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Rapid Institutional Appraisal

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Abstract

A week-long intensive process of staff development and induction called Rapid Institutional Appraisal (RIA) was conducted in November 2000 in the Systems Discipline, Centre for Complexity and Change (CCC) at the Open University (OU). We report the systemic roots and characteristics of the RIA as designed from traditions of soft systems methodology and rapid rural appraisal. Our experiences arising from our own use of RIA is described and the wider implications for organisational learning in a complex organisation discussed. Whilst acknowledging limitations with this RIA event, we argue that RIA offers a potential model for staff development for adaptive use in different contexts and on varying scales. The process builds on principles of 'conversation' and 'multiple perspectives' as the touchstone for establishing a purposeful community of practice

KEY WORDS: Staff induction; participatory learning and action; learning organisation; systems practice.

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Rapid Institutional Appraisal

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1. INTRODUCTION

Joining a fresh institution on a new employment contract can be an exciting as well as a daunting and sometimes fearful experience, for new recruits as well as for existing staff. In the latter part of 2000, such experiences were magnified by the recruitment of four new lecturers to an existing complement of twelve academics in the Systems Discipline at the Open University (OU). The formal institution-wide induction process for new staff at the OU has consisted of issuing wads of written information on the history and dynamics of the OU with relevant rules and regulations to digest with accompanying organograms and maps for improving the sense of orientation and 'security'! The induction packs are complemented with a formal two-hour address to new staff from specialist divisions in the University including Health and Safety and Personnel. The underlying purpose of this appears to be orientated more towards satisfying legal requirements rather than an introduction to continual staff development. Whilst continuing staff support is provided through a series of non-compulsory *ad hoc* specialist workshops provided through the university's Academic and Professional Development Programme, further induction for new recruits falls under the discretionary responsibilities of the individual Faculty and Department. The induction programme therefore varies. In some cases new recruits are left completely to their own devices with the hope that they will 'muddle through' successfully, whilst others are given carefully orchestrated activities to introduce them to the intricacies of departmental work.

Where there is an identifiable process of induction, the process can be described as being systematic with reductionist underpinnings: new recruits are *programmed* to *assimilate* knowledge about the *entities* of the OU; knowledge regarding the peculiarities and idiosyncrasies *specific* to the assigned department is privileged; wider dimensions of the OU outside Walton Hall, the OU Headquarters, are given relatively little prominence; the process of induction tends to be *targeted* at new recruits; and, as a corollary of this latter point, there is the assumption that induction only *impacts on* the intended beneficiaries (new recruits). In other words, there is little opportunity to get a feel of the culture, or develop an integral sense of belonging. Indeed the process might actually serve to alienate the new recruit by presenting the workplace as an object of study rather than as an enveloping, creative, working culture.

When appointed to the OU as Professor of Systems in 1994 Ray (Ison) had no formal induction and quickly realised that his own experience was not atypical. Taking his own initiative he recognised a need to gain a systemic appreciation of the OU (Ison 1995):

"Much of my first year in the OU I spent trying to understand it as a 'system'. Such a process involves a lot more than compiling and analysing the facts and figures. It involved listening to people, particularly their stories of the past and present and creating the space for them to give voice to their aspirations for the future"

Rosalind (Armson), Head of the Systems Discipline in 2000 and responsible both for induction of the four new staff and staff-development at a particularly difficult and stressful time, was likewise concerned with the risks of subscribing to an induction process which left much to be desired:

"We wanted people to be able to hit the ground running. If I understand this as a military-parachuting metaphor, then they need to hit the ground running, fully equipped and fully trained if they are to be effective. Without the equipment and the training, they are of limited use and at risk of injury. Not fair to them, a waste of resources… "[1]

Having a purely internal Systems-based induction, Rosalind maintained, risked reproducing Systems' own prejudices about the university. Furthermore, a narrowly conceived induction process would miss opportunities for serving wider staff development needs, where experienced staff might have the chance to reflect on and refresh their own perspectives on the environment and culture within which they work. The fact that the OU is a constantly changing complex organisation might lead to experienced staff members having views which might not be as relevant as they once were, simply through not being aware of some of the changes in the organisation. As a staff development exercise, Rosalind wanted an induction process which could provide an opportunity to exploit:

"… fresh perspectives of new people, precisely to access views of ourselves and our practice that we normally cannot access - extending that to collecting perspectives on the university"[2]

In short, a systemic approach was called for; an approach where (i) the boundaries of induction were considered more widely than the technical mastery over the job specification; (ii) the quality and nature of relationships between people was the focus rather than the departmental entities; (iii) the participants (new recruits and experienced staff) were envisaged as co-creators of, as well as beneficiaries from, the induction process and (iv) multiple perspectives of the OU as 'system of interest' were surfaced.

