

The role of participatory action research in leading the development of engaging assessment

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The Australian Learning and Teaching Council funded project Leadership and Assessment: Strengthening the Nexus succeeded in building the capacity of a group of cross-disciplinary leaders to create effective and engaging assessment practice. A Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology underpinned the project. This paper presents an evaluative perspective on the methodology and process of PAR and its role in the assessment focused action research projects across thirteen departments in one Sydney metropolitan university. It also outlines the range of outcomes achieved across the multiple of the organisation (unit, program, department and faculty). Multi-phase development initially included three departments in the project with Action Research Enablers leading the initial “assessment profile” in their department, supported by an “influencer”. The Action Research Enablers formed a community of practice known as the “Leaders in Effective Assessment Practice” (LEAP) group (also presenting on this panel), and this community grew as each subsequent phase was rolled out. At each phase of the project a scholarly approach was adopted to developing new and engaging assessment practice. Individual and collaborative reflective practice informed the identification of theoretical models for leading assessment, informed strategies, aided development of tools used in each department, and informed the evaluation framework. The paper provides examples of the many outcomes that have been achieved including intended project outcomes such as profiling assessment, introducing new and engaging assessment practices and new policies. In addition to the planned outcomes, serendipitous outcomes include the acknowledgement of the leadership capacity of each Action Research Enabler in driving assessment change across the organisation, as well as many additional outcomes resulting from drawing on the synergies made possible by an organisational academic restructure and a corresponding shift in the culture of assessment across all levels of the university.

Keywords: assessment, Participatory action research, leadership

Introduction

The two year Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) funded project Leadership and Assessment: Strengthening the Nexus aimed at building the capacity of a group of cross-disciplinary leaders to create effective and engaging assessment practice across one Australian metropolitan university. An underlying assumption of building leadership capacity across the organization has been that the leaders will continue to actively lead assessment across the organisation, and therefore ensure project sustainability beyond the project funding period.

The project succeeded in attaining this and other outcomes, in part, due to the underlying methodology. Two main theoretical approaches informed the methodology: each phase of the project was framed within a Participatory Action Research approach and the development of assessment leadership capacity was based on a distributed model of leadership.

The Theoretical Approaches

Participatory Action Research

A Participatory Action Research (PAR) (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988) model was adopted as the methodological framework for the project. This approach was chosen as it was believed that it would provide the opportunity for participants to develop different assessment strategies tailored in response to the needs of their contexts, that is, their departments. While the project started with the participation of three departments, it grew to include thirteen departments, across a range of disciplines. As each department brought contextually specific assessment needs, an approach that provided a high degree of research flexibility was essential in enabling appropriate strategies for each context. PAR also offered an emphasis on collaboration, intervention strategies, the construction and testing of new knowledge and theory, and an evaluative component for each stage and phase (A. Burns, personal communication, November 22, 2006).

Action Research has had a long tradition as a methodology in education research projects (Gray, Chang & Radloff, 2007; Minty, Weedon, Morss & Cannall, 2007; Goodnough, 2003; Harland, 2003; and Staniforth & Harland, 2003) and is well-documented as a method for encouraging innovation and change at local levels of organization (Pedlar, Burgoyne & Brook, 2005; Pedlar, 2006). The incorporation of aspects of Developmental Action Learning (DAL) for the development of leadership capacity (Raelin & Raelin, 2006) was compatible with the PAR cycle as it stresses the importance of collegial reflection on real life challenges in their own educational environments. DAL brings an emphasis on introducing theory, then reflection on the theory and on experience prior to the activation of project phases, especially during the early stages of each process (Raelin & Raelin, 2006).

The simplified cycle of the PAR process, being: Plan, Act, Observe and Reflect (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988), together with the introduction of theory as a stimulus for reflective practice (after DAL) that informs action, provided clear and systematic direction for informing the progress of the project. At regular meetings, forums and workshops, project participants therefore engaged with the literature on the theory of PAR (as well as leadership, see below) and were supported with developmentally appropriate resources, responsive to their needs at action research cycle, and each project phase before they initiated a series of actions.

Distributed Leadership

Theoretical stimuli included the exploration of theories and conceptualisations of leadership (for engaging assessment). Leadership in Higher Education has been an elusive and variable concept, ranging from traditional authoritarian and hierarchical to democratic and transformational (Anderson & Johnson, 2006). Less is known about developing leadership capability (Marshall, 2006) or capacity, in assessment.

