

# TWO

## Learning in Action

The questions underpinning this chapter direct you to first person activities as you, the insider action researcher, engage in first and second person inquiry/practice as you enact the action research cycles. How do you learn in action? How do you attend to what you might be learning as you engage in the issues of your action research project? How might you do research in the present? As answers to these questions, we outline the structure of human knowing and ground some processes of how adults learn in action and how reflection and journaling may be used to help you realize what and how you are learning. Our focus is not on learning *on* action but on learning *in* action.

As the insider action researcher, you are an actor in the setting of the organization. In contrast with traditional research approaches, you are not neutral but an active intervener making and helping things happen. Accordingly, a critical feature of action research is how you learn about yourself in action as you engage in first, second and third person inquiry.

At its core, first person practice means that your own beliefs, values, assumptions, ways of thinking, strategies and behaviour and so on are afforded a central place of inquiry in your action research practice – the actor-director, as we portrayed in the previous chapter. It involves attention to how you experience yourself in inquiry and in action, what Reason and Torbert (2001) refer to as ‘upstream’ and ‘downstream’ inquiry and Marshall (1999) as ‘living life as inquiry’. As Marshall (2001) describes it, self-reflective practice involves enacting inquiry with intent in a manner that is distinct for each person, suggesting that each individual must craft his/her own practice and attend to its quality through inner and outer arcs of attention, enacting cycles of action and reflection and being both active and receptive.

Learning in action is grounded in the inquiry–reflection process. Schon’s (1983) notion of the ‘reflective practitioner’ captures the essentials of knowing in action and reflection in action. Knowing in action is tacit and opens up outcomes that fall within the boundaries of what you have learned to treat as

normal. Reflection in action occurs when you are in the middle of an action and you ask questions about what you are doing and what is happening around you. The outcome is immediate as it leads to an on-the-spot adjustment of your action.

Inquiry can be focused outward (e.g. what is going on in the organization, in the team etc.?) or inward (e.g. what is going on in me?). In Chapter 7 we will outline some conceptual frameworks which provide a basis for understanding organizational processes which are utilized for that outward-focused inquiry and reflection. Here we focus on the activities of inward inquiry and reflection of first person practice. Marshall (1999; 2001) presents individual learning in action as ‘inquiry as a way of being’ and describes this first person research/practice in terms of (1) inquiring into the inner and outer arcs of attention, (2) engaging in cycles of action and reflection and (3) being active and receptive. Lonergan (1992; Flanagan, 1997) describes the process of grasping and internalizing the process of knowing as ‘self-appropriation’.

## Knowing and learning

The structure of human knowing is a three step heuristic process: experience, understanding and judgement (Lonergan, 1992; Flanagan 1997; Coghlan, 2008a; Melchin and Picard, 2008) (Table 2.1). First, we attend to our experience. Then we ask questions about our experience and receive an insight (understanding), and we follow that up by reflecting and weighing up the evidence to determine whether our insight fits the evidence or not (judgement). Of course, a great deal of our knowing is actually belief, where we accept the work of others, though at times we may need to verify for ourselves. The pattern of the three operations is invariant in that it applies to all settings of cognitional activity, whether solving a crossword clue, solving an everyday problem or engaging in scientific research. Added to the process of knowing is that of deciding and taking action.

## Experiencing

Experience is the empirical level of consciousness and is an interaction of inner and outer events, or the data of sense and the data of consciousness. You can

Table 2.1 Operations of human cognition and doing

<b>Experience</b>	Seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, remembering, imagining, feeling, ...
<b>Understanding</b>	Inquiring, understanding, formulating what is being understood
<b>Judgement</b>	Marshalling evidence, testing, judging
<b>Decision/action</b>	Deliberating, valuing, deciding, choosing, taking action, behaving, ...

not only see, hear, smell, taste and touch, imagine, remember, feel and think, but also experience yourself as seeing, hearing, thinking, feeling, remembering and imagining. As the action researcher you experience a great deal as the project goes through its cycles. Some of your experiences are planned; others are unplanned. Some are what is done to you by others. Some experiences are cognitive; they occur through the intellectual processes of thinking and understanding. Some occur in feelings and emotions. At times you may feel excited, angry, frustrated, sad, lonely and so on. Other experiences may be experienced in the body: excited energy, embarrassed blushing, tightness in the stomach, headaches, ulcers or sickness. These three domains – cognitive, feelings and body awareness – are where experiencing occurs and you can learn by attending to these (Gendlin, 1981).