We now explore the intellectual tradition and main features of Rapid Institutional Appraisal (RIA) as designed by Ray, and report and reflect on its application in CCC as a means of induction and staff development.

2. RAPID INSTITUTIONAL APPRAISAL: TRADITIONS

Ray's research background in participative rural development focused on designs for researching *with*, as opposed to *on*, people (Ison & Ampt, 1992; Ison, 1993a; Webber & Ison, 1995; Kersten & Ison 1998). The work was influenced by soft systems approaches to rural development and particularly the set of tools and methods that became associated with 'farming systems research' (FSR) spearheaded by agricultural economists in the USA (Collinson, 1981; Shaner *et.al.*, 1982) and rapid rural appraisal (RRA) spearheaded principally in India as part of externally sponsored development initiatives (Khon Kaen, 1987; Chambers et.al., 1989). FSR and RRA provide a

[1] Rosalind Armson, 3 November, 2000, presentation to respondents on final day of RIA exercise.
[2] Rosalind Armson, 3 November, 2000, presentation to respondents on final day of RIA exercise.

repertoire of mainly qualitative research tools including visualized analyses (mapping, activity profiles, matrix scoring etc.), interviewing (semi-structured, transect and group walks, ethnohistories etc.) and group/team work which, proponents then argued, provide a more effective alternative to traditional survey questionnaires in gaining meaningful insights to the complex world of rural livelihoods.[3] Practitioners of these approaches during the 1980s became increasingly aware of the need for greater participation amongst the intended beneficiaries (farmers and particularly resource-poor farmers) in both the design of, as well as involvement in, the appraisal exercise. Whilst 'farmer *participatory* research' (FPR) emerged from FSR (Farrington & Martin, 1987), 'participatory rural appraisal' (PRA) similarly emerged from RRA (Chambers, 1992; Scoones & Thompson, 1994). As well as providing a creative approach to experiential learning and the generation of timely and relevant knowledge, these approaches also recognise that it is ethically responsible that participants have control.

The rich array of experiences gained and tools developed were also found to be of value for institutional transformation. Thompson (1995) uses a conceptual model of an 'institutional learning and training cycle' to report on the adoption of such techniques by three large public agencies in Sri Lanka, Kenya and the Philippines. Notwithstanding the significant progress toward building internal capacity to employ participatory approaches to facilitate institutional change, both the model and the case studies reveal that to have a lasting impact training must be viewed as part of a broader process of organisational learning. Amongst the elements recommended as being necessary for institutionalising participatory approaches within public agencies, Thompson identifies the following items which have a bearing on the development of RIA for induction and staff development:

- Careful attention to, and patience in, working out the details of systems and procedures - each involving careful analysis of lessons learned from small scale pilot tests, and the negotiation and accommodation of different interests and perceptions

- Creative management, so that improved policies, procedures, and field practices, once developed, can be scaled-up and implemented effectively

- An open, supportive, yet challenging organisational climate in which it is safe to experiment and safe to fail

- Small, interdisciplinary teams or working groups of innovative and committed agency professionals working in collaboration with external resource persons capable of acting as catalysts for change

- Regular documentation and analysis of lessons for improving practice and building an institutional memory

Just as induction is about starting out in a new institution, RIA is a process with the potential to be adapted to particular contexts for starting out systemically. As Ison (1993b) said:

[3] For a full description of these tools see contributions to Part II 'Methodological Innovations, Applications and Challenges' in Scoones and Thompson (1994)

'Historically RRA is not within the systems tradition but its strengths, and appeal, are that it is intrinsically systemic, orientated to learning and involves communication by mainly listening, to especially local people. In the hands of appropriate practitioners it is also clearly methodology rather than method or technique. ……. In our own work we … are explicit that it is a systemic, experiential, learning process which: (i) enables team members drawn from different disciplinary backgrounds to bring forth their "ways of seeing the world and making sense of it". In this way we take Churchman's (1968) point that it is ..."silly and empty (to) claim that an observation is objective if it resides in the brain of an unbiased observer (instead) one should say an observation is objective if it is the creation of many different points of view"; (ii) brings forth agreement about issues, or systems, which can be seen to be problematic; (iii) is sufficiently flexible to draw on the different experiences of those involved.'

