

Action research-driven professional development: Developing transformational health care managers and creating learning organisations

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Abstract

The Foundation for Professional Development (FPD) offers, *inter alia*, an advanced management development programme for health care managers in the public and private sector, sponsored by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and co-certified by Yale University in the United States (US). The focus is on professional development and transformational leadership. Authentic learning opportunities are created that focus on deep learning in the work context. Portfolio assessment is used. A developmental portfolio is compiled by the health care managers enrolled in the programme. The developmental process is underpinned by the principles of action research. Managers are self-empowered to take responsibility for investigating the transformation of their management practice as a measure of self-driven quality assurance. In most cases the action research process becomes educational to both the manager and his/her colleagues participating in the project. In this way a culture of professional organisational learning is created and maintained. This article reports on a number of case studies of health care managers who conducted action research in an array of health-related contexts, covering health science fields such as HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and capacity building programmes to create learning organisations and community engagement projects. The lessons learned by the managers regarding the innovative ideas they experimented with in their specific contexts can be transferred to other managers and action research scholars. All these case studies provide evidence of knowledge being created in authentic contexts. These case studies are reported as scholarly endeavour to showcase the empowering and emancipating nature of action research and the contribution it makes to the existing body of knowledge in different fields in which health care managers have to operate.

INTRODUCTION

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.

Margaret Mead

This above quote aptly reflects what we have set out to do with the professional development programmes that the Foundation for Professional Development (FPD) offers – creating opportunities for health care managers to empower themselves through action research and in so doing to change their management practices and build learning organisations, irrespective of how small they might be. The process is considered emancipatory (Zuber-Skerritt 2002) and we acknowledge the fact that the managers are empowered, but our focus is on self-empowerment. Change starts with the individual. Action research – the process adopted for learning – is about the individual taking responsibility for bringing about change and monitoring the process. It also entails learning from the experience and encouraging colleagues to do the same. It all starts with a small-scale intervention.

The FPD is a private higher education institution. As its core function the FPD offers programmes for the professional development of health care managers. As a professional development intervention it is the largest health management development initiative in Africa. The focus of the advanced programme is on management in different health-related contexts, with an emphasis on the management of HIV/AIDS and TB programmes. Since 2002, the FPD has enrolled 1 100 health care managers from the public and not-for-profit sectors through a scholarship from the Presidential Emergency Fund for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) provided through a grant from United States Agency for International Development (USAID). This scholarship funds tuition fees on a one-year management development programme offered in collaboration with Yale University. The course combines substantial self-study with quarterly contact sessions and is offered in all nine provinces of South Africa. In 2011 this programme was expanded to the Southern Africa region through funding secured from the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA). The health sector traditionally has an amateur management culture with the majority of managers being health care professionals with little or no exposure to management development programmes. This approach is also reflected in the composition of the FPD's students where 96 per cent of the enrolled managers are health care professionals. Less than 50 per cent had ever been exposed to any management education (including short courses).

On reviewing the general outcomes of the programme during the period 2006 to 2008, the FPD (2010) reports that the programme succeeded in improving the level of development of the managers enrolled as evident in their improved understanding of management theory; that they were doing their work better by applying theory to practice; however, only a minority of the participants were creating transformation in their work environment. This was a matter of concern as the FPD had set out to develop managers as transformational leaders in line with its vision to build a better society through education and development (FPD 2010, 7). This vision is underpinned by a set of organisational values that include innovation, integrity, constructive criticism and a commitment to quality.

The FPD agrees with the statement that leaders are made and not born and that how they develop is critical for organisational change (Rooke and Torbert 2005). From the literature innovative ideas are substantiated as is evident from the theoretical framework included in this article. To support this view that transformational leaders can be 'made' through exposure to action research the assessment strategy for the advanced health management programme was changed to include portfolio assessment. This approach is discussed in more detail and is supported by qualitative data. Students are also challenged to be innovative in their management practices by having to select an innovative idea that they have to apply to their management environment as the theme of their action research. Integrity is another value that the FPD fosters in its academic staff and students by means of honest and professional conduct and personal accountability. Using action research and professional portfolios as part of the learning process cultivates these in students and their management practices. The continuous drive to achieve excellence is embedded in quality.

