The Suitability of Action Research for Enhancing the Quality of Teaching in Hong Kong

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Abstract

When action research was first proposed as a mechanism for teaching quality enhancement, there were sceptics who questioned whether it was appropriate for Hong Kong — indeed there are some who still do. At the time it was based upon very different assumptions to the prevailing mechanisms for quality assurance. There were also the issues of perceived conservatism of teachers in Hong Kong, resistance of students to innovation and possible cultural incompatibility. Successful use of action research in Hong Kong has shown that many teachers are keen to innovate and that students will adapt well to innovation if given support and time to adapt. There has been no evidence of cultural incompatibility as participating teams were able to engage in communal critical reflection. Overall, action research provides a suitable mechanism for teaching quality enhancement which works sufficiently well in Hong Kong for the SAR to have established an international reputation for its use in higher education.

Introduction

Action research, as a means of teaching quality enhancement in Hong Kong, grew out of a collaborative project on student approaches to learning. In the late 1980s there was considerable interest in conducting research into Hong Kong students using the student approaches to learning (SAL) research framework. The prevailing anecdotal impression of Hong Kong students was that they relied heavily on rote learning, which ought to show up on instruments such as the Study Process Questionnaire (SPQ) (Biggs, 1987) which measures deep and surface approaches to learning.

It came as a surprise, therefore, that initial use of the SPQ in Hong Kong resulted in scores for surface approach which were no higher, and in some cases lower, than those found for students elsewhere. Careful examination of the data eventually ruled out experimental artifacts so the research team became convinced that Hong Kong students were no more inclined to use a surface approach than those elsewhere (Gow, & Kember, 1990; Kember, & Gow, 1990; 1991).

In many cases observations of rote learning could be attributed more to the teaching environment and the nature of the curriculum than inherent characteristics of the students. The most compelling evidence for this came from data which showed that on average, deep approach scores declined as students progressed through their programmes at university (Gow, & Kember, 1990; Kember, & Gow, 1991). Essentially a university education was making students less inclined to learn for understanding or to think critically.

The initial gathering of SPQ data was undertaken in conjunction with a number of participating departments. The results for each of these departments were fed back to departmental meetings.

The reaction of department members to declining deep approach scores by year of study was often to bring to the surface a number of concerns about the curriculum or the mode of teaching which had been lying dormant. Some staff had realised that everything was not as it should be but were uncertain what to do and, more significantly, how to go about doing what needed to be done.

This conclusion led to attempts to do something about the issues. Our value judgement was that higher education should be promoting qualities, like critical and creative thinking, consistent with a deep approach to learning. If this was not happening then a way was needed to address the contextual problems. Those, in the departmental meetings who had been expressing their concern about problems in their curricula needed to be convinced that bringing about change was within their sphere of influence. They had to be convinced that there was a suitable mechanism for introducing change and examining its effects.

The SAL research tradition had been instrumental in diagnosing the situation, but appeared unlikely to be applicable to tackling the problems. The tradition is part of the interpretive paradigm so seeks understanding. It is not inherently concerned with bringing about change or transforming attitudes.

A mode of research which does embrace change is action research. One of the characterising features of this mode is that change is brought about through successive cycles of planning, action, observation and reflection. A series of cycles provides a vehicle for iterative refinement or development.

Reservations about Action Research

When I first proposed conducting action research projects in an attempt to transform teaching and learning in some courses, there were a number of sceptics who thought it might not work in Hong Kong. Indeed there are still some who doubt its applicability. Li, Yu, Lam, and Fok (1999) cited a wide range of factors restricting the use of action research in the school sector in Hong Kong. The factors were grouped into four classifications: policymaking, school system, professional factors and individual factors. In view of the extensive use of action research in the higher education sector in Hong Kong, the paper has to be seen as myopic and pessimistic. Nevertheless it does provide a written record of the type of doubts about action research expressed in its early history of deployment in higher education.

In this chapter I intend to deal with the main perceived doubts about using action research in the early days when it was first in the higher education sector. These fall into Li et al's categories of the system, professional and individual. The policymaking one is less relevant because higher education does not suffer from the rigid top-down imposition of policy imposed by the education department on the school sector.

System's Different Approach to Enhancing Quality

At the macro level the main conceptual hurdle to proceeding with action research projects came from prevailing attitudes to ensuring teaching quality. At that time my institution was a Polytechnic and had instituted a teaching quality control system modeled on that imposed upon the British polytechnics by the Council for National Academic Accreditation. It was by no means unusual in this respect. World-wide, of the resources devoted to promoting or ensuring teaching quality, the majority were, and indeed still are, allocated to quality assurance, control, or inspection measures.

