
Becoming a learning organization through partnership

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Abstract

Highlights Glasgow Caledonian University's Partnership for Quality Initiative (PQI), a five-year learning-through-partnership programme, unique in UK higher education, designed to create equal, decision-making partnerships of university staff, students, employers and community groups. Claims that partnerships have improved the quality and speed of decision making, and increased resources. Explains the background to partnership and learning organizations, the theoretical framework developed through action learning research, and the practical processes, tools and techniques used to turn the idea of learning partnerships into reality.

What you can do or dream you can, begin it.
Boldness has genius, power and magic in it.
(Goethe)

Those seeking to jump on the band-wagon of innovation should first assess its potential as a hearse.
(Nisbet)

Introduction

Glasgow Caledonian University's Partnership for Quality Initiative (PQI) is a five-year learning-through-partnership programme, unique in UK higher education. Its £1 million funding came initially from the Department of Employment, which has now transferred responsibility to Scottish Enterprise. This funding is matched, in cash or kind, by the university and employers.

Since the programme began in Glasgow Polytechnic, it merged with Queens College to become a new university. Glasgow Caledonian University now has approximately 11,000 full-time and part-time students and 800 staff. It has strong relationships with employers, who provide 2,500 student placements per year, and most students undertake research projects.

We are now into the fourth year of the PQI programme. The experience has been both painful and liberating. Having been fortunate to meet people willing to share their knowledge, skills and experience, we, in turn, aim to share ours.

This article explains the background to partnership and learning organizations, the theoretical framework developed through action learning research, and the practical processes, tools and techniques used to turn the idea of learning partnerships into reality. Since our partners come from a very wide range of backgrounds, we have tried to make the explanations as straightforward as possible.

Learning partnerships

Continuous, rapid change and turbulence have led many organizations to rethink. Traditional structures and processes are inflexible and hierarchical: they cannot harness the ingenuity needed to solve unprecedented problems and grasp unpredictable opportunities. Some organizations are, therefore, seeking alternative ways of encouraging and enabling everyone to learn quickly, so that they can contribute to decision making. In the information-technology sector, for

example, some companies see empowerment as central to business development. The ability of individuals at all levels to make informed, independent decisions, enables the business to respond to change quickly and flexibly. It has also led to long-term partnerships with customers and suppliers who share similar cultures. For traditional organizations, however, ideas of continuous learning allied to empowerment and partnership, imply a major change of culture.

To keep it simple, we adopted Peters and Waterman's[1] definition of culture, "the way we do things round here". The way academics did things around here was to keep ahead of subject development through research and consultancy, while designing courses and teaching students. The academic credibility and practical relevance of degrees were regularly reviewed by other academics, students and employers. We emphasized what went into courses, i.e. an input model.

The PQI is designed to help the university community shift the perspective, so that we become a learning organization. Initially we concentrated on "the way we do things round here" in terms of what students had learned and could do by the time they graduated, i.e. an output model. Now we are learning how to make decisions in partnership. By bringing together the skills, knowledge, experience and ingenuity of university staff, students, employers of all kinds, and community groups, i.e. our stakeholders, we are learning to value and build one another's contributions to Scotland's development. We have come to realize that learning through partnership is a key to continued development as it:

- improves the quality of students' education and development;
- improves the quality and speed of decision making;
- increases resources for all partners;
- creates action research opportunities of benefit to staff, students, employers and community groups.

The idea of genuine partnerships between people from a wide age range, with such different levels of power and status and diversity of backgrounds, provokes discussion. Some find it absurd to suggest that young, less educated, inexperienced people could be equal participants in university decision making. Some university staff are concerned that partnership will dilute academic integrity. Some students fear that others' status and power will make them feel stupid, inadequate

or, worse, that disagreement could lead to unspecified punishment.