It was not assumed that project participants would already be in formal, especially hierarchical, positions of leadership across the organization. Rather, the project would provide an opportunity for those with an interest in improving assessment practice to pursue this interest whilst developing the capacity to lead change in assessment in their departments, and then expand their leadership across a wider range of influence.

For the project, Leadership was viewed as an ‘emergent property of a group or network of interacting individuals’ (Bennett, Wise, Woods & Harvey, 2003, p.7). In keeping with the ethos of Developmental Action Learning, the project participants were provided with literature, workshops and forums to focus their reflection. Reflecting upon and synthesising the literature supported participants in developing their conceptualisations of, and framing their strategies for building personal capacity in leading effective assessment. Indeed, as their personal capacity grew, together with the capacity of the whole project team, they began to investigate new theories and models.

Theories collaboratively investigated included Bolman and Deal’s (2003) Reframing Organizations, supported by McDonald’s (2007) reflections; Critical Action Learning (as proposed by personal communication with Marshall, November 22, 2006); Duignan and Bezzina’s (2006) principles of effective leaders and Sergiovanni’s transformational leadership (e.g. 2005). CEDAM’s DVD on Leadership in Teaching (2007) was used as another stimulus for collective reflection and as preparation for a practice in leadership workshop. One leadership model, that was not just explored but tested as a reflective prompt for Developmental Action Learning, was the integrated competing values framework (ICVF) (Vilkinas & Cartan, 2006).

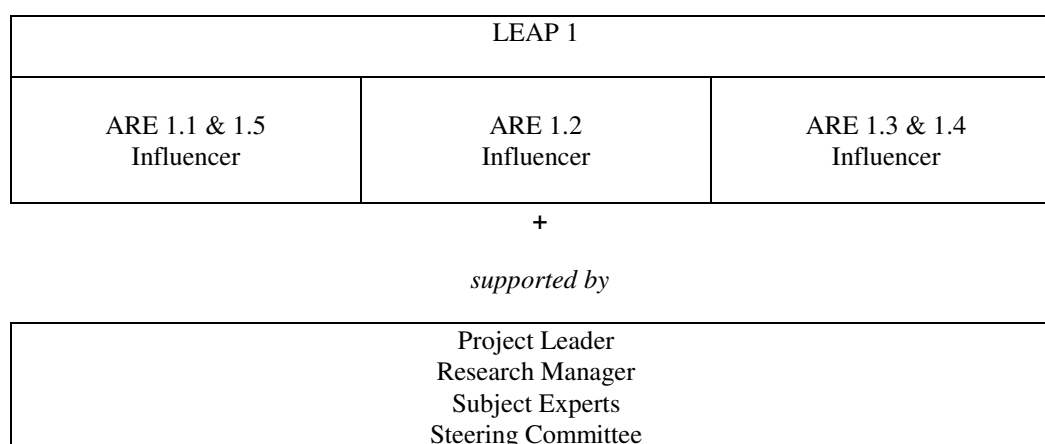
All the models and approaches explored were compatible with a PAR approach, and all contributed to shaping the conceptualisations of leadership of assessment in this project. In this way, the PAR framework, with its pivotal role of reflection, was “connecting” (Warwick & Swaffield, 2006) to the emerging developmental leadership framework.

The project

Phase 1

The ‘Leadership and Assessment: Strengthening the Nexus’ project was planned as a three phase project over a two year period. The first phase commenced with three departments with staff who had expressed an interest in learning and teaching, and specifically effective assessment practices.

Each of these participants, representing a department, were known as Action Research Enablers (AREs) and to ensure multi-hierarchical support, each was paired with an Influencer, either a Head of Department, Associate Dean (Learning and Teaching) or Dean of Division or Faculty (Figure 1). Thus, the AREs had a supportive colleague, located within their own department and, of equal importance, a champion for enhanced assessment practice. While three departments were initially involved, there were four AREs, as in one department two participants decided they would like to share the role. With a theoretical underpinning of distributed leadership together with a participatory action research framework, the proposal to collaborate by job-sharing a role was highly compatible.