Where resources were dedicated to staff development or teaching quality enhancement it was predominantly through workshop-type activities (Moses, 1985). To show that action research was

not an established approach to enhancing learning and teaching quality, it is sufficient to note that the initial proponents of the approach in higher education were able to publish accounts of their initial trials in which they found it necessary to explain the basis for the approach, and show how the theoretical framework was appropriate (Kember, & Gow, 1992; Kember, & Kelly, 1993; Schratz, 1992; Zuber-Skerrit, 1992).

Quality enhancement through action research was, therefore, both a new approach and one which did not fit within the prevailing paradigms of quality control / assurance or quality enhancement through workshop-type activities. Its most radical distinction from these approaches was the assumption it makes of academic staff. Both of the other broad approaches make something of a deficit assumption of academics. Quality control assumes there are teachers or courses which are not up to standard, and so reviews have to identify these and ensure that remedial action is taken. Workshop activities assume that there are academics whose teaching ability could be improved through being taught better teaching skills.

Action research takes a more positive view of academics. It assumes that there exists a body of academics who are sufficiently committed to their students' learning, and interested in their own teaching, to commit themselves to engaging in a project to improve some aspect of learning and teaching in one of their courses. Further, it assumes that they are capable of taking this on, though it does recognise that they may need some support in doing so. In forging ahead with action research, assumptions about academics were also to be put to the test.

Professional Conservatism in Teaching

To illustrate a common attitude of teachers, a quotation is taken from the official minutes of a course meeting in one of the universities in Hong Kong. The fact that this statement was allowed to be recorded unchallenged in the minutes of a formal university committee, and would have been endorsed by other committees, shows that it was typical of attitudes held by many at the time.

> Students in Hong Kong ... expect lecturers to teach them everything that they are expected to know. They have little desire to discover for themselves or avail themselves of the facilities which are available to them within the teaching institution. They wish to be spoonfed and in turn they are spoonfed. Lecturers are under pressure to feed the student with a certain amount of academic and community needs information and the simplest way to do it, given the programme does not confer a degree and the student wishes to be fed in the traditional manner, is to adopt the old and traditional approaches to teaching. The result of this is that the student is not encouraged to think for himself and rarely goes beyond the level of understanding principles. In other words the student is stuck at a stage where he finds it difficult to apply those fundamental principles to situations outside the norm. The responsibility for learning remains with the teacher, rather than the student. (Minutes of the [...] Course Planning Committee, 1989, p. 13)

The lecturer who provided this quotation clearly attributes the nature of the prevailing teaching and learning environment to the students. It is also, though, quite clear that he himself holds beliefs about teaching which are highly teacher-centred. A review of thirteen studies of teachers' conceptions of teaching in higher education (Kember, 1997) synthesised the outcomes into a two level categorisation scheme. At the higher level were two broad orientations. The first was teacher-centred with an orientation towards content. The other was student-centred and had a focus towards students' learning.

It is quite clear that the above quotation was made by someone whose beliefs would belong in the teacher-centred orientation. Persuading such a person to introduce more innovative forms of teaching could only happen if these beliefs about teaching were first changed. As it appeared that

such teacher-centred beliefs were widespread, this might be expected to constitute a major impediment to change.

Resistance of Students

The above quotation also illustrates a belief in the conservatism of Hong Kong students. At the time there was a widespread conviction that students would resist any form of teaching and learning other than didactic lecturing to a passive audience. Such beliefs would act as a disincentive for teachers to try out methods of teaching other than traditional didactic forms. No one is going to be keen to try out anything more innovative if they are convinced that students will be reluctant to participate or be antipathetic towards the approach.

Individual/Cultural Incompatibility

There were also doubts about whether action research was compatible with Chinese culture. These related to the position of reflection within the action research cycle. In most of the variants of action research, reflection is seen as a communal process involving all participants in a particular project. The aim of the reflection is for the participants to consider their observations and actions, and together reach a perspective to carry forward to the next cycle. The process inevitably involves exposing personal beliefs, and the critical discourse must involve trying to resolve positions where, initially, there are discrepancies. Perspective transformation through critical dialogue is often seen as an outcome of this facet of action research.

It did seem to some that this process of critical reflection would be in conflict with the traditional Chinese concept of 'face'. If this were the case it would be a significant issue because face is important in Chinese society. Redding and Ng (1982), for example, asked a sample of 102 Hong Kong business managers whether face was important in daily transaction and all said it was. Ting-Toomey (1988) argued that saving face would mean that conflicts were less likely to be resolved. Gao, Ting-Toomey and Gudykunst (1996) observed that the Chinese practiced implicit communication in which everything was not spelt out so that individuals were left with room to manoeuvre.