Quality assurance in higher education has recently become a focal point of the newly established Ministry of Higher Education and entities such as the Council on Higher Education (CHE). However, the quality assurance these entities and ministry promote mainly serves as an external drive, while the FPD advocates the need for quality assurance from within. Quality assurance from within includes steps taken by the FPD as an organisation and individual academic staff. Part of the internal quality assurance is done by means of action research as this article shows. By being a role-model for quality assurance, the FPD expects health managers to do the same by conducting action research in their management practices and by documenting the outcome by means of a professional portfolio. Another value is constructive critique and creative debate not only among staff, but also among staff and students, and among students, that promotes deep learning. These values have become the educational values that McNiff and Whitehead (2006) refer to and that drive the FPD's programmes and learning – both student learning and the professional learning of the FPD's academic staff.

The research question that drives this spiral of the longitudinal action research project is formulated in the next section. The section that follows substantiates the new curriculum interventions from the literature.

RESEARCH QUESTION

The multidimensional nature of the teaching practice at the FPD requires that several research questions be posed in order to investigate the practice holistically. Within an action research paradigm such questions constantly come to the surface while the action research is being conducted. For the purpose of this article the following research question has been formulated to give direction to this small-scale intervention: How can the principles of action research be used to enrich the professional learning experience of managers in becoming transformational leaders who transform their practices and create learning organisations of which evidence is documented by means of a professional portfolio?

The unit of analysis (Mouton 2001) of the study is twofold: action research for professional learning and professional portfolios as an assessment opportunity.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Health Care has historically adopted an ‘amateur’ management model based on the idea that ‘because you have worked for years in the health care system as a health care professional you will automatically be a competent health manager’. This is on a par as suggesting that because the air hostess has worked on the airplane for years, next time a pilot is needed she should be promoted to that position without any further training. Furthermore, health management is perceived as a reactive administrative process rather than a proactive process.

As authentic learning is the end result for which the FPD strives this is brought about by creating opportunities for health managers to learn from investigating their health care management practices in an authentic context. For academic staff the authentic learning they experience comes through investigating the teaching practice at the FPD since that is the authentic context they operate in. For both groups it is about professional learning: professional learning as health care manager and professional learning as academic respectively. In this way, the FPD is enriched by different stakeholders who contribute by helping to build learning communities that collectively contribute to creating a learning organisation.

In order to create a learning environment conducive to authentic learning the FPD approached transforming its education practice from a constructivist point of view. The article provides a rationale for using constructivist learning. To transform from a more traditional education practice to a constructivist one the lecturers involved in the programme had to make an important paradigm shift in their views on knowledge and learning. They also had to rethink their current teaching strategies in the light of these new ideas. Such changed thinking has to do with the education values (McNiff and Whitehead 2006) that FPD lecturers hold and that are aligned with the values described in the FPD’s annual report (FPD 2010) and discussed in the introductory section of this article. Shifting from one paradigm to another implies innovation – one of the FPD values discussed above. The value of a learning-centred approach (Du Toit 2011) to facilitating learning is aligned with constructivist learning (Von Glasersfeld 2001). In a constructivist learning environment students’ points of view are valued. The FPD values discussed above, namely constructive critique and creative debate, are applicable in this regard.

The FPD uses the following as guiding principles for facilitating learning derived from constructivism: students are challenged by authentic problems. It is not only those problems posed during contact sessions, but specifically those applicable to the action research process in which they identify their own problems that they would want to address and that are therefore relevant and of value to them.

When an education practice is transformed as described above, it is imperative to transform the assessment practice in such a way that it complements learning – in the

case of the FPD constructivist learning. For this reason developmental portfolios were introduced. The rationale for using portfolios is borrowed from the title of Rieman's (2000) work: *Presenting your professional best*. The focus is on professionalism and the highest quality of learning. Farris's ideas about teaching portfolios (Rieman 2000) are applicable to the portfolios that the managers have to compile. One such an idea is that a portfolio is more than a collection of a manager's best efforts, but rather a demonstration of his/her growth and improvement as a manager benefiting him-/herself at a personal and at a professional level. At a professional level the constructivist nature of the portfolio as it is based on action research promotes scholarship of management. In compiling the portfolio the manager develops his/her own philosophies of management and construct his/her own theories of management. This implies producing new knowledge.