From this rich tradition of practical initiatives, Ray was keen to design a process of induction and staff development appropriate to the needs of a university department.

3. RAPID INSTITUTIONAL APPRAISAL: DESIGN

3.1 Overview

The RIA for induction was designed to serve five purposes:

(a) To enable new staff to gain some systemic understanding of the Open University as an institution;

(b) To surface issues of potential importance to the Systems Discipline in making sense of its environment;

(c) To enable new and existing Systems staff to experience each others' ways of working to make sense of a situation experienced as complex;

(d) To build relationships with staff from other parts of the OU;

(e) To identify possible opportunities for enhancing the opportunities and activities of the Systems Discipline and its members.

The five purposes correspond to the four dimensions of a systemic approach outlined in the introduction: that is, purposes (a) and (b) signal the widening of boundaries to be addressed; purposes (c) and (d) address the focus on relationships rather than entities; purpose (e) reflects the commitment towards improving the system and acknowledging all participants as co-creators of the systems' future and (a - c) are concerned in practise with surfacing multiple perspectives.

The programme schedule covered five days beginning Monday 30th October and finishing Friday 3rd November with semi-structured interviews scheduled for days 2, 3 and 4. Throughout the week, a temporary 'home room' was set aside in which the RIA team could prepare, debrief and relax. The programme outline was as follows:

1. Team Building (Day 1)

2. The Technology Faculty (Day 2)

3. Walton Hall (Day 3)

4. Cambridge Regional Office/Associate Lecturers and students (Day 4)

5. Making sense; preparing for preliminary feedback (Day 5)

6. Follow-up actions

During the week six 'new' staff participated including three new lecturers and a Visiting Professor in Systems, a new staff member in the Technology Manufacturing and Management (TMM) Discipline (also part of CCC) and a new staff member from Learning & Teaching Services. Of these a core group of three participated for the whole week: Magnus (Ramage), Lynn (Short) and Martin (Reynolds).

Those who participated with the new staff included 9 existing staff from the Systems Discipline and 2 postgraduate students from Systems. A total of 18 members of CCC participated in the interviews during the course of the week. In all 33 staff were interviewed at Walton Hall over days 2 and 3. At the Open University's Regional Office in Cambridge a further 28 staff were interviewed on Day 4.

Days 2, 3 and 4 constituted the core of the RIA exercise, with semi-structured interviews being undertaken on successively wider boundaries with staff from, on Day 2, the Faculty (including managerial and editorial staff associated with course teams, academic staff from other departments as well as academic and secretarial staff from the Deanery), Day 3, other university departments at the Walton Hall Headquarters in Milton Keynes (including Director of Estates, Media Relations, Vice-Chancellor, Postroom, BBC production unit etc.), and Day 4, the Cambridge Regional Office (including Student Services, Study Support, Teaching Support, Assistant Lecturers, Finance Co-ordination, Academic Assistants, Staff Tutors, Switchboard operators, Residential School organisers etc.).

Clearly, a great deal of preparatory work was required for selecting, inviting and scheduling the interviews beforehand. After Ray and Rosalind identified a suitable range of different departments to approach, invitations and schedules were processed through telephone conversation. This was undertaken with considerable secretarial support from Pat Shah for scheduling Days 2 and 3, and our Systems Staff Tutor based at Cambridge, Tony Wright, for Day 4. Interviews were scheduled on the basis that there would be four pairs of interviewers running concurrently during the morning sessions of days 2 and 3 (afternoon sessions were reserved for group debriefing) and between 10am and 3pm on day 4 at the Regional Centre (because of travel time to Cambridge group debriefing continued the following Friday morning on day 5). Each interview was scheduled to last 30 minutes.