The process of reflecting upon practice could also be seen as incompatible with the Confucian respect for authorities (Wu, 1996). Discussing changes to existing beliefs and practices could be seen as undermining the established practices set up by the authority figure. In which case there would be a loss of face for the authority figure.

A Trial in Spite of the Doubts

In spite of these reservations, educational development through action research was tried out. The initial trials within one university (Kember, & Gow, 1992) spread to a second university (Kember, & Kelly, 1993) and eventually encompassed all tertiary institutions in Hong Kong through the Action Learning Project. This initiative has supported 50 projects in its first phase and 40 in the second, thanks to funding from the University Grants Committee of Hong Kong.

This mushrooming of involvement in action research itself suggests that the sceptics were wrong. The process of supporting over a hundred action research projects and organising the Action Learning Project has resulted in a great deal more evidence to confront the sceptics' negative stereotype of Hong Kong teachers and their students. It has also resulted in a valuable body of knowledge about action research as a means of enhancing the quality of teaching and learning, and has clearly shown that it can be successfully applied in Hong Kong. It is the purpose of this chapter to paint a more positive picture of the attitude to innovation of both teachers and students in Hong Kong.

Evaluation Design

Before dealing with the doubts it is first necessary to describe the evaluation design from which the evidence has been drawn. The description applies both to this chapter and the next.

The first round of the Action Learning Project employed a three level multiple voice and multiple method evaluation design. The project teams were responsible for evaluating their own projects and used a wide variety of methods to do this. Assistance and advice was available from the coordinating team on the design, collection, and analysis of evaluation data.

The coordinating team contributed to the evaluation of the overall project through reflections upon their involvement with the initiative. They conducted a survey of participants in the projects using open- and closed-response questions. A randomly selected sample of eight project teams was also interviewed.

A panel made an independent evaluation of the overall project. They had access to the reports of the individual projects and the survey and interview data. They also conducted interviews with the coordinating team and some participants in projects.

For the second round, the evaluation design was similar except there was no independent evaluation panel. It became clear that the initiative would not continue for a third round, so independent judgement was less necessary. Many lessons about the overall organisation of the mode of educational development had been clearly established from the first evaluation and so it seemed prudent to dedicate a lower level of resources to evaluating the second round.

The surveys contained both open- and closed-response questions. The large majority of the questions were the same for both rounds of the project so that comparisons could be made. The small number of alterations to questions was due to differences in the way the project operated between the two rounds. Percentage responses to the survey questions are used to substantiate points in the remainder of the chapter. The typical quotations given come from either the open-ended questions or the interviews conducted with first round participants.

The response to the surveys was 72 from the first round and 57 for the second. This represents response rates of about 65% and 60% respectively. The figures are approximate because of uncertainty over exactly how many participants there were in some project teams. Quite a few projects had a core of committed workers and others with more peripheral involvement. Some project proposals contained lists of participants, not all of whom subsequently appeared to be actively involved in a significant way. The response rates given are based upon the coordinating teams' perception of active participants.

Individual/Cultural Incompatibility of Reflection

To counter the sceptics' view that reflection was incompatible with Chinese culture, there was considerable evidence of reflection taking place and it being in itself a valuable outcome of the projects. The participants saw action research as an appropriate framework for work of this type and none expressed any difficulties with the position of reflection as an integral component of the action research cycle. To the contrary, there were a significant number of comments from both the open-ended questions and interviews suggesting the value of the reflective process. The following response talked about the experience of self-reflection.

> It has helped me to reflect on my own teaching as well as trying to understand how the students learn.

More significantly there was a greater emphasis from respondents upon reflection as a group activity. From the perspective of the sceptics, it would be communal reflection rather than self-

reflection which might be alien to Chinese culture. The majority of the teams noted the importance of reflection-in-action in fine-tuning their teaching practices. They expressed the need to discuss and listen to others experiences in the action process, because this helped them to step back from the action and reach new perspectives.

> The most useful was the team meeting in reflecting the results and the experience.
>
> That is important because we would like to know how to adjust our own teaching by knowing the effect of other classes.

Evidence of Changing Perspectives

It was also clear that in many cases the meetings engaged in what Dewey (1933) called critical reflection, or Mezirow labeled perspective transformation (1991). The participants were seriously re-appraising existing beliefs and assumptions and were prepared to alter their practices in the light of these reflections.

> By involving a group of colleagues in active regular discussions of teaching styles and learning needs, it has raised questions about what we are trying to do and how best we should go about this.
>
> Implement action research in teaching and learning, we need to change to adjust our method of teaching to accommodate the need of students.