### Understanding

Insight is an act of understanding that grasps the intelligible connections between things that previously have appeared disparate. It occurs at the intellectual level of consciousness. Sensory data are what you experience but do not yet understand. So you ask questions, 'What is this?', 'What does this mean?' Answers to such questions come in the form of insights, which are creative acts of understanding, of grasping and formulating patterns, unities, relationships and explanations in response to questions posed to your experience. The search for understanding is intelligent, focusing on a question or problem. While you might not know yet if a particular current search is intelligent, you anticipate intelligent answers. This act of understanding grasps a pattern in data. There are no recipes, rules or procedures to follow that lead inevitably to insights. The achievement of insight is unpredictable. It can happen quickly or more slowly. For example, if you do crosswords, notice your questions about a clue, the flashes of insight that you get (eventually!), how you check those insights with how they fit with the blank spaces for the letters and the other words that cross it. Then you verify: this must be the answer. Perhaps later, when you have completed other parts of the crossword, you find that you were not correct and you have another insight and then you verify that your new insight seems to fit better. If we tell you a joke, you get the unexpected connection at the end and you laugh (hopefully!). If you are watching a detective story on TV, you are furnished with clues throughout and the challenge is to figure out who the villain is with the detective as the story unfolds. You report that it suddenly dawned on you or that you saw the connection. Or it may be that you say, 'I just don't get it.' 'Getting it' occurs all the time and in all sorts of situations. Archimedes got it when, while having a bath, he saw how submerging the king's new crown would determine its specific gravity and so inform him of what it was made. You laugh when you get a joke. You get the possible answer to the crossword clue.

There are also inverse insights, ones for which there are no intelligible answers or patterns. It is not that you can't find them but that you grasp that there aren't any.

Lonergan (1992) argues that to grasp an insight into insight is to grasp knowledge about knowledge, and as such it is relevant to a whole series of basic problems in philosophy. Insight makes the difference between the tantalizing problem and the evident solution. In so far as it is the act of organizing intelligence, insight is an apprehension of relations and meaning. Every insight goes beyond experience to an explanatory organization.

Attending to experience is the first step to learning. The second step is to stand back from these experiences and inquire into them. What is it that has me feeling angry? What is it that I do not yet understand? You are reflecting on your experiences of constructing, planning action, taking action and evaluating action in the project.

### Judgement

While insights are common, they are not always accurate or true. The question then is, does the insight fit the evidence? This opens up a question for reflection. Is it so? Yes or no? Maybe. I don't know. The shift in attention turns to a verification-oriented inquiry for accuracy, sureness and certainty of understanding. So you move to a new level of the cognitive process, where you marshal and weigh evidence and assess its sufficiency. You are at the rational level of consciousness. You set the judgement up conditionally; if the conditions have been fulfilled, then it must be true or accurate. There may be conflicting judgements and you may have to weigh the evidence and choose between them. If you do not think that you have sufficient evidence to assert that your insight fits the data then you can postpone judgement or make a provisional judgement and correct it later when you have other evidence.

There are, of course, such things as stupidity, obtuseness, confusion, divergent views, lack of attention and a general lack of intelligence. Understanding may not spontaneously flow from experience. Many insights may be wrong. Your interpretations of data may be superficial, inaccurate, biased. Judgements may be flawed. You can gain insight into these negative manifestations of knowing by the same threefold process of knowing.

### Taking action

You are not just a knower; you also make decisions and act. Decision/action is at the responsible level of consciousness. The process of deciding is a similar process to that of knowing. You experience a situation. Using sensitivity, imagination and intelligence you seek to gain understanding as to what possible

**Table 2.2** General empirical method in action research

Empirical level	Attentiveness
Intellectual level	Intelligence
Rational level	Reasonableness
Responsible level	Responsibility

courses of action there might be. At this level you ask what courses of action are open to you and you review options, weigh choices and decide. You reflect on the possible value judgements as to what is the best option, you decide to follow through the best value judgement and you take responsibility for consistency between your knowing and your doing. Accordingly, in the terms of action research, to the empirical, intellectual and rational levels of the empirical method is added the responsible level (Table 2.2).