Equal partnership does not imply that everyone has the same level of skill, knowledge or experience. It means that, instead of one interest group making decisions for others, each partner speaks for himself or herself. Clearly, a 60-year-old biochemist is likely to know far more about biochemistry than a 17 year old. Equally, young partners know more than anyone about being young at the end of the twentieth century. Their very lack of experience makes almost everything seem possible. In fast-changing disciplines, such as information technology, seventeen year olds may actually know more about a particular aspect than older partners. By bringing partners together on an equal footing everyone gains the benefits of synergy, i.e. the sum is greater than the parts. Decisions are made much more quickly, are of better quality and are more likely to be carried out because everyone has a stake in them.

In a university, an obvious example is degree design. By designing degrees in partnership, academic integrity is related to student, employer and community perspectives from the start. Students, employers and community groups have proved liberating influences, producing imaginative ideas for the curriculum and for teaching, learning and assessment methods. The same is true of faculty and university-wide issues.

Sceptics argue that successful partnerships are exceptional, created only by especially clever and/or experienced groups. Having successfully transferred partnership processes to businesses, the not-for-profit sector, people suffering mental illness, and disadvantaged people on special training programmes, we have found the opposite to be the case. Although each group is "special", in the sense that it is unique, each includes a spectrum of ability and experience. The fact that such mixed groups work effectively together is precisely what makes partnership exciting.

The PQI beliefs

A basic premiss of the PQI is that people are capable of making their own decisions. Our job is to create worlds in which mixed groups of people can create their own partnerships and learn together. For this to be sustained, we must also enable partners to facilitate change and learning for one another so that the processes become embedded in the orga-

nizational culture. The more quickly people learn to facilitate change, the greater their control over their own futures. Conscious, deliberate learning leads to change which leads to learning, and so on. Becoming a learning organization seems to be a most effective way of embedding processes and enabling partners to sustain continuous development without adding to everyone's workload.

Those attempting to create learning organizations need to hold beliefs which make this possible. Ideally, those who hold the power and resources, usually top management, would support the creation of a learning organization. However, as Honey[2] says, this is not always possible:

Clearly it helps if everyone in the organization subscribes to the same plan. But you cannot wait for Utopian conditions. If top management is out of sympathy with the notion of a learning organization, use the steps to create a mini-learning organization in the parts you can influence.

Honey[2] defines the underlying beliefs of a learning organization, to which we subscribe, as follows:

- Learning is "a good thing". It helps to believe that "learning is the only sustainable competitive" advantage and that "learning is our business and we sell the by-product of that learning".
- The quality and quantity of learning can be massively increased if it is done deliberately rather than left to chance.
- Learning is continuous: it does not have a beginning or an end.
- Solo learning is the most difficult to sustain. Shared learning, together with other people, is easier to sustain.
- Learning is not on the conscious agenda of most organizations and they foster behaviours which militate against continuous improvement, e.g. covering up mistakes, blaming, being deferential to seniors, keeping active, being cautious and filtering bad news.

3 × 3: a framework for the learning organization

Action learning research has been conducted throughout the lifetime of the PQI[3]. As a result, we have created a flexible framework for explaining and developing learning organizations, which "speaks" to all partners, i.e. they understand the elements and can see the relationships between them. The framework

includes three broad, interrelated dimensions, linking culture to behaviour and learning.

Three levels of culture

The framework differentiates between three broad levels of culture. Although they overlap, this is a useful, easily understood way of explaining the complexities:

- (1) *Symbols*. Symbols are the conscious elements of organizational culture. They include rules, procedures, job descriptions, working conditions, wages and salaries, marketing images, etc.
- (2) *Attitudes*. Over time, attitudes act as a filter between the first and third levels of culture, i.e. between the conscious (symbols) and the subconscious (beliefs). For example, an organization may introduce a new rule. If people's attitudes are such that the rule is rejected or ignored, eventually, the organization may change it. If, on the other hand, the rule becomes universally accepted and taken for granted, it may well become a belief.
- (3) *Beliefs*. Beliefs refer to subconscious elements of culture, which are taken for granted. Subconscious beliefs are reinforced by rituals, anecdotes, organizational myths and non-verbal behaviour. Beliefs provide meaning for symbols and attitudes, so change at this level can have major effects at the more visible levels.