Figure 1: Phase 1 participants

A PAR model for research stresses collegiality. The Action Research Enablers (AREs) met monthly at a supportive and strategic forum, forming the Leaders in effective assessment practice (LEAP) group, a collegial support network. In addition, these leaders in effective assessment were also supported with regular workshops and fora facilitated by the project team. Experts have facilitated workshops on leadership, on participatory action research and on evaluation. The funding body (ALTC) also supported project participants with a range of fora and workshops on leadership and assessment.

A critical component of the action research cycle has been that of reflection. Assessment leaders were asked to maintain a critically reflective journal of the process of developing leadership in assessment. One effective and successful strategy for supporting reflective practice has been the structured reflection sessions. These sessions have been facilitated by the project research manager who used two semi-structured questions as a prompt for the AREs to verbalise their reflections from the past month. These sessions supported the AREs by providing them with a regular and systematic opportunity to consider the praxis of theory and action and to journal the process of capacity building in leaders of effective and engaging assessment. Each session was digitally recorded and then transcribed providing rich data to inform the building of a process model of leading effective assessment practice. In all, twenty eight reflection sessions provided the data. Data were content analysed with a thematic approach using QSR NVivo8 software. Twenty themes emerged (including leadership of assessment; identification of assessment issues; assessment culture and best practice in assessment). Several of these themes provided depth and breadth in their conceptualisations and therefore were further analysed for sub-themes, for example, the theme of leadership of assessment provided the sub-themes of concepts of leadership, enacting leadership and leadership roles.

After collecting copies of each unit, or course, outline for those taught in their department, the AREs had baseline data on current assessment practice. This data had to be synthesised into a format that would be succinct and present a visual profile of assessment in a department. Through LEAP forums an assessment profiling tool, originally developed as a matrix by RMIT, an Australian University (The Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education, 2006) was collaboratively modified and then successfully used to profile assessment practice (Appendix 1 presents an extract example from one department). Modifications included generating possible types of assessment used across the organisation and then assigning a colour code to each assessment type. This would result in a profile that provided data on

assessment practice including types of assessment used and the timing and weighting of assessment tasks. Profiling, rather than auditing, assessment was a deliberate conceptual choice as auditing carried (negative) surveillance and compliance connotations, whereas profiling was more aligned to providing a picture, a visual insight. The data told many interesting stories including assessment practice with a heavy emphasis on final semester examinations, a lack of variety in assessment tasks, no staggering of due dates for assessment tasks and all within an organisational context of no formal organisational assessment policy, a context not compatible with engaging assessment.

The next phase involved AREs interviewing colleagues about their assessment practices. As the departments were very different, in discipline, in staffing and in level of engagement with assessment issues, how the interviews were to be structured and conducted had to be flexible. AREs supported each other (through the LEAP forums) with developing their strategies, and in turn, each was developing their leadership capacity as they led the data collection, profiling, interviewing and dissemination in their departments.

Phase 2

Three additional departments joined the project in the second phase. Support was again provided for the AREs in the form of influencers, workshops and a new LEAP group. The first LEAP group strongly believed that the second phase members had to originally meet separately as this provided the opportunity for the new group to have space to identify their own needs and therefore project roles.

The new AREs undertook similar tasks to the first phase members, of mapping out assessment practice to produce a profile, interviewing colleagues with a responsibility for assessment and opening up, often, a new dialogue with colleagues around engaging assessment through departmental meetings and local workshops they initiated. They quickly assumed leadership roles in effective assessment.

Phase 3

The final phase of the project saw another seven departments join as they led small assessment research projects targeting a “burning” issue they had identified. At the time of writing, these projects were being finalised, although many were planned as seeding projects, which will continue and grow into larger projects.

The outcomes: planned and serendipitous

When the project was first proposed it set out four main aims, namely to:

1. Develop and implement a sustainable and systematic leadership and organisational development model for the enhancement of assessment practice across higher education institutions.
2. Develop a transparent and coherent policy framework for assessment and feedback at all levels (unit, program, department and division).
3. Foster ‘leaders of effective assessment practice’ at all levels of the institution by enhancing these leaders’ scholarly understanding of assessment and feedback in higher education, and their knowledge and ability to work in cross-level and integrated teams. These individuals will be representative of various disciplines and organisational levels within the university.