What do you do as a result of your experience, understanding and judgement? It may be that you decide to behave differently the next time you are in a similar situation in order not to repeat the previous experience or in order to create a different outcome. What actions are you taking as a consequence of your reflection on constructing, planning action, taking action and evaluating action?

These four operations function in a cycle where experiencing, understanding, judging and deciding/acting set up another cycle of experiencing, and so on. Learning becomes a continuous cycle through life. You need to develop skills at each activity: be able to experience directly, be able to stand back and ask questions, be able to conceptualize answers to your questions, and be able to take risks and experiment in similar or new situations. The insider action research process makes particular demands on how you experience, understand, judge, decide and act.

### General empirical method

The cognitional operations of experience, understanding and judgement form a general empirical method, which requires:

- attention to observable data
- envisaging possible explanations of those data
- preferring as probable or certain the explanations which provide the best account for the data.

These require the dispositions to perform the operations of attentiveness, intelligence and reasonableness, to which is added responsibility when we seek to take action.

A method is not the same as a recipe, which delivers another instance of the same product. The key to method is the relationship between questioning and answering; it is a framework for collaborative creativity that deals with different kinds of questions, each with its own objective. So questions for understanding of specific data (What is happening here?) have a different focus from questions for reflection (Does this fit?) or questions of responsibility (What ought I do?). The general empirical method of being attentive, intelligent, reasonable and responsible is a normative heuristic pattern of related and recurrent operations that yield ongoing and cumulative results. It is operative in natural science, in human sciences, in spirituality and in the common sense world of the everyday. As it is grounded, not in any thesis or grand theory, but in the recognizable operations of human inquiry and action, it crosses technical and philosophical boundaries and is applicable to inquiring from critical, constructive and constructionist perspectives. It is also the ground for first person authenticity, which we will now explore.

## Authenticity

There is no guarantee that you will be attentive, be intelligent, be reasonable and be responsible all the time. You can be inattentive and miss or ignore data. You can distort data. You can fly from insight by turning a blind eye, by refusing to ask questions, by ignoring awkward or disconfirming questions and by not facing unresolved feelings. The desire to know manifests itself in attentive questioning, but there are fears which block and divert this questioning: censoring, repressing, controlling symbols of feeling and imagining, selecting what you choose to question. You can be unreasonable in your judgements, settling for what is comfortable rather than for what the questions evoke. You can resist the evidence and try to escape responsibility. Sometimes, you might do these in ignorance; at other times you probably know that you are being bull-headed, obstinate or fearful. This is not a peculiar aberration but a frequent occurrence and you are likely to be resourceful and inventive in how you flee from attentiveness, intelligence, reasonableness and responsibility. Hence authenticity is characterized by four process imperatives (Table 2.3). Be attentive (to the data). Be intelligent (in inquiry). Be reasonable (in making judgements). Be responsible (in making decisions and taking action) (Coghlan, 2008b). They address *process* issues in that they point to how you engage in inquiry and action and are *imperative* in that they point to what 'ought' to be. You experience data so you ought to be open to experience; hence the imperative, be attentive. So avoiding issues, closing your eyes to reality, turning a blind eye, burying your head in the sand, refusing to inquire into some matter and so on, diminish your authenticity. You ask questions and

**Table 2.3** Authenticity

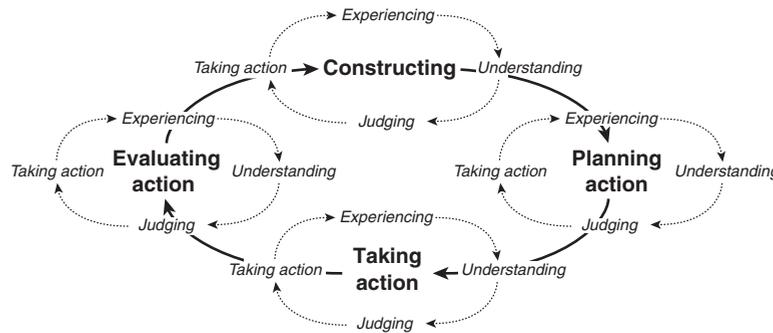
<b>Operations</b>	<b>Activities</b>	<b>Process imperatives</b>
Experience	Attending, sensing, imagining	<i>Be attentive</i>
Understanding	Inquiring, understanding,	<i>Be intelligent</i>
Judgement	Reflecting, weighing evidence, judging	<i>Be reasonable</i>
Decision	Deliberating, deciding, acting	<i>Be responsible</i>

