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Using action learning for developing staff skills in interviewing children in child protection: a reflection on practice

- Melissa Lindeman

This paper draws on my experience as an education and training officer in a statutory child protection setting in the Northern Territory where I had the opportunity to implement a short action learning project to address identified training needs in the area of interviewing children. The initial experience of implementing action learning in this setting was disappointing. However, other staff development initiatives in the same work setting, where I was able to draw on the principles of action learning, were more successful. These experiences provided me with some insight into the potential application of these approaches in child protection work, and the conditions in which action learning is more likely to succeed.

Description

The initial project was a small-scale action learning initiative undertaken in a Northern Territory office of Family and Children's Services (the organisation responsible for statutory child protection) with the aim of assisting staff to improve their skills in interviewing children. The project was initiated because management and supervisors had requested training in this area for their staff. As all members of the child protection team were new, a response was needed quickly. Although my organisational counterpart in

another office location was working on developing a training package on this topic (designed to be delivered to a group over several days), I did not feel able to duplicate this training. Firstly, I did not have the detailed content knowledge of this particular area. Secondly, a response was needed more quickly than would have been possible had I waited for the training package to be finalised, and for a suitable trainer to deliver the package to be available. For these reasons I felt that an action learning model would best meet the needs of the work group and would best fit with my background and experience (which included action research and action learning).

My background research on the topic revealed that developing staff skills in interviewing children presented challenges for staff development professionals in the area of child protection. Traditional approaches to training staff in interviewing children tended to be one-off workshops where the content is developed by the workshop facilitators based on what experts in the area regard to be the key knowledge required for effective practice. Poole and Lambe (1998, p.252) noted a “critical need to develop innovative teaching strategies that will help professionals translate abstract principles into flexible and effective interviewing”. Suggestions for effective staff training appearing in the literature emphasised opportunities for practice together with critical feedback (Federal Law Enforcement Training Centre, 1992, cited in Poole and Lambe, 1998) and critical self-reflection (Poole and Lambe, 1998; Zwiers and Morrissette, 1999). Others highlighted the need for training in particular aspects of interviewing children, such as questioning techniques, but did not go into detail about the most appropriate training strategies (Aldridge and Wood, 1998). Freeman and Morris (1999) concluded that knowledge-based workshop training programs may not adequately prepare child protection workers to conduct appropriate investigative interviews with children, and that knowledge about how to conduct such interviews may not

be the best indicator of whether someone is prepared for this aspect of the job. These themes are borne out by the recent findings of Westcott and Kynan (2006) who highlight the difficulty for child protection practitioners in maintaining and implementing the knowledge and skills they should have acquired during training on interviewing children.

The literature on training practitioners in interviewing children in general concurred with my understanding of professional development in other health and community services sectors where traditional (content-driven, and often didactic), approaches are seen to have limited effectiveness in translating new knowledge to practice. Kolb (1984) claims that learning is both an experiential and reflective process, which should be closely tied to the real world and the experiences of the learner. Understandings are seen to be constructed over time, connecting new information with existing knowledge in ways which have meaning for the individual (Horwath and Morrison 1999; Jarvis, *et al*, 2003; Moon, 1999). In this way, the learner's role is central in the construction of knowledge, removing the main focus from the 'teacher' (delivery) and content. A functional learning environment enables access to the learning process of experiencing, reflecting, conceptualising and experimenting, and all aspects of the organisation have a role to play in creating these conditions (Morrison, 1997). An over-reliance on 'off-site' and somewhat disconnected training may not deliver the best outcomes.

As an advocate of action research and action learning as effective models of practice change and development, I was interested in the application of these approaches to meet the training needs that I was asked to address. Action learning is a process of learning and reflection that occurs within an organised group process (commonly in work teams) where colleagues work on a common problem or issue (McGill and Beaty, 2001). It is learner-driven, and it always has the two elements of the growth and development of people and of

the organisation, and the simultaneous finding of solutions to problems (Inglis, 1994). Action learning is a cyclic (usually facilitated) process for drawing learning from experience, and involves both action and reflection on that action (Dick, 1999). Action learning is also an approach that does not require the trainer/facilitator to have a detailed knowledge of the 'content', or subject area, allowing for specialist input to be organised where necessary in response to the particular needs of the group.