4. Establish a community of practice in higher education assessment and feedback across the sector.

These original outcomes are in the process of being achieved or have already been achieved. Use of a PAR approach has been effective in supporting a distributed process of leadership capacity building for the leaders of effective and engaging assessment, and more discussion on this follows in the next section. The original project approach provided for systematic development of leadership capacity across the thirteen participating departments, with a process of regular reflection (including on the theoretical literature) and supportive collaboration in developing context specific strategies, consultation, then initiation and enactment of strategies. Supported reflection sessions were highly valued by the AREs, as were the developmentally appropriate support of regular LEAP forums, and a range of workshops. The sustainability of the project, past the initial funding period, is already evident in outcomes such as the ongoing role of AREs on an organisation wide assessment working party, where they lead new policy development and review. Two ARE have recently been appointed as Associate Deans of Learning and Teaching for their faculties. To sum it up, as more than one ARE has stated, “this will never stop”.

When the project commenced there was no formal assessment policy for the organisation. The approach to assessment across campus was not consistent and practice tended to follow unconsidered and unchallenged precedent, basically, as we had done it this way for years, it must be the right way. The AREs, starting with their assessment profiles of departments, initiated a new dialogue around engaging assessment. This dialogue raised many questions, of which the majority could not be answered as there was no policy. The literature provided insight into good practice and there were many examples of good practice across the campus, however this was still ad hoc. Two-thirds of the way through the project, the organisation’s executive made a call for policy. With the establishment of a working party, the AREs were empowered to lead and inform this policy development based on their expert knowledge, working with representatives from across the organisation. They began to change the culture around assessment (for example, from a norms-based approach to a standards-based approach). As a result a new assessment policy was, not only drafted but, recently passed by Academic Senate for implementation in the new year. The policy is evidenced based and clearly promotes principles of good assessment. A large number of related policies and documents (for example, examinations policy) have also been drafted and are in the consultative phase. The organisation now has a policy framework. The serendipity of the executive calling for, and funding the development of, policy was opportune. The AREs had developed the capacity to lead this change and the organisation resourced the process, enabling scholarly and efficient policy development.

The AREs, singularly and collaboratively as LEAPers, have demonstrated their capacity to lead assessment. Each has led the process of profiling assessment in their department and used this as a stimulus to engage their department in a new discourse around engaging assessment practice. As a result, each of the departments has worked towards systematically improving assessment practice, for example, varying the nature of the assessment tasks and planning more efficient assessment tasks. Many have led workshops to support this change. Another serendipitous outcome is that once assessment had been reviewed, it led to the curriculum of departments also being reviewed. This is also in synergy with the organisational goals, as the university undergoes both restructuring and academic review. In one department there has also

been the acknowledgement by their professional accrediting body of improved assessment design in their curriculum.

The questions were:

Q1. Reflecting on your role as a leader in assessment in your department, what have been your experiences over the past month?

Please elaborate on any positive experiences.

Please elaborate on challenging experiences.

Q2. (If not mentioned) What are your reflections on the following processes?

Name relevant events that have occurred over the past month.

Originally, many of the AREs approached leadership of assessment with some reluctance:

‘Most of us avoided the leadership part of the project altogether, apart from discussing how we were not leaders.’¹

‘I like to think of myself more as a facilitator than a leader. I’d like to see myself as a facilitator ... not a ...traditional type of leader.’²

and

‘I think you know I’m not going to be a leader in the kind of up front sort of leader. I think I’m going to have to work on the one at a time level to try and create it.’³

However, supported by the PAR approach and using a framework of distributed leadership, the AREs developed their capacity to lead assessment:

I now feel capable of leading a discussion within my department about assessment. I have a good knowledge of the key issues and on that basis feel that I have the ability to offer some leadership on the issue. I think that I have also acquired some useful insights into what it means to ‘lead’ such a discussion effectively.