seek answers, so you ought to question and wonder and seek to understand. Accordingly, the imperative is, be intelligent. Refusing to question or wonder, uncritically or sheepishly following the party line, suppressing curiosity and so on, destroy authenticity. You wonder if your ideas are correct, so you ought to have sound reasons for what you hold and base your judgements on evidence. So the imperative is, be reasonable. Suppressing discussion or dissent, lying about facts, obscuring evidence and so on, destroy authenticity. You discern what you ought to do, so you ought to be sensitive to value and choose what you believe to be right. The imperative, therefore, is, be responsible. Cheating, destroying resources, being unjust and so on, destroy authenticity.

Because the *core* action research project and the *thesis* research project are not identical, you need to engage your own learning in action as you participate in the action research cycles (Figure 2.1). So you are experiencing what it is like to engage in constructing, planning action, taking action and evaluating action, while inquiring and seeking insight and understanding into the enactment of the cycles, judging what is appropriate and then taking action on the basis of your judgement.

### Reflection

Reflection is the process of stepping back from experience to question it and to have insights and understanding with a view to planning further action



**Figure 2.1** The general empirical method in action research projects

(Kolb, 1984; Boud et al., 1985; Seibert and Daudelin, 1999; Rudolph et al., 2001; Raelin, 2008). It is the critical link between the concrete experience, the judgement and taking new action. As Raelin (2008) discusses, it is the key to learning as it enables you to develop an ability to uncover and make explicit to yourself what you have planned, discovered, and achieved in practice. He also argues that reflection must be brought into the open so that it goes beyond your privately held taken for granted assumptions and helps you to see how your knowledge is constructed. In action research, reflection is the activity which integrates action and research. As we discussed in Chapter 1, reflection on content, process and premise is critical both to the action research cycle and to the meta learning.

Action science and developmental action inquiry, which we will introduce more formally in Chapter 3, provide focused approaches to attending to individual learning in action (Argyris, 1993; Torbert and Associates, 2004). In action science, you focus on how your actions tend to produce defensiveness and undesired outcomes, the opposite of what you intend (Argyris, 1993). This happens because you may hold assumptions which govern your behaviour, and you may make private inferences and attributions about the motives and thought processes of others which you typically do not test. Accordingly, the core of action science is learning how to identify the assumptions which govern behaviour and develop skills at testing assumptions and inferences, while at the same time exposing your own privately held theories to public testing. Through developmental action inquiry you may learn to grasp how your ability to learn in action is integrally linked to the stages of your ego development (Torbert and Associates, 2004). In the concluding sentence of their book on action science, Argyris et al. say [you are] 'iteratively moving forward from a more protective orientation toward a more reflective one' (1985: 449).

Techniques from action science, such as the ladder of inference, the right/left-hand column and treating facts as hypotheses provide valuable tools for testing consistency between the process imperatives. The ladder of inference (Figure 2.2) plots how meanings and assumptions are attributed to selected observable data and experiences, and conclusions and beliefs are adopted on which actions are based (Argyris et al., 1985; Ross, 1994). For example, at a team meeting you make a proposal for action. One of your colleagues, Joe, doesn't say anything. You think he looks as if he is sulking, and conclude that he is sulking because his proposal has not been considered. Accordingly, you decide that Joe won't be on your side and that you cannot rely on him for support, and subsequently you do not inform him of meetings as the project progresses. What has happened here is that you observed an event, i.e. all that is going on in the room. You selected part of that event (Joe not speaking) and added your own interpretations and meaning, which you did not share or test; and then your own subsequent actions of excluding Joe from



**Figure 2.2** The ladder of inference

further meetings were based on the beliefs and assumptions deduced from your private interpretation. In terms of the image of a ladder, you have ascended the steps of inference, from the bottom rung of what is directly observable behaviour to upper rungs of acting on privately held, untested inferences. As Fisher and Sharp (1998) express it: data are at the bottom rung, reasoning is at the middle rung and conclusions are at the top rung. Differentiating between these three elements is central to the process of learning in action. The ladder of inference helps us retrace our steps from what we have seen and heard (directly observable behaviour) to the conclusions we draw (inferences and attributions).

