

Using Action Research to develop new strategic directions in a not for profit learning organisation

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Abstract

This paper describes the use of action research to develop new strategic directions for a pan-Canadian educational standards agency. As a learning organization, Curriculum Services Canada has a history of partnering with university researchers to review and improve its service to the education community. Our research process included interviewing staff and stakeholders, synthesizing their views, and providing recommendations to enable the organization to revitalize and move forward as a team. We used action research in this study to engage all staff in a reflective and dynamic decision-making process. Our study supports action research as a means to facilitate organizational learning and change in a business setting.

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Introduction

In this paper we describe how two researchers from Nipissing University's International Institute on Teaching and Learning (NUIITL) assisted Curriculum Services Canada (CSC) in its quest to evaluate, maintain, and improve services to public and private sector education clients. CSC describes itself as:

the Pan-Canadian standards agency for quality assurance in learning products and programs. We are an incorporated, not-for-profit organization that provides services including the development, implementation, evaluation, and accreditation of teaching and learning resources, and the delivery of professional learning opportunities online, using multimedia and social networking. Our organization works closely with governments, NGOs, industry, and agencies across Canada and internationally on initiatives related to learning and learner success at all ages and stages of life. CSC supports educators and community groups in taking a leadership role in their boards, schools, classrooms, organizations, and communities. (Curriculum Services Canada 2012)

CSC envisions itself as a learning organization, which has been described by Giesecke and McNeil (2004) as:

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an organization skilled at creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge and at modifying its behavior to reflect new knowledge and insights... In a learning organization, managers and staff encourage work-related learning, the exchange of information between employees to create new ideas and knowledge, and continuous improvement... In a learning organization, people are appreciated for their skills, values, and work. Staff opinions are sought and are treated with respect. (p. 55)

CSC had reached a critical point in its practice, which required new direction; had chosen and implemented new directions; and was now intent on monitoring and evaluating these new directions for the purpose of ongoing confirmation and modification. We used an action research methodology (AR) as a tool to review CSC's existing strategic directions, recommend objectives for the coming year, and provide input on CSC's overall goals for the next five years.

In the 1940's, Kurt Lewin described action research as a process of self-study, "proceeding in a spiral of steps, each of which is composed of planning, action, and the evaluation of the result of action" (Kemmis & McTaggart 1990, p. 8). Many approaches to action research have been developed over the years since (Corey 1953; Stenhouse 1975; McNiff, Lomax & Whitehead 1996; Stringer, 1999; Delong, Black & Wideman 2005; Sagor 2010), each of which involves elements of planning, action, reflection and revision (Halsall & Hossack 1996). This study was conducted within the context of McNiff's (2000) cycle of action research, which is described below.

Jointly, the two Nipissing University faculty members who conducted the review and the Executive Director of CSC, decided to collaborate in writing this paper in a manner consistent with the notion of action research, to report not just on the results of the review but also on how those results were used by CSC to continue its work on strategic directions and

goals. We begin by describing the methodology of the study and contextualizing it in the literature on organizational change.