As well as our public feedback session on the final day of the RIA, Magnus and Lynn returned to Cambridge on 4th December to report back to, and answer questions from, staff involved with the RIA. Magnus and Martin also made presentations and answered questions at a meeting of the OU Staff Development Committee on 19th February. All presentations focused on (i) the process of RIA (ii) what we as individuals learnt regarding the OU; and (iii) what we learnt about the RIA process and its potential – for induction and other uses.

3.2 Establishing protocols

During the team-building exercise on Day 1, members of the team introduced themselves to each other by way of preparing a poster about themselves (rich picture, mind-map, river of life etc) and making a short team presentation through speaking briefly to the poster. We then brainstormed what was required from the RIA exercise; exploring individual and collective purposes and appropriate measures of performance for the different collective purposes. We then discussed aspects of the inquiry process to establish a protocol of good interview practice. This was necessary in order to fully exploit the potential of the limited 30 minute interview period. It was generally agreed that interviews should take place with pairs of interviewers, ideally one new recruit doing the actual interviewing being paired with an experienced staff member who should take notes. The resulting protocol included the following points:

- Preparation: being sure of times and places and reconfirming with interviewees beforehand; being sure of names and positions of interviewees; being clear on roles of note-taker and speaker; working out succinct introductions to include information on who we are, why we are here, who will do what, general questions to be asked, requesting consent for taking notes, an explanation on issues of confidentiality (see note below), and reminders of feedback session on day 5;

- Interview process: being appropriately dressed; deciding on time keeper; maintaining eye contact; not interrupting (when operating in pairs); allow time for interview note-taker to ask supplementary questions; allow time for interviewee to comment on things not addressed and to ask questions of interviewers;

- Interview questions: the following set of questions were generated but it was recognised that time for the interview was short and that each situation would be different, hence the need to be contingent.

    - How long have you been at the OU?
    - How did you come to be at the OU?
    - What is your role?
    - How do you interpret your role at the OU?
    - How do you feel the OU supports you in your role?
    - What is the most significant issue(s) you are having to deal with at the moment?
    - Who in the OU do you have the most to do with?

Some interviewers used only two generic questions regarding, firstly, the respondent's personal history at the OU, and secondly, the respondent’s key concerns/issues. It was found that this allowed for a relaxing conversation space in which important themes could emerge.

- Ethics/confidentiality: It was decided that: (i) we would check-out with all interviewees that they are happy with our interpretations (use of quotes etc) before we distributed any written document in the public domain; (ii) we would accept and work to maintain group confidentiality but the interviews would be discussed within the group during group debriefings; and (iii) in our feedback on Day 5 and thereafter we would not feedback what people had said but what we (especially as new staff) had learned from the process.

- Follow-up: it was agreed to allow time for pairs of interviewers to debrief each other after the interview and to make notes; decide on how we were to present 'learning' back to the whole group in the afternoon debriefing sessions; have some discussion about the most significant outcomes in terms of the statements of purpose – but particularly what was learnt about the OU and about the RIA process.

Given other commitments from various members of the team during the course of the week, it was felt appropriate also to develop a protocol for colleagues joining and leaving the group. The following letter was developed:

Dear

Welcome to the RIA Group. We look forward to working with you. On Monday the group explored individual and collection purpose (and measures of performance) for the RIA (a copy of the 'collective purpose' is enclosed in your pack). We also explored the interview protocols, including ethics/confidentiality and there is some material about this also in your pack.

When you join us we would like to ensure that:

- You have an opportunity to introduce yourself - this might take the form of preparing a poster (see e.g.) but may not be done properly until lunchtime.

- We would also expect members of the team whom you are working with to guide you through the outcomes of Monday and to address any queries or concerns you might have.

We hope that as many as possible will join (or rejoin) us for lunch each day, and for the final session on Friday at 3.00pm (Systems Seminar Room). We trust you enjoy your participation and invite your input on all matters.

Other issues of group inclusion would continue to be addressed through the process.

4. REFLECTIONS

Our collective reflections are presented below with reference to the five purposes outlined in section 3.1 above. Section 4.6 reflects on the wider RIA process in the light of practise.