Argyris's (1993; 2004; Argyris et al., 1985) technique of right-hand/left-hand column provides a useful means for you to uncover your own privately held inferences and attributions in second person practice. He illustrates how that in a conversation there are privately held thoughts about the situation in the minds of the two participants, which are not shared or tested and which shape the flow of the conversation. These private thoughts are inferences and attributions and they foster defensiveness and inhibit inquiry in action. See the exercise at the end of this chapter.

Another useful construct to support learning in action is the notion of cognitive distortions, whereby you may become aware of how you might be prone to distorting reality, particularly when under pressure (Coghlan and Rashford, 1990). You may distort reality when you engage in such activities as: over-generalization, all-or-nothing thinking, mental filtering, jumping to conclusions, emotional reasoning, fortune-telling and other similar ways of misperceiving what is happening. Distortions such as these impair your ability to engage in inquiry in action.

Emotions as well as thoughts are part of the reflective process. You need to be able to recognize and acknowledge the role feelings play in the formation

of judgement and in taking action. *Focusing* (Gendlin, 1981; Cornell, 1996) provides a valuable method of listening to experiences within the body by noticing how you feel and by having a conversation with that feeling in a friendly way. It is a process of listening to your body in a gentle accepting way and hearing the messages that your inner self is sending through your body.

In terms of the general empirical method, you are seeking to be intelligent and reasonable about what you are attending to. So you inquire of yourself what you are doing and what is going on in your head, such as: what is the evidence of your understanding? How have you come to understand in the way that you have and not in another? How do you know that your understanding fits the data? Argyris poses similar questions in a more focused way. What are your espoused theories and your theories in use, and can you express them in a way that you can't squirm out of them? How can you become more aware of your skilled incompetence, that is, how your reasoning functions to protect yourself and how you become blind to your blindness? How do you cover up inconsistent messages that you produce, deny producing them and make that denial undiscussable and the undiscussability of the undiscussable itself undiscussable? On what evidence are you forming a judgement about what is going on and what you choose to do? Is your insight an inference/attribution? How might you test it?

### **Developing reflective skills through journaling**

Journal keeping is a significant mechanism for developing reflective skills. You note your observations and experiences in a journal, and over time learn to differentiate between different experiences and ways of dealing with them. Journal keeping helps you reflect on experiences, see how you think about them, and anticipate future experiences before you undertake them (Moon, 1999; Boud, 2001; Raelin, 2008). It enables you to integrate information and experiences which, when understood, help you understand your reasoning processes and consequent behaviour and so anticipate experiences before embarking on them. Keeping a journal regularly imposes a discipline and captures your experience of key events close to when they happen and before the passage of time changes your perception of them. McNiff et al. (2003) describe some of the useful functions a journal or research diary can have:

- a systematic and regularly kept record of events, dates and people
- an interpretive, self-evaluative account of the researcher's personal experiences, thoughts and feelings, with a view to trying to understand her own actions
- a useful way of dumping painful experiences
- a reflective account where the researcher can tease out interpretations
- an analytic tool where data can be examined and analysed.

Journals may be set to a particular structure. One obvious structure is provided in this chapter. You can keep track of your experience, the questions which arise out of the experience, the insights you receive, how you weigh evidence in order to verify your understanding and how you make decisions and what actions you take. Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle is a useful structure, whereby experience, reflection, conceptualization and experimentation form practical headings. These formats work well. You may learn to attend to details of a situation, and with practice can isolate critical incidents which have affected your cognitive processes and your judgement as to what to say or do. You develop skills of awareness and attentiveness. You are challenged in your use of theory, and learn to use theory in a practical manner. You learn to experience learning as a continuous life task as you apply your learning to future situations.