Methodology

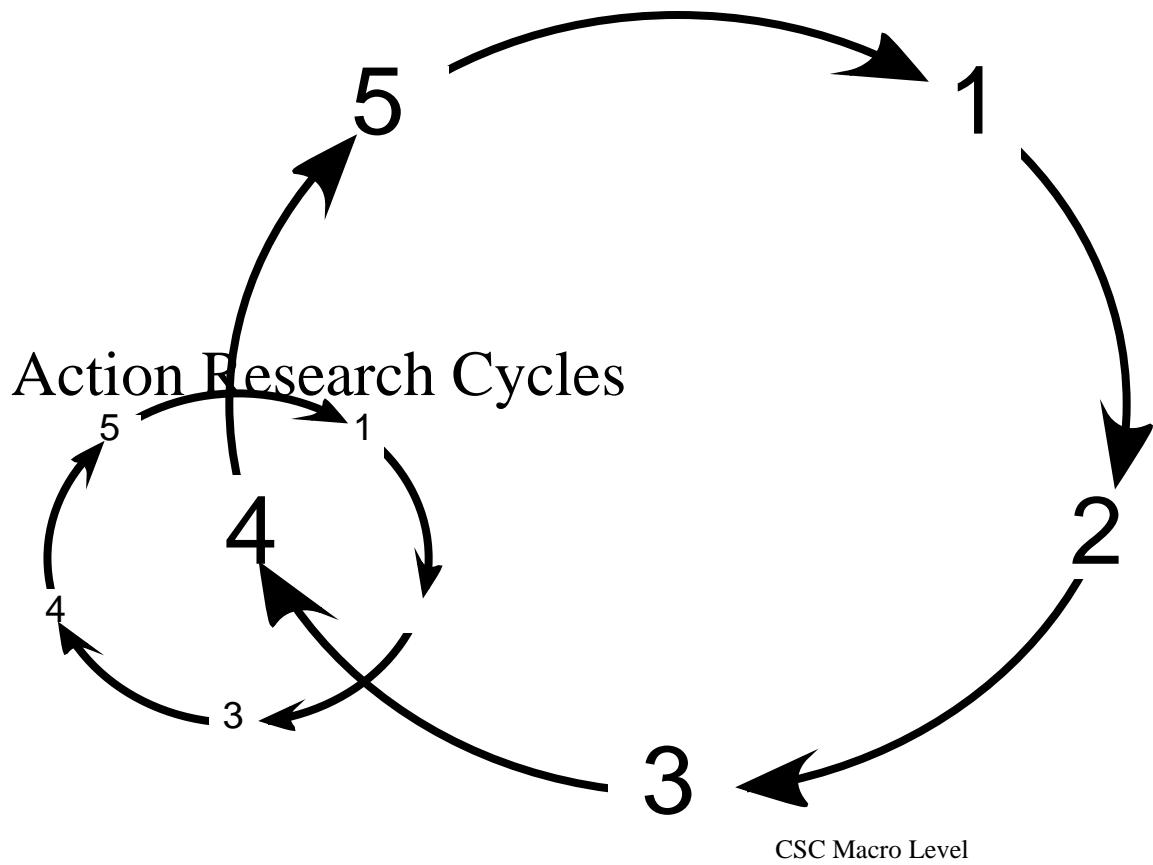
This study was undertaken with CSC in the fall of 2009 and winter of 2010, at the invitation of Amy Coupal, Executive Director of CSC. Ron Wideman and Carmen Shields worked with CSC staff and stakeholders to address three main areas for the coming year: maintaining what is in place at the same time as moving forward with new initiatives; exploring new service offerings for new and existing clients; and gathering ideas for expanding CSC's client base beyond the K to 12 education community.

The review also addressed the following areas in terms of Strategic Directions for 2009–2014: how to leverage expertise and reputation for quality and safety of curriculum-related information to include potential new areas of business in a time of new economic reality; and how to expand partnerships and create new markets for national and international development and delivery of CSC products and services.

We chose action research (AR) as our methodology to support inclusion of all the voices of employees at CSC, as well as other stakeholders, in the organization's quest for improving or changing current practice. We have constructed the diagram below to illustrate how we have used the five statements that formulate McNiff's version of the AR cycle to create the conceptual framework for the macro and micro levels of the study. The statements are:

1. The organization has reached a critical point in practice;
2. It is evident that new direction is needed;
3. Avenues for new direction are chosen;
4. Ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the new direction(s) takes place;
5. Further change in direction may occur in light of these evaluations.

The numbers 1 to 5 in the diagram below represents these five statements.



CSC Micro Level

At the macro level, CSC had already completed phases one through three of McNiff's action research cycle independently and the researchers became engaged at phase four. At the micro level, however, the researchers returned to phase one and engaged staff and stakeholders in interviews that included all five points of McNiff's action research cycle. Once the researchers' had completed their work and reported back to the organization, CSC continued on to phase five, furthering its own macro cycle. The data gathered by the researchers formed a "living self-appraisal" (Whitehead 1993) that helped broaden and deepen the goals and strategies that CSC had set for the next five years.

As researchers, our first task was to understand the critical points that had been reached in the CSC organization and the need for new directions. In our initial meeting in September 2009, Amy, the Executive Director, acquainted us with issues and perspectives that staff had been grappling with over recent months. Following Research Ethics Board approval from Nipissing University, Amy organized interviews for Carmen and Ron with the 13 members of the CSC staff and stakeholders. The interviews were conducted in November 2009. Each interview was approximately fifty minutes in length. Each participant read and signed a consent letter and names of participants were not used in the report.

Conducting individual interviews was a critical factor in assuring that each voice within the organization was heard. Following analysis of the interview data, a research report was prepared and disseminated to CSC management and staff. Then, CSC used the report and its skills in team learning and building shared vision (Senge 1990) to inform decision-making for its new five-year plan.

Results of the Review as Reflected in the Research Report

In order to think about, understand, and present the data, Carmen and Ron began with a metaphor that emerged from our conversational interviews. A metaphor is a description that

is not literally applicable to a process or concept, but can be used to clarify thinking about that concept or description. Metaphors are often used in qualitative research as a means of considering data (Clandenin & Connelly 2000). Consistent with this notion and in order to focus on the second and third phases of the AR cycle in this study, we conceived of our task as one of centering in on the targets noted by CSC, much like a sharpshooter honing in on a bull's eye. While the short term goals and strategic directions for the next five years comprise the overall target for CSC, we felt that a process of focusing on the increasingly smaller circles of the target and the bull's eye itself was key for helping CSC choose avenues to pursue more specifically in the short and long term. It was with these concepts in mind that we sifted and sorted the interview data that comprised our field text.

