**Action Research: from *The Emo Project* to the facilitation of parent-teacher communication**

**The Discovery….**

We have all heard those familiar regrets, “If only I knew, I could have helped”, and, “If someone spoke up earlier then this would not have happened”. Missed opportunities for communication often leave us in dire circumstances. In some cases a lack of communication is unavoidable. In many cases communication can be facilitated. If we are not facilitating then we are being neglectful. This is of particular importance for our school age children who are primarily supervised by their parents and teachers. Routinely, regular interaction between parents and school staff is limited.

My insight to the lack of interaction between my daughter’s teachers and myself slipped past my attention until that dire consequence surfaced. I discovered that my thirteen year old daughter had been cutting her body and doing so for an entire year! This was shocking in and of itself, but as my daughter and I discussed this incident, she shared the information that some of her peers also self-harm. She then showed me that she had her own personal email address which was established, in class, at school, but could be accessed from any computer. Through this email she and her friends establish a shared document, shared between only selected friends. She and her friends used this shared document to report their newest self-injury. Dr. Mitch Prinstein warns parents about self-harm in the January 2001 issue of Psychology Today. Self-harm is considered to be addictive, maladaptive and trending in today’s adolescents. Self-harm includes cutting, burning, biting, or any self-inflicted harm.

**Initial inquiry…..**

I had an opportunity to speak with one of my daughter’s teachers in which I inquired what she knew about children injuring themselves. She calmly acknowledged that this behavior was presently trending within the school. My new awareness of this trend, which the teacher casually shared, was due to our ability to spend an unusual amount of time together. I attended an overnight field trip to help the teachers supervise a large group of children. This teacher and I shared a room with bunk beds, allowing us time to talk. She was quite familiar with hearing of students self-harming, yet, there had been no attempts made by the school system to address this. No notice sent home, no group email to parents, not even a prerecorded voice mail. Interestingly, the school readily sends out announcements about half days, fund raisers, and school events. Why the discrepancy for the less glorious news? I have never asked this of the school administration but the obvious need to ask becomes quite clear as I discuss this issue.

**Creation of *The Emo Project*….**

A spark that was fueled by my coursework in the Critical and Creative Thinking program. I was taking, Seminar in Creativity, and was asked to create a project that was a portion of a larger whole; something that was a smaller subset of a larger perspective; something that might grow on its own. With this instruction, I created a Power Point presentation intended for parents and school staff to view and learn about the trending self-harm. My hopes were that I would provide an awareness of self-harm with which others would all move to address. Along with the self-harm trend, other issues might be addressed, such as peer awareness programs and support groups. This educational presentation was named *The Emo Project* and it relied heavily on shock value as its motivating force.

I sent the Power Point presentation to a few school faculty members and delivered it to the Mayor of Fall River in printed form. No constituents came knocking on my door. No school faculty begged me to share my information. The piece sat untouched and unused. There was no action, and I just could not understand why the mere awareness of this matter did not beg exploration by others. Though this Power Point earned me a nice grade in Seminar in Creativity, it did not facilitate any change. My course ended and my power point sat unattended.

My next plan sparked as the result of an Organizational Change course. I decided I would set the power point aside and create an informative web page. I pulled the project apart and reassembled the former Power Point into a public web site; [*www.TheEmoProject*](http://www.TheEmoProject)*.org*. On this platform, the internet, I thought my information would reach numerous people. Then, I sat and waited for the hundreds of hits to pour in. A few did. But not much more. I closed the web page due to the fact that I was paying a monthly fee for a site that was not earning the attention I expected.

**My introduction to Action Research…**

My newest Critical and Creative Thinking program was Action Research. This was decidedly my final attempt at making *The Emo Project* into something. One constant in Action Research is reflection. So I began reflecting on what I had done to date. I discovered that I may have focused more on attempting to educate my intended audience; talking at them, rather than with them. Though I initially thought that my intentions would facilitate action, it did not. Maureen Jenkins informs readers that Action Research is not “teaching” or “classroom theory”, however; that was exactly my tactic (Jenkins, 2000). My own feelings driving me to address this issue were not sufficient. I needed to do something beyond merely informing others.

Only upon my introduction to Action Research did I realize that my former attempts were not about action at all. My previous attempts at addressing self-harm were merely an informative collection of emotion and information. Realizing that Action Research actually requires ‘action’ made me realize, to this point, how little ‘action’ I actually made. The Power Point set aside as a reference, and the web page closed, I looked at what Action Research meant to my goal.