Another useful framework for journal keeping is Schein's (1999) ORJI model. ORJI (Observation, Reaction, Judgement, Intervention) focuses on what goes on inside your head and how it affects your covert behaviour. You observe (O), react emotionally to what you have observed (R), analyse, process and make judgements based on the observations and feelings (J) and intervene in order to make something happen (I). Schein pays particular attention to the movement from observation to judgement, because he believes that frequently the individual does not pay attention to the reaction stage. In his view, the individual typically denies feelings, short circuits them and moves straight to judgement and action. You may react to an event by saying to yourself, 'That's stupid' – a judgement. What you have probably done is to miss an emotional reaction of feeling threatened by the event. You may not have recognized or acknowledged that feeling of being threatened, yet it is present and is governing your judgement. By learning to identify and attend to feelings, (1) as initial reactions and (2) as influencing judgements, you may learn to deal with them and choose whether or not to act on them. Denial of feelings frequently means acting on them without adverting to the fact that you are acting on them. Acknowledgement of feelings to yourself and the subsequent judgement as to the origins and validity of those feelings are critical to learning and change. A journal may be structured around the four ORJI activities.

Schein's ORJI model adds a sophistication to Kolb's experiential learning cycle in two ways (Coghlan, 1993). First, it focuses on a neglected and typically by passed area, namely the spontaneous reaction to an incident. It provides a framework whereby you may learn to recognize feelings and distinguish them from cognitive processes. Second, it inserts a structured reflection process that works back from action to judgement to reaction to observation. When your view of a situation is not confirmed by how events develop, you may question the original judgement. When you find

that the judgement is based on an emotional reaction, then you may question the source of that reaction. With practice, you may learn to become more aware of emotional reactions so as to be able to recognize them as they arise, rather than in retrospect.

## Second person skills

The core skills underpinning action research are relational, that is we need to be skilled at engaging with others. When we engage in second person work, we need to be able to build relationships with others, listen well and have a range of ways of interacting with them so that collaborative inquiry and joint action can take place.

The starting point for second person practice is to examine your own dispositions. Carl Rogers (1958), in describing the characteristic of the helping relationship, invites those in the helping role to face certain questions about their own dispositions. These dispositions relate to the ability to build trust, to allow oneself to experience positive feelings towards the other, to be strong enough in oneself to allow freedom to the other, to be able to enter the subjective world of the other and to see things as he or she sees them, to be free from external evaluation, and to allow the other person to be in the process of becoming. At the same time, as we will discuss in Chapter 10, you need to be politically astute and ethical in your engagement in your second person work.

Second person research involves core skills at engaging with others in the inquiry process. In his articulation of the dynamics of helping, Schein (1999; 2009) describes several types of inquiry. His first category is what he calls *pure inquiry*. This is where you prompt the elicitation of the story of what is taking place and listen carefully and neutrally. You may ask, 'What is going on?', 'Tell me what happened.' The second type of inquiry is what Schein calls *diagnostic inquiry*, in which you begin to manage the process of how the content is analysed by the other by exploring (1) emotional processes, (2) reasoning and (3) actions. So you may ask, 'How do you feel about this?', 'Why do you think this happened?', 'What did you do?', 'What are you going to do?' and so on. The third type of inquiry is what Schein calls *confrontive inquiry*. This is where you, by sharing your own ideas, challenge the other to think from a new perspective. These ideas may refer to (1) process and (2) content. Examples of confrontive questions would be, 'Have you thought about doing this ...?', 'Have you considered that ... might be a solution?'

Schein's typology may be reframed in terms of the general empirical method: working with others to attend to their experience, to have insights

into that experience, to make judgements as to whether the insights fit the evidence and then to take action (Melchin and Picard, 2008; Coghlan, 2009). Observation of people in systems and subsequent conversations between you and your co-researchers seek to bring out experience (through pure inquiry), to test insights and form judgements about that experience (through diagnostic inquiry) and then to make decisions and take action (through confrontive inquiry). Through these conversations, constructed meanings may be uncovered and tested, and action planned, taken and reviewed.

Because as insider researcher you are part of the situation, you may not always act as an external facilitator/consultant might, that is, be solely the enabler of emergent information and action. Of necessity you have a view of things as they are and what needs to change, and will be expected to share and argue that view. Accordingly, a critical skill for you as the insider action researcher is to be able to combine advocacy with inquiry, that is to present your own inferences, attributions, opinions and viewpoints as open to testing and critique (Argyris et al., 1985; Ross and Roberts, 1994). This involves illustrating inferences with relatively directly observable data and making reasoning explicit and publicly testable in the service of learning.