Whether or not creating a learning organization is a realistic mission depends on all three levels of culture. If rules (symbols) and attitudes stop people participating, the mission will fail. If rules do allow participation, but people with power do not believe in the mission, this will be reflected in attitudes. Manifested in behaviour, the attitudes will block learning.

Allowed, able and willing to learn and change

This part of the framework draws on Human's work[4]. She is a consultant, who was, until recently, Cape Town University's director of the Centre for African Studies and co-author, with the now vice-chancellor, of the university's equal opportunities policy.

In developing black managers, she found that, although they were willing and able to learn, they were not allowed to put their learning into practice. White male managers, committed to the principle of equal opportunities, retained subconscious beliefs, e.g. black people and women are emotional and

not good with figures, which prevented progress towards equality in practice. Consequently, the development programme switched from developing black managers to developing their white supervisors. Many UK organizations behave as if people further down the hierarchy are incapable of contributing to decision making. Consequently, they too are excluded from creating policy and implementation strategies. Human[4] argues that for empowerment, learning and change to take place, people must be the following:

- *Allowed.* The people with power, the “gate-keepers” or resource holders, must allow learning and change to take place.
- *Able.* People need to be equipped with the knowledge and skills which will enable them to learn and contribute to change.
- *Willing.* To learn and change, people need to be self-motivated. Consequently, organizational objectives and expected outcomes must relate to individuals’ beliefs. For example, an organization’s mission may be to become a learning organization. If, however, managers do not really believe that this is possible or desirable, their unwillingness will be reflected in behaviour. Their beliefs are likely to be a powerful disincentive to learning and change, despite the overtly supportive symbol of the mission statement.

Triple-loop learning

The third element of the framework comes from the work of Swieringa and Wierdsma[5]. They identify three learning loops. Within the 3 × 3 framework, each loop is related to a particular level of culture.

Single-loop learning deals with the conscious, obvious levels of organizational learning. If, for example, an organization is having difficulty in attracting customers, its most likely response is to change symbols, e.g. changing its image through marketing.

Double-loop learning usually arises where the single loop fails to deal with the issue. The organization then starts to address deeper questions of what should be (attitudes). A university might re-examine the curriculum; a business might start looking at the quality of the product or service.

Triple-loop learning usually arises when the organization finds either that it is still unable to grasp an opportunity, or that the problem has not gone away. Fundamental beliefs begin to be addressed, such as “What

is this university for?” or “What business are we in?”

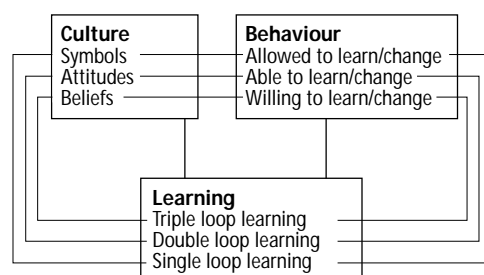
In practice, double-loop learning can be confrontational. Because it deals with attitudes, discussion can centre on what went wrong in the past, and who is to blame. As a result, organizations are reluctant to delve into triple-loop learning because they fear that confrontation will intensify. Our evidence suggests that, because triple-loop learning addresses beliefs, it provokes curiosity and revelations. It is oriented towards learning for the future, and rarely leads to confrontation.

3 × 3: culture, behaviour and learning

Putting the three dimensions together, the framework (see Figure 1) explains the relationship between culture, behaviour and learning. Clearly, the world is rarely as simple as a model or framework suggests. Being allowed, ability and willingness can apply at each level: we are simply referring to their likely degrees of significance at each level. Similarly, the lines between beliefs, attitudes and symbols are not clear cut. They are inter-related components of a whole culture. No one is more important than the other. It is the combination and the way they relate to one another that produces organizational behaviour.

