

Action Learning and Critical Thinking

A Synthesis of Two Models

Research Concept

- There is an urgent need to improve the critical thinking capability and ethical standards of our business leaders and business school students.
 - Recent scholarship: De Dea Roglio & Light
 - New York Times & Wall Street Journal
- Examples: B.P., Enron, Madoff, Goldman Sachs, and the Space Shuttles Challenger and Columbia disasters.
- A synthesis of two models may have value in addressing this issue.

Marquardt Model of Action Learning

- Firm basis in adult learning, sensemaking, and reflective practice theory.
- Six components
 - Problem or challenge
 - A group
 - Power to act
 - Commitment to learn
 - A process
 - Reflection and questions
 - A coach

Paul and Elder on Critical Thinking

Critical Thinking Defined: “Critical thinking is that mode of thinking – about any subject, content or problem – in which the thinker improves the quality of his or her thinking by skillfully taking charge of the structures inherent in thinking and imposing intellectual standards upon them.”

Critical Thinker Defined: “Critical thinkers are persons who consistently attempt to live rationally, fairmindedly and self-reflectively.”

Paul and Elder Model of Critical Thinking

The Elements of Thought

- Purpose of Thinking
- Question at Issue
- Information
- Interpretation & Inference
- Concepts
- Assumptions
- Implications & Consequences
- Point of View

Universal Intellectual Standards

- Clarity
- Accuracy
- Precision
- Relevance
- Depth
- Breadth
- Logic
- Significance
- Fairness

Note: There are many additional intellectual standards; those above are the ones that Paul and Elder have identified as the “essential” standards.

Conceptual Framework

Critical Thinking (Paul & Elder)

Elements of Thought

- Purpose
- Question at issue/Problem
- Information
- Interpretation/Inference
- Concepts
- Assumptions
- Implications/Consequences
- Point of View

Intellectual Standards

- Clarity
- Accuracy
- Precision
- Relevance
- Breadth
- Significance
- Depth
- Logic
- Fairness

Action Learning (Marquardt)

Components

- Problem/Challenge
- A Group
- Commitment to Learn
- Power to Act
- A Process (Questions/Reflection)
- A Coach

Theories Supporting Action Learning and Critical Thinking

Reflective Practitioner (Schön)

Basic Concepts

- Knowing in Action
- Reflection in Action
- Reflection on Action

Sensemaking (Weick)

Properties of Sensemaking

- Retrospective
- Social
- Ongoing
- Enactive of Sensible Environments
- Focused on Extracted Cues
- Driven by Plausibility vs Accuracy
- Grounded in Identity Construction

Adult Learning Theory (Merriam & Caffarella)

Theories

- Constructivist
- Behaviorist
- Humanist
- Social Learning
- Cognitivist

[Red = Link to Action Learning]

Questioning/Reflection: Approaches Compared

Current Action Learning Approach

- Questioning to bring fresh insights into what is not yet known.
- Reflection involves recalling, thinking about, pulling apart, making sense, trying to understand.
- Asking good questions which make people think, while making them feel challenged, not criticized.
- Questions are aimed at stimulating deeper understanding and thought, they are not only a quest for solutions, but are an opportunity to explore.
- The questioning and reflection processes enable set members to explore what they do not know, as well as what they do know.

Structured Critical Thinking Approach

- Fosters an awareness of “ego-centric thinking.”
- Questions are aimed at improving the quality and depth of thinking.
- The Socratic method of questioning is systematic, disciplined and deep, focusing on foundational concepts, principles, theories, issues or problems.
- Questioning that focuses on the elements of thought and intellectual standards provide a substantive framework that ensures depth, breadth, and quality of thought.
- The intellectual standard of “fairness” ensures that ethical considerations are included in problem/issue resolution.

Intellectual Traits

- Intellectual Humility
- Intellectual Perseverance
- Intellectual Autonomy
- Intellectual Integrity
- Confidence in Reasoning
- Intellectual Courage
- Intellectual Empathy
- Fair-mindedness
- Open-mindedness

Questions for Discussion

First – Would the introduction of a structured critical thinking process, such as Paul and Elder’s model, into the question and reflection component of Marquardt’s Action Learning Model have the potential to enrich set members’ critical thinking abilities to an even greater degree while encouraging them to consider the ethical consequences of their actions?

Second – If such a potential exists, what would be the most effective way of introducing the structured critical thinking process into that component of the model?