

6-9-2011

## Review of Richard Sagor's Collaborative Action for Professional Learning Communities

Judith J. Slater

*Florida International University, slaterjj@earthlink.net*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.nl.edu/ie>

---

### Recommended Citation

Slater, Judith J.. (2011). Review of Richard Sagor's Collaborative Action for Professional Learning Communities. *i.e.: inquiry in education: Vol. 2: Iss. 1, Article 6.*

Retrieved from: <http://digitalcommons.nl.edu/ie/vol2/iss1/6>

Copyright © 6-9-2011 by the author(s)

i.e.: inquiry in education is published by the Center for Practitioner Research at the National College of Education, National-Louis University, Chicago, IL.

## Book Review

Sagor, R. (2010). *Collaborative Action Research for Professional Learning Communities*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press. 155 pages.

Reviewed by Judith J. Slater  
*Florida International University, Miami, USA*

In light of recent conservative state legislative action to further de-professionalize education, where in some states tenure is legislatively gone and pay is increasingly tied to student achievement, the call for more teacher reflective practice has never been greater. Teachers must produce results, and their students must show progress. They therefore need to find new ways to engage students, to analyze student progress, and match instruction to specific goals and objectives so that measurements of student success show progress. In order to accomplish these goals, teachers need to engage in site-specific practices that inform their instructional milieu. One of the effective ways to do this is through collaborative action research that emerges from research on best practices.

Richard Sagor's *Collaborative Action Research for Professional Learning Communities* (2010) is a comprehensive step-by-step guide for those who wish to engage in collaborative action research. It is premised on the work of Kurt Lewin, who described the normative-re-educative

There can be no innovation, change, or revision of the organizational behavior if there is no cognizance of the human relationships between and among people who reside within.

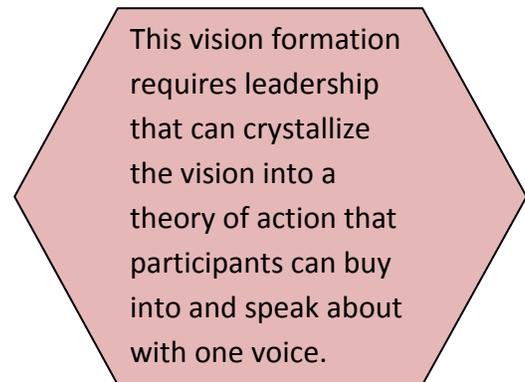
strategies of change as those which arise from "required interrelations between research, training, and action (and, for him, this meant collaborative relationships...between researchers, educators, and activists) in the solution of human problems...needs for change...and improved knowledge" (Bennis, Benne, Chin, & Corey, 1976). There is no small importance to this because the Lewin

perspective has fueled much research and spawned an entire body of literature. His work denotes that in order for real change to occur there needs to be an awareness that the potential for innovation in organizations resides within the people who work there. In effect, there can be no innovation, change, or revision of the organizational behavior if there is no cognizance of the human relationships between and among people who reside within. When everyone is on the same page, working toward shared goals, outcomes are more likely to be achieved.

The literature on collaboration and the reporting of practices, of which action research is an example, are replete with analyses that point to the critical nature of a continuous need to engage in this type of research and practice (Slater, 1996; Slater and Ravid, 2010). The benefits are

enormous, both professionally and personally, when participants engage in reflective practices and elevate their levels of inquiry so that they can improve their practice and the performance of their students. In addition, most action research involves university faculty who manage the change effort and provide the innovation impetus that grounds the practices that are being introduced. Most importantly, the change in the organization, in the way they operate and do their work, has the potential to be life altering when the managed change is successful. In other words, a successful strategy of collaboration changes the way the organization operates in the future. It alters the way they do business, it changes the culture (Schein, 1992), and requires a change in outlook and belief, what Sagor calls “vision,” in the way participants view their own work and that of others. But, it also requires a level of expertise, that of a professional manager of the change.

