

A Co-Operative Inquiry To Develop Leadership Capabilities

Chris Booth* and Michael Segon**

In the past ten years there has been considerable debate on the subject of leadership and management development (Finegold, 1994; Friga, Bettis and Sullivan, 2003). Two of the key debates in the management education literature have been firstly the place of Business Schools in developing leaders and managers (Cornuel, 2005; Marrington and Rowe, 2004; Grey, 2004; Pfeffer and Fong, 2003; Wankel and Fillipini, 2002; Leavitt, 2000) and secondly the continued relevance of the MBA as a pre-eminent source of management education (Mintzberg, 2004a; 2004b; Conolly, 2003; Mintzberg and Gosling, 2002; Mintzberg and Lampel, 2001). In 2001 following input from two cross industry focus groups RMIT University established a graduate certificate post-graduate award program in organisational leadership as a response to the growing questioning of practices in management development and as a response an industry identified need to develop an applied leadership practice program at post graduate level suited to experienced practicing managers. A process of co-operative inquiry (Heron, 1996; Heron and Reason, 2001) was used as both a research approach under critical theory driven action research and as an aid to participants co-researching their insights into leader-manager practice and implementing improvements into that practice. This paper explores the methodology adopted, approaches to action research undertaken and also conclusions drawn from the project, many of which now inform practices in the RMIT MBA Executive program.

Field of Research: Leadership, Management, Organisation Behaviour.

1. Introduction – The State Of Management Education

There has been considerable discussion in the past ten years on the topic of developing leadership and management practice, (Finegold, 1994; Friga, Bettis and Sullivan, 2003). A key debate in the management education literature has been around the role of Business Schools in developing leaders and managers, (Cornuel, 2005; Marrington and Rowe, 2004; Grey, 2004; Pfeffer and Fong, 2003; Wankel and Fillipini, 2002; Leavitt, 2000) and also the continued relevance of the MBA degree and the failure of academic programs to build leadership and management

*Mr Chris Booth, Lecturer and Course Coordinator, Graduate School of Business, RMIT University. Australia. Email chris.booth@rmit.edu.au

**Dr Michael Segon, Senior Lecturer and Course Coordinator, Graduate School of Business, RMIT University. Australia. Email michael.segon@rmit.edu.au

practice in students, (Mintzberg, 2004a; 2004b; Conolly, 2003; Mintzberg and Gosling, 2002; Mintzberg and Lampel, 2001).

The present study is related to an industry based program delivery of a university award based post-graduate leadership and management development program. The significance of the study was to assess the impact of an action research approach using co-operative inquiry methods as a key driver for reflection and action on participant leadership and management practice. The following research methodology explores action research literature, practices and processes regarding change at the technical and practical levels of knowledge constitutive interests within a group of leader-managers participating in a co-operative inquiry process, (McNiff and Whitehead, 2000; Carr and Kemmis, 1997; Grundy, 1982).

2. Research Methodology Informing a Leadership Management Development Program

This paper explores a university award post-graduate program aimed at developing leadership and management capabilities in a group of practising managers (Mintzberg, 2004b). The program was a graduate certificate in organisational leadership from RMIT University. The program was delivered to three successive intakes between 2002 and 2004. The paper explores research undertaken within one of these intakes as a series of action research cycles (Dick, 2000), using a co-operative inquiry approach within an action research project (Heron, 1996; Heron and Reason, 2001; 1997).

The action research approach was informed by a critical theoretic paradigm, (McNiff and Whitehead, 2000; Crotty, 1998), aimed at improvements at the technical and practical constitutive interests of knowledge, (How, 2003; Carr and Kemmis, 1997). At the technical level of knowledge practice is improved based on the researcher's own standards, at the practical level of knowledge, the researcher role is to encourage practical deliberation and critical self-reflection on the part of the practitioner research participants, (Kemmis, 2006; Carr and Kemmis, 1997).

2.1 Literature Review of the Cooperative Inquiry Action Research process

The action research project involved a preparatory cycle, which acted as the planning stage for the major action research cycle (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1982), plus the cycles within cycles (Dick, 2000; Cherry, 1999) of the main action research cycle itself.

The preparatory cycle that identified the key characteristics of and rationale for the GCOL post-graduate award program. Three successive intakes of the program formed the basis of the succeeding action research cycles aimed at confirming and disconfirming data in a large

scale research project, (Coughlan and Brannick, 2005; Dick, 2000; 1992; 1991). The preparatory cycle can be considered a major planning input informing succeeding cycles. This phase of the project equates to the pre-step, 'context and purpose phase' of the project, (Coughlan and Brannick, 2005, p. 21).

