

Learning - Especially Online

A hot seat with Bob Dick



Monday 13th November to Friday 24th November 2006

In the past I've worked in retail, the electrical trade, drafting, recruitment, organisational psychology, and academia. I now spend much of my working time doing consulting and facilitation. In my consulting work I help people learn action learning, action research, qualitative evaluation and change management. This year I'm setting aside more time for reading, thinking and writing. I have an adjunct appointment at Southern Cross University, mostly supervising action research PhDs. Twice a year I offer an email-based on-line course in action research and evaluation. My non-work hours are spent enjoying the company of my partner Camilla, dodging grandchildren, and reading science fiction.

http://www.uqconnect.net/action_research/

Some questions to consider



Peer Review Online

Can you suggest some strategies for getting good critical peer review online?



Peer review online

Thanks for the question, Ken. I think it's a very realistic question
it doesn't have a simple answer. And I think that's because many different aspects of the situation influence it.

Before you read my answer below, I suggest you try to answer it for yourself. Ask yourself when you give good critical peer feedback, and why. Then work out what you might do to create the same possibility for others. You might also ask yourself when you don't give good feedback, and why not, and what might be done about it.

Here are just a few thoughts I have on creating the conditions for good critical peer feedback. I'd be

interested in hearing which of them you think you could use.

- First build good relationships. That makes it easier to separate the feedback from the person.
- In the peer group, negotiate some guidelines for feedback. Make them as specific as you can.
- Give your peers something to respond to. Give yourself feedback by identifying what you think is good, and what would most benefit from improvement. Ask for feedback on parts of the assignment (or whatever it is) that you are least confident about.
- Give feedback on the feedback. Encourage people to be helpfully critical by thanking them when they are. Also, let them know what you are going to do differently as a result of their feedback.
- Encourage group members to offer critical feedback as suggestions rather than as attempts to persuade.
- In the feedback you give to others, model the behaviour you'd like to get from them.

And there's much more you can do too.

Warm regards
Bob



Peer Review problems

I had this topic in mind before I saw the **Questions to Consider**, and hope it's appropriate.

I find, and I think others do too, that it's very difficult to get discussion going about a particular topic online, because we're all at different stages with our research and reading. I find peer review difficult too, again because other researchers complete tasks earlier than me, and I find it makes me panic to read completed work when mine isn't. (Also it still feels like cheating, a year on.)

Something I noticed in our first module about the on-line community, was that I felt much more comfortable once I had found comparisons between the on-line lecture room and the 'real' one – types of learners, ways of learning. Learning about my own "learning style" really helped with this.

So I am mooting the idea of "virtual seminars" with my set at the moment. I'm copying this from listening to a student from a "realtime" university, where students are given specific articles to read, then to return the next week to present a summary to their seminar group. I wondered if we could do the same. For myself, I feel that this would give me better structure to focus on getting through the core resources, because I would have a time frame to get back to my learning set. I have asked whether we can be more focussed on peer review in the same way, selecting particular aspects on which we request review, rather than presenting the whole draft.

Is this a practical way to approach learning on-line? Or is it "cheating"? Does the asynchronous time forum render it inoperable? From some responses, it seems too structured for many learners. Chris



Peer review problems

Hello Chris

You're welcome to ask whatever questions are useful for you. I wouldn't like to think that the questions I posted were any sort of constraint.

My own online experience is similar to yours. Face-to-face, small groups can be highly interactive. Online, even large groups can consist mostly of people who read everything but post little or nothing.

If it's possible to do some early relationship building, that seems to help. But that, too, is harder online than face to face.

It's interesting that you were more comfortable when you could relate the online experience to something you already knew. That suggests that it might help people initially if any parallels between online and face to face were pointed out.

It would be a pity, though, if it distracted people from the particular advantages of online learning.

I like your idea of virtual seminars. I'd be interested to hear how they work out. I think they will. And I think that will be as much from the structure you're suggesting as from their similarity to "realtime" universities.

If you were asking me to provide peer review I'd find it really useful to know where you were looking for feedback. (See my reply to Ken above.) I think I'd also want to read the whole article, though. Otherwise I'd think I wouldn't have enough context.

You ask is it "cheating". Everything's transparent. I wouldn't see it as cheating at all. In asynchronous learning, the face to face component is missing.

On the other hand, people can choose the time that's most suitable for them. I'm typing this reply at a civilised hour on Monday morning. Where you are it's an hour or so after midnight, long after I've turned to a pumpkin.

