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Concepts of Action Learning and Reflective Practitioners

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In the contemporary era of knowledge-based societies, the ability to learn continuously from experience has become an essential competency for professionals across disciplines. Traditional education and training systems have largely relied on teacher-centered approaches where knowledge is transmitted through lectures, textbooks, and examinations. Although such methods provide a theoretical foundation, they often fail to equip learners with the practical skills and critical thinking abilities required to address complex real-world challenges. In fields such as agricultural extension, rural development, education, and management, professionals frequently encounter dynamic situations that demand adaptive learning, problem-solving, and reflective thinking. To address these limitations, modern educational philosophy emphasizes experiential learning approaches that integrate action, experience, and reflection as essential components of the learning process, where knowledge is constructed through active engagement with real-life situations rather than passive reception of information (Kolb, 1984).

Within this experiential learning framework, the concepts of Action Learning and Reflective Practice have emerged as powerful approaches for professional development. Action Learning, introduced by Reg Revans, emphasizes solving real-world problems through collaborative learning, questioning, and reflection. Reflective Practice, highlighted by Donald Schön (1983), focuses on critical self-examination of professional actions to improve competence and decision-making. Both approaches share a common foundation in integrating action and reflection, enabling professionals to analyze experiences, refine their practices, and respond effectively to complex and evolving challenges, particularly in fields such as agricultural extension and rural development.

Concept of Action Learning

Action Learning is a participatory and experiential learning approach that combines **problem-solving, action, and reflection** to generate new knowledge and improve professional practice. The concept was pioneered by **Reg Revans in the 1940s**, who observed that individuals learn more effectively when they work together to address real problems rather than merely studying theoretical concepts.

Revans proposed the well-known learning equation:

$$L = P + Q$$

Where:

L = Learning

P = Programmed knowledge (existing theories and information)

Q = Questioning insight (critical questioning and reflection)

This formula suggests that meaningful learning occurs when established knowledge is combined with thoughtful questioning and reflective inquiry.

Action Learning typically involves small groups known as **learning sets**, consisting of four to eight participants who collaborate to address complex problems. Each participant brings a real issue or challenge from their professional context, and the group collectively explores

solutions through discussion, questioning, and reflection. Members of the learning set support each other by offering diverse perspectives, challenging assumptions, and sharing experiences.

The Action Learning process is characterized by several key principles:

1. **Real Problems:** The learning process focuses on authentic issues that require practical solutions.
2. **Collaborative Learning:** Participants learn from each other's experiences and perspectives.
3. **Action Orientation:** Learning occurs through implementing solutions rather than merely discussing them.
4. **Critical Questioning:** Participants use questioning to explore assumptions and generate new insights.
5. **Reflection:** Continuous reflection enables participants to learn from both successes and failures.

In agricultural extension systems, Action Learning can be applied when extension professionals and farmers work together to identify agricultural problems, test innovative practices, and reflect on the outcomes. This collaborative process enhances knowledge sharing and encourages participatory problem-solving within rural communities.

Concept of Reflective Practitioners

The concept of the **Reflective Practitioner** was developed by **Donald Schön (1983)**, who emphasized the role of reflection in professional learning and practice. Schön argued that professionals often operate in environments characterized by uncertainty, complexity, and uniqueness, where standardized solutions may not always be applicable. In such situations, professionals must rely on reflection to guide their decisions and actions. A reflective practitioner is an individual who critically examines their experiences in order to learn from them and improve future practice. Reflection involves thoughtful analysis of what happened, why it happened, and how similar situations can be handled more effectively in the future.

Schön identified two major forms of reflection:

Reflection-in-action: This occurs during the course of an activity when professionals reflect on their actions and make adjustments in real time. For example, an agricultural extension officer conducting a farmer training session may modify their teaching approach based on the responses of participants.

Reflection-on-action: This occurs after the activity has been completed. In this stage, the practitioner reviews the experience, analyzes outcomes, and identifies lessons for future improvement. Reflective practice encourages professionals to question assumptions, evaluate their approaches, and continuously refine their skills. It fosters self-awareness, critical thinking, and adaptability—qualities that are essential for effective professional practice.

Relationship between Action Learning and Reflective Practice

Action Learning and Reflective Practice are closely interconnected and mutually reinforcing concepts within experiential learning. Action Learning emphasizes learning through real-world action and collaborative problem-solving, while Reflective Practice focuses on critically examining experiences to generate deeper understanding and improvement. In the Action Learning process, reflection plays a crucial role in transforming actions and experiences into meaningful learning; without reflection, actions may lead to outcomes but not necessarily to deeper insights. Reflective Practice therefore strengthens Action Learning by enabling participants to analyze their experiences, question assumptions, and identify lessons for future action. At the same time, Action Learning creates opportunities for reflection by engaging individuals in practical problem-solving situations. Together, these approaches form a dynamic learning framework that promotes critical thinking, adaptability, innovation, and continuous professional development.

Conclusion

The concepts of Action Learning and Reflective Practitioners represent a significant shift from traditional knowledge transmission toward experiential and participatory learning approaches. In a rapidly changing world, professionals must not only acquire knowledge but also apply it effectively, evaluate their actions, and continuously improve their practices. Action Learning enables individuals to collaboratively address real-world problems while learning from practical experiences, whereas Reflective Practice encourages critical self-examination and continuous professional development. By reflecting on their actions and decisions, practitioners gain deeper insights into their work and enhance their ability to respond to emerging challenges. Particularly in fields such as agricultural extension and rural development, where professionals operate in complex and diverse environments, the integration of Action Learning and Reflective Practice helps practitioners engage with stakeholders, test innovative solutions, and learn from real-world experiences, ultimately contributing to more effective, responsive, and sustainable development practices.

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