The major action research cycle comprised the four courses in the GCOL post-graduate award program for the development of leadership and management practice. Cycles of planning, acting, observing and reflecting to inform further cycles, were undertaken within each course that was consistent with action research approaches under a critical theory perspective, (Carr and Kemmis, 1997; Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988; Zuber Skerritt, 2000; 1991a; 1991b; McNiff and Whitehead, 2002; 2000).

The research methodology under action research was built upon a cooperative inquiry. According to Heron (2006, p. 1), 'Co-operative inquiry involves two or more people researching a topic through their own experience of it, using a series of cycles in which they move between this experience and reflecting together on it. Each person is co-subject in the experience phases and co-researcher in the reflection phases.' A cooperative inquiry involves research with people as opposed to on people (Reason and Heron, 1997). In such research the primary researcher and participants become co researchers into a mutual thematic concern (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988).

The thematic concern in this research project was improved leadership and management practice. The cooperative inquiry involved building empathy with co-researchers for open dialogues regarding research and critique on leader-manager practice and open dialogues to share insights to practice. Heron, (1996, p.58) refers to this process as 'being present'. Constructs such as 'imaginal openness" (intuiting patterns of meaning), 'reframing' (challenging mental models) and 'emotional competence" capacity to identify and manage own emotions, were evident as the cooperative inquiry group considered individually and collectively the practice of leadership and management in their own organisational contexts.

As the group became more capable and confident in the program and action and research processes involving reflection on practice, more of the characteristics of co-operative inquiry became evident. These characteristics included greater propensity for co-research moving from a logical 'Apollonian' inquiry to a more imaginal and divergent 'Dionysian' inquiry towards greater ownership of decision-making in the inquiry, (Reason and Heron, 1999; 1997; Reason, 1994; Heron, 1996, p.46). This action research cycle and the succeeding two cycles in the large scale project also used elements of first person research/practice, (intrapersonal awareness of practice) and second person research/practice (intrapersonal awareness and understanding) as espoused by Torbert (2004; 2001, pp. 251-256). Conceptual aspects of

action inquiry (Torbert, 2004; 2001), linked very strongly to the program and course content areas of the first two courses – Personal Knowledge and Leadership Practice and Managing Organizational Relationships.

The major data gathering processes in the research project included program facilitator records such as research journals and notes, diary entries and notations, emails associated with program (Facilitator, participants, University administration) and University program records and documents (Hughes, 1998). Other sources of primary data to surface action (change) and research (understanding) included, participant reflective journals, participant presentation records, artefacts developed through the program such as posters, images, and the like (Hendricks, 2006) and the post program interviews based on a semi-structured question approach.

Multiple sources of data provide a means of testing for agreement and explaining disagreement between different data sets derived through the cyclical action research process (Dick, 2002; 2000). Dick (2000; 1999; 1992) refers to the process of multiple data sources challenging and refining action research cycles as a 'dialectic' process. The 'dialectic' process, which is a form of triangulation, provides a degree of rigour to qualitative research in data collection and analysis (Dick, 1999; 1992).

3. Project Aims in the Action Research Cycles

There were five key aims for this critical theory informed action research project. Firstly, to involve project participants in determining the focus of research on leadership and management practice and decisions on processes, content and contexts of learning through participative approaches and co-operative inquiry into practice. Secondly, to develop improved leadership and management practice for the program participants through an applied adult learning university award program. Thirdly, to develop an action and research environment in the program, for participants to act, reflect and improve own practice in a process of collective co-research using 'co-operative inquiry' approaches, (Heron and Reason, 2001, p.179; 1997). Fourthly, to identify action research developed initiatives and insights from the project that appeared to improve the leadership, management and learner practices of the program participants. Lastly, to assess the impact of Emotional Intelligence competence, (Goleman, 1998; 1995; Goleman, Boyatzis and McKee, 2002; 2001) approaches in improvements in leadership and management practice and action research processes. This final aim was evaluated through a process of 20 post program interviews and case reports as the subject of a separate research project.

4. The Process of Action Research in the Project

The action research cycle was undertaken within a delivery of a university graduate certificate program in organisation leadership (GCOL) aimed at mid level managers from a single organization. Following a presentation to senior managers of an Australian government department involved in

environment and resource management and an expression of interest presentation to 20 managers interested in a graduate management program, a small group of 10 participants applied for the program. The program commenced in June 2002 with a planned delivery over 12 months.