This is, incidentally, an illustration of the example of the process of engaging in these action research projects being an outcome in itself. Firstly the process of reflection leads to insights into better approaches to teaching and a greater understanding of student learning. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, by engaging in this collective reflection the participants realise the importance of reflecting on their teaching and hopefully should adopt a reflective stance in the future.

Development of a Team

There is then considerable evidence that the teams of participants did reflect together upon the observations and experiences arising from their projects. What is more, in many cases there was evidence of this reflection resulting in reconsideration of existing positions. It is clear that the sceptical view that reflection would not be compatible with Chinese culture had not transpired. It is worth examining why this apparently plausible expectation had not been upheld.

The reason advanced for reflection perhaps not being appropriate in Hong Kong was that re-consideration of existing positions and resolution of discrepancies would lead to an unacceptable loss of face. This hypothesis, though, assumes a hierarchical structure within the participant teams. It assumes that there will be an authority figure and subordinates. Traditional Chinese beliefs do stress respect for authorities (Wu, 1996). The notion of face has most commonly been invoked in terms of the need for authority figures to avoid or not be exposed to loss of face (Ting-Toomey, 1988). It implies that subordinates should avoid situations or confrontations which might make their head have to back track on a decision. There is also a tendency for those authority figures who see face as important, to adopt authoritative rather than consultative management styles to minimise the chance of any discord.

The reason that such concerns did not deter the Action Learning Project teams from engaging in reflection is that they did not adopt authority-subordinate relationships. Even though the formal positions of the participants within a team might have been radically different, their relationships within the team could be quite democratic. The teams could have participants who were Deans or

Heads of Department at one end of the spectrum and research assistants at the other. When engaged on the project, though, it seemed possible for those involved to set aside these formal differences in status, and function as a genuine team. The participants usually ranged in status from full Professor to research assistants. They seemed to be quite happy to be learning together. I remember one workshop on NUD•IST where the (full) Professor was getting a lot of help in the exercises in using the programme from his research assistant.

Many projects attributed their success to the existence among the participants of a willingness to put effort into their project and collaborate with others in a united front. This sense of ownership of some common goals led to a commitment to persevere towards the outcome.

> I think the most important factor (that makes our project so successful) is the commitment of people. Although there were problems in coordination at the beginning and technical difficulties, all of us are very committed. We are determined to complete the project. Otherwise, we could not have done the evaluation. So although there were some delays, it's because everyone of us wanted to give our best. We all put in great effort to make it work.
>
> I agree with [...] point of view. If there had not been such great commitment, it would have been difficult to complete this project. At first, we got many problems and quite often had to work overnight. Without that commitment, we just couldn't do it. Besides, the animation was very creative. I didn't expect it would be so interesting. I don't think I can make it myself.

The reason for this commitment was that they had been able to forge themselves into a coherent team. These were teams in which everyone was valued and all opinions were accepted. Criticism was acceptable if it could help enhance the project's effectiveness. A problem-solving norm was upheld. People became confident to speak out and were open-minded about taking initiatives to evaluate their work for further improvement.

> Here, the culture is, as it has been said earlier, more open. We can discuss our problems openly. We don't need to hide anything. That should be better. I have learnt how to cooperate with other people and give suggestions to one another for improvement. This is what I've gained apart from the technical side.
>
> Besides, everyone is willing to speak out. If there's a problem, it would be known. Everyone is willing to make suggestions and accept the need for changes when necessary. All of us are willing to be open. So if there is any problem that needs to be solved, it will be solved first. We are not afraid of criticising our own systems. This is also very important.

The reason they were able to develop open teams of this nature may be because of another characteristic of Chinese society. Salili (1996) has argued that Chinese culture is marked by collectivism. Traditionally the primary group has been the family but loyalty to other social groupings has been recognised. Wu (1996) argues that achievement motivation in Chinese society has a social or collective orientation whereas Western measures of achievement motivation have stressed individual achievement. The evidence of strong affiliation within the project teams may, therefore be seen as a manifestation of this traditional recognition of collective goals. Indeed it is possible to go further than this and argue that reflection itself has long had a place in Chinese culture. Lee (1996) argues that the Confucian tradition has stressed reflective thinking. He provides a quotation from Confucius himself to substantiate the point.

> While there is anything that he has not reflected on, or anything which he has reflected on which he does not apprehend, he will not intermit his labour. While there is anything which he has not discriminated, or his discrimination is not clear, he will not intermit his labour. If there be anything which he has not practised, or his practice fails in earnestness, he will not intermit his labour (The Mean, XX.20).