I have established a reputation within the department as someone who is worth consulting on matters relating to assessment. Since my involvement in this project I now find that colleagues frequently use me as a sounding board for ideas on assessment.⁴

and

The team has now developed a pool of expertise, which is being shared across the University in a variety of ways... For example, we were co-opted to the University Learning and Teaching working party which has been drawing up a new assessment policy for the whole university; we ran a panel session at the Learning and Teaching Forum last week; we led an organized panel session at an international conference last year; and were invited to participate in a 2 day intensive workshop on leadership, along with representa-

¹ ARE 1.1, April 2008

² ARE 1.4, January 2007

³ ARE 1.2, February 2007

⁴ ARE 2.1, July 2008

tives from about 15 other Australian universities. Various researchers from other Divisions ... have approached me to discuss and get help with learning and teaching projects of their own. All of these activities are leadership opportunities, defined as the chance to influence or change someone else's thinking and/or practice.⁵

As LEAP teams, the AREs have worked in cross-level and integrated teams. In addition to the assessment working party, they have been members of organisational curriculum working parties, have facilitated workshops in whole-of-organisation forums and shared their learnings at national and international forums and conferences, and through invitation on national research projects.

Through these forums they have gained membership to a wider community of practice. While a website was established for a more formal community of practice, its' use as a discussion forum has been irregular. A public website that acts as a repository of project resources is being planned.

The role of PAR in enabling outcomes

Utilising PAR as the foundational approach to the project contributed to the project's success and outcomes. The basic components of the PAR process: plan, act, observe and reflect were a strength, as these research cycles provided an inherent flexibility which allowed for the evolution of each level of the project in direct response to time and context specific requirements. A more structured approach may have led to project failure. In one department undergoing a high rate of staff attrition, the "influencer" changed three times in the first year and then the role was left vacant. Observation and reflection on these events allowed for planning of different strategies in response to these events and the project continued. Likewise, initiating discussion on engaging assessment practice with departmental colleagues was effected using established departmental meetings in one context, however, in other contexts dedicated workshops were most effective. While each of the departments worked towards many shared goals (e.g. assessment profiling, policy development) their journeys were different. A one model suits all (departments) would not succeed, and PAR provided this necessary flexibility. The AREs have worked collegially on drafting a set of indicators to evaluate how successful a PAR approach is in such projects, however a discussion of these is beyond the scope of this paper.

Summary

Changing assessment practice across disciplines and then across an organisation is a challenge. Utilising a participatory action research approach, that supports a distributed model of leadership with participants working at many levels of the organisation, provides a model for capacity building of leaders of engaging assessment. These leaders are then empowered to bring about multi-level, effective and long-term change. With affirmation of their capacities as leaders, the ongoing development of assessment is ensured.

⁵ ARE 1.1, April 2008

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Appendix 1: Extract example of assessment matrix from one department (LEAP Colour-coded Matrix)

Semester 1 or 2														Final	
	Week 1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	Exam	Total %
2							ASS					ASS		EXAM/Fc	
							15					15		70	100
1	PracEx			ASS				ASS				ASS		EXAM/Fc	
	10			5				7				8		70	100
1 and 2	Oth	attend.		ASS			ASS		ASS			ASS	EXAM/PI	EXAM/Fc	
		4		4			4		4			4	20	60	100
1 and 2	Oth	tute		ASS	Quiz			ASS	Quiz			ASS	Quiz	EXAM/Fc	
		4		5	2			8	2			7	2	70	100
1	Oth	tute						ASS				ASS		EXAM/Fc	
		12						14				14		60	100
2	Oth	attend.				ASS			ASS				ASS	EXAM/Fc	
		5				10			10				10	65	100
1 and 2					ASS			ASS			ASS		ASS	EXAM/Fc	
					8			8			10		4	70	100
2	Oth	attend		ASS			ASS				ASS		ASS	EXAM/Fc	
	neg. marks			?			?				?		30	70	100
2	Oth	tute					ASS						ASS	EXAM/Fc	
		10					14						16	60	100

Legend Phase 1

ASS	Assignment
C/S	Case Study
C/Part	Class Participation
ESS	Essay
EXAM/Fo	Formal exam-open book
EXAM/Fc	Formal exam-closed book
EXAM_Fh	Formal exam-take home
EXAM/Pc	Practical exam-clinical
EXAM/PI	Practical exam-laboratory
Moot	Law
MCQ	Multiple choice questions
PracEx	Practical exercise
PS	Problem solving
Report	Report
RES	Research project
SEM	Seminar presentation
Quiz	Quiz
Verbal	Verbal/ oral presentation
Viva	Viva voce
Oth	Other