Beginning to create a learning organization: where are we now and where do we want to be?

Having created a theoretical framework, the question then arises as to how to translate it into practice. Since “manifest behaviour is always the outer sign that learning has taken place” and shows whether or not people are “taking continuous improvement seriously” [2], the next step is to find out which existing behaviours encourage learning and which need to be consciously developed. This part



of the process is still at an early stage of development.

With Peter Honey's agreement, we have been redesigning Honey and Mumford's "Learning diagnostic questionnaire" [6] (see Figure 2) so that departments/organizations can analyse the degree to which people are able, willing and allowed to learn. Individuals complete the questionnaire. Responses are collated and presented in several forms to the whole group, so that members can explore possible interpretations of their collective positive and negative learning behaviours. For example, a department which discovers that able, willing people do not feel allowed to apply their learning, examines the behaviours which led to these perceptions. Conversely, where a "gatekeeper" would like to devolve responsibility, but people feel ill equipped to cope or unwilling to try, discussion centres round the reasons for these views.

Following analysis, and using triple-loop learning processes described later, the group then:

- discusses, negotiates and selects a manageable number of positive learning behaviours, which all subscribe to and are willing to adopt;
- selects "triggers" and "reinforcers", which everyone will employ, to encourage and reward desired behaviours;
- agrees a time-scale and ways of measuring progress towards embedding the behaviours;
- decides when the time is ripe for new, desired behaviours to be added.

This collective approach makes clear that, to create a learning organization, everyone's behaviour matters: example is of the essence. The very fact that a group consciously and willingly adopts desirable behaviours also creates a collective confidence, which leads to the next stage – exploring the areas of possible partnership.

Using "open space" agenda setting and networking[7], the large group can then separate into smaller numbers, to work on themes of potential partnership which they want to pursue.

How are we going to get there? Fast, creative decision making and problem solving

For partnership events to succeed and develop into continuing relationships, decision-making processes must allow and enable

genuine participation. We have, therefore, spent time and effort seeking out and developing processes, tools and techniques which encourage and enable people to participate and engage in triple-loop learning.

Processes

Process leaders and plenary sessions

An individual or group which aims to initiate a partnership works with a process leader. Together they design a partnership event in the light of the wanted outcomes. Prior to the event, the process leader briefs the facilitators. On the day, she/he:

- welcomes people and explains the events' purposes, stages and processes;
- liaises with facilitators to ensure that groups are operating effectively, picks up problems and "sweeps up" where needed;
- checks the "feeling" of the event – if discussion goes in an unexpected direction, and the "feeling" is that people would prefer to change from the planned programme, the process leader negotiates change with the whole group;
- helps small groups collectively share ideas at plenary sessions, identifying common interests, and negotiating ways forward using the meta-plan;
- ensures that arrangements have been made for follow-up, usually through action plans.

Small groups with facilitators

Prior to the event, partners are arranged into small mixed groups of up to seven people. Each group has a facilitator, whose job is to ensure that everyone is encouraged to contribute so that the group can concentrate on the task. Thus, barriers are broken down, every group has the benefit of a variety of perspectives and the individual's voice is heard.