It is true that these admonishments were directed largely to the individual scholar, and do not deal with perspective transformation through collective discourse. It does show clearly, though, that reflective thinking is hardly an alien concept to Chinese culture. Those who have quoted Dewey (1933) to show that reflective thinking is not a new concept might recognise that it has older origins than they first thought and that the roots were planted in a different part of the world.

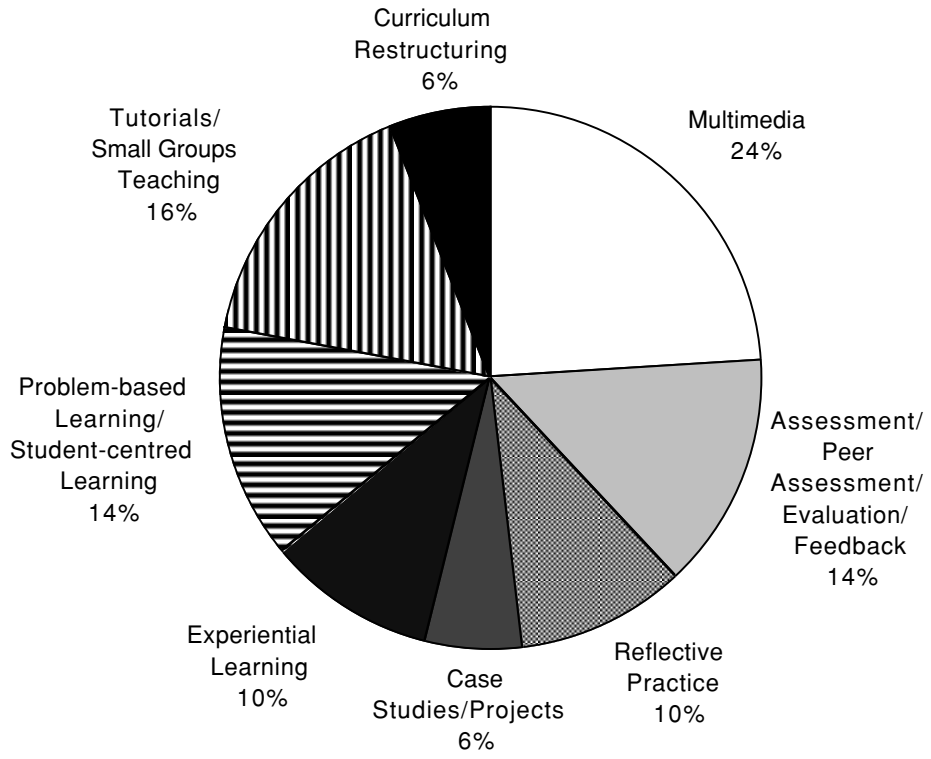
Professional Conservatism of Teachers

The Action Learning Project was funded by the University Grants Committee of Hong Kong. A large proportion of the funds received were in turn used to fund action research projects by academics into some aspect of teaching and learning in courses they taught. The method of selecting projects to fund, was the conventional approach of calling for proposals and selecting the best applications. The inter-institutional management committee, which ran the project, was not drawn from the sceptics. However, even members of the committee wondered how much of a response there would be to the call for proposals. Five of the seven institutions involved in the first round had no history of involvement in such action research projects. In spite of newness of the concept, a total of 109 applications were received for first round funding; 80 in response to an initial call, and 29 for a second supplementary one. For the second round of the project a total of 104 grant applications were received, requesting a total sum nearly six times that available.

Not only were the applicants requesting funding to introduce an innovative form of teaching, those applying for first round funding were committing themselves to a mode of educational development which, at the time, was in its infancy in higher education. There had been some initial projects in the Polytechnic University to try out the approach (Kember, & Gow, 1992; Kember, & Kelly, 1993). There had also been a small number of projects at City University, mostly within one department (Kember, & Kelly, 1993). In the rest of the world there had been a small number of initiatives (e.g. Zuber-Skerrit, 1992; Weeks, & Scott, 1992) but other methods of educational development still predominated.

The type of initiatives put forward in the proposals and carried out in the projects were very diverse. To give some idea of the range of initiatives the figure below is an attempt to classify the projects carried out in the first round by the type of educational change attempted.

Figure 1: Types of projects in round 1



The level of teachers willing to write proposals for innovative teaching projects and the number involved in successful projects suggests that Hong Kong academics are far from conservative in their attitude to teaching. The diversity of the innovations attempted shows a rich vein of imaginative thinking about how to transform student learning for the better.