The following from Farris's list (Rieman 2000) of characteristics of a constructivist learning environment, as adapted to the FPD context, are applicable to the programme under investigation:

- The curriculum is presented whole to part with the emphasis on big concepts. In the management programme students are confronted by their management practices as a whole and need to think about the critical concepts as they are aligned with the focus of their action research.
- The pursuit of student questions is highly valued as having managers develop an enquiry mind is a value adding attribute. Students and not the lecturers should be the ones asking the questions.
- Curricular activities rely heavily on primary sources of data. Using action research necessitates generating primary data. The managers on the programme are expected to work with fresh ideas and therefore new data sets need to be built. Generating such data sets occurs in authentic settings at the managers' workplace and contributes to authentic learning.
- Students are considered critical thinkers with emerging theories about the world. Linked to the idea of developing enquiring minds, action research creates opportunities for managers to think at a scholarly level and to construct new theory based on what they have learned from studying the literature, their experience, scholarly discourse and feedback from others.
- Learning is mediated and meaning negotiated.
- Assessment forms an integral part of the process of facilitating learning. Since the action research process represents the learning process the portfolio and the contributing assignments as explained elsewhere in this article serve as a learning opportunity.
- Students do not necessarily work in groups but the nature of action research brings about collaborative learning.
- Student initiative and autonomy are valued. This is evident in the self-regulated learning that action research fosters and the idea that the manager should take

responsibility for implementing an innovative idea that will transform his/her health care management practice.

With a view to implementing the principles of the adult learning theories applicable in the FPD context, the FPD has put the following steps into place: Firstly, the curriculum of the initial management development programme was refined; secondly, action research was integrated in the curriculum with a view to effecting positive change; and thirdly, a greater awareness of other world views through setting personal development goals, coaching and mentoring was established.

Action research is included as a module. Students are required to conceptualise and implement an innovative idea or solution to a management problem in the context of a rigorous scientific framework that allows them to plan, act, observe, reflect and evaluate the results of such innovation. The action research project is the examination assignment on the course. As an assessment strategy, different steps form part of the developmental process. At the first workshop to be attended students should come prepared and do an oral presentation of their proposed plan of action. As indicated above the research proposal is about an innovative idea to be implemented in the workplace to address a problem identified. The action research project forms the overarching learning process consisting of different key learning points. These key learning points are made up of the different module assignments that form an integral part of the action research process. Seeing that action research is a reflexive process students reflect on what they do as part of their learning and include such reflections in their final portfolio. The following formative assessment opportunities are offered:

- A written action research proposal;
- A personal development assignment;
- A project management assignment;
- A financial management assignment;
- An assignment on resource mobilisation;
- A monitoring and evaluation assignment.

By the middle of the programme students have to submit a mid-term progress report on their action research as part of the formative assessment. The end of the year report describing the action research project outcome serves as summative assessment. Failure in terms of the innovative idea not presenting the desired results is an acceptable outcome and the students are not penalised for that but could still obtain good marks if they were to give adequate evidence of effectively monitoring the process. The final report is submitted in the form of a developmental portfolio. A chronological account of the manager's personal development path is documented and linked to evidence of effort. All the formative assignments are assessed by means of rubrics. The rubrics are designed in such a way that they can be used by

both the lecturer (for grading the assignments) and the student (for the purpose of self-assessment).

When it comes to increasing the pass rate of an institution of higher learning it is often expected that the pass rate should increase after putting in every effort to transform and innovate a programme. However, the experience at the FPD was that the pass rate dropped quite significantly. The pass rate for the year prior to the introduction of action research was 54 per cent. After the introduction of action research, it dropped to 45 per cent. One might question this figure but we consider it a tendency that we can account for in scholarly terms by referring to current trends observed in the literature. It is evident from the changes made to the programme that the level of learning has improved from a lower level to the higher levels of Bloom's taxonomy (Du Toit 2011). An indication of this improvement is to be found in the learning outcomes formulated. The consequence of this is that students have to put in more effort to master higher order thinking and deep learning.