4.1 Systemic understanding of the Open University

As one member of the team put it, the act of taking a step out of the normal working environment enabled greater awareness of "the water that we swim in". The sense of "rediscovering the OU" was shared amongst many of the experienced staff in the team. For new staff, the benefits recorded ranged from the seemingly banal though important physical dimension of "getting to know my way around the campus", towards more significant pay-offs regarding perspectives: "where I fit in this very large jigsaw… I know how my role fits into the wider organisation and have more a sense of 'belonging' to a large organisation, rather than being in an isolated department".

The interviews and group debriefing sessions generated a wealth of systemic issues which confront the OU. Whilst it is not the purpose here to reflect in detail on these substantive issues, several general inter-related themes might be flagged as being significant areas of concern regarding the future directions and challenges confronting our university. Firstly, there are issues regarding the future of distance learning in the context of (i) support and sponsorship of OU as a flagship E-university (ii) outreaching to, and learning from, a more international client base including the USA, (iii) development of, and significant interests in, OU as a 'Corporate University'; (iv) challenges of teacher education and medical education; and (v) increasing national and international recognition of, and demand for, research as well as teaching. Secondly, there are issues of internal organisation: the perceived divide between Walton Hall and regional centres; more rigid hierarchical structures arising in some areas and the loss of organisational slack so valued for innovation and the need for experimentation; increased specialisation of departments within the OU leading, in some peoples' opinion, to less cohesion and loss of OU identity; alienation of 'student services' from academic units; and emerging tensions between traditional course-team practice of course design and delivery and the demands of newly emergent named degree programme boards. Thirdly, there are issues of marketing: the changing image of the OU to outsiders; the changing client groups being targeted; and problems associated with student counselling and student retention.

4.2 Issues of importance to the Systems Discipline

Clearly, many of the issues identified above have a direct bearing on the Systems Discipline. Again, this is not the place to discuss these in detail, but more specific issues include: the opportunities and reservations in development of web-based material for systems-based courses; possible conflicts between research and teaching commitments; potential in sharing 'best practice' from the diverse backgrounds of personnel in the Systems Discipline; changing work relationships with the Deanery and wider administrative bodies; changing roles of Associate Lecturers in response to new information technology; gradual retirement of experienced 'pioneers' who embody OU commitments along with what some in the regional centres see as uncomfortable restructuring processes causing concern regarding fears of alienation and lose of essential OU identity; impact of programme boards on systems-based and systems-related courses; need for appropriate governance structure to allow for efficient and effective performance as well as organisational slack for innovative development; changing marketing strategies for level 2 and level 3 systems-based courses including the residential school; impact of shift towards vocational-oriented training in course design and evaluation.

4.3 Staff relationships within Systems Discipline

As Rosalind pointed out during one of the afternoon RIA team debriefing sessions, there is rarely an opportunity for systems academics to engage *together* as a group with systems practice. The RIA team dynamics worked very well despite, or perhaps at times because of, variation in team composition over the 5 days. The added value of having people from outside the Discipline in the team was significant. Having new and experienced staff as partners proved very useful in developing relationships. Changing interview partners during the course of the day also proved beneficial, providing opportunities for informally broadening appreciation of other Discipline members. It became increasingly clear during the exercise that the 'old lags' (as they became affectionately called) were also getting a lot from the interviews and debriefing exercises. The sense of mutual learning and becoming aware of others' ignorance on various issues provided an important source of confidence-building amongst colleagues.

Whilst there was general agreement within the RIA team on the enjoyable interaction and constructive dialogue during planning and reflective group debriefing sessions, there was some concern raised regarding the limited amount of time for debriefing between the interview partners immediately after each interview. From some perspectives, debriefings perhaps constituted the most demanding and fruitful part of the whole exercise.

4.4 Staff relationships at the Open University

As well as fostering opportunities to develop closer working relationships with colleagues within the Systems Discipline, the RIA provided space for getting to know people from a wide range of departments which help to keep the OU running. Several participants, both within the team and respondents, commented on the relaxed nature of the interviews; interviewees were, in general, very open and informative "…as though they had never been asked these questions before!" (commented one team member). The play between having a formal structure (set interviews with defined time and pre-set rules of engagement including demarcation of responsibilities) with a less formal medium of discourse (relaxed format of semi-structured questions) enabled a sense of mutual respect to be generated between all involved with the exercise. According to at least one team member, respondents appeared genuinely pleased and animated to be engaged with conversation regarding their role in the OU.