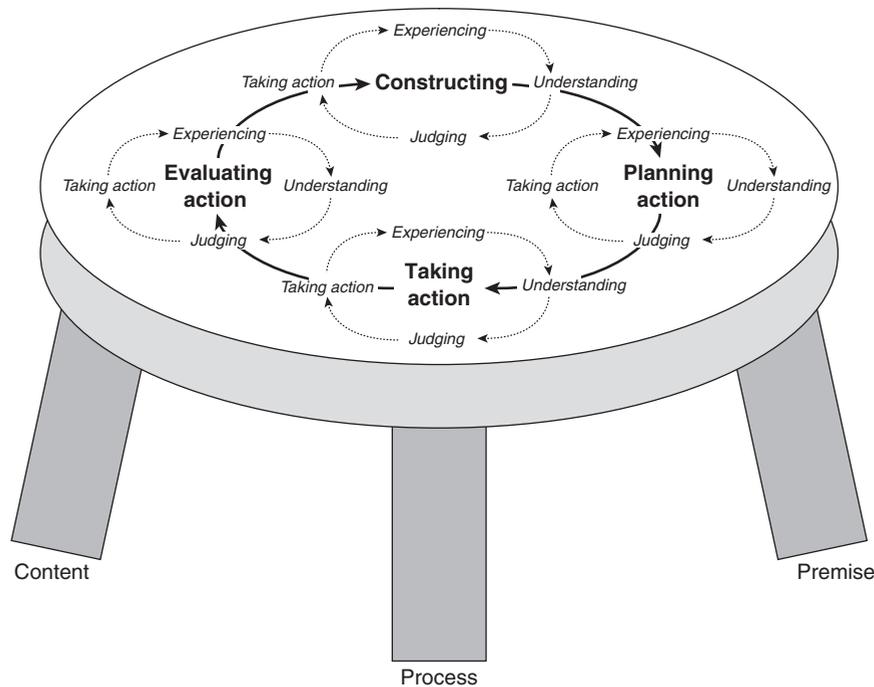
Argyris et al. (1985: 258–61) provide seven rules for hypothesis testing:

- 1 Combine advocacy with inquiry.
- 2 Illustrate your inferences with directly observable data.
- 3 Make your reasoning explicit and publicly test for agreement at each inferential step.
- 4 Actively seek disconfirming data and alternative explanations.
- 5 Affirm the making of mistakes in the service of learning.
- 6 Actively inquire into your own impact in the learning context.
- 7 Design ongoing experiments to test competing views.

Torbert and Associates (2004; Fisher et al., 2000) suggest four ‘parts of speech’ as useful to the action inquiry role:

- *Framing*: explicitly stating the purpose of speaking for the present occasion, that is what dilemma you are trying to resolve, sharing assumptions about the situation, and so on.
- *Advocating*: explicitly stating the goal to be achieved, asserting an option, a perception, a feeling or a proposal for action.
- *Illustrating*: telling a bit of the concrete story that makes the advocacy concrete and orients the others more clearly.
- *Inquiring*: questioning others to understand their perspectives and views.

Putnam (1991) asks if there are recipes which might be useful in helping others explore their reasoning processes. He suggests that questions like ‘What prevents you from ...?’ and ‘What have I said or done that leads you to believe that ...?’ facilitate a focus on directly observable behaviour rather than on attribution, inference or privately held meanings. These interventions may occur in one-to-one or group situations.



**Figure 2.3** The complex dynamics of action research

## Conclusions

In this chapter we have placed the focus on you as the action researcher. When you engage in the action research cycles of constructing, planning action, taking action and evaluating action with others and try to understand and shape what is going on, you are engaging in your own learning cycle activities of experiencing, understanding, judging and taking action (Figure 2.3). The general empirical method provides a normative pattern of related and recurrent operations that yield ongoing and cumulative results. It envisages all data, both of sense and of consciousness. It enables you to inquire into how you think, construct meaning, and verify your understanding as you receive insights as to what is going on in any situation and you seek to take appropriate action.

The underlying assumption is that you as the researcher are yourself an instrument in the generation of data. As Buchanan and Boddy (1992) remind us, the desire to be involved or to lead radical change involves high hassle and high vulnerability. So you need a combination of skills in self-reflection with vulnerability, realistic expectations, tolerance, humility, self-giving, self-containment and an ability to learn (Bell, 1998). When you inquire into what is going on, when you show people your train of thought and put forward hypotheses to be tested, you are generating data. Accordingly, some of your core skills are in the

areas of self-awareness and sensitivity to what you think and feel within yourself and to what you observe going on around you, supported by the conceptual analytic frameworks on which you base your observations and interpretations. In this respect your knowledge base in the field of organization behaviour on which you base your observations is central.