With the change in the level of learning comes the change from a lecturer-centred practice to one in which learning becomes the focus – both the learning of the student and the professional learning of the lecturer. Learning in a learning-centred (Du Toit 2011) practice differs from traditional learning. Students need to show evidence of taking responsibility for their learning as is to be found in the principles of self-regulated learning (Gravett 2001). Other terms that are used to refer to this mode of learning are metalearning, action learning and self-directed learning. Whatever term is used, the principles in the form of learning strategies are the same, namely: planning one's learning; implementing the plan; monitoring the implementation; and evaluating the outcome. Implied in these strategies is that this form of learning occurs at a different level than traditional learning that takes place at an execution level. Self-regulated learning takes place at a managerial level; it manages the learning that is executed, for example reading, writing, memorising, summarising, listening or visualising.

As action research is a learning theory that fits into both the theoretical framework and the research design of the research reported in this article, the discussion on action research is detailed in the next section. It suffices to indicate that in terms of its relevance to the theoretical framework, it is representative of theories such as self-regulated learning. It represents the basic principles and strategies for the professional learning that action research initiates.

The constructs taken from the literature that are briefly discussed above directly address the FPD's mission and vision.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The overarching design for the longitudinal action research project that we as authors embarked on is action research. Only a sub-section of the project is reported in this article, namely the introduction of portfolio assessment as an innovative idea. It is acknowledged that the education practice at the FPD is far more complex and multidimensional than what a single research question can cover.

Action research is insider research by a practitioner-researcher who engages in professional development (McNiff, Lomax and Whitehead 1996). As academic staff members who are in some way involved in the programme, we act as practitioner-researchers who benefit from the research in terms of our professional development. From the lessons learnt we construct new knowledge that becomes our new education theory as McNiff and Whitehead (2006) suggest since through enquiring about our own practice, we are able to create a living form of education theory. The construct of living theory and constructivist professional learning directly tie in with production of knowledge as suggested in the overarching theme of this issue.

We distinguish action research to be different from other research designs because of its collaborative nature. Scholarly collaboration between the authors has enriched our efforts to develop action plans to make the necessary improvements (Tomal 1996). Scholarly collaboration between two or more academics is considered collaborative action research (Feldman 1999). Well-conducted action research can lead to our personal development, better professional practice, and improvements in the FPD as an institution, and can also make a contribution to the good order of society.

We follow a typical cyclical action research process that consists of several spirals (McNiff, Lomax and Whitehead 1996). One such a spiral is about the innovative idea of portfolio assessment and introducing action research in the programme in question. In contrast to the traditional approach of indicating problem identification as one of the first steps to be taken that most action research models promote, we opt for an asset-based approach (Du Toit 2009). We prefer focusing on an innovative idea and on our transformational actions as assets to work with rather than asking what is wrong, a question that we consider as a deficit approach to action research.

Our action research design can be refined by means of different research methods, and those we selected to best present an answer to the research question posed above, are a mix of quantitative and qualitative data. The next section reports on some of the applicable data sets.

Qualitative data

Narrative text analysis (Bolton 2006) was used to determine to what extent the health care managers opted for creativity from the outset, as reflected in the titles of their portfolios. The learning material students have to study indicates that the title should be 'catchy'. Some of the creative titles read as follows:

- Quality leadership for dummies: A journey of self-realisation and empowerment (Case study D);
- First things first: Get tested (Case study M).

Since specialists in health sciences usually come from a traditional research background, it was difficult for most of the health care managers to come up with a creative title. The following titles of ten sampled portfolios indicate a more traditional

approach and give an indication of the complexity of the challenges the managers face in their respective management practices:

- Introducing a transformational leadership model by challenging current traditional leadership practice at managerial level in a public sector organisation (Case study A);
- Strengthening participatory structures for doctors employed by the Foundation for Professional Development as a measure to optimise mentoring and to improve job satisfaction and performance (Case study B);
- Lack of compliance and a deeper understanding of the training and development cycle: loveLife Training and Programmes Department (Case study C);
- Investigating methods to evaluate training outcomes to improve current assessment practice and develop and improve my training methodologies (Case study E);
- Improving my strategy to improving adherence to antiretrovirals at Imbalenhle Community Health Centre (Case study F);
- The design and implementation of a capacity-building programme for professional nurses at Orsmond TB Hospital (Case study G);
- How can I develop and implement an effective programme, through MaAfrika Tikkun that will have the biggest impact on the quality of life of children living with disabilities in South African townships (Case study H);
- The role of the project director in enhancing recruitment in a microbicide clinical trial (Case study I);
- Creating a culture of monitoring, evaluation and reporting at an NGO (Case study J).

