

Action Inquiry
from a
Whole Person Learning Perspective

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Introduction

Many people are aware that all is not well in education as it exists at the moment and that much more than ‘tinkering’ at the edges is needed in order to see ahead clearly. One way forward is to re-examine the whole concept of how we approach the place of the individual in their own learning – whether that be in school, universities or the business and corporate world. Having education ‘given’ to us, like a dose of medicine is no longer enough in a time of such change and turbulence in our society.

A person needs to be involved in their own education, their own learning and their own development; not simply via their academic/intellectual capacities but in a way that involves their whole being. This is the essence of *whole person learning* (WPL). There is a growing awareness that, challenging and uncompromising though it might be, this approach is the key to preparing ourselves for a world of increasing complexity. Whole Person Learning can also be thought of as a form of inquiry based learning: it sets out to empower the learner to inquire into their own place in the scheme of things and not simply the content under study. It is this holistic dimension of whole person learning that includes and goes beyond other forms of inquiry based learning (IBL)

WPL has developed out of other approaches including participative, experiential and peer learning. All these forms of learning – often put together under the term *action inquiry* – began back with Kurt Lewin’s attempts soon after the Second World War to involve learners much more in their learning. The key differential between these forms of IBL/AI is the level of engagement of the participants in the event in which they are involved.

IBL and AI (Action Inquiry) are terms that are often used interchangeably and each distinguishes between action, learning, reviewing and planning. However, they do balance these elements in different ways: the level of *engagement*, the number of areas over which participants have *influence*, and the degree of collaborative decision-making all determine the point on the spectrum of IBL/AI (see figure 1 below) at which the event is operating.

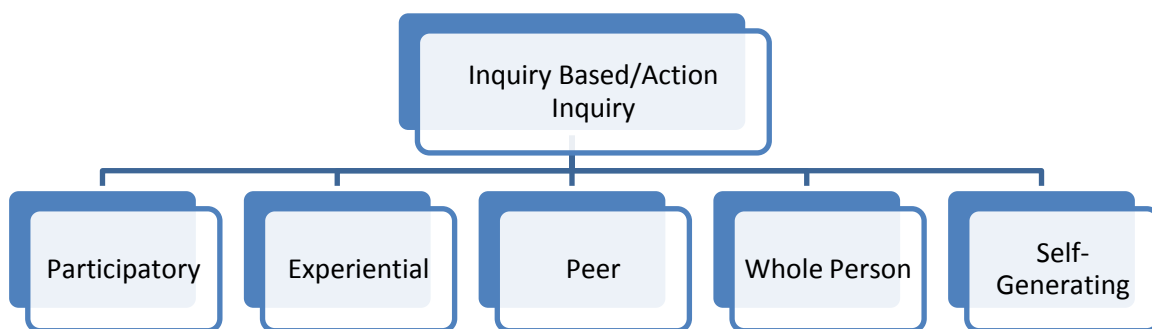


Figure 1: Spectrum of Inquiry Approaches

A further key distinguishing feature is the role of the facilitator – and it is facilitator rather than ‘trainer’. The further along the spectrum we travel, the more the facilitator hands over the process to the participants. The most radical stance is that of the *self-generating culture* where every person has the freedom to examine the norms of the group/community – both explicit and implicit, the

power to challenge the decisions being taken, as well as an equal opportunity to be heard and influence the community. When more of these are in place there is the possibility that we might even be able to sustain our planet.

A WPL facilitator aims to be open, transparent and empowering of the group to make collaborative decisions. In this document, therefore, IBL and AI are used interchangeably for our purposes because the underlying approach is WPL. Anyone interested in the literature needs to read carefully to discover the stance of the author to the level of engagement of participants.

In this document we are exploring inquiry based learning through a whole person approach. In such an approach, group members take as much responsibility as is possible and feasible for all aspects of their learning given the time, the topic and the motivation for them coming together to learn. There would, indeed, be a great incongruity in someone committed to WPL offering an invitation to a group to work in such a collaborative fashion only for them to then determine unilaterally on behalf of the group the limits of the members' participation and the degree of influence they can have on the input into their own learning.

As part of this exploration of inquiry based learning from a whole person perspective the manual explores:

- Inquiry based learning;
- The inquiry cycle and inquiry outcomes;
- The power of transforming problems into questions; finding my/our questions;
- Self-managed learning;
- Whole person learning;
- The question of development
- Working for a change;
- Working from the inside out;
- Learning and the principles of learning.

All of these themes are approached from a WPL perspective. In addition, the human relations skills that are likely to develop through being involved in whole person learning and inquiry based learning are described and examples are given of how IBL can operate within work and individual settings.

Deep Culture Change

Such forms of learning are a way of bringing about change at work with others – usually others involved in similar areas of activity or from the same workplace. The first step in enabling change is recognising that:

- We are going to have to move from seeing change as a series of events to recognising it as a continuous process;

- We have to develop attitudes to change that see it as something to engage with and not a series of 'problems' to 'solve';
- The earlier we can identify the potential areas of influence we can exercise upon a change process the more impact we are likely to have;
- The only way we can get the change to work on the scale that is needed is to work with the *willing* – so the first task is to work out who is *with* us – or rather who is with *you* in your part of the world.

One of the most common ways to bring about change is to change the structures and those don't change much of anything on the scale that is needed; it is an approach that belongs *to another age* and another time. We are talking *about deep culture change* – not a change of behaviour, or a change of mind, but a change to the way we appreciate what is going on. This will mean people being told less and being expected to work out more. To get more from people they need to realise that we are in a new phase – a new paradigm of understanding – and *we have to spell out what that means to us* before we can ask anyone else to take it on.

It is worth remembering that:

- A big problem is only a little problem that has been fed and watered and well looked after for a long time;
- The system won't change unless people change and people won't change unless it makes sense for them to change: For some it would be to see an improvement that makes sense to them. For some it will be because 'it' (whatever 'it' is) is not working out 'now', so why not give a different approach a go?