Prior to commencing the project, I discussed the role and process of action learning with key staff, and obtained agreement to trial this approach from the Program Manager and the Casework Supervisor. I then held a brief meeting with interested staff to discuss their information and skill development needs and to seek commitment from them to participate in the project. I also needed to ensure there was sufficient interest from staff to engage in such a project. I then prepared a short summary of the how action learning is undertaken, and included the outcomes of this initial meeting in the summary. The summary contained basic information on action learning and the intended conduct of the project, under the following headings:

- What is 'action learning'?
- What sorts of projects do action learning groups (sets) work on?
- How does an action learning group (set) actually work?
- How can action learning help participants to develop skills? (drawn from Dick, 1999; and Inglis, 1994)
- How much time commitment is required?
- What is the common task or problem that this group will work on?
- What will the learning goals be?

- How will we know that this project has been successful?

A series of four meetings were held over a two-month period, with some individual follow-up and consultation occurring as required. These meetings were essentially designed according to the principles of action learning (although were perhaps a little more 'formal' or 'didactic' than would usually be associated with action learning processes), and were intended to meet the specific learning needs of the group as decided by them. Detailed notes were taken at each meeting and a copy given to each participant to include in their resource folder, which was provided as part of the project.

The model of the action learning used was intended to rely heavily on using participants' own reflections on real work experiences and therefore included some discussion on self-reflective practice. The project also utilised expert input to target learning needs arising in the context of these reflections (one session was led by child a psychologist). Attendance at the meetings ranged from 12 (initially) to four (at the final session).

During the preparation for and conduct of the project there was some anxiety and doubt expressed by key staff about the effectiveness of this approach. Some concerns expressed to me were:

1. that the model does not emphasise content consistency and therefore some important material may not be covered;
2. it is unlikely that there will be consistent attendance, that is, some staff may not be able to attend all meetings and therefore some staff will not learn as much as others (the nature of child protection work means that staff will often be unable to regularly attend scheduled meetings);

3. the model does not provide certainty that staff have all the skills they need to carry out effective interviews with children;
4. people learn by hearing from experts, and a trainer with no real expertise in interviewing children will have credibility problems.

These concerns all have some validity; however they are probably equally valid for any other educational strategy. On reflection, I recognise that I didn't spend enough time trying to address these concerns before commencing the project. I also feel that I took on some of the anxiety of the project not being 'content driven', as in point 4 above, and possibly tried to 'provide' too much information to participants, rather than following the pure model of action learning where the process is learner-driven. I doubt whether the participants would feel that they had truly been empowered in setting their own learning goals and strategies. Another important fact is that I was new to the role, and the staff (with the exception of the Program Manager) had no experience in approaches to learning such as the one that I was suggesting.

Facilitating staff to use (and develop) self-reflective skills was intended to be a feature of the project. Zwiers and Morrissette (1999) encourage professionals involved in interviewing children to develop techniques for self-reflection as a means for reliving and recapturing experience in order to understand it, learn from it, and develop new insights and appreciations. And it is acknowledged more generally that critical reflection is important to ensure that the desired learning results from real work experiences (Moon, 1999). Therefore, I included some materials and time in each session to enable this process. However, only a minority of participants in the project seemed to grasp the need for, and would engage in the process of, critical reflection. This could have been due to a number of reasons

including that critical reflection was not generally part of the office or team culture (or at least was not identified or named as such). Or it could have been due to my approach to trying to encourage reflection. I approached the project with the assumption that as most participants were professionally trained, they would have familiarity with critical reflection on their work and/or the work of the organisation as a whole. However, this assumption placed too much emphasis on the experience and values of the individual practitioners. Had I taken more time to assess the work setting, I may have focussed attention initially on creating more opportunities for critical reflection in all aspects of practice (and not just in the context of this project). Alternatively, I may have recognised that critical reflection did occur but was not named as such. Where critical reflection is part of the office/team culture (and, importantly, is recognised *as* critical reflection), it is unlikely to appear threatening, or new, or 'time wasting'.