Resistance of Students

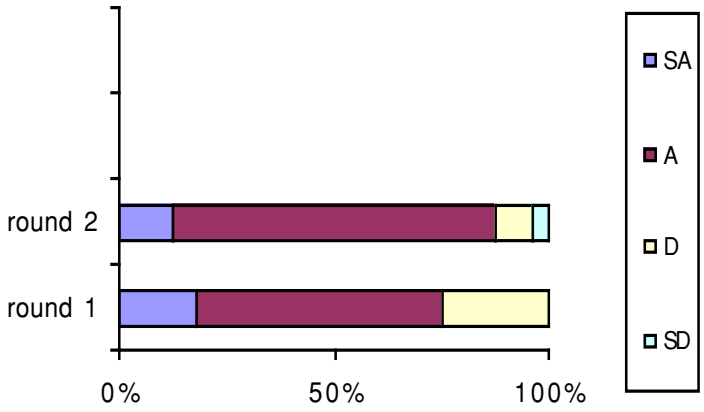
If there was any reluctance to utilise innovative forms of teaching, there would be two most likely explanations. The first of these would be that the teachers held teacher-centred content-oriented beliefs about teaching (Kember, 1997). Those holding such beliefs tend to adhere to didactic forms of teaching simply because other forms are incompatible with their belief of what teaching is. Even when a class is designated as a tutorial, those with such beliefs often talk for most of the session (Kember, 1997).

The other likely cause for reluctance to engage in non-didactic forms of teaching is a perception that students will resist or show displeasure if any alternative is tried. Conservatism and negative reactions from students to educational innovation is a common item of anecdotal wisdom. It has perhaps been particularly prevalent with respect to Asian students particularly if the innovation involves a shift from didactic teaching to more interactive forms (Gow, Kember, & Sivan, 1992).

If this were a real phenomenon it would have a marked effect on the numbers of teachers willing to try anything innovative. Those who did, would experience negative reactions which might cause then to abandon the innovation, and would almost certainly deter them from other experiments with their teaching. Most would, no doubt, relate these experiences to their colleagues so they in turn would be deterred from trying anything different.

The results from the two surveys are pertinent to determining whether student resistance is a significant phenomenon and hence a real blockage to innovation. The questionnaire to participants asked them to agree or disagree with statements that they had received support from their departmental head, colleagues and students in participating in the project. The results from the answers about students in the two rounds are shown below.

Figure 2: Level of support from students



Combining the agree and strongly agree responses results in very high levels of agreement that the students did support the projects in the two rounds. This was higher than that from either the department heads or departmental colleagues. Such high levels of support are hardly indicative of student resistance. The written comments substantiate this point by showing that the Asian students, who are often described as passive, are perfectly able to participate actively if the teaching encourages active learning.

> The PBL approach engaged students far more actively and sustained their involvement far more than any other courses within the Department.
>
> - students more active in learning
>
> - students contribute more in discussion
>
> The project was really quite successful in giving students an alternative learning experience.

The large majority of participants felt that students supported their initiatives rather than resisting them. Comments saying that students preferred more active participation strongly out-weighed the remainder, which were limited to a small number of students.

> Some prefer the traditional one [teaching method] more ... For example, some say that I am conservative in thinking, so I like the traditional one.

The participants were also pleased with the impact of the projects on the students' attitudes towards teaching and learning and teacher / student relationships.

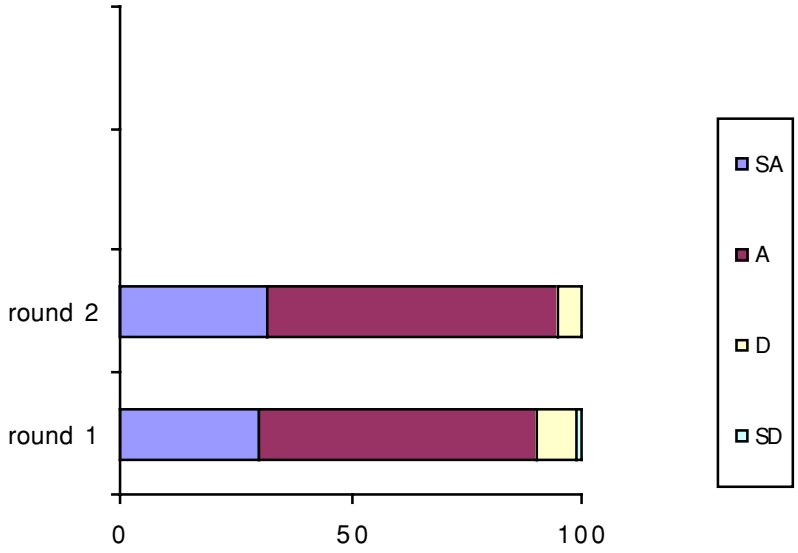
> As far as learning is concerned, I feel that students are gaining their attendance and participation is good, skills are developing, and their performance is improving.
>
> One of the classes invited me to be in their class photo, it did not happen before, and I was delighted.