4.5 Co-creators for improvement

Several team members reflected on the simple *fun* element of the RIA exercise. In contexts of increasing stress and workloads at UK universities in general, the idea of 'taking time out' is, we believe, a useful endeavour necessary for exercising and refuelling creative energies. It was evident in feedback from some of the respondents that providing the opportunity for university employees to briefly reflect on their experiences in a semi-formal conversation can itself prompt new ideas, perspectives, even laying roots to new initiatives, on making sense of and improving upon their ~~complex~~ situations. This sense of creative reflection was also evident during many of the actual interviews. For us, as team members, both new and experienced staff, our own perceptions of the Open University were certainly enriched and, in some instances, transformed. The experience of participating in the RIA has had an impact on our present ways of seeing and confronting issues that we in Systems are presently engaged with. These include, apart from creating new curricula and more radical forms of assessment, the development of the metaproject (see paper in this issue by Ramage), developing new forms of governance for the Systems Discipline, horsetrading (allocating tasks associated with our collective responsibilities), and the design of a marketing initiative based on systemic thinking.

The RIA process itself has triggered the generation of new ideas within the University. Apart from interests being expressed from both the University and Faculty Staff Development Committees, representatives from the 'knowledge management' project have been in discussion with us about the possibilities of developing a new pilot induction programme built on the thinking behind RIA in collaboration with the Library Services.

4.6 Input-output evaluation

If the RIA is considered as a simple purposeful input-output system, we have so far reflected favourably on the transformation process from an input of *less* competent, aware and committed staff to an output of *more* competent, aware and committed staff. The inquiry system has other inputs, in terms of resources, and other outputs, in terms of by-products, which might also be evaluated.

For example, another output might be measured in terms of the 'hard' information generated. As Ray pointed out during the feedback session on the final day: "that we have a rich array of data means that we need to think carefully how we can best feedback given our existing workloads". Whilst acknowledging that a purpose of the exercise was never claimed to be the production of a document providing the definitive update on the 'State of the Open University', there nevertheless remain questions on two issues: (i) possible wastage of valuable documented information (in the form of interview notes, diagrams, debrief documents etc.); and (ii) provision of 'appropriate' feedback to respondents on the substantive issues discussed. On the first issue we decided that the best that we could possibly do would be to archive the material generated and to make it accessible for future reference to team members or - with the associated proviso regarding confidentiality of source - on request from researchers. On the second issue, a letter of thanks was issued to all respondents who took part in the exercise. The letter summarised through bullet points the main substantive findings from the three days of interviews and had with it attached copies of the presentations made by each of us on the final day of the RIA induction week. Although this seemingly perfunctory treatment of invaluable data might be considered as inadequate amongst some respondents (or even as 'sacrilege' amongst diehard researchers!), there simply was not the immediate time to do otherwise. The important point here is to make the primary purposes of the exercise absolutely clear to prospective respondents in the initial invitation, as well as making it absolutely clear what purposes are *not* being served. The form of feedback needs to be carefully thought out so as to (i) avoid over-drive in presenting in-depth analysis of issues (which could prompt angst as well as being time-consuming), whilst (ii) triggering some appreciation of value in being interviewed.

In terms of other important inputs to the system, two resource inputs prompt attention: people's time, and the variety of participant involved. Time was clearly a constraint during the Induction RIA week. One new staff member observed sceptically at the beginning of the exercise that the RIA represented a big investment of time by the Professor of Systems and the Head of Discipline. This was clearly true but both senior staff members claimed that it was a high-return investment. The point here is ultimately one of professional judgement. As Rosalind put it during the final day's presentation, having already invested huge resources in the process of recruitment "it would be crazy not to follow through on induction". There is widespread opinion from the contacts that we have had that induction in the OU generally attracts low priority.

