

FACILITATING ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING AND TRANSFORMATION WITHIN A PUBLIC SCHOOL SETTING

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Abstract

This paper presents a model for organizational learning and transformation within the context of public school reform. The strategy is to offer action research classes in a school setting, which serve as a vehicle for transforming a traditional school environment into a professional learning community. Excerpts from the class dialogue show how instrumental and communicative learning are intertwined in the transformation process.

Introduction

Improving public education is among the highest domestic priorities in the United States and is embodied in the controversial legislation, "No Child Left Behind". The challenge is to figure out how to accomplish meaningful school reform within the whirlwind of punishing political rhetoric coupled with self-defeating legislative and administrative mandates. Meeting this challenge as an adult educator provides the context for the present research program. The strategy entails offering action research classes within selected public schools with the goal of transforming the culture into a learning organization.

A substantial body of research and practice literature on school reform is focused on creating professional learning communities within the school environment (Hord, 1997; Morrissey, 2000). The process represents a major transformation in the organizational life of the school and the professional practice of its members. DuFour and his colleagues (2004) identify an array of cultural shifts that are integral to the movement from a traditional school environment to a professional learning community. These include shifting from teaching to learning, from isolation to collectivity, from activities to results, from fixed time to flexible time, from average learning to individual learning, from punitive to positive, from tell/listen to coach/practice, and from a few elite to many winners. These cultural shifts entail fundamental changes in ways of knowing and thinking about one's self-concept as an educator and how one interacts with colleagues professionally. These cultural shifts are accomplished as the school staff addresses three core questions: What should students be learning? How do you know if they are learning? What are you prepared to do when students aren't learning?

Theoretical Framework

Action science and transformative learning provide the theoretical framework for the present study. Action science (Argyris, Putnam, & Smith, 1985) is a research and intervention strategy aimed at helping individuals and organizations shift from a Model I learning system that is closed, defensive and characterized by win-lose behaviors to a Model II environment that is open, driven by internal commitment, and characterized by a collaborative win-win learning environment. The focus of an action science intervention within a public school setting is to shift the reasoning-in-action among teacher teams to reflect Model II values and action strategies as

they work collaboratively in answering the three core questions by aligning the curriculum within and across grade levels, conducting common assessments of student performance, and designing support programs for students who continue to struggle with learning. From an action science perspective, this shift entails overcoming the defensive reasoning that permeates one's own professional practice and the dysfunctional communication patterns that flourish in Model I environments.

Kegan and Lahey (2001) approach transformative learning in the workplace by focusing on the myriad of competing commitments and the “BMW” language that characterizes most work environments—bitching, moaning and whining. The challenge is to shift this language into a productive discourse. The strategy is to find the set of competing commitments that are embedded in every day complaints and the underlying assumptions that align behavior with one set of commitments at the expense of others. This is accomplished by creating a language for both personal and public transformation. At the personal level it is a process of discovering the set of competing commitments and assumptions that help explain how well-intending individuals often send mixed messages and produce unanticipated and contradictory results. At the public level this is accomplished by creating a language of mutual regard, public agreement, and active experimentation aimed at producing a collective vision and a coordinated action agenda.

The shift in reasoning and language among the members of an organization is a form of transformative learning that takes place not only at the individual level, but also at the group and organizational level. Transformative learning among individuals is focused on a shift in meaning schemes and meaning perspectives and explores the psychosocial, epistemological, and cultural forces that keep the individual from changing his/her own pre-existing ways of knowing and being in the world (Mezirow, 2000). Transformative learning at the group and organizational level (York & Marsick, 2000) refers to significant changes in the way people function and interrelate within the organizational setting. The primary focus is on instrumental learning, which is associated with improving job related performance. This improvement, however, may require communicative learning through which individuals challenge pre-existing points of view and established ways of problem solving within the organization. It may also trigger a reassessment of organizational assumptions, norms, procedures and structures. This, in turn, can lead to more fundamental shifts in meaning perspectives which include “framing, reframing, experimenting, crossing boundaries, and integrating perspectives” among individuals and teams throughout the organization—transformative learning. York and Marsick describe two approaches, action learning and collaborative inquiry, that are particularly useful in facilitating transformational learning at the organizational level. These approaches are used in conjunction with parallel structures that serve as temporary devices through which people practice new forms of action, learning, and critical reflection, which are then transitioned into the more permanent structures and culture of the organization.

Shifting a school culture is a daunting task that requires skillful facilitation. Hall and Hord (2001) provide a set of tools for guiding the change process. One challenge is to create a common understanding of what the change process entails from a multitude of opinions, preferences, understandings, and action strategies that are held by individuals throughout the school. Divergent views persist even with significant staff training. A tool that addresses this issue is the innovation configuration map, which is used to depict the different mental models and action strategies held by individuals and to facilitate the construction of a shared image and implementation process. A second tool is the stages of concern questionnaire that identifies the range of different issues (concerns) that implementers have that are based on their knowledge of and experience with the innovation strategy. Facilitating change requires paying attention to the different issues people have as the change process unfolds and providing training and other

support accordingly. The following diagram summarizes the transformative learning strategy being employed in the present study.