The delivery of the four courses in the GCOL program would make up the action research cycle. Each course could be considered a mini cycle in its own right which provided opportunity to plan, act, observe and reflect on learning processes of participants in the joint focus of the action research process on leadership and management practice development. The concept of cycles within cycles is also consistent with practitioners reported experiences of action research in practice, (Mellor, 2001; Dick, 1999a; Cherry, 1999; Straker and Hall, 1999).

In applying for the program the 10 department managers had made a decision to seek to improve their practice of leadership and management through the RMIT GCOL program. Many were unsure of the program and what experiences lay ahead but all had made an explicit commitment in taking up the program that they were seeking to improve their practice. The improvement of leadership and management practice became the principal 'thematic concern' of the action research project, (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988, p.8). The aim was to develop a collaborative approach to critically examine leadership and management practice and improve such practice. According to Kemmis and McTaggart, (1988, p.5), 'The approach is only action research when it is *collaborative*, though it is important to realise that the action research of the group is achieved through the critically examined action of individual group members'.

Individual and collective action in participant practice and critical reflection on action leading to changed practice was developed through individual reflection reporting, reflection on action presentations and group reflections on action and researched insights to practice. The processes were verbal, written and publicly shared reflections and insights consistent with a collaborative and critical focus on improved practice under action research, (McNiff, Lomax, and Whitehead, 2003, McNiff, and Whitehead, 2002; Zuber-Skerrit, 2000; Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988).

The Government department RED at the time of the graduate certificate program was comprised of several departments amalgamated into a super department. Primary industry, Sustainable Resources, Parks and Waterways, State Communities, and an Indigenous Affairs department, were amalgamated into a single organisation. Table 4.2 below highlights the goals of 'One RED'. Quality leadership and management skilling was identified as a need by RED and the department had invested heavily in the Front Line Management Initiative (FMI) as the principal organisational leadership development program. Following several successful deliveries of the RMIT FMI program, DNRE now sought further development of mid level staff with the RMIT GCOL program.

Table 1 Goals supporting the Vision of 'One RED'

<p>RED Goals</p> <p>Achievement of...</p> <p>Sustainable growth from competing natural resource-based industries <i>with a</i></p> <p>Smaller footprint <i>through</i></p> <p>Capable communities <i>who have</i></p> <p>Knowledge of ecosystems <i>supported by</i></p>
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4.1 Planning stage for the Action Research cycle

In terms of program content, and processes of learning engagement, much of the planning for the first action research cycle was undertaken in the pre-cycle GCOL program development and accreditation. This pre-planning and associated actions developed the program framework.

A number of specific action stages were required to implement the first action research cycle of the project. Firstly, there was a need to define the nature of the engagement with the host organisation (RED), (McNiff and Whitehead, 2000; Huxham and Vangen, 2004; 2000), and to work with the RED Learning Development manager to develop a program delivery schedule over twelve-months, arrange venues, communication with participants and arrange reporting lines to the learning and development manager. In terms of the first meetings with participants, the core 'thematic concern' of improving leadership and management practice, needed to be clearly articulated and participants affirm commitment to the program, (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988). On the RMIT University program management side there were a number of program management issues to be planned and implemented in order to coordinate the program, maintain academic records and assess program performance.

Approaches to build relationships of collaboration with the program participants through the first course needed to be planned out. As well as processes of continuing this process through the remaining three courses to research and learn with the participants, also (Heron and Reason, 2001; Torbert, 2004; 2001). A further planning issue was identifying approaches to encourage movement from a pedagogic model of educational interaction and learning to one built on androgogic practices consistent with the aims of the GCOL program. The aims of building reflective practice processes, developing self-directed adult learning and encouraging change in leadership and management practice for

participants, were critical to success of the action research project, (Knowles, Holton and Swanson, 2005; Mezirow, 1991; Knowles, 1985; 1984; 1975; Marsick and Watson, 1999; Burns, 1995).

It was important in the planning stage of the first action research cycle as well as succeeding cycles that research approaches were consistent with a critical theory methodology to assist the researcher and participants to collaboratively reflect and act to improve leadership and management practice towards technical, participatory and emancipatory outcomes as emergent within the action research project, (Kemmis, 2006; 1992). The success of the inquiry processes in the action research cycles depended upon creating a cooperative action research approach where facilitators and participants co-developed GCOL program content, processes and context of delivery during the action research project, (Reason and Bradbury, 2001). Finally, approaches to effective action research data collection and evaluation methods need to be planned. These, approaches would be critical to the observation and reflection stages and insights to come out of each of the cycles (Dick, 2002; 2000; 1992; 1991; Cherry, 1999; Zuber-Skerritt, 2000; 1991b).

