An action learning research thesis: exploring the potential contribution of using action learning research to help Emergency Department (ED) Advanced Nurse Practitioner’s (ANP’s) measure clinical outcomes for their patients.

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The background and the practical concern

Articulating how, why and for whom ED ANP’s add value is critical to the future viability of the ANP role (Begley et al 2010). It is proposed to establish an action learning research (ALR) group to see if we can develop a tool to measure the clinical outcomes of those patients seen by the ED ANP, in the short, medium and long term. Pedlar & Trehan (2010) and Rigg (2011) suggest that the usefulness of ALR lies in improving our ability when dealing with ‘wicked problems’ in complex systems and networks.

Action research (AR) is an established research framework for examining and developing clinical practice (McCormack et al 2004). Greenwood and Levin (2007) state that AR is a set of self-consciously collaborative and democratic strategies for generating knowledge and designing action in which trained experts and local stakeholders work together. The local stakeholders are those who have articulated the problem (ED ANP’s) and the author facilitates a co-learning process to address a problem. I will be using an ALR approach, which aims to solve practical problems in real situations with people, rather than on or for them.

Action Research vs. Action learning research

Even from a cursory glance at the literature on AR is it evident that there is a wide diversity in its practice and also within the discourse of that practice (Coghlan, 2011, Rigg & Richards 2006, Coghlan & Brannick, 2010). Action research is not so much a methodology, but as Reason & Bradbury (2008) claim an ‘orientation to inquiry’ and involves a family of approaches. The more common AR approaches include, action learning, action science, appreciative inquiry, clinical inquiry/research, cooperative inquiry, developmental action inquiry and participatory action research (Bradbury & Reason, 2008, Koshy et al, 2011, Coghlan 2011). Which approach to choose and articulating the rationale for the choice is paramount for defending a good ALR project. My concern is this: Is there a solid enough philosophical underpinning of ALR to defend my thesis?

According to Greenwood & Levin (2007) AR belongs to the class of knowledge construction processes that should be known as ‘scientific knowledge generation’. Greenwood & Levin go so far to suggest that AR is a ‘stronger research strategy than

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1 The term expert should be used cautiously as Reg Revans was wary of so called experts who seek to impose solutions rather than putting our trust in each other as co-learners. I would therefore regard myself as a knowledgeable facilitator and co learner (Pedlar, 1997).
conventional social science’ (p.53). They support this argument by claiming that AR utilises all relevant social science methods and integrates them into a larger research strategy where local participants play a vital part in acquiring new knowledge, agree after deliberation and discussion its meaning, and finally by testing its validity in action, as opposed to ‘in theory’. The research ‘problem’ is chosen by the local context and not by the researcher or the academy. The ED ANP’s asked me to help them with their problem, therefore an ALR approach appealed to me as they will be using their own personal and professional experience to help address their problem, in other words it is their agenda, not the researchers, the researchers agenda lies in attaining a PhD and being an effective ALR facilitator.

Although action learning is regularly cited as an accepted approach to doing AR, action learning research is not. AR is further developed than action learning research, in both practice and theory (Pedlar & Burgoyne, 2008). However, ALR is becoming part of a wider growth of interest to action approaches within managerial and organisational development strategies (Pedlar & Burgoyne, 2008, Coghlan 2011, Rigg & Richards 2006, Coghlan & Brannick, 2010).

Action learning is an approach to the development of people who work in organisations, and is based on two principles:

‘There can be no learning without action and no (sober and deliberate) action without learning and those unable to change themselves cannot change what goes on around them.’ (Revan’s, 1998).

Coghlan and Coughlan (2010) state that ‘action learning research is a related but different form of activity to action learning’ (p.193). It would seem that the term action learning is beginning to evolve into a new paradigm called action learning research which is based on Revan’s praxeology of cyclical systems – alpha, beta, gamma.

Coghlan and Coughlan (2010) argue that Revan’s two principles as cited above form the oncological basis for action learning and his formulation for equating theories of learning and knowing (L=P+Q)² provides the epistemological basis. Coghlan and Coughlan (2010) argue that while Revan’s scientific method provides a foundation for ALR it is in the method where the key difference lies between action learning and ALR. Coghlan & Coughlan (2010) claim that the difference between action learning and ALR can be articulated through the level of commitment. Action learning is committed to action and committed to learning. They argue that action learning has no further expectations with regards to a wider group. ALR on the other hand contributes to what the authors term ‘the store of actionable knowledge’; the research has made a contribution to knowledge, or has generated actionable knowledge for others.

Coghlan & Coughlan (2010) position ALR within ‘contemporary expressions of alternatives to traditional research paradigms’, suggesting that Revan’s praxeology, learning formula and scientific methods are the fundamentals for a philosophy of action research. Coghlan goes further, I would argue, than any other contemporary scholar arguing for a general empirical method which he calls ‘practical knowing’ which focuses on how we know, rather than on what we know. Coghlan describes the

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² Learning = programmed learning + questioning in sight.
notion of ‘interiority’ which allows the realms of theory and practical knowing to be held together and valued for each distinctive contribution.

Rigg (2011) suggests there are four fundamental principles of action learning, they are:

- A requirement for action,
- Problems whose resolution will benefit outcomes,
- Peers and
- Questioning insight.

Again, this would fit with the research problem for the ED ANPs’. Rigg (2011) asserts ‘Questioning insight’ is a discursive process as people examine new ways of framing an issue. The issue here might be (I don’t want to pre-empt) that there are only 34 ED ANP’s nationally, there is a known, or acknowledged requirement for more, but there is no Health Service Executive policy (yet) to employ more. Patients presenting with a minor injury to the ED will therefore still have to wait on average, 10-12 hours to be seen and treated.

The action engaged in by peers (ED ANP’s) as they discuss organisational concerns (patients waiting hours to be seen by a competent practitioner) inevitably involves social interaction within the social network that makes up the wider organisation. The result of this interaction and action within their own set and within other organisations may have the net effect of enacting new organisational practices, i.e., more ED ANP’s. This viewpoint would appear to fit with Coghlan and Coughlan’s (2010) stance that the net effect of ALR is in establishing organisation wide change and development.

These four fundamental principles and Coghlan’s theory of practical knowing would seem to fit into the objectives of the study which will involve a group of ED ANP’s coming together over time to help each other learn from their differing experiences in order to demonstrate their effectiveness in delivering care to a specific cohort of patients with a view to making a coherent data driven argument for appointing more nationally, thereby improving the experience of patients with a minor injury who attend the ED. I would relish the opportunity provided by the colloquium to discuss the risks associated with trying to defend a PhD thesis that will use ALR as its methodology (sic).
References:


Rigg, C. (2011) Stytematic action and learning in public services, Action Learning : Research and Practicre, 8:1, 15-26