The results of the survey show clearly that the attitude that students resist academic innovation is a myth which needs debunking. If Asian students are truly more conservative, their Western counterparts must positively relish innovation.

Yet further evidence of this contention comes from the evaluations of the projects. Virtually all of the participants judged their projects to be successful. Evidence for successful outcomes comes from the evaluations of the individual projects. All of these incorporated feedback from students through techniques such as questionnaires, interviews and classroom observation.

It is obviously impossible to succinctly summarise the evidence from the individual evaluation of 90 projects. Perhaps the most relevant statistic is the percentage of the participants who felt that this feedback provided evidence that their project was successful (see Figure 3). Obviously the large majority of the very large number of students involved in these innovative projects expressed positive reactions to them rather than resistance.

Figure 3: Percentage of participants who thought their project was successful



Need for Adaptation

A possible explanation for the widespread perception of the conservative nature of Asian students lies in the need to allow them to adapt to new forms of teaching and learning. In a number of the Action Learning Project initiatives, students initially found the new course formats taxing, but eventually came to appreciate them.

It should be appreciated that just about all of the students would have passed through the Hong Kong school system and would therefore have a long history of exposure to didactic forms of teaching. They would have been used to a system geared to learning material for frequent external examinations which have a major impact upon their future in a system which is still highly selective. Such exposure to this didactic teaching and learning environment inevitably leaves its mark. It results in new cohorts of students with beliefs that the normal way of teaching is transmissive and they conceive of learning as a passive activity in which their aim is to absorb as much as possible for the examinations. They would also see both knowledge, and what had to be learnt, as something which was defined by the curriculum, set by the education department, and then passed on by their teacher.

It is not easy to change any long established beliefs or practices, and indeed it can be quite a traumatic experience if the activity is a central one. The process of learning and teaching is obviously pivotal to students so it is only to be expected that initial experiences of new approaches to teaching could take some getting used to. It is, therefore, important for teaching innovations to incorporate measures to help students adjust and to allow time for them to do so.

An example comes from a project which focussed upon students reflecting upon their own experience through reflective writing and small group discussion (Kember et al, 2001, ch. 10). The students initially found the approach difficult as it was expected that much of the content would come from the students' own experience of working in the field. Having to take greater responsibility for their own learning, was a quantum leap for many of the students. They also found reflective writing difficult as personal reflection is a very different form of writing to normal academic essays in which the content is drawn from external sources.

> In the past I was quite inflexible in my method of study. I only revised what the teachers said was important. Now I have to read books and find (relevant) material for myself. Of course they are different ... very different, so I am not able to cope with this (learning approach). ... I could not decide what was right or wrong, the feeling was so insecure. , Through journal writing and sharing in the learning process, I found that writing papers is very difficult. Maybe I am still not familiar with the learning approach in tertiary education.

The above quotation was taken from an interview in the early stages of the course. By the end of the course most of the students had not only overcome these initial difficulties but had come to see the value of learning from the experiences of themselves and their fellow students, as shown by the typical quotation below.

> When we discussed it further, some of them even agreed with me, so there was an integration of our thoughts ... Small group discussion helped me a lot. The other students are from different hospitals, different clinical units. Sometimes, they talked about their experiences which I have never heard before.

Those who formed the impression that Asian students resist innovation may not have allowed the students time to adapt. They also might not have taken steps to ease the transition process. In the project used as an example, the teachers provided a structured introduction to reflective writing and students making the transition received support from tutors and fellow students (Kember et al, 2001, ch. 10). Most people find that change of any sort can be difficult to adapt to, so when new forms of teaching are introduced it is important to address the issue of implementing the change and allow the students time to make the transition.

It seems possible to generalise this explanation for perceptions of resistance to innovation to a wider context. Most people find it difficult to adapt from well-established practices and beliefs. It is common for any form of major change to meet initial resistance. Successful integration of an innovation requires strategies to deal with the initial resistance.

Fine Tuning

An additional factor in recognising the students' need for adaptation to an innovation, is that the innovation itself will inevitably need some adaptation or fine-tuning. Action research recognises that the first time something new is tried, everything will not be perfect, however careful the planning. The observation and reflection phases of the action research cycle are for the participants to determine what might be improved, and how to accomplish this. The next cycle can then incorporate the necessary modifications.