4.2 Action and Observation in the Action Research Cycle

The actions and observations presented in this first cycle of the action research project are framed within the four courses of the GCOL program delivered to DNRE. Each of the four courses of the GCOL program effectively became cycles within a cycle, (Dick, 2000; Cherry, 1999).

4.2.1 Project Management: Engagement with the Organisation

The nature of the engagement with the government organisation was at two levels. Firstly, the inter-organizational level, where relationship trust was developed (Vangen and Huxham, 2003), whilst developing an effective learning and development intervention to build leadership capability, (Cacioppe, 1998). Secondly, at the intra-organizational level, where facilitator and participant collaborated on learning and development needs in an ambiguous and complex organizational setting, (Huxham and Vangen, 2004; 2000; Hardy and Phillips, 1998).

A critical element of the engagement was the relationship management of the consultant providers at RMIT with the client project manager within the organization. Kanter (1994) has identified that the relationship aspects of any partnership are critical to the progress and success of inter-organisational collaborations. Clear expectations were formed and articulated by both parties to build confidence that they could be fulfilled, (Vangen and Huxham, 2003; Hardy and Phillips, 1998). A further element enabling the engagement to proceed was successful delivery of earlier programs in management under the Front Line Management Initiative (FMI), (Karpin, 1995). Successful relationship management and program delivery consolidated the relationship and trust in the value and expected deliverables in the new leadership program, (Vangen and Huxham, 2003).

The approach to building trust was adapted from the 'Cyclical Trust Building Loop' of Huxham and Vangen, (2000, p. 12). The model (Diagram 1 below), is an adaptation of the authors original concepts enhanced by inclusion of the following. A greater emphasis on the clarity of expectations of process and outcomes to ensure expectations and perceptions remain largely congruent through the term of the engagement. A further stage to the cycle indicated as a 'Reinforce trusting attitudes' stage, which would be demonstrated 'through behaviours' congruent with expectations.

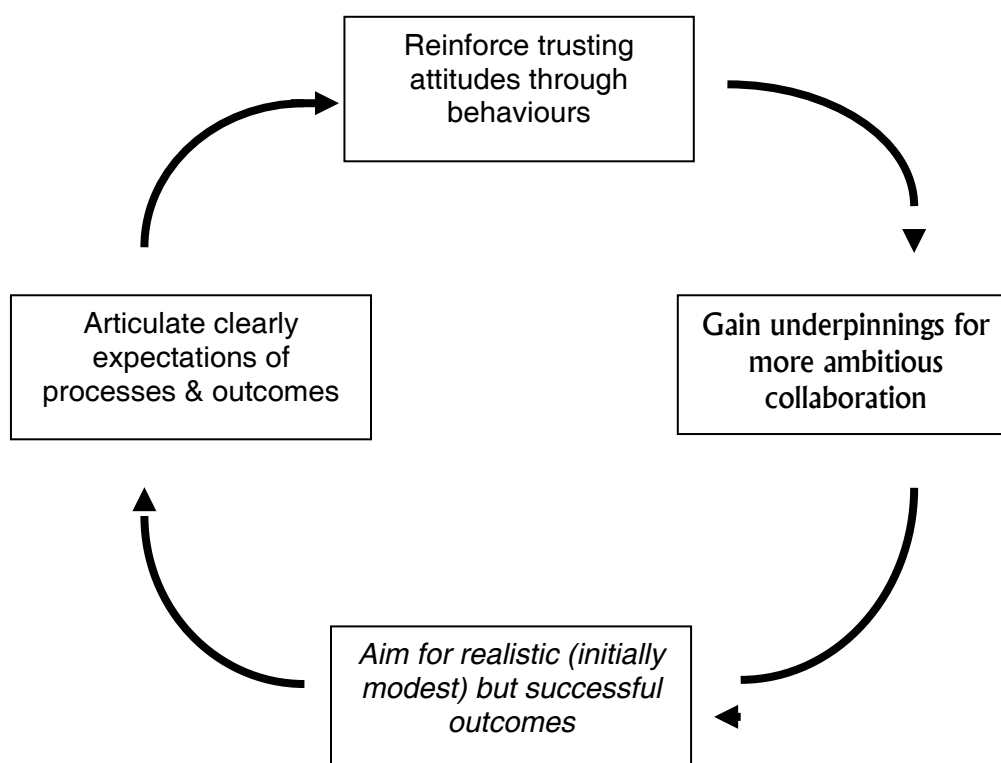


Figure 1: A Process of Trust Building adapted from Vengen and Huxham (2003:12)

4.2.2 Process of Inter-Organisational Engagement to Develop a Leadership Program.

The process of developing the leadership and management program for Resources and Environment Department (RED) followed a process for developing leadership programs outlined by Cacioppe (1998). Diagram 2 represents the process as applied to RED.