The overall conclusion was that CSC needed to centre itself as an organization on certain core activities and to target specific areas for longer-term growth rather than trying to move forward on a broad front all at once. The data pointed to the need for CSC to move from the broadly stated goals and long-term strategies for the company to more precise directions that are outcome-based and target-specific. CSC is increasingly aware that in these economic times, the organization must maintain core services while also maintaining high quality outcomes for all projects if it is to remain viable in a world where the 'knowledge economy' is only increasing in significance (Senge 2006). While participants in this study provided many possible avenues to consider in this regard, three main target areas were stated: 1) targeting one area of the broader education market beyond Kindergarten to Grade 12 (K-12); 2) focusing on consultation and knowledge brokerage in regard to quality assurance, digital learning or staff development; and 3) staying on the cutting edge of development in educational technology by forming alliances with appropriate partners to create a national think tank. In addition, two main categories emerged that would be central if the above directions were chosen going forward: 1) the need to place relationships at the forefront of decision-making; and 2) the need to restructure CSC to allocate resources to chosen targets.

According to our interviews with stakeholders, CSC has an excellent reputation in quality assurance, educational curriculum resources, professional learning and technology in the K to

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12 arenas. Stakeholders encouraged CSC to use the organization's reputation when scouting for new business in the broader education context. The idea was to grow from a consulting service to becoming the creative basis for think tanks of partner organizations working on educational improvement in the broadest sense. To do this, CSC was advised to re-consider all aspects of the business including perhaps the name of the company and appropriateness of board members and Honorary Patrons and to revise the structure of the company so that it can be both responsive and proactive.

Further, it was recognized by staff and stakeholders that CSC has a great deal of energy, knowledge, and expertise to direct at targets of its choice. Its management team is active and respected. Staff members are dedicated and hard working. Just as importantly, innovation, synergy, and positive working relationships are valued within the organization and there is an effort to include a broad perspective in decision-making rather than to operate in a top-down manner. Team learning and shared vision, key characteristics of a learning organization (Senge 2006; Mason 2012), are also evidenced by the methodology itself in which the Executive Director enabled all voices to be heard. The function of the Nipissing researchers as academics, therefore, was to conduct the interviews and mirror for the organization the ideas and priorities that emerged from employees and stakeholders themselves.

These results are consistent with Hargreaves' (2003) description of three dimensions important to the knowledge society, which arguably are also crucial for companies such as CSC to consider in their plans to serve present and future clients. The dimensions are: 1) an expanded technical sphere; 2) complex ways of processing and circulating knowledge and information in a service-based economy; and 3) basic changes in how corporate organizations function so that "they enhance continuous innovation in products and services by creating systems, teams and cultures that maximize opportunities for mutual, ongoing and spontaneous learning" (p. 17).

Results from Engaging in the Research

The action research process had an immediate and ongoing impact on the staff, culture, and focus of CSC. As early as staff receiving the interview questions prior to the interviews, the involvement of Nipissing researchers stimulated questions and discussions among the staff. Staff began sharing ideas and perspectives on the interview questions and on their work. In a self-described learning organization (Senge 2006; Mason 2012), such conversations are both the norm and encouraged. Having external researchers, however, truly supported the generation of worthwhile insights and a means to harness and leverage them through monthly staff and department head meetings. Most notably, the process led to questions on identity—What is CSC? How do we bring value? Where are we going?

As Fullan (2005) notes, "Sustainability is the capacity of a system to engage in the complexities of continuous improvement consistent with the deep values of human purpose" (p. ix). The shared team goal of working with Nipissing researchers was to gain valuable feedback and insight from a third party who could provide a mirror of the current state, contribute insights on the potential of the organization and serve as a catalyst for change to help propel it forward. This contribution was made most noticeably during the reporting and engagement phase after the research was conducted. CSC's goal for the report was to obtain a "living document" (Whitehead 1993), one that could contribute to the evolution of the organization, not just gather dust on a shelf. To ensure that this contribution would occur, the researchers agreed to facilitate a session with the whole CSC staff to share the results and help stimulate deeper dialogue and reflection. This inspired further dialogue and action in staff and department head meetings to initiate short and long-term efforts to seize the identified opportunities and close highlighted gaps.