Eight other portfolios were sampled to determine the type of research questions/problem statements with which the health managers were confronted. In some cases the question served as title for the portfolio. The following examples are representative of these questions/problems:

- How can I as the Clinic Manager develop a system to reduce queuing/waiting times in my clinic?
- How can we increase HIV testing amongst university students?
- My hospital is in disarray and I as the Hospital Manager will use the methodology of action research to improve my leadership skill and effectively lead my team.
- How can I effectively reduce the high staff turnaround that is having a negative effect on my organisation?
- Ineffective communication amongst managers is causing frustration amongst staff. How can I act as a catalyst for change and improve my own communication style and that of my colleagues?

- I have been trained as a medical doctor and now manage a large unit within the government. I have very poor management skills and believe that this has a negative impact on my team. How do I improve the effectiveness of my unit and improve my own practice?
- I would like to develop a staff orientation programme that will lead to happy staff.
- How can I make the visit to a Government clinic a great experience?

Several portfolios were sampled to determine what the general experiences were by analysing the narratives in the different texts. Since each portfolio represents a specific management practice, each text is regarded as part of the qualitative data of a case study. Qualitative data extracted from the following case studies are representative of the portfolios assessed. After each comment (unedited), an indication of the alignment with an applicable theory or FPD value or other educational aspect discussed in this article is given as example to substantiate the claims we make:

Case study A

- This action research study towards transformational leadership did not only lift my own higher level needs, but also allowed and enabled me as a full person in the South African government hospital setup with its ongoing crises, challenges and looming strikes (Self-regulated learning);
- I have come to realise this model not only has tremendous potential, but also provides the South African health sector with a model and process through which leaders can take action to ensure organisational and individual transformation by raising the followers' and colleagues' motivation and satisfaction levels and to move staff beyond their self-interests for the good of the internal culture, the organisation as well as the society as a whole (Constructivist learning);
- Exposure to Transformational Leadership shifted my paradigm and the conservative point of view I had on the role of managers and leaders in organisations – my personal outlook on life as a young professional can and will never be the same (Innovative thinking).

Case study B

In this case study the manager had the innovative idea of establishing an FPD doctors association and creating an Intranet forum for them. This is one of the examples of where the innovation did not work. The candidate did extremely well in terms of planning the project, monitoring it and gathering data. He obtained a distinction for reporting the action research process in a scholarly manner in his portfolio. It suffices to quote the following:

- A new experience was that I was able to resist feelings of guilt and shame concerning the 'outcomes' of this research. I realised that an 'outcomes-based' mindset easily tends to hold the researcher liable for the outcomes. But I

am dealing with a complex intervention here. And complexity is difficult to understand and hard to predict. So I was focusing on the process, realising that I was just one of a multitude of various driving forces ... could have resulted in powerfulness, it has not so far. On the other hand I embraced and enjoyed the rather unexpected positive outcomes, such as the change of mind-set within FPD, which might have passed unrecognised if I had focused on the measurable outcomes such as the number of Internet users (Authentic learning).

Case study C

- My action research has helped me and the rest of the team to improve the implementation of the Training and Development model (Collaborative professional learning);
- I have also observed that through my action research, the change that I wanted to see had to start with me. The departure point was always 'I', 'ME' and 'MYSELF'. I discovered that after improving my own learning, I had the power to influence the learning of others. I had to believe in myself first before influencing my participants (Creating a learning organisation);
- After my experiences and observations I now know why we had to do the action research module. It is a powerful and liberating form of professional enquiry that has allowed me to investigate my own work. Thank you for allowing me to experience, observe, and reflect and to discover all these learnings throughout the year (Self-enquiry).

Case study D

- That sinking feeling has abated ... I feel a sense of calm in knowing that not only have I identified a stumbling block in my personal development but I have found a manner of addressing it to improve myself and positively influence the functioning of our research clinic (Intra-reflection);
- Working in a traditional research background, I can't help feeling nervous yet excited about observing the interplay between these 2 different domains – not to mention the anticipated confusion (by self!) (Self-learning);
- A major draw-card of action research is that by virtue of the process being open-ended, it allows for continuous personal and social renewal. By adopting the continuous cycles ... and using the suggestions from the literature reviews, I hope to prevent myself becoming a 'living contradiction' (McNiff 2002) but rather a quality leader who is a 'living congruence' (McNiff 2002) (Scholarship).

