

Research students learning set

I Hughes^{#,1}, A Campbell^{*,1}, K Duncan^{*,1}, Y Gyoung^{*,1}, Z Rapaich^{*,2}, T Saetherskar^{*,1}, E Tadros^{*,1}
1. School of Behavioural & Community Health Sciences, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Sydney; 2. Faculty of Engineering, University of Sydney.

Introduction

Universities in Australia and overseas are experiencing external and internal pressure to improve performance in educating researchers, but few universities exhibit the characteristics of learning organisations¹. Too often, postgraduate research supervision practices frustrate creativity, open inquiry and change.

Action inquiry (action learning and action research) is employed in efforts to transform universities into learning communities², and to support postgraduate research students in management, education, development and other professions. While action research is used by some individual doctoral students in health sciences³ the approach has not been used in a systematic way to create and support communities of inquiry in postgraduate research education in health sciences.

This participatory action research study will explore the potential of an action learning set to generate a community of inquiry in postgraduate research education in Health Sciences, and has the practical aim of providing support to participating research students to enable them to complete their research projects and theses successfully and on time.

Methods

Students enrolled in Master of Applied Science, Doctor of Health Science or Doctor of Philosophy programs under the supervision of one supervisor meet as a learning set once each month. This two-hour meeting is a facilitated peer support system and a cooperative inquiry⁴ into the process of the learning set. Each participant reports on progress and makes an action plan at each meeting. Face-to-face meetings are supported by an e-mail list, used for notices and discussion. Data is collected during each meeting using a learning set record form, in a short reflection at the end of each meeting, and evaluation workshop at the end of each year.

Arrangements for individual consultation between research students and their supervisors are not changed by participation in the learning set.

Results

This research in progress has not yet produced formal results. Six students at various stages towards completion of their research projects are participating during this first year of the research students learning set. Three students with prior experience of individual research supervision report that they experience support and do not feel isolated since participating in the learning set.

Discussion

Though formal research findings are not yet available, the learning set process may be of interest to research students and their supervisors. A participatory demonstration will be offered during the conference.

1. Senge, P. et al. *Schools That Learn* (Nicholas Brealey, London, 2000).
2. Levin, M. & Greenwood, D. in *Handbook for Action Research: Participative Inquiry and Practice* (eds. Reason, P. & Bradbury, H.) (Sage, London, 2001).
3. Gibbon, M. Doing a doctorate using a participatory action research framework in the context of community health. *Qualitative Health Research* **12**, 546-558 (2002).
4. Heron, J. *Co-operative Inquiry: Research into the human condition* (Sage, London, 1996).

Although research results are not yet available, the process of an action learning set to generate a community of inquiry among health science research students may be of interest to research students and supervisors.