The process of RIA benefits from a wide range of participant involvement. This applies as much to the inquiry team as to the range of respondents. Having four new recruits in a relatively small department did present a unique opportunity for piloting an Induction RIA. A critical mass of people for the RIA team is clearly necessary. However, only two of the new staff could take part as core team members throughout the week. Having new staff from outside the Discipline joining the team provided for a viable critical mass but also enriched the quality of team planning and debriefing sessions. There are no particular attributes prohibiting involvement in any RIA team other than a reluctance to learn. Similarly, it is beneficial to invite respondents from a range of institutional positions. In a complex organisation like the Open University this in itself might prove a challenging task. Inevitably there will be stakeholder groups left out. Many of the different academic departments were omitted, and we failed to interview ancillary workers such as gardeners, cooks or cleaners. Perhaps one of the most striking stakeholder group omissions from our exercise were our main 'clients', the OU students. Whilst several staff members interviewed were past and/or current OU students (and one non-OU staff student was interviewed at the regional centre), there were inevitably some limitations on the boundaries being imposed during planning. The systemic point here is not so much to optimistically seek total comprehensiveness by widening the boundaries of participation, but rather to at least make visible the boundaries of inevitable partiality.

4.7 RIA process design and scaling up

As discussed above some aspects of process design might have been improved but in conduct it ran quite smoothly. One of the criteria for success we would argue is that at least one member of the team is able to play the role of participant conceptualiser. One of the main functions for this person is to appreciate how theory and practice might combine to arrive at a process design suited to a particular context. This requires flexibility and contingency. These considerations have particular implications for any attempts at scaling up RIA in a wider institutional context. Based on our learning from the event we argued in our feedback that it would be a trap to think that this could be a generic model 'rolled out' across the institution. Instead we argue that any attempt at scaling requires the facilitation of the emergence of communities of practice in which there are participants capable of bringing theory and practice to bare on a process design which is context specific.

On reflection we would argue that all of Thomson's (1995) criteria for successful conduct of RIA were met (see section 2). However we would wish to add to other design considerations: (i) commitment to clarity of purpose which also brings forth boundary judgements; (ii) practice in which the responsibility for the learning outcomes is taken by those in the RIA team. This last factor has important implications for the possible use of RIA in processes of institutional change. It would be a trap, in our view, to consider that the learning out of a process such as ours could be reified in formal reports with the potential to trigger significant change (this is the trap of information transfer - Ison & Russell, 2000). Institutional change potential from an RIA process is likely to depend on (i) who participates in the team; (ii) the extent to which RIA practice becomes distributed throughout the institution; (iii) resourcing and (iv) the linking of RIA with other systemic change processes (e.g. the RIA process could be seen as a 'rich picturing' phase in an adaptive use of SSM).

5. SUMMARY

The impetus for the RIA emerged from three inter-related drivers: first, a significant expansion of staff placements particularly within the Systems Discipline immediately prior to the induction event; second, Ray Ison's own personal experience of an inadequate induction process and his realisation from action research undertaken in rural development that an RIA process was potentially suited for induction in a complex organisation like the OU; and third, a recognised need identified by Rosalind Armson, the then Head of Discipline, for more purposeful procedures of staff development in general and induction procedures in particular. Prior measures of induction at the OU have proved at best to be inadequate and at worst non-existent. Where induction might be seen to be evident, the process might be termed systematic rather than systemic. The boundaries of induction are limited towards developing technical capacity in the specialist field rather than developing broader awareness of the work situation. Induction tends to be based on 'instruction' often calling upon specialist expertise with a focus on understanding complexity in terms of institutional entities rather than institutional relationships. The latter is as much concerned with the managing of emotioning as with the rational provision of information (see Ison & Russell 2000). Traditionally the learning process has been assumed as being one-way traffic from experienced to non-experienced personnel rather than as a mutually co-creative process that has wider possibilities regarding staff development.

The systemic process of RIA provides a counter to these traditional systematic characteristics of induction. Based on the design of participatory research strategies used in rural development, RIA provides the basis for enabling a more meaningful form of organisational learning in a complex organisation. Whilst acknowledging some design limitations associated with this RIA event, we argue that RIA, building on principles of 'conversation' in which 'multiple perspectives' emerge as the touchstone for establishing a purposeful community of practice, does offer a potentially powerful model for induction and staff development for adaptive use in different contexts and on varying scales.

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