Genuinely responsive organizations are ever changing and adapt to changes in the environment. They continually revise their “theories in action” and alter their “theories-in-use” (Argyris & Schön, 1974). Sagor, in his nod to Argyris & Schön, delineates five “Habits of Inquiry” for effective collaborative action research to be successful. Like Lewin, he stresses the importance of vision, which he equates with the goals of the project within the context of the organization. This vision formation requires leadership that can crystallize the vision into a theory of action that participants can buy into and speak about with one voice. These theories of action, according to Sagor, are beliefs held that provide a route to the goals and a justification of the choices made to get there. These theories are constantly revised so that the changing needs of the students are met.



This vision formation requires leadership that can crystallize the vision into a theory of action that participants can buy into and speak about with one voice.

While it is effectual for organizations to continually renew themselves, the organizational bureaucratic structure serves itself, duplicating the memes (Slater, 2010) of routine. Innovation and change vie with the status quo making it difficult to sustain any innovation over time. It becomes easier to maintain than to innovate. This is problematic for even simple changes unless mandated by bureaucratic authority. Action research requires elements of time, money, commitment, and momentum that may not be available to participants. It also requires a relationship between a university person and staff who acts as a guide to the process and a conduit for the skills and knowledge necessary to be successful. Sagor does not address this, nor does he talk about the limitations involved and the political and economic toll this takes on schools and universities.

Sagor’s third step is the action component or plan that is to be implemented. It is the most problematic part of his design since there is a rather sophisticated qualitative data analysis component involved that requires, in most circumstances, a deep qualitative understanding of procedures required to sort through and make sense of the human interactions that go on in the organization. Determining the impact of an innovation is fairly easy if you look at quantitative test scores, but the complexity of qualitative analysis without formal training is daunting for the uninitiated. This part of Sagor’s plan requires the preparation of a design for research that includes: surveys, focus groups, interviews, member checking, causal relationship analysis, time

charts, and a plethora of diagrams and flow charts to keep track of what is going on in the project. All of this needs appropriate teacher training at a cost to the school, and appropriate guidance all through implementation. It also requires time to design instruments, to collect data, to plan, etc. In most schools this is not a commodity in abundance. Suggestions that faculty meetings be used once a month for this in the text may not be realistic. While there are extensive worksheets to guide the reader, this alone is not enough to understand and alter operation

Like the action step, the analysis step requires skills most teachers just do not have unless they have had a graduate qualitative course. Sagor asks for trend analysis for questionnaires, disaggregation of summative data by division and class level, trend analysis, coding of data and computer analysis, etc. While this is necessary to see if an innovation is working, is it realistic in light of the daily demands on teachers?

Sagor's last step is future planning and a revamping of the vision statement so that goals can be revised and the whole process can begin again. This is critical to collaboration so that the skills and momentum learned in a project can be sent forward and the culture of the school is changed. When this happens the innovative techniques become sustainable and the participants recognize that group inquiry is better than individual efforts to affect change.

*Collaborative Action Research for Professional Learning Communities* is a good overview of what is involved in the process and serves as an overview of the components that are needed to enact such an undertaking. It is a guide to a process that is multilayered and labor intensive. If all the other components are in place, and time is set aside for planning, analysis, evaluation, recycling, and dissemination of information, this text is a useful and welcome tool. In the best case, a university faculty member can lead the training and analysis phase and meliorate some of the limitations inherent in conducting and practicing collaboration.

*Judith J. Slater is Professor Emeritus, Florida International University. Her expertise includes curriculum theory and evaluation and organizational collaboration. Her books include Anatomy of a Collaboration, Pedagogy of Place, The Freirean Legacy, Teen Life in Asia, Educating for Democracy in a Changing World, Acts of Alignment, The War Against the Professions, Collaboration in Education, and Higher Education and Human Capital: Rethinking the Doctorate in America.*

## References

- Argyris, C., & Schön, D. A. (1974). *Theory in practice: Increasing professional effectiveness*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Bennis, W. G., Benne, K. D., Chin, R., & Corey, K. E. (1976). *The planning of change* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). New York: Holt Rinehart & Winston.
- Schein, E. (1992). *Organizational culture and leadership* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Slater, J. J. (1996). *Anatomy of a collaboration*. New York: Garland.

Slater, J. J. (2010). The meme of collaboration. In J. J. Slater & R. Ravid (Eds.), *Collaboration in education* (pp. 1-13). New York: Routledge.

Slater, J. J., & Ravid, R. (2010). *Collaboration in education*. New York: Routledge.