

The Double Helix: Action Research and Action Learning in Classrooms

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This project frames classroom teaching and student learning as a concomitant process of constructivist teaching by instructors and inquiry learning by students. Teachers engage in preliminary processes of inquiry to ascertain the characteristics and qualities of their students, then frame processes of inquiry that form the basis for student learning. They first engage students in learning activities that enable them to identify their existing knowledge and skills related to a topic of interest, and these capacities become the foundation of continued learning. Cyclical processes of inquiry using a look-think-act heuristic enable students to acquire information (data gathering), select and sort it (analysis), and use the outcomes in reports or projects that enable them to demonstrate what they have learned. Continuing cycles of action research enable the teacher to extend student learning and evaluate outcomes of these processes of action learning.

We describe how these processes have been effectively applied in a variety of quite diverse contexts, including urban US settings and remote Aboriginal community settings in Australia, with high school and primary school students. The interaction between teacher and learner, and the different ways in which these entwined processes of research and learning occur are not easily framed within the conceptual structures of traditional learning theories. The dynamic, somewhat organic nature of the processes are not easily assimilated into the linear rationality of these paradigmatic perspectives. We therefore frame them according to the orientations of complex systems theory. These provide the basis for understanding the cyclical, interactional procedures required to achieve learning that itself is enmeshed in a fuzzy field of outcomes that defy the logic of the carefully prescribed outcomes defined by traditional approaches to education. It is our contention that such approaches to learning more nearly reflect the reality of a truly educational project, providing learning experiences more consistent with the social, emotional and pragmatic features of everyday social life.