Chapter 11

GENERATING DATA FOR RESEARCH ON EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES
An Action Learning Approach

Pak Yoong¹, David Pauleen¹ and Brent Gallupe²
¹Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand; ²Queen’s University, Canada

Abstract: One of the difficulties of conducting applied qualitative research on the applications of emerging technologies is finding available sources of relevant data for analysis. Because the adoption of emerging technologies is, by definition, new in many organisations, there is often a lack of experienced practitioners who have relevant background and are willing to provide useful information for the study. Therefore, it is necessary to design research approaches that can generate accessible and relevant data. This chapter begins with a description of action learning and its application to the training of e-facilitators. It will also explain the differences between action learning and action research. The chapter will then describe two case studies in which the researchers used an action learning approach to study the nature of e-facilitation for face-to-face and for distributed electronic meetings. Finally, the chapter describes some lessons learned for both practitioners and researchers.

Key words: Action learning; emerging technology; electronic meeting; virtual teams; e-facilitation.

1. INTRODUCTION

The introduction and use of emerging technologies in organisations has been found to be a complex process (Orlikowski, 1992). Collaborative technologies that supports group members in face-to-face meetings or in virtual meetings are examples of such emerging technologies. One of the difficulties in studying the introduction of collaborative technologies in organisations is the lack of experienced and knowledgeable users who are
able to provide meaningful data so that researchers can better understand the actual processes of how these technologies can be successfully introduced.

One of the critical success factors in the use of IT to support face-to-face and virtual collaborative work is electronic meeting facilitation (e-facilitation). E-facilitation could be described as a set of activities carried out by the facilitator to assist a group of people to achieve its own outcomes in face-to-face and virtual environments. Research has shown that these electronic meetings can be productive (Dennis and Gallupe, 1993; Fjermestad and Hiltz, 1999; Kayworth and Leidner, 2001) but they also show that the productivity is largely due to the skill of an e-facilitator (Benbasat and Lim, 1993; Nunamaker, Briggs and Mittleman, 1996; Duarte and Tennant-Snyder, 1999). The skilled facilitator aids the group in using the technology, helps with group process and facilitates the building of relationships between members who may be separated by time and distance. Yet, because the adoption of e-facilitation is new in many organisations, there is often a lack of experienced practitioners who have relevant background and are able to provide useful information. Therefore, researchers and less-experienced practitioners continue to struggle to understand the subtleties and difficulties in the application of meeting facilitation techniques in the 'electronic' context. What is needed, then, is a way for researchers and these less-experienced practitioners to learn more about the nature of e-facilitation and the learning processes associated with becoming a facilitator of e-meetings.

The purpose of this chapter is to describe how the researchers used an action learning approach to produce a rigorous and flexible method for studying e-facilitation. In particular, two cases are discussed that met this need by designing research approaches that enabled the generation of easily accessible and relevant data related to e-facilitation, as well as giving practitioners the opportunity to learn such skills. In the first case, the author conducted a study that examined the question of how facilitators of conventional meetings become facilitators of face-to-face electronic meetings (Yoong, 1996) while the second explored the nature of virtual facilitation and relationship building in virtual teams (Pauleen, 2001). In both cases action learning was used, via an intensive training programme, as the means for data generation.

The chapter begins with a discussion on action learning. This discussion highlights the differences and similarities between action learning and action research. The second section presents each study and the application of action learning. Finally, some implications of this research approach for practice and research are outlined.