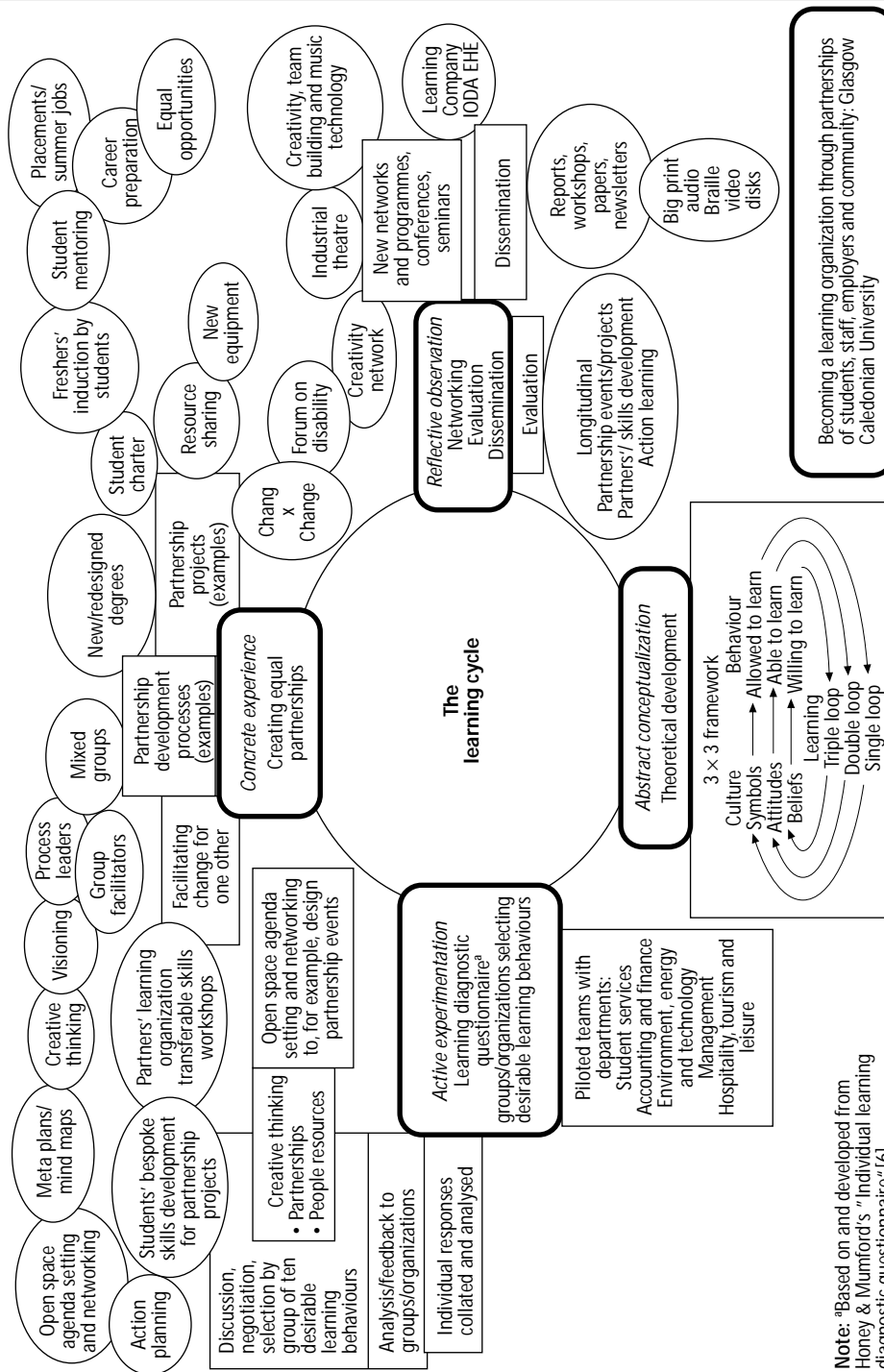
"Organized" groups are most useful when the whole group is establishing collective visions of "where we are now" and "where we want to be", and generating ideas about "how we are going to get there".

The meta-plan

In this context "meta" means "beyond" or "above". A meta-plan is a way of creating an overall plan from the ideas of several groups or individuals. We use them for a range of tasks, from designing degrees and writing scripts, to action planning.

Each group has a pile of cards and thick pens. As discussion progresses, each individual writes down each of his/her ideas on a

Figure 2 Becoming a learning organization through partnerships of students, staff, employers and community: Glasgow Caledonian University



separate card. No one controls what anyone else writes. At plenary sessions, one representative from each small group presents all the ideas to the whole group. The cards are stuck on a wall of paper, and groups organize them into patterns of commonality and difference.

