

## Co-operative Inquiry

Co-operative inquiry is a way of working with other people who have similar concerns and interests to yourself, in order to:

- understand your world, make sense of your life and develop new and creative ways of looking at things;
- learn how to act to change things you may want to change and find out how to do things better.

We usually think of inquiry and research as something done by people in universities and research institutes. We think there is a researcher who has all the ideas, and who then studies other people by observing them, asking them questions, or by designing experiments. The trouble with this kind of way of doing research is that there is often very little connection between the researcher's thinking and the concerns and experiences of the people who are actually involved. People are treated as passive subjects rather than as active agents.

We believe that good research is research *with* people rather than *on* people. We believe that ordinary people are quite capable of developing their own ideas and can work together in a co-operative inquiry group to see if these ideas make sense of their world and work in practice.

A second problem with traditional research is that the kind of thinking done by researchers is often theoretical rather than practical. It doesn't help people find how to act to change things in their lives. We believe that the outcome of good research is not just books and academic papers, but is also the creative action of people to address matters that are important to them. Co-operative inquiry is thus a form of what is called action research: it is concerned with revisioning our understanding of our world, as well as transforming practice within it.

In co-operative inquiry a group of people come together to explore issues of concern and interest. All members of the group contribute both to the ideas that go into their work together, and also are part of the activity that is being researched. Everyone has a say in deciding what questions are to be addressed and what ideas may be of help; everyone contributes to thinking about how to explore the questions; everyone gets involved in the activity that is being researched; and finally everybody has a say in whatever conclusions the co-operative inquiry group may reach. So in co-operative inquiry the split between "researcher" and "subjects" is done away with, and all those involved act together as "co-researchers" and as "co-subjects".

These are some examples of co-operative inquiry groups:

A group of general medical practitioners formed a co-operative inquiry group to develop the theory and practice of holistic medicine. They built a simple model of holistic practice, and experimented with it in. Building on this work, a group of general and complementary medical practitioners worked together to explore how they might effectively work in an interdisciplinary fashion. .

A group of obese and post-obese women explored their experience together, looking in particular at how they were stereotyped in society, and how it was difficult for them to obtain appropriate attention from doctors and other medical people . This is one of several inquiries in which groups of people with a particular physical or medical condition have worked together to take charge of how their condition is defined and treated. Co-counselling, a form of peer self-help psychotherapy, has also used co-operative inquiry to deepen understanding of its processes and methods.

Two black social work teachers established inquiry groups of black social work students, practitioners and managers to explore their experience. They looked at relationships between black people at work, particularly the experience of black managers and subordinates working together; and how a creative black culture could be generated.

Several inquiry groups have met to explore ceremony, mystical and subtle experience in an attempt to create forms of spiritual practice which are appropriate to present times.

Several groups have formed to explore questions of gender, in particular experience of women and men at work. One inquiry looked at how black women might learn to thrive, as well as survive in British organizations. Another explored the experience of young women managers in primarily male organizations . And another is looking at whether men in organizations need to explore questions of their gender in the workplace.

From Peter Reason ' Integrating Action and Reflection through Co-operative Inquiry (1999)

## Learning Histories

In producing a **learning history**, researchers work closely with key organizational members to identify questions that are important and relevant for the organization, before moving to explore these questions with a wider range of organization members and where appropriate with a wider circle of stakeholders.

The researchers and organisation members, then produce a report to stimulate further conversation at one or more **dialogue conferences**, whose aim is both to confirm or otherwise the validity of the provisional findings, stimulate an exploration of the issues raised, and move toward whatever new actions the learning history activities suggest.

A learning history would thus document the changes that had taken place within the organization, help make this explicit for organization members, point to new programmes and policies that might be needed, and set an agenda for further action research projects. Specific issues might then be explored in closer detail, for example through **co-operative inquiry**

A learning history has two main phases of activity:

**Phase 1** – hold dialogue conferences in organisation to feedback learning history and develop in-company dialogue.

**Phase 2** – develop work within organisation using co-operative inquiry, further learning history and other suitable action research methodologies.

In working in this way, the intention is to increase awareness and learning in each organisation—including awareness of paradox and unintended consequences.

From Learning Histories, by Gill Coleman (2004)