Case study E

- The action research process has helped me to evaluate my professional practice and facilitated further development which would have been difficult to maintain

had it not been for the structured, documented approach that action research provided (Professional learning).

Case study F

- I found it difficult to grasp the concept of AR without more reading (Self-regulated learning);
- Through this AR project, I have been able to reflect on my professional practice style at IARVC and have learnt some valuable lessons from this. I am now a 50 year-old father of 2 ... teenagers: I realise that there is a huge gap between me and many of the young antenatal patients ... it is not surprising that I have some conceptual differences with them ... I think this AR process has stimulated me to re-examine my consulting style, which is crucial for a family physician (Self-enquiry);
- I will endeavour to complete the AR spiral to my satisfaction. As mentioned above this topic is not well represented in the medical literature. I would like to submit the work to the SA family Practice Journal: Action Research is a methodology very well suited to the ethos and practice of family medicine (Scholarship).

Case study G

- This action research has been very challenging in various ways, has led to lots of introspection and has already necessitated a change in my management and leadership style (Intra-reflection).

Case study I

- Introducing a new reporting system meant that several staff were taken out of their comfort zones and needed to perform ... Allowing staff to engage in invigorating discussions allowed them to think more critically and I think the process tantalised their curiosity towards the world of research that was otherwise frowned upon. Affording staff the opportunity to present and showcase their work boosted their levels of confidence and helped staff interact with each other's work, instead of working in silos (Organisational learning).

Case study K

- As this course is my first contact with management, by just attending the classes and applying what I had learnt, I was able to see the mistakes I unknowingly made during the initial planning phases of my project (Theory into practice);
- With the help of my fellow learners I came to understand that it is not easy to influence the perception of people and get people involved in the project and that a different approach needs to be followed (Collaborative learning);

- From the reflection journal submitted with the portfolio comes the following: This is a difficult time for me. Reflecting on this, I've decided that the negative perceptions amongst my fellow colleagues are there for a reason and my attempts to stand up for this association might not be seen as admirable or ambassador-like as I'd hoped it would. This makes me sad ... (Intra-reflection);
- Yet after each experience and reflection on it, I grew and came up with new ideas and questions regarding not only perceptions but also project management (Enquiring mind);
- I know that this experience in my life has exposed me to many new challenges and allowed me to reflect on many new situations, resulting in my growing and developing. As this research investigation is based a lot on my personal reflection it will remain an ongoing search for ways to enhance my personal self and managerial skills (Continuous professional learning);
- Perception is seen as reality, and I will attempt to see it, hear it, listen to it and live it for the better development of myself, my organisation and that of my colleagues (Organisational learning).