Meta-plans can be used as reference material, with each stage building on the one before. They can also be developed to, for example, identify which areas the whole group sees as priorities.

Open space agenda setting and networking
 Open space allows people to set their own agenda and link up with others who share common interests[7]. It is particularly useful with big groups and/or where there is a variety of possible avenues to explore. It is ideal for networking within or across organizations.

Open space starts with a theme, for example "becoming a learning organization", and a blank agenda of paper posted on the wall (the bulletin board). Each person who wants to

pursue a particular aspect, writes it down on a sheet of paper with his/her name on it, explains who she/he is and what she/he wants to discuss. The idea is then posted on the bulletin board.

When all ideas are posted, the process leader negotiates between individuals so that similar ideas may be put together (the marketplace). Each idea, or set of ideas, is allotted a venue and starting time. People join whichever group interests them. If they find it is not what they were looking for, they follow the “law of two feet”, leave, and join another group. Each group is responsible for producing an action plan by the end of each session.

We have adapted this approach in several ways. With a group of up to 60, the absolute minimum time needed is half a day. Ideally, and with bigger groups, it runs for one to three days.

Action learning sets

Action learning sets come into their own once small groups have taken responsibility for carrying out action plans. They are a means of enabling people to work through, act on and evaluate complex plans and projects, which have no ready-made answers. Founded on the questioning skills of non-experts, they can be a very powerful way of encouraging and supporting innovative developments.

Tools

The learning cycle

The learning cycle [6] is an essential tool for groups coming from a variety of backgrounds, because it:

- values learning wherever and however it is acquired;
- makes the link between theory and practice clear;
- makes the need for regular reflection/evaluation obvious;
- reminds people that learning is an iterative, endless process;
- “speaks” to everyone.

Allowed, able and willing

A large chart is posted on the wall, which links allowed, able and willing to learn, with the notions of “can do”, “could do”, “want to do” and “do do”. Again, it “speaks” to everyone and is easy to understand.

Nine kinds of intelligence

Handy’s “nine kinds of intelligence” [8] support learning partnerships by explaining the rich variety of intelligence that diverse people bring to collective decision making. When

used as an ice-breaker, each person identifies the intelligences she/he brings to the group. The list can also be posted on the wall to emphasize the significance of looking at issues from a variety of perspectives. The nine intelligences are:

- (1) factual;
- (2) logical, analytical and mathematical;
- (3) musical;
- (4) linguistic;
- (5) interpersonal;
- (6) intuitive and psychic;
- (7) practical;
- (8) physical and kinetic;
- (9) spatial.

Techniques

Ice-breakers

Ice-breakers are a fast way of enabling people to make contact and, because they inject humour, create relaxed atmospheres.

Creative thinking

Creative thinking techniques encourage people to chip in their ideas, however absurd they might seem, create humour and always produce unexpected ideas.

Action planning

Action planning turns ideas into practical propositions. Based on agreed beliefs and objectives, and with creative ideas to draw on, each action planning group works on one plan: deciding what is to be done, what resources are needed, where they can/will be acquired, who will do what by when, and how.

Plans are shared in a plenary session, so the whole group can comment and make links between plans.

Facilitating change for one another

At partnership events, a person is either leading the process/facilitating or participating in achieving the task, but not both. This ensures that facilitators resist the temptation to take over the task. Consequently, although process leaders and facilitators must have process skills, they need no knowledge of the subject. So far, the PQI’s youngest facilitator is 17 years old and our youngest process leader is 23.

Young students have led several highly successful partnership projects. Once equipped with knowledge and skills, they have produced entirely new resources and opportunities, and made major contributions to one another’s learning opportunities. For

example, 18 students designed and delivered the induction programme for approximately 2,500 freshers, and two students created a database of over 1,000 vacation jobs.