### **Exercise 2.1 First person learning in action**

The following exercises are aimed at stimulating your own skills in learning in action. There is an extensive literature that is aimed at helping people learn to develop skills in awareness, attentiveness and mindfulness through, for example, t'ai chi, yoga, Gestalt, focusing and the meditation practices in all religious traditions. These are most useful. In this context we are building on these and seeking to provide tools for you to develop skills in a more focused area, namely insider action research. Fisher et al. (2000) provide very useful attention and reflective exercises that you may also practise to develop your skills in learning in action in the workplace. For illustrations of teaching reflective practise see Taylor et al. (2008).

#### **General empirical method**

- Take any puzzle with which you are confronted – crossword clue, sudoku, jigsaw, arithmetic teaser, how to get the kite down from the tree, how to prevent the water from leaking, how to help your class learn differential calculus, and so on.
- Attend to experience of movement from puzzlement or confusion to understanding through insight in your search for an intelligible solution and the flash of insight (the 'aha' moment) you receive.
- Attend to how you verify and test your insight and how you may go through many iterations of trial and error and of testing alternative insights.

Keep doing this exercise in as many of your everyday activities as is feasible or appropriate so that you learn to apprehend how you know.

#### **Ladder of inference**

Take Figure 2.2 and apply it to an incident in your project. Retrace your steps from what you saw and heard during the incident.

- What evidence did you select from all that was going on around you?
- What inferences did you draw and did not test?
- What conclusions did you draw?
- What actions did you take or not take?

Now review the whole process and receive whatever insights appear about how you may have moved from data to reasoning to conclusions.

### Double column

- Take a page and write down the progress of a conversation you have with a person with whom you are working on your project.
- Then on another page or column, write down what you have been thinking privately about what is being said in the conversation and what is *not* being said.
- Notice how you make inferences and attributions privately in your own head out of what is rather hazy evidence and how you act on them by what is rather hazy evidence and how you act on them by what you say in response.

## Exercise 2.2 Keeping a journal

### Kolb's cycle

Based on Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle (McMullan and Cahoon, 1979; Coghlan, 1993).

- *Concrete experience.* Describe a concrete event which has taken place in the work situation – what happened, who said/did what, what you felt/said/did, what happened next, what the consequences were. Stick to a single event bounded by time. Be clinically neutral in the description – like a news bulletin.
- *Reflection.* Now look back with hindsight: what are your feelings, reactions, observation, judgements on this event? Perhaps now you notice that this has happened before or often. Maybe you are disappointed, angry or pleased with your own reactions at the time. How do you view your reactions and behaviour? What were the triggers that provoked your reaction?
- *Conceptualization.* Relate relevant concepts to the experience described and formulate tentative conclusions, generalizations and hypotheses.
- *Experimentation.* Suggest action implications for applying, testing and extending what you have reflected on, with a view to setting some behavioural goals for similar future situations. These are not general resolutions, but specific and concrete actions coming directly from your experience, reflection and conceptualization.

### Schein's ORJI

Based on Schein's (1999; Coghlan, 1993) cycle of observation, reaction, judgement and intervention.

Take a situation or event where your own behaviour resulted in an unpredicted outcome.

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- What did I actually observe? Can I describe it?
- How did I react? What feelings were aroused in me?
- What was my judgement about what happened? What thoughts or evaluations did the event trigger?
- What did I do about it? How did I intervene? (Remember that doing nothing or remaining silent is also an intervention.)

### **Exercise 2.3 Developing inquiry skills**

In your learning group or with colleagues, form a triad and adopt roles A, B and C as follows:

- A presents an issue that she is dealing with in her action research project.
- B inquires into the issue, using Schein's (1999) intervention typology.
- C observes and then facilitates reflection on the process using Schein's intervention typology.
- Change roles and repeat.
- Change roles and repeat.

This exercise may also be done using Argyris's seven rules for hypothesis testing or Torbert's four parts of speech. McGill and Brockbank (2004) provide other useful techniques for developing skills in working in action learning sets.