Evidence of this happening is found in many of the projects' final reports (Kember, Lam, Yan, Yum, & Liu, 1997) and in the interviews with the project teams. It was clear that the teams recognised the importance of reflecting upon their observations and evaluation data, and used it to re-plan for the next cycle.

> You know that we have to redesign the cycle as the research goes along. That is the characteristic of action learning. It is required to redesign and make amendment to the action. When you have new data and you need to decide how to use the data. These are important and we need to discuss it together.

In some cases the observations revealed that quite radical departures for the original design would be needed.

> In our forum, we found that the students had great anxiety. This really surprised us. We found out about their responses to the fieldwork. They become sick and cannot sleep.

Whether the iterations were major or minor, the fact that they were necessary adds confirmation to recognising the need for students to adapt to the changes. If the innovation itself needs adaptation it is hardly surprising that those involved need time to adjust to it.

System of Action Research as a Quality Enhancement Mechanism

At the time of the first ventures into action research as a quality enhancement mechanism for teaching and learning in higher education, it was a mechanism which was not firmly established anywhere. The Action Learning Project has shown that it works, and indeed works very well. Detailed evidence is given in Kember (2000). This book also argues that it is a highly cost-effective form of quality enhancement, and institutions might well get better quality returns on committed resources if there was a degree of shift from quality control schemes towards encouraging action research initiatives.

The Action Learning Project has been one of the world's largest initiatives in quality enhancement through action research. Most of the universities in Hong Kong have also established schemes for funding educational development projects. These do not have an explicit action research underpinning, but do facilitate innovation and initiatives in teaching by front-line teachers. The Hong Kong university sector is, therefore, one of very few in the world where the level of activity in quality bottom-up enhancement of university teaching approaches that of top-down quality assurance.

At the time of writing, the Action Learning Project is drawing to a close. No new projects have been funded since the set of 40 projects funded under the second phase, were awarded grants in mid-1997. The venture has achieved its goals of showing that action research is an appropriate quality enhancement mechanism. It has determined how best to establish an appropriate infrastructure for initiating and supporting projects, and ensuring that findings are disseminated. Having achieved these targets it was no longer appropriate to apply for further funding from a fund meant to support new initiatives.

For project-type initiatives to continue to be a feature of the Hong Kong university education system, a supporting infrastructure needs to be provided in an alternative form. At the present time, educational development projects operate within each of the institutions under various banners and in various guises. Funding comes either from the UGC, for some large projects, or from internal funds.

There are three reservations about the current situation. None of the schemes has an explicit action research framework. Many tend to concentrate upon funding the development of computer-based teaching packages. As such, the participants may not reflect upon their practice and acquire the qualities and outcomes discussed in the following chapter.

Secondly the more fragmented nature of the schemes means that the cross-institutional perspective which emerged is no longer apparent. Action Learning Project participants in similar discipline areas, or in related projects, found it valuable to cross-fertilise their ideas with colleagues in other institutions. Currently, dissemination activities may be more restricted and normally within one institution. This has tended to curtail the development of the inter-institutional dialogue, which was found to be one of the most valuable features of the Action Learning Project (Kember, 2000).

The final concern is that this project-based approach to teaching quality enhancement is not necessarily guaranteed on-going status. Just about all of the current activity is funded through teaching development grants from the UGC, either directly, or by institutions using part of the funding from this source to operate their internal schemes. If the teaching development grants are no longer awarded, or significantly curtailed, it is difficult to see project-type activities continuing.

Applicability to Other Sectors

In the time since the initial hesitant exploration of action research in the higher education sector in Hong Kong, attitudes have changed markedly. Many were hesitant about action research, and there were a number of reasons for them to be so. Now there can be no valid grounds for doubting its effectiveness as a mechanism for teaching quality enhancement in higher education.

It is perhaps time to see whether the same mechanism might be beneficial in other educational sectors. The Education Commission is currently reviewing education in Hong Kong and has produced a very adventurous blueprint for reform known as 'Learning for Life' (Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Education Commission, 1999) and a set of reform proposals based upon these (Education Commission, 2000). Looking back over the previous Education Commission Reports though, it is possible to find many fine sounding proposals. The speed of implementation of these proposals can only be described as slow, and the fact that the same issues keep recurring shows that many proposed reforms are not effectively implemented at all.

The top-down approach to change of the Education Department has clearly not been a dynamic force for innovation and reform. Perhaps it is time to learn from the university sector and shift towards a bottom-up style of implementing innovation through action research. Those such as Li et al (1999) may feel that school teachers would be less able to participate in action research projects than their university counterparts, but then there were sceptics who thought Hong Kong academics would not take to action research. They were wrong!

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