Facilitating change for one another has other benefits:

- It makes clear that becoming a learning organization depends on everyone.
- Young, inexperienced people learn transferable skills which build confidence and encourage independent learning.
- Students and young staff become recognized as valuable resources
- Young people facilitating for older, more experienced people change the perceptions of both and, in subtle ways, alter relationships and perceptions of power.

Learning organization development workshops enable partners to acquire the necessary skills, knowledge and experience to facilitate and lead events and partnership projects.

Dissemination and networking

Over the lifetime of the PQI we have learned that, for learning organizations attempting to contribute to a learning society:

- we must find ways of sharing our learning;
- we must be willing to learn from others;
- it is impossible to provide too much information;
- information must be in forms which our audience can access and relate to.

Reports

PQI reports are faithful to the letter and the spirit of partnership events. They include reproductions of the meta-plans, either as mind maps or on pre-prepared hexagons. Action plans and outcomes of open space are faithfully reproduced. The advantages of this approach are that:

- Ownership of the outcomes remains with the people who produced them. They are not tidied up, censored or interpreted.
- Reports include all the ideas and points, which can be referred to as action plans develop and new ones are initiated.
- In written form, reports are a lot quicker to produce than most conventional methods, so the event can be followed up quickly.

Audio, Braille and disk

When designing the partnership event with people with disabilities we were embarrassed to realize that we had been excluding people.

We now produce reports on audio tapes, in large print, in Braille and on disk for those who cannot access standard written reports.

Cartoons

We commission cartoons from one of our partners. They make reports and invitations amusing, attractive and show, far more clearly than words, the wide variety of partners.

Papers, newsletters, workshops

We produce newsletters, papers and articles, run workshops and seminars, and make presentations to anyone interested in learning through partnership.

Video

A PQI student has made more than a dozen videos to record particular projects and help students learn. Video titles range from the irresistible *At Home with Amanda's Tracheostomy*, to *Dancing Daze*, which was televised.

Networks

As a result of partnership events, we began creating networks. The first was the Change × Change, a network for sharing experiences of change across organizations. To support its development, one of the authors of the original PQI proposal undertook action learning research into interorganizational networking[9]. She found that:

- networking between organizations is a far newer concept than we thought;
- writers in related areas see networking and partnerships as the way forward because of world markets, the quest for quality, the need to transfer technologies, ideas and skills quickly, and the need to combine employees' talents in new ways;
- we are engaged in "soft" networking, i.e. connecting people and creating successful partnerships;
- networking can develop individual and organizational skills in alliance building, exchange and sharing;
- the Change × Change network, which involves people from all levels of organizations, and brings concepts and experiences to life in colourful, immediate ways;
- open space experience demonstrated that people want to set their own agenda, network and turn ideas into action plans;
- people who have grasped the concept and value of networking are keen to share experiences and develop ideas.

As a result of the research, future network events will include both participative workshops and a full day, open space session. By combining the two, people can experience others' learning processes, tools and techniques, and network across boundaries, so that new connections and developments can be made. We intend to develop other networks; e.g. building on the partnership event about people with disabilities.

We participate in existing networks including, for example, the Learning Company Project[9] and the International Organizational Development Association (IODA).

Collaborative projects

The PQI team also collaborates with other organizations. Examples include work with:

- Strathclyde University on a narrative case history project, and a learning organization approach to assessment.
- Random Rythms Music Workshop (*sic*) to design the Creativity, Team Building and Music Technology programme – it proved to be the fastest team-building exercise we had ever encountered, and opened up opportunities for partners to make radio advertisements and market through audio tape.
- The Creative Training Company and the Sair Feet Theatre Company to develop industrial theatre, which we learned about in South Africa, through IODA – it has proved a powerful tool for both inter- and intra-organizational communication.

Where people are willing to learn together, the possibilities for inter-organizational networking, collaboration and development are virtually endless.

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