Warm regards
Bob



Action learning

Can you please define clearly what is action learning and researching and is it only confined to IT?



Action learning

Hello Maggie

Let me begin with the easy part of your question. Action learning and action research are not confined to IT. In fact IT is a field in which the use of action learning and action research has developed relatively recently.

Much of my AL and AR work in corporate settings has been for leadership development. It has spanned all functions. In both community and corporate settings it has often been for planning or for problem solving and decision making.

What are action learning and action research? I think of them as part of the same package, really. (In the literature they were mostly separate until quite recently, but in my view were always closely related.)

Action learning often consists of a group of people (a "learning set") which comes together to solve a collective problem. A frequent alternative is a group which helps one of its members to solve an individual problem. The group may or may not be facilitated.

Action research sounds different. It's usually described as a cyclic or spiral process which pursues the simultaneous goals of action (that is, change) and research (that is, learning). Each cycle consists of planning, action, and critical reflection on the results of the action.

If you look beyond the different words action learners and action researchers use, the similarities become apparent. People are using a cyclic process
in most respects a very natural process -- to plan what actions they intend to take.

After taking action they reflect critically on what they did, and what happened. With the learning they develop from this experience they then repeat an improved version of the previous step (if it didn't work) or plan the next step.

If you'd like a bit more detail, you'll find it on the web at
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/guide.html

Warm regards
Bob



Action learning

PS, ignore the bolded sentence in the middle. I have to avoid double hyphens (instead of a dash) in the middle of my posts. — B.



Your question

You questioned - how much of effective on-line learning depends on the technology and how much on the people? How can you make the best use of both? I believe that an online learning experience is an

amalgam of the two. Recently I have held an online exhibition to present my Action Inquiry findings. I selected Microsoft Producer as a presentation tool and received comments that suggested the synchronised audio commentary with PowerPoint Slides mimiced a face to face presentation. An approach my audience seemed to appreciate, one said they felt I was in the room with them while they viewed, the key though seemed to be the flexibility to view the presentation as and when time allowed. I feel my choice of software was very important and can see its potential for future use in school based situations. My question to you is, do you consider todays lifestyle as a major contributing factor in the development of online communication?



Your question

Hello Angela

Thanks for responding to one of my questions and for offering an example. I think your use of a synchronised audio commentary with PowerPoint slides shows how the technology is improving and how it is beginning to capture some of the features of face to face communication.

You ask if I consider "lifestyle as a major contributing factor in the development of online communication". Yes, I think it's an important contributing factor.

I don't know that it's the most important factor — I suspect the technology arrives first. I imagine it's lifestyle factors that then determine which technologies get most used, and how.

What do you think?

I must confess I'm a bit of a luddite in these matters. Mostly I use the lowest technology that will serve the purpose. There's less to go wrong. In saying this I'm not trying to persuade you to adopt my way of doing things. I'm trying to continue a conversation.

When it's feasible I prefer face to face. Last night I returned home after spending three days with five peers of mine. Face to face, we helped each other with personal and professional development.

We come together from all over Australia to do this three time a year. We all find it so valuable that we've been meeting now for ten years.

I think we're a long way short of having the technology for this to be as effective if we did it online. So now I'm wondering how good the technology would have to be for us to forsake our face to face version.

Warm regards
Bob



Peer review

Having read others comments how do you feel about assessing other people's work based purely on our understanding of a subject. I am a cohort 4 researcher dealing with single / double loop reflection and we are all commenting on each others work with the feeling in the back of our minds that we may not have the first clue if we are really on the right lines. In a class a teacher will quickly stop you in your tracks and point out errors - this is of course impossible in our small peer groups. I welcome your thoughts if you consider this to be an equal learning opportunity.



 **Peer review**

Hi Matthew,

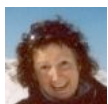
I agree with the comments you have made. I am a Cohort 4 researcher and had the same thoughts as you when commenting on single and double loop learning. Even now I hope I have done it correctly.



 **Peer review**

Linda, can you think of some way of making use of double loop learning? Trying out your learning in practice will let you check and perhaps refine your understanding.

Cheers — Bob



 **Peer review**

Absolutely agree matthew you have hit the nail on the head. Our discussions would be more meaningful if a learning facilitator butted in often to point us in the right direction. Also it is very difficult because with our busy lives when we ask a question or request some feedback we need the response straight away as you would in a face to face course and sometimes you wait ages or even get no response. Helen



 **Peer review**

Yes, Helen, I think so too. Busy lives do distract us from learning if we let them. I, too, find that it isn't always easy to set aside time for reflection. And this is true even though I know it will be useful if I do.

