Should We Be Doing Action Learning Research?

A Presentation By

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Who Cares?

The question was raised by David Coghlan at a board meeting of the journal, *Action Learning: Research and Practice*, and then became the subject of a colloquium at the Third International Conference on Action Learning at Ashridge in March 2012.
What is Research?

Often considered to be a systematic inquiry to advance new knowledge not only for the benefit of immediate stakeholders but for the benefit of third parties in the world.
Depending upon one’s epistemology, research, however, can mean different things.

For positivists: researchers outline a set of logical enduring relationships mapped to replicate and predict observable reality across multiple situations [“between the ears”*].

For constructionists: since there is no permanent stock of knowledge that can be communicable to other settings, researchers can only observe and capture what is going on in practice [“between the noses”*].

*Courtesy: Rene Bouwen
What is Action Learning?

Action learning is a practice – a vibrant democratic practice – that helps ‘comrades-in-adversity’ generate learning from their human interaction arising from engagement in the solution of their real-time real-world work problems. Most of this learning comes from questioning insight (Q) though programmed knowledge (P) is available.
Action Learning’s Contribution to Epistemology

So, action learning is performed rather than discovered.
It’s present and relational, not historic and captured.

It seeks truth not from the head but from our interactions searching for it!*

*Paraphrased from Mikhail Bakhtin
In its many forms, action research entails a systematic collaborative inquiry into group and organizational phenomena for purposes of social change. In studying action learning interventions, it might produce mid-range theory, which acknowledges the contribution and representation of some general principles that can apply across multiple situations, recognizing their limitations in informing a local reality.
Action Learning Research

Making action learning a form of research would require converting its estimable Q into P, and not just for the benefit of the assembled.

But rather than attempting to construct a permanent P (the stock of knowledge), we would focus on releasing local and actionable knowledge.

We would be attempting to capture and convert tacit knowledge into learning.

Remember Confucius: Learning without thought is labor lost!

But should we question how much this will help when there are so few regularities in the social world?
From the realists, we learn to judge competing claims to the reality we see.

From the symbolic interactionists, we learn to evaluate the self as often a reflection of the pattern of social behavior in which it is involved.

From the constructionists, learn to deconstruct texts and challenge taken-for-granted meanings.
So, Should There Be An ‘Action Learning Research’?

1. What would it look like if it became a classic research approach?
2. Is there a unique action learning research methodology?
3. What would it be giving up?
4. What contribution would it make in the world of research?
5. How would it differ from action research of action learning?