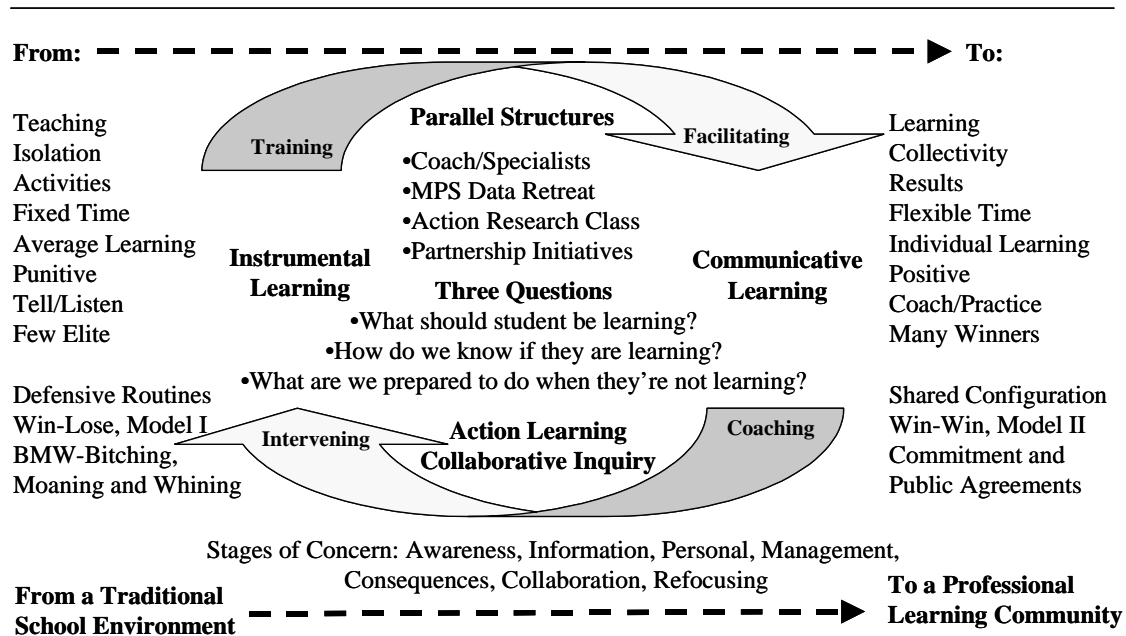


Diagram 1. Transformative Learning: From a Traditional School Environment to a Professional Learning Community Culture

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held on site at individual schools with participants recruited from the school staff. The assignment was to address one or a combination of the three core questions with the members working as a collaborative team to complete the task. A total of six action research classes were held during the 2003-04 academic year. In most cases, the schools decided to use the class setting to align their curriculum in one or more subject area (reading, math, language arts) and, with time permitting, to develop common classroom assessments as part of the completed product. In effect, the class members were asked to assume leadership and responsibility for completing a district-wide mandate that each school align its curriculum with state and district standards. Class time was used for grade level or subject area teams to work on the alignment exercise, while the dialogue that occurred among the members provided opportunity for reflective inquiry on the process. Written assignments included the completion of the curriculum map, the creation of common assessments, and a reflective essay on what was learned in the process with recommendations for improving the effort next year. The following is a passage from the tape recording of the class dialogue as well as excerpts from the students' written material.

The following dialogue shows how work on an instrumental task like aligning the curriculum triggers communicative learning or a reframing of what needs to be done, with whom, when and how. This brief exchange is a snapshot of transformative organizational learning in action that is having a rippling effect on the culture of the school.

Chart 1. Excerpt from the dialogue occurring in an action research class on aligning the reading curriculum

