exploration

This proposed research addresses two connected questions in the context of action learning and story under an action research approach. Firstly, what situations and opportunities can we create to enable learning to occur? Secondly, what are the processes to reflect and embed that learning within and between people? At the conference, we invite attendees to explore:

- how these methods can facilitate PBL;
- what this may offer as way of researching PBL;
- and, any practical factors that might enable or hinder.

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