The first stage of the model (Cacioppe, 1998) articulated 'One RED' as a strategic imperative. The second stage of setting objectives for development was the objective of a widely distributed practice of

leadership. This was first undertaken in an earlier front line manager program and now identified as a further need for a more advanced development of select managers. The third stage identified that a customised, integrated adult learning program recognised at a post graduate level, would attract potential internal candidates and also provide them with more advanced processes and techniques than a training program or generic management program. The fourth stage selection of appropriate providers and design of learning programs was the point of entry by RMIT University. The University program team was able to present its graduate program and develop customised content and processes suited to a mix of managers from disparate backgrounds of science, HR, administration and policy development and implementation. The fifth stage identified successful outcomes through promotions and new roles for many participants and high levels of satisfaction by participants. Equally evident was positive feedback from the managers of several participants related to their improved capabilities and leadership acumen. Finally, the sixth and seventh stages, namely 'Integrate with HR Systems' and 'Evaluation of Strategic Imperatives, Objectives and HR Systems' were disrupted by a major restructure of the government organisation into three separate entities. The strategic Imperative of 'One Organisation' was therefore redundant.

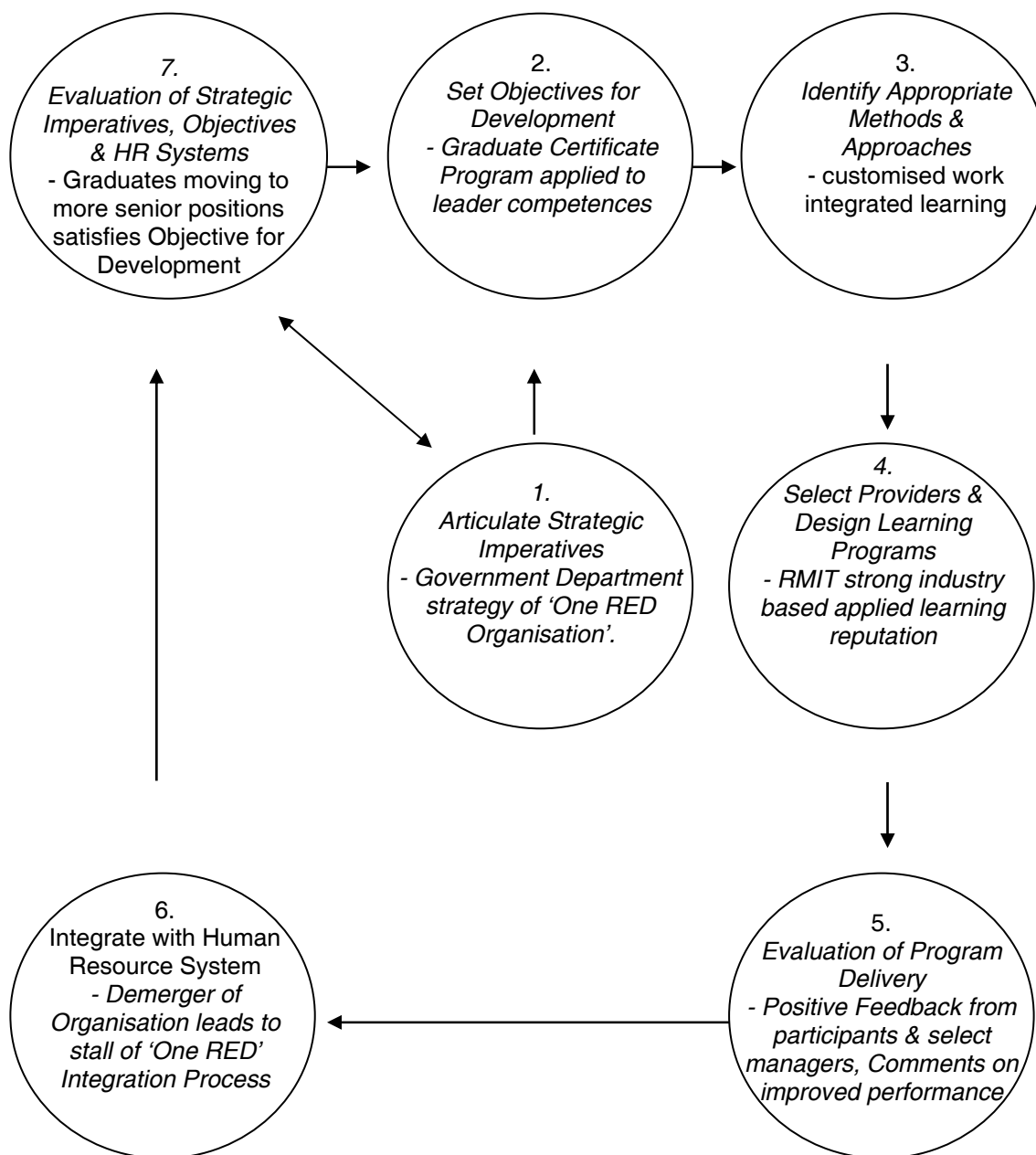


Figure 2: An applied adaptation of a model of an integrated approach to Leadership Development by Cacioppe (1998)

4.2.3 Program Delivery

The nature of the program was a lock step design in which each preceding course (i.e. subject), added value to the succeeding course. It was decided to move against the traditional university model of delivery of two courses contiguously in a semester and move to delivery of one course every ten or so weeks to allow an immersion in the content and processes of that course.

Participants at this stage of the program seemed content to have a number of operational decisions made unilaterally and presented rather than discussed and made collaboratively. This perhaps represented acquiescence to a set mental model, (Senge, 1990; Flood, 1999), on the role of the academic, nature of a tertiary award program and collective experience in other training and tertiary programs.

4.2.4 Defining the Core 'Thematic Concern'

Action research involves identifying a 'thematic or area of concern' agreed to by the group and with action (change) and research (reflection) undertaken to improve the outcomes of the thematic concern, (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988, p.9; McNiff et al, 2003). The thematic or area of concern, of the GCOL program was developing approaches to improve leadership and management practice both at the individual participant level and also to improve practices at the program level in understanding what facilitation processes and program design appeared to assist participants.

The major goal of the GCOL program was to improve practice through broadening knowledge by way of critical readings, dialogue interaction in workshops on leadership practice across the four course areas. Each course would develop participant capabilities through individual and small and larger group reflection and sharing of insights on changes in leadership and management practice stemming from their involvement in the GCOL program. The nature of action research approaches in reflection and action towards improved practice in the GCOL program was clearly aligned to the notion of thematic concern of improving leadership and management practice as shared by the group, (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988). A presentation to approximately twenty-five potential candidates outlined the thematic concern (i.e. an aim to improve leadership and management practice) and processes (reflection on and in action towards insights in class seminar dialogues, individual and group learning set presentations and submission of reflection on practice reports) of the program. Ten managers from across the host organization accepted the program as meeting their needs and this group of ten committed to improving practice through the GCOL program with all ten completing it in 2003.