Cheers — Bob



Peer review

Hello Matthew. Thanks for the question.

From what you say, I have the impression that you don't think it's an equal learning opportunity.

I imagine you're thinking of the knowledge possessed by a relatively inexperienced student compared to an experienced teacher. From that perspective I think you're correct.

Your post certainly seems to have struck a chord with Linda and Helen. (Hello Linda and Helen. I'm pleased you've joined the conversation.)

There is often some key knowledge and skills which people must acquire. For some skills and knowledge I think it's valuable if an experienced teacher can provide immediate guidance.

For instance I often help to start up action learning teams. I try to have one of the participants facilitate the second meeting of the team. I like to be there as a coach, to offer suggestions about how they might improve their facilitation.

But I think it depends. When I was facilitating face to face learning I mostly didn't quickly stop people in their tracks and point out errors. (You can download a description of the sorts of classes I facilitated at

http://www.uq.net.au/~zzbdick/dlitt/DLitt_P05mdl.pdf

This was because the skills which I hoped people would acquire weren't easily taught. They included self-management, taking responsibility, having confidence, being able to critique one's own work, and so on. They also included double-loop reflection.

I thought those skills would be more effectively learned through experience. When an independent researcher surveyed people who had been participants in the class some years earlier, they agreed too.

They were asked which of the classes they had taken were most useful in their actual work. They reported that they got most from the classes where they were encouraged to take responsibility for their own learning.

I'd be interested to hear which skills and understanding you think would be most valuable for you, and how you might acquire them. What do you say?

Warm regards — Bob



Peer review

I think I've just learned how to insert headings. I indent the following paragraph. In other words that bolded sentence isn't meant to be treated like a heading.

I'm sort of enjoying the experiential learning. Poetic justice, in a way. — B.



Your questions!

Hello Bob. Welcome to Ultraversity and this hotseat. In answer to your questions, firstly I must admit the I am coming towards the end of my second year and so far this has been the best learning experience I have had. Why? Although I have never come face to face with Learning Facilitators or fellow researchers there is a bond, one of help, guidance and a listening ear. By **talking** in the communities you are able to collect valuable insight and information regarding wide and varied topics, as we are not all in education! I have also found that by taking this on line degree that i have become a more disiplined person, than I was before. Reasons for taking this degree are firstly to prove to myself that I am able to complete. The research has been overwhelming but also fascinating. I have been able to follow my own learning path and choose within reason the topics I wish to cover. To be able to overcome new technology and talk to people far and wide, is an experience by itself and one that I am enjoying immensely. In answer to your last question regarding educators, I would say that in part I would agree that educators (Learning Facilitators) don't teach, but what they do give and in high demand is a wealth of knowledge and determination in us as researchers to achieve. I for one would recommend an online degree as I have learnt more in the last two years than before and I have made many friends on the way. Hope this answers your questions? Mine is: How do you deal with the pressures of a dissertation when it is an Action Inquiry? How could you plan and pace yourself? Thank you :-)



Your questions!

Thanks for the warm welcome, Tracy. I really enjoyed my previous time in the hotseat, and that was partly because of being made to feel at home here.

Thanks, too, for the thoughtful response. I would guess that you are getting a lot out of the course because you're putting a lot into it.

You ask about dealing with the pressures of the dissertation and about how to plan and pace yourself.

I think you've half answered the first part of your question in the second half. The planning and the pacing are important ways of dealing with the pressures, I reckon.

Do you set aside regular time for planning and pacing? If you do, I imagine that helps a lot.

How do you manage other pressures in your life? Some of the strategies you use may also work here. I suggest you think about that before you read further.

Here are a few comments based on my experience of supervising action research theses. Some of them may fit your situation.

- You don't have to write up everything you do. Above all, a thesis is expected to be a contribution to knowledge. You need write up only the things that are relevant to your contribution.
- A lot of thesis candidates find the greatest pressure is the final write-up. Those who keep good documentation from the beginning find it easier, I think.
- You might be able to team up with some other people doing theses. Especially if they are using action inquiry you'll be able to help and support each other. I supervise off-shore action research PhDs for Southern Cross University, and the candidates are organised into action learning teams. The more cohesive the teams, the easier the time people seem to have.
- Some thesis candidates try to read all of the relevant literature before they begin the action. For many of them the sheer volume of information becomes a further pressure. If they read as it becomes relevant, they read more intelligently and selectively.