Reflecting on the experience

Reflecting on this experience, I recognise that busy practitioners, particularly in child protection settings, had very different expectations of how training should be delivered and experienced than what they were offered in this project. Training can often be seen as 'time out' from their demanding and stressful roles and most expect that the training event itself will provide them with the information and skills that they need. Participatory and empowering approaches to learning and development were not familiar to these practitioners.

Unfortunately, for those that usually attended training with the expectation of being provided with all the information they need, they would not necessarily have had this perspective challenged in a positive way through their participation in this project. I also recognise now that the inexperience of the work team (learning set) in interviewing

children also meant that there was insufficient case material (and depth to their experience in this area), to engage the group in critical reflection on their own practice.

Despite this disappointing experience, I did not abandon the belief that action learning models can be effective. Two subsequent initiatives, focused on different subject areas, had far more positive results. One involved another work team (comprising six staff) in the same office, initiated by them to share and consolidate their skills in foster carer assessments. This was a different experience in that the whole work team was involved and participation remained constant (unlike in the first project where 12 commenced, but only four attended the final session). As the staff had approached me with their request, I did not establish the process as a formal action learning project, as I had done for “interviewing children” learning needs. However, the principles of action learning were followed; the group was fully involved in setting their own learning objectives and strategies for meeting them, with me acting as group facilitator and enabler. The group was aware of different approaches to training and learning being used in this initiative, although it was not named as an action learning project. A major difference with this team, which may also have contributed to the success of this initiative, was that the workers operated on a less crisis-driven basis than the staff involved in initial child protection investigations, and they were more able to commit to attend meetings. The group was comprised of both experienced and new staff and thus was more conducive to practice-based discussions. The work team also had an established culture of discussion, possibly due to the less immediate demands of the work compared to child protection and to the leadership style of the senior caseworker.

The other positive staff development activity, where the principles of action learning were followed, was a facilitated group discussion process aiming to develop a commitment

to, and a shared understanding of, cultural safety in child protection. Participation was voluntary and open to all staff. A core group of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff participated throughout the whole group discussion process including those that had initially articulated their desire to develop an understanding of cultural safety in child protection settings. Other staff members who were not involved in the core group were invited to contribute ideas and comments in focus groups, the findings of which were discussed in staff meetings and other team discussion opportunities. Although not established as an action learning project, the principles were followed and some powerful learning and critical reflection resulted for the whole staff team (see Zon, *et al*, 2004).

These initiatives described above were all undertaken in a relatively small workplace, where several staff teams involved in all aspects of child protection (including myself as education and training officer) were co-located. The first encounter with action learning floundered, and my perceived lack of appreciation of critical reflection by the group may have been a contributing factor. However, in the subsequent initiatives critical reflection occurred as a natural part of the group processes; it was not imposed on participants as an essential 'ingredient' in the learning process (the issues and strategies for addressing them were also genuinely driven by the participants). Over time, and with a supportive management team, my role as education and training officer was seen to be broader than simply arranging and delivering the commonly understood training workshops. Rather, the workplace culture began to accept that the education and training officer was a resource person who could participate more broadly and directly in the workplace such as through facilitating discussions, and working in close partnership with staff teams to meet their (broadly identified) professional development goals. Also, as my own appreciation of the workplace culture developed I could seek out opportunities to engage with work teams in

more direct and involved ways.

Conclusion

Action learning faces obstacles in the environment of child protection. The crisis-driven nature of practice, and the high demands on staff means that training is often viewed as something separate from practice. Formal learning opportunities are often established as external, one-off workshops where attendance is less likely to be overtaken by competing priorities than other forms of (work-based) learning. Any potential obstacles to action learning in child protection settings (such as competing work priorities, different expectations of training and learning, unhelpful workplace culture, lack of experience of participatory learning) need to be seen as challenges rather than reasons not to proceed with these approaches. Where child protection workplaces have access to education and training personnel who can work flexibly and can integrate their role within the workplace (as I could), then there are many possibilities for professional development and practice change as indicated by two of the approaches described above. More trials of participatory or action learning approaches would provide valuable information for managers and staff development professionals in child protection to determine whether this is a viable and effective model for improving staff skills in interviewing children, as well as other important subject areas.

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