'Action research is participatory, collaborative research which typically arises from the clarification of some concerns generally shared by the group. People *describe* their concerns, explore what others think, and probe what it might be possible to do.... The group identifies a thematic concern.' (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988, p.9).

In electing to become part of the GCOL program and continuing with it through the processes of action research cycles at a group level and reflection on practice at the individual level individuals had committed to a process to improve leadership and management practice. The reflection

reports and final post program interviews provide evidence of a process of research into own practice through reading, collegial dialogues, reflection and critical incidents leading to altered practices. The improvement of leadership and management practice became the thematic concern, the topic of inquiry of the courses in the program and the action research process undertaken during and after the program, (Heron, 1996; 1992; Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988).

4.2.5 Program Content, Activity, and Assessment.

In the first two courses of the program, (Personal Knowledge and Leadership Practice and Managing Organisational relationships), the RED participants accepted the array of readings and variety of activities. The first course included a full Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) session run by accredited staff and activities around use of metaphor and mind mapping for RED issues. The course also included activities involved in Transactional Analysis, (Karpman Triangle) and Rational Emotive Therapy (RET), which provided rich streams of dialogue and group insight making in terms of RED related issues and also awareness of personal aspects of leadership and management practice.

In the second course Emotional Intelligence (EI) in leadership and in groups was examined, (Caruso and Salovey, 2004; Goleman, 1998; 1995; Goleman, Boyatzis and McKee, 2002; 2001; Druskat and Wolff, 2001). Persuasion and influence approaches, decision-making as a process, empowerment and stressful performance conversations were all issues covered through key readings in the second course. In this second course there was greater focus on discussion and less focus on activities. There was also a move for participants to contribute materials such as readings and become more involved in determining learning activities and processes reflecting an increasing level of androgogic learning practice under self-direction, (Knowles, et al, 2005; Burns, 1995; Brockett, 1991; Knowles, 1990; 1985; 1984)

Participant feedback at the end of the second module provided a basis for change to content and delivery in modules three and four. On the basis of the feedback and further dialogue with the RED participants, key improvement issues were identified. The feedback was obtained through in class discussions recorded in field notes and diarised, also in individual emails from participants as well as an email of collective thoughts. The issues identified were addressed in a revised plan of content, interaction processes and delivery was established. Appendix A presents the planned changes as they were implemented as actions into the remainder of the action research cycle.