Dialogue	Shifting frames of reference
<p>Voice: The 5th grade and 6th grade [learning targets] are basically identical.</p> <p>Principal. Ok, so the learning targets are so close.</p> <p>Voice: ... But if the goal is [not to] repeat ourselves, then we have to figure out and break down each of those sub-skills. So what is a 5th grade expectation for previewing text, what is a 6th grade expectation? So how in the world are we going to do that?</p> <p>Principal, This is what I saw the primary grades doing. They had blends. By the end of K5 we need these done, First grade the next level. In 5th grade [we have] graphic organizer. We need to split it up so by the end of 6th grade ...</p> <p>Male voice: I agree, so you say now we know that in Kindergarten you are going to know “al and bl or whatever. But what we don’t know in 4th grade is what are they are doing in third. What have they set as their limit for me to start in 4th grade? I don’t know. Where do they stop and where do I start?</p> <p>Principal: ... So are you saying we need to rework the troops again.</p> <p>Voice: Cross groups. Fourth grade has to work with third grade</p> <p>Voice: Maybe one class session we can do 4th and 5th and in the other we can do 3rd and 4th.</p> <p>Principal: ... It seems we start in 4th grade looking at 8th grade requirements.</p> <p>Voice, Right, its like the transition.</p> <p>Principal:, the WKCE assessment of 4th grade is the culmination of everything through 3rd grade.</p> <p>Voice: after that it starts off again. We are the starting point.</p> <p>Principal, 4th grade is the beginning of what is needed by 8th grade.</p> <p>Voice: Right it is the beginning of the intermediate.</p> <p>Principal: and the mapping procedure is the benchmarks along the way.</p> <p>Principal: should I ask that everybody submit a copy of what they have completed and I’ll disseminate to everybody including those who are not in this class. Then</p>	<p>From teaching to learning. The focus is on what students should be learning at each grade level.</p> <p>From isolation to collectivity. It’s not just what each classroom or grade level needs to cover, but the sequencing between grade levels.</p> <p>From activities to results. Emphasis is not only on what is being taught and how but also on results. The students must achieve a given proficiency with a progression in and across grade levels.</p> <p>Collectivity. One’s individual practice is affected by what other teachers are doing and accomplishing in other grade levels.</p> <p>From fixed time to flexible time. Rethinking how to alter the class format to improve communication between grade levels.</p> <p>From being defensive to a new shared configuration. The grade level teachers were frustrated and defensive by not being able to sequence the curriculum until meeting with lower grade levels. While true, a reframing places 4th grade at the beginning of a new sequence that ends in 8th grade. The group reaches a new mental image or configuration where 4th grade is a transition to a new sequence that goes beyond the school.</p> <p>Collectivity. The dialogue returns to altering the class format for improved communication between grade levels</p>

that will be our starting point next time.

Voice: that way we will have something concrete to see.

but is more inclusive—involving staff that are not in the class

The preceding dialogue took place over a few short minutes. However, it represents many similar exchanges that have occurred between different groups of teachers in different classes. It shows how the focus on an instrumental task triggers an array of issues and action planning that will move the process forward—the task gets completed while the individuals, the group, and the organization begin to change. A class member in her reflective essay captured the significance of this cycle of learning between instrumental and communicative discourse. Looking over the entire year she observes a transformation in progress.

We did come together to work for a mutual good of teachers and students. Through many hours and months of planning and preparation before and after school and even during school time, as we passed each other in the hall, in the lunch room, cafeteria. We quickly asked each other information and up-dates, asked questions, and worked together to meet continual deadlines... Before this some teachers ... were working off by themselves but not really making time to find out what the next grade teacher ... was doing, what skills [were being taught] or if they were overlapping... Were we teaching the same things in the same grade? I really didn't know... The process of [aligning the curriculum] was something everyone knew needed the continual involvement [of the whole school] ... and a cohesive urgency arose... The challenge gave the teachers time for input, comparison, and time to ... remove things that became repetitive. Also, to evaluate what I [we] need to teach that was not being taught... The school climate and school culture, along with curriculum, would evolve with many interventions to make our school a place where [new] procedures and structures [will be] common to the school population.

The learning process, however, is fraught with challenges, frustrations, and disappointment. Strangely, everyone contributes to both the progress and setbacks. Everyone has something to learn -- even those attempting to lead the effort (including the author of this report). The reflective essay gave the participants the opportunity to catalogue their complaints and to suggest improvements for next year.

I soon learned that this class was completely different than any other class I have taken. I felt that there was no structure, organization or direction... I felt lost throughout this process. I really felt like more direction should have been given to us in the beginning [by the professor]. The only concrete matter that we accomplished [in the first weeks of the class] was the template [for recording the aligned curriculum]. I did not really start understanding or learning until I was in the small group... I also believe this class should have been structured differently as far as who was working when. By this I mean the kindergarten teachers should have started and as they finished one target the first grade teachers should have started and that it should have kept going with that pattern. A lot of the ... grades really sat and wasted time or had to redo most of their work.

Kegan and Lahey (2001) provide a framework to transform the language that often surrounds the change process, which may be seen as mere complaining. In fact, much that is being done in the name of change could be improved; moreover, many feel strongly that the change process ignores and even violates their basic values, commitments, and assumptions about professional practice. If this is happening, then yes, complain, step forward and be heard. The challenge for those facilitating the change is to see the underlying values, commitments and assumptions that are behind the complaint. In the above statement, the individual is saying that she values her time and wants to be a productive contributor but expects or needs a certain

level of guidance and structure to facilitate the process. Kegan and Lahey also suggest that the difference between negative complaining and productive criticism is a plan of action. This too is being modeled in the above statement. If valuable time is wasted, then a different approach, such as staggering the work of the different grade level teams, may be the answer.

Conclusion

This paper has presented a model for organizational learning and transformation within the context of public school reform. Emphasis was placed on the connection between instrumental and communicative learning. Data was presented from the dialogue that occurred during an action research class, as well as from reflective essays written by the class participants. The findings point to a cycling pattern within an action learning dialogue. Within this pattern the focus is on completing a task like aligning the curriculum. However, the dialogue that occurs moves across an array of issues that challenge individual practices, the existing environment, and organizational structures. The discussion leads to new patterns of interaction among the participants and new structural arrangement throughout the organization. In the present example, the participants in the action research class not only aligned their reading curriculum with state standards and district learning targets but also made significant movement toward becoming a professional learning community.

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