The report had an impact on the CSC Board of Directors as well. They identified key follow up tasks to pursue based on the recommendations of the report. Each item was reviewed, researched and returned to the board for a final decision on how to proceed. Not all report recommendations were followed and many were modified based on subsequent investigation

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and reflection, but the report served a powerful purpose in stimulating reflection, dialogue and action. By undertaking this process, the board not only refined its sense of what the organization is and where it is going but also made clear decisions on what it is not, leading to greater clarity and focus.

The most notable impact on CSC can be found in the operational plan created for the fiscal year that began shortly after the report was presented. The report, staff presentation, board investigations and all associated dialogues informed the identification of four themes that became the framework for the annual operational plan. They were: clarify, consolidate, collaborate, and communicate. These themes reflected the staff and board's distillation of the key recommendations of the study. All operational goals and activities within the plan fell under one of those themes.

Over the course of the next year, all of the operational activities were governed by these four themes and the staff team worked regularly to refine their approach as new circumstances arose. Each staff meeting included a standing item entitled, 'Keeping the Operational Plan Alive'. Each time, a different member of the management team facilitated an activity designed to stimulate dialogue, reflection and new action to propel the plan forward. By the end of the year, all of the goals and activities that fell under the 'clarify, consolidate and collaborate' themes were fulfilled as well as all internal communication goals. The external communication goals and activities had expanded so much over the year that it inspired the creation of a new communications specialist position for the organization to pursue those activities on an ongoing basis.

As a learning organization, the importance of reflection and informal action research has always been emphasized and supported at CSC; however, there is only so much a team can accomplish within itself. By working with the Nipissing University researchers in a formal AR process, the team was able to identify specific questions that required further investigation, draw on the collective wisdom of the group, benefit from insights provided by external stakeholders, and engage with third party insights and recommendations. This result

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allowed the team to go much further in a shorter period of time than would have been possible on its own. It was critical that certain success factors be in place to support such an optimal outcome including: leadership buy-in at board and management levels; a staff culture that celebrates reflection and differences of opinion; and the creation of an action research process by philosophically aligned researchers designed to initiate reflection and change. The buy-in and engagement of team members not only supported an effective action research project but set the stage for meaningful, long-term impact and organizational change.

Conclusion

In this paper we have described how the authors worked together to enable CSC to move forward with its strategic plan for the next five years. The action research process proved to be effective in engaging management and staff in building a shared vision through team learning. Looking back on this project, several aspects stand out for the three of us. Firstly, the partnership among the three authors proved to be fruitful, so much so that we three came together again to engage in the writing of this paper.

Secondly, in the field of Education where Carmen and Ron usually conduct their research, teachers and principals often think of AR as a means of classroom or school improvement; however, in this instance, we found it also to be a productive tool to offer in a business setting as a means to support organizational evolution and change. This conclusion reminds us that some of the early origins of action research, emanating from the work of Kurt Lewin, are within the business sector (Masters 1995), and that there is continuing potential for such work in this context. From the point of view of CSC's aspirations as a learning organization, the voices of the management team, staff and stakeholders were heard by researchers who, as outsiders, brought fresh eyes to the study process.

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Thirdly, our experience supports McNiff's (2000) assertion that the investigative and inclusive nature of AR can enable an organization to crystallize understanding and agreement within itself for the purpose of setting priorities for further action. Because of the dynamic nature of the in-house team at CSC, and the passion that each participant brought to the interview process and the study results, insights were shared in a community of learners which, consistent with McNiff's model of AR, we are convinced will result in an ongoing cycle of improvement over time.

Fourthly, the pre-existing learning organization culture within CSC provided fertile ground for the use of action research as a means of further organizational growth. The researchers felt that active listening on the part of all concerned was central to the study being well received. By implication, action research would be more difficult to use as a review strategy in a more top-down organization.

Fifthly, an interesting result was that the researchers discovered that there are two ways of thinking about McNiff's model—the macro level and the micro level of the AR cycle, as noted in the methodology section above. It is our belief that for a full and complete review, each step in the AR cycle must be re-addressed during the review stage. As external researchers, if we had begun the micro level of the study at Stage 3, we would have missed a great deal of information. Thus, we may have unearthed a new dimension to McNiff's model.

Lastly, through this project we see AR as a means of investigation in organizations that wish to grow and develop by including all the voices they have available to reach for new goals and opportunities. This insight has implications for leadership and management, for if individuals are not heard, they cannot fully visualize their potential contribution to the organization. We reflect on Senge's (2006) term "system citizenship" which he describes in these words:

start with seeing systems that we have shaped and which in turn shape
us...being stuck in a system that is not working invariably leads to feeling

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frustrated and trapped—until we see the larger patterns and our own part in creating these patterns. Once we do, new alternatives become evident. There are two fundamental aspects to seeing systems: seeing patterns of interdependency and seeing into the future (p. 343).

In this project, we believe both these aspects have been revealed and CSC is all the stronger for it.

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