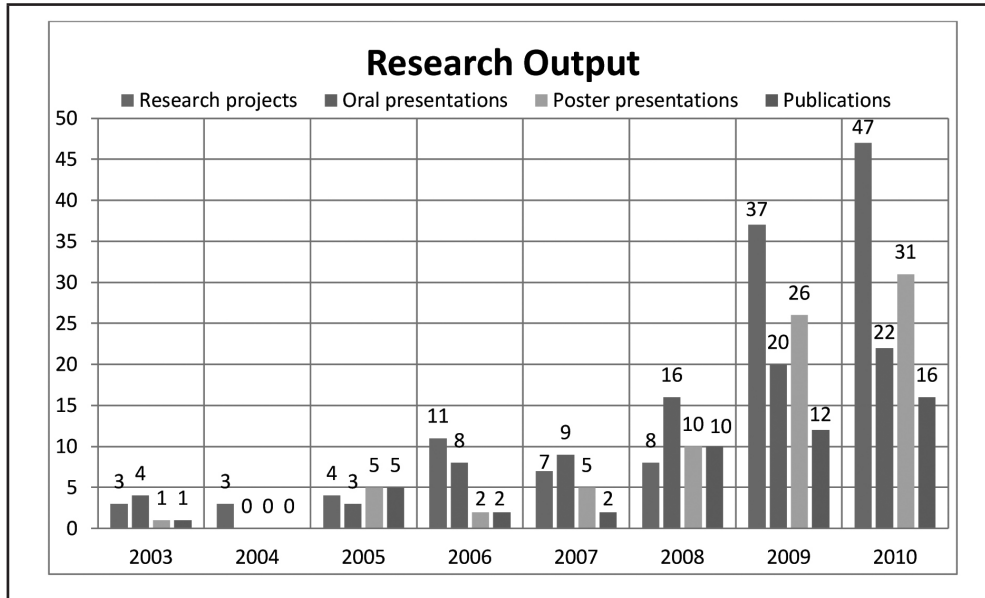
Case study L

- The action research process has helped me to evaluate my professional practice and facilitated further development which would have been difficult to maintain had it not been for the structured, documented approach that action research provided (Professional learning);
- The action research process helped me to move from an inexperienced trainer to a more confident trainer. I am now more comfortable with the training I do and training methodologies I use as action research helped me to prove why I am implementing different ways of training in different circumstances (Self-confidence).

Quantitative data

- As is expected from the health care managers, the FPD is continuously building itself as a learning organisation. As a higher education institution, part of the organisational learning within the FPD is to be found in the research that is conducted and in the increase in research outputs. Table 1 indicates how the research outputs increased from 2003 to 2010 as per category, namely research projects, conference presentations, conference posters and publications. The rapid increase since 2009 is ascribed to the introduction of action research to FPD staff and the management programme.

Table 1: FPD research output (2003–2010)



CHALLENGES AND CONCLUSION

Introducing an innovative intervention such as action research and portfolio assessment into a professional development programme not only has its value but often comes with challenges. Students who are either exposed to or familiar with conventional research have difficulty grasping the concept of ‘action research’. Some are afraid of the amount of work that has to be done. There is fear of the element of ‘reflection’ that is a new concept to students and academic staff. There are those who are unwilling to accept that as managers they have weaknesses and action research forces them to do introspection.

From a curriculum transformation perspective, action research has brought about transformation in the Management Development Programme. It forces students to think deeply about changing their behaviour. Transformational behaviour is evident in those students who have accepted action research as a change model. We have seen the same results among FPD managers.

As a visionary thinker, the FPD has decided to do the following from 2011:

- To strengthen the personal development component of the programme;
- To promote visionary thinking, assignments will be introduced that require students to develop future-orientated goals, by means of, *inter alia*, formulating personal mission statements and compiling a ‘life list’ consisting of ‘100 things to do before you die’;
- To strengthen the reflection component of the portfolios.

The discussions and data reported on provide evidence that action research and professional portfolios have enriched the management programme in terms of students' professional learning and their becoming self-regulated professionals. This enrichment does not only bring about personal professional growth but also helps to create learning organisations managed by transformational leaders. Ultimately the research discussed is about evidence of *Presenting your professional best* (Rieman 2000) – as a lecturer and as a student.

Using action research as a process for professional development of managers and lecturers in general is not new as scholars such as Zuber-Skerritt (2000) advocates. However, it is a novel idea within the context of developing health care managers as transformational leaders and lecturers responsible for offering the programme, especially in South Africa. The fact that action research is constructivist, empowers health care managers attending the professional development programme in question to produce new knowledge. This becomes evident in the portfolios they submit. Lecturers are challenged to adapt to the transformational practice of introducing portfolios as an innovative assessment opportunity and this contributes to their professional development.

Transforming one's own management or education practice contributes to creating a sustainable learning organisation. Producing new knowledge and understanding based on experience, is a continuous process. It ensures that producing knowledge is not a single event, but occurs sequentially as the nature and needs of the organisation change. It further promotes the idea of having all members of an organisation contribute to producing knowledge by applying the principles of other adult learning theories.

Producing knowledge as the overarching theme of this issue is evidently underscored by the research project reported in this article. Furthermore, it is highlighted as a scholarly act that does not happen in isolation but is interlinked with approaches to deep learning that are to be found in adult learning theories such as self-regulated learning and constructivist learning. This applies to the professional development of ourselves as researchers and the lecturers (investigated as sub-projects of the overarching research project, but not reported) and specifically the health care managers who attend the management programme as reported.

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