Do any of those look as if they might work for you? Can you modify them so that they fit in with your preferences?

I've actually written a piece on doing an action research thesis. You can get it on the web at http://www.uq.net.au/~zzbdick/dlitt/DLitt_P50arth.pdf

Warm regards — Bob



 **Your questions!**

Oops. That, too, leads to a sentence being treated as a heading. — B.



Getting over my hang ups

Please could you give me some tips, when making links in the on-line community as i really struggle with this approach the lack of personal links. I know this can be done i think i see the computer as blocking this for me. I don't feel the connection with the learning sets and always feel that i am interrupting. Must admit this is largely down to my lack of input within the community how can i get over this hang-up. As i feel this has really held me back Janet



Reflection

Hi, I am a cohort 4 member and since completing my first and second reflection in the work setting module, I am begining to notice that I am now reflecting on every incident and thought I come across. I seem to be looking at all modern technology, the way we all learn, fatal accidents and disasters etc, etc and then realise that it is due to someones reflection and indentifying a critical incident that changes are made. It always seems there has to be a major event or disaster to make this change, so that the same incident won't happen again. Do you think this is normal, that now I am aware of reflection and critical incidents that I should be looking for it all the time? On the other hand it is through Ultraversity and my own studying, that I have now learnt this valuable technique. I hope you understand what I am trying to say? Linda



Reflection

Hello Linda

For most people, the hardest part of action research is to reflect often enough, and systematically enough, and critically enough. It seems as if you have that difficulty well in hand. I think you'll correct in thinking of it as a very valuable skill and habit.

I agree with you that much change comes about because something major happens. It seems to require something major to get people's attention.

It doesn't have to be that way, though. I think there is a lot to be said for developing the habit of always reflecting on what is happening and looking for other ways of dealing with it.

I hope I've understood what you're trying to say, too. Have I?

Warm regards — Bob



Getting over my hang ups

Hello Janet

I've noticed that some people function better online if they have been able to develop a more personal relationship with their colleagues first. It sounds as if that might be true for you.

What could you do to develop better relationships with your colleagues?

For instance, do any of them live close enough to get together for a drink and a chat? Can you phone them? Exchange photographs maybe? Start to contact some of them by email, offline, so that you're interacting with only one person at a time?

It also seems that you might have created a bit of a self-fulfilling prophecy for yourself. Because you haven't participated much, participating feels intrusive.

So I reckon it's a good thing you've already posted to this hotseat.

I suspect the best way out of that bind is to just start, as you have here. For example, I reckon if you planned to send one short communication every day, or every couple of days, that might help. What do you think?

Practice on me, if you like.

Warm regards — Bob



Best experiences

Hello Bob Having read your questions I consider this course to be my best learning experience so far in respect of how much I've learned technically and how relevant it is to my job. However I come from a very structured grammar school background many years ago and find this informal learning very difficult and therefore stressful. I need more input! Do you think there is a way of getting more from the "educators"? Helen



Best experiences

Hello again, Helen

I'm pleased it has been a good learning experience for you.

I also think I can understand that for someone used to structure this sort of course can be stressful. That was the experience some people had in the (face to face) classes I facilitated in the past.

You ask if there's a way of getting more input from the educators. I don't know. Perhaps you'll have to ask them.

It has been my experience that almost everyone would rather do a good job than a bad job. I expect that's true for them too. Perhaps they don't know what would constitute a "good job" in their interactions with you.

Let me know how you get on.

If that doesn't work, there may be some ways in which you can provide more structure for yourself. Or there may be some ways you and your friends can provide some structure for each other.

Warm regards — Bob



Learning on-line

At the moment, because I am on Module one as a member of Cohort 6 I feel that as the module is to do with my own working environment that I am looking at that rather than the on-line community but know this will change from 2nd module onwards. I have enjoyed delving into First class and replying to comments when I feel I am able to and have even posted questions as part of my research for my module. I feel that when you first start it does feel overwhelming and there is a lot to take on. This is my first attempt at joining in "hot seat". I feel that the further in you go, the more confident you become and less afraid of taking part in things like on line discussions that I have never done before I started this degree. I already feel that the learning journey has benefited me and look forward to the on-line experiences ahead.
Sue N C6



Learning on-line

Hello Sue

Your first attempt at the hotseat? Welcome, then. We're both fairly new to it so we'll be able to learn together. I'm looking forward to it, too.

I suspect you'll learn a lot about your own working environment because you'll be paying attention to it in a different way. I think, too, that it will be a good foundation for the later years.

Warm regards — Bob