The evidence of changes in leadership and management practice was noted in participant's own referent feedback as well as peer feedback from within the participant group. In a number of cases, participants attributed significant organisational and personal performance gains in whole or in part to practices stemming from the GCOL program. Stated

below are some specific instances of improved practice in leadership and management practice stemming from the program as reported by participants and observed by the researcher.

It appears that for the RED group of participants that leadership and management practice has been improved in many instances, thereby addressing the thematic concern of the action research project and also confirming some effectiveness of the program in delivering improved leadership and management practice. Case studies from interviews have confirmed this and are the subject of a complementary research project output to the research of this current paper.

The major improvements appearing in the reports from participants and observed in their behaviours within work environments are presented in Table 1 linked to the aims of the action research project. Evidence for claims is sourced from artefact data, observational data and inquiry data, (Hendricks, 2006). 'Artefact data', (Hendricks, 2006, p.74), included participant's individual and group presentations, Participant reflective reports, Program Coordinator reports and assessment records,; 'Research Diary' entries, (Hughes, 1998, p.1). 'Observational data', (Hendricks, 2006, p.83), included the researcher's 'Field Notes' and 'Anecdotal records', (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988, p.100). 'Inquiry data' included such items as the student program evaluation survey and qualitative feedback as well as post program interviews confirming positive engagements and value derived from the program. (Hendricks, 2006, p.89).

Table 1
Evidence of achievement of Action Research Cycle 1 against Research Project Aims

Research Aim	Evidence of Achievement
<p>Improved leadership and management practice through a university award based the program.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ A significant number of program participants reported improved levels of self-confidence and surety in their leadership and managerial practice. ▪ Participants reported and displayed improved business level acumen in using efficient processes to achieve effective organisational and personal outcomes. ▪ Participants reported improved capacity to think more systemically and strategically in dealing with operational issues and longer-term strategic issues that impact their department and organisation as a whole. ▪ High number of participants completed program and displayed observable improved leadership and managerial practice. <p>(The above confirmed through: examples of improved practice and learning processes in participant reflection reports throughout program; observed practices in final sessions; observed practices in workplaces during visits by the researcher; specific statements of improved practice in post program interviews)</p>
<p>Participants able to act, reflect and improve own practice in a participative process of collective co-research using co-operative inquiry approaches.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Increased participant involvement in decisions relating to processes and content of courses. ▪ Increased coordination and control of facilitated learning sessions on practice by the participants. ▪ Increased sophistication in inquiry, collaboration and emotional and interpersonal interactions (Heron, 1996), in action research cycle, reflecting co-operative inquiry characteristics of authentic collaboration. <p>(The above confirmed through: examples of improved practice and learning processes in participant reflection reports throughout program; observed practices in final sessions; observed practices in workplaces during visits by the researcher; specific statements of</p>

	improved practice in post program interviews)
Improvement of learner practices of the program participants through action research project processes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Participants reported capacities to see multiple perspectives on issues and a capacity to identify core strategic issues for action. ▪ Participants reported improved capacity to think more systemically and strategically in dealing with operational issues and longer-term strategic issues that impact their department and organisation as a whole. ▪ Participants displayed high levels of self-directed learning actions and negotiating learning processes and forms of evidence with facilitator and each other. <p>(The above confirmed through: examples of improved practice and learning processes in participant reflection reports throughout program; observed practices in final sessions; observed practices in workplaces during visits by the researcher; specific statements of improved practice in post program interviews)</p>
Impact of Emotional Intelligence competence in improved leadership and management practice and action research processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Participants indicated specific examples of benefits in developing practices in emotional intelligence in order, to identify own emotions involved in analysis and decisions, to be aware of the emotions of others in play in work and life situations and to manage others and own emotions effectively towards improved outcomes. ▪ Participants displayed increasing self-awareness and self-management competence and improving social awareness and relationship management competences. <p>(The above confirmed through: examples of improved practice and learning processes in participant reflection reports throughout program; observed practices in final sessions; observed practices in workplaces during visits by the researcher; specific statements of improved practice in post program interviews)</p>

5. Conclusions Drawn From the Action Research Project

In terms of the intra-organisational engagement, the three constitutive interest 'modes', (Grundy, 1982, p.23), of critical theory informed action research can be considered to be 'developmental stages' of a project, (Zuber-Skerritt, 1991a, p.114). Both Grundy (1982) and Zuber-Skerritt (1991a), indicate that a transition across modes in a project life can and does occur. To quote Zuber-Skerritt, (1991a, p.114), ' ... it is quite legitimate to start with technical action research and gradually to proceed to the higher levels, ...'.

