

Cultural Variance of Reflection in Action Learning

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The mantra of « Learning by Doing » resonates well with my mainland Chinese colleagues and participants of management development processes. After years of undergoing a mixture of traditional rote memorising and strict (and numbing) indoctrination, Chinese teachers, trainers and students have enthusiastically embarked on a journey of adapting western style learning methods among them active learning and action learning.

However, while Asian managers and executives responded with high spirit and enthusiasm to active learning, they were more reluctant to adopt action learning. Methods of active learning such as case studies, role plays and experiential exercises were all adopted with great success, the action learning variant in China was often without its key practice features, such as qualified facilitators and open reflection. Hence despite the celebrated success in application of action learning in China (Gordon, Meininger & Chen, 2004), the Chinese AL variant remains long in solving organisational problems and short in facilitating personal development.

In contrast to the common expectation regarding action learning outcome in the West, which stresses Level 2 or Level 3 learning goals as a minimum (as defined by Yorks, O'Neil and Marsick, 1999), the learning goals of the Chinese action learning design tend to focus on Level 1 and possibly Level 2 learning goals. Both foci emphasise a contextualised learning process which tends to be de-personalised and content driven.

Looking back over more than 20 years of project work in China consisting of train-of-trainers and action research components (Yiu & Saner, 2002), I would like to reflect on my extensive field experience in China and argue that the reasons for Chinese preference for the more "business-driven" action learning variety (terms used by Pedler, Burgoyne and Brook, 2005) are reflective of strategic choices.

A case example cited here concerns CSEND's project in China (1993-1997) on building internal capacities for change in Chinese public administration and state owned enterprises (Yiu & Saner, 2002). This project involved teaching of *P* knowledge and action learning in solving real workplace problems important to the reform processes in China. Participants were selected from both the in-service training institutions and the training management unit of the provincial party apparatus to undergo a professional development process of 18 months. A "business-driven" action learning design supported by action research was chosen for this project in order to achieve real organisational impact, such as developing new management training curricula and training material, adopting of active training methodology and consequently improving the training effectiveness and efficiency of the Chinese in-service training system. All together, approximately 10,000 such institutes were in operation during the time of this project and were in need of transformation.

Different organisational and cultural constraints existed to call for this particular action learning variant which deemphasised the public personal reflection of the action learning cycle. Instead, reflection tended to focus more on the theory and was devoid of criticism and/or evaluation. These design constraints, to name a few, were:

Design constraint 1: Similarity between public reflection and self-struggle sessions.

Design constraint 2: Participants' lack of prior experiences with relevant technical and theoretical content in terms of western management theories and techniques

Design constraint 3: Lack of qualified set advisers versed in the human relations' theory and practices, and equipped with sufficient experience in managing organisations in a market economy

Design constraint 4: Lack of psychological mindedness of the participants and the general deficiency of Chinese language in expressing affective experiences

Design constraint 5: The importance of conflict avoidance and preservation of individual "face" in Chinese culture

Design constraint 6: Different cognitive styles between the Asian and Western participants leading to different developmental needs regarding cognitive skills

In order to accommodate these constraints, the reflection component of action learning was relegated to the private and tacit domain of the learning process. Instead of public reflection, participants kept a personal learning journal that was later submitted for review by the Chinese programme director and tutors (set advisers). Critical reflection concerning the organizational reality and operating assumptions were examined through systematic research and collection of data (action research) and discrete feedback to the client organisations. Institutional resistances were mitigated through promotional tour of the programme management team and orientation sessions and overseas study tours for the stakeholder groups and institutional hierarchy.

By presenting factual data in a learning context, learners were able to present information about their respective organisations without incurring the danger of being seen as "negative", or by challenging the authorities and being labeled as subversive. They proposed alternative ways of organizing training, of delivering training and/or alternative training products. Today this business-driven variant of action learning continues to operate within the Chinese public sector for whom this CSEND designed project was designed and implemented.

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