The action research cycle moved from technical to a confirmed practical action research mode, (Zuber Skerritt, 1991b: Grundy, 1982), as the participants during the cycle became more sophisticated in the examination of their leadership and management practice. In the final courses of the program participants, in their personal reflections, group dialogues and public presentations on action, displayed more insightful 'practitioner understanding' and clearly defined 'transformation of...consciousness' in their respective leadership and management practice, (Zuber-Skerritt, 1991b, p.12). For some participants the new, found knowledge and capability of practice encompassed an emancipatory level of practice as they challenged organisational routines and redefined their leadership roles and capacity to change situations through their practice, (Altricher et al, 2002; Zuber-Skerritt, 1991b)

Following a process of action research with participant managers over a year-long series of action research cycles, the following was achieved:

1. Action research insights at the *Technical* level through mastery of intra-personal, interpersonal, systemic thinking and strategic thinking, theories, concepts and constructs were introduced as knowledge and skills base and critiqued for personal and organisational benefit.
2. Action research results at the *Practical* level through application of new knowledge and skills to leadership practice and reflection on where and how these concepts and new patterns of practice could add value. Also evident during the cycle were high levels of participation and co-operative inquiry processes that assisted in the exploration and improvement of leadership and management practice which was the thematic concern of the participant's individual and collective research and remedial action.
3. Action research insights at the *Emancipatory* level with reflection on practice and in practice providing new levels of self-confidence, competence and acumen in participant's leadership and management practice.
4. Importantly the key learnings from this co-operative inquiry approach under action research in the GCOL program has informed practices, content and processes in the RMIT MBA Executive program in the Leadership and Management course in terms of content, processes of engagement and change through reflective practice, (Schön, 1983; 1987). The new course design in

content and processes was a key initiative in renewing MBA program performance in terms of student program satisfaction and retention within the intake.

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Appendix A**Program improvement issues raised by program participants and revised plan of actions for modules 3 and 4 of the program under research project first action research cycle.**

(Source: Participant feedback in dialogues & emails in Action Research Cycle 1, 2002).

Courseware or Delivery Issue for Improvement	Revised Plan responses effected as AR cycle actions in DNRE GCOL Modules 3 and 4
Greater variety in the reading	Moved towards variety of courseware inputs: Provided articles on Public Sector management (Australia/International) Other Management Journals (eg Organizational Dynamics, Academy of Management etc) Provided more contemporary text extracts to supplement HBR articles
More structured and consistent approach to time management in the weekly meetings	Moved to structured agendas with timelines for activities and specified dialogues.
Clear outline of the purpose and subject matter for discussion at the commencement of weekly meetings	Designed and provided work sheets to assist in focused discussions. Items were emailed before weekly sessions.
Learning sets possibly taking more carriage of meetings – and linking this to presentations	Planned an intervention in module 3 to build whole session around group presentations on insights from readings
Less preoccupation with administrative issues dealing with venues and times for module 3.	Ensured that venues, a schedule of readings and activities were fully detailed for modules 3 and 4 with the consensus of the group.
Program Coordinator's role in GCOL Program	Decision was taken for the GCOL Program Coordinator to relinquish coordination and control of other commercial programs at RMIT and take up full delivery of program in modules 3 and 4. This action affirmed and clarified the Coordinator role in the GCOL program
There has been an observation that were an individual's various	Moved to implement detailed discussion of the elements of performance in higher achieving reflection reports. Moved to

<p>assessments to be shared and the rationale made clear as to the grading that this would benefit those who would like to enhance their performance.</p>	<p>share insights on reflection and report writing capabilities. Facilitator provided more detailed feedback commentary on reflection reports to assist participant reflective practice.</p>
<p>The mechanisms by which the group will collectively contribute to NRE also need to be considered during module 3 in the context of applying learning to a body of work or an issue that may be relevant for everyone in the group.</p>	<p>Determined that the group needs to decide on approaches to integration to meet Department of Primary Industry, Department of Sustainable Environment, Department of Victorian Communities needs. Group determined approaches to capture potential to share the learning from the GCOL Program in terms of leadership and learning practices that would benefit wider departmental community.</p>