**Redefining my goal based on my reflection…**

My reflection had me looking at my motivating factors which, I determined, resulted in response to my outrage. My outrage was focused on the fact that my daughter was participating in something dangerous that was common knowledge among school faculty; yet entirely unknown to me. The self-harm awareness was merely a subset of potential issues that might arise and be allowed to progress due to a lack of communication. My new goal would be centered on opening the lines of communication, specifically between parents and school staff.

Action Research requires constituency building so that the researcher does not bear all of the work alone. I now needed to include potential actions I could make I order to build constituents. I decided to play with a pilot project and I created a parent-teacher forum which I opened with Facebook. I chose this option as I was already on FaceBook and the task was comparably easy. I started to build a constituency by asking my sister-in-law to spread the word about the site. I sent out numerous Facebook messages to any school staff member I could find. I made daily contributions to the site, including potential parental concerns. Once again I waited, only to see a small increase in attendance which soon ceased. The site remains barely active. That was my action, the result was a failure.

**Back to the drawing board…**

Craig (2009) discusses the steps of Action Research. He states, “Key factors and components of the practice are there is an organized plan, onsite data collection, analysis, reflection, and use of findings to improve practice” (Craig, 2009). Reflecting on what I had attempted to date revealed a weakly organized plan. I decided that my failed attempts could be viewed as my data. The data would likely have confounding variables due to the poorly organized beginning, but I did not want to view any previous attempts as a waste. Now I needed to analyze, reflect, and make improvements. One blatant oversight came to mind when I read Costella’s discussion of a literature review. A literature review has several purposes including the need, “to outline existing knowledge” (Costello, 2011). This step, though now an obvious one, was a step I neglected.

Up to this point, I merely had ideas that I thought would just evolve into my desired goal. Considering research, I started to look at other school systems and if they had applied a forum to allow parents and school faculty to communicate. I discovered several school systems actively utilizing forums. This discovery led me to have more confidence in my goal. The forums appeared to be a casual place, readily accessible, identified by topic resulting in abundant communication. I decided that these forums might be a new direction for me to head. Additionally, presenting these active online communities as examples, I could urge our community’s school system to emulate.

**Focus on constituency…**

Further reflection would have me questioning why my previous attempts failed. Clearly, other forums exist and thrive. Why not mine? Costella states that, “Practitioners do not work in isolation”. Other than my one constituent, my sister-in-law, most of my work was in isolation. In fact, the common theme among all of my previous attempts *was* my total isolation. My only interaction with others was by email or messaging, with the rare phone conversation. I had very little interaction with others which minimized my ability to build constituents. This now seemed to be my next dilemma.

Social interaction with other parents and school staff would likely build my constituency more readily than a stray email. I could clearly see that discussions with other parents would alert them to the need to increase communication. I thought discussions with school staff might offer me guidance on how to proceed through appropriate steps within the school system. Minimally, I would be interacting with my intended audience receiving crucial feedback. Readily I could conceive all of the potential opportunities for such interaction; from Parent-Teacher meetings, to school gatherings, and even volunteering at the school.

**Another dilemma…**

I discovered that I made every effort to remain unavailable to such social events. Why? Why wouldn’t I just go and socialize and get that conversation flowing? I knew the answer to this question. I am extremely anxious in social settings. I knew this, but for the sake of my project I believe I would overcome. I did not. After peer reviews and professor meetings, I now recognized this limitation as a new area to address as part of my Action Research. Can I do that? Can I work of my limiting behaviors as part of my project? I can, the professor said, and so my project took yet another turn. The new direction to proceed would have to be redefined, yet again!

**Overview…**

Since I started Action Research, my ultimate goal changed from spreading information to establishing a means for ease of communication for school staff and parents, such as in a forum. This is a considerable change that came about simply from learning about Action Research and the need to review and reconsider previous attempts and results. As the course progressed and the epicycles of reflection repeated, I found several other idiosyncrasies I needed to address before my larger goal could be considered. I recognized the importance of building a constituency and I realized that addressing my social fears were important.

**Simple solutions…**

I have not thrown away the idea of needing to attend certain social settings. Instead I have decided to establish a written pamphlet which I can hand out to potential constituents. This document will aid me in my limitations to opening conversation with others. I have decided that attending such stressful settings would be easier if I attend with another parent or drag my daughter along. In the case that I am unable to push myself into these settings, I will keep a brief but informative pamphlet with me at all times. When I discover that I have inadvertently entered a social setting I can seize the moment to offer my pamphlet to the potential constituent.

As far as my goal to facilitate communication, I continue to further explore existing methods such as forums. This allows me to research other practices looking for the potential benefits as well as the potential hazards. One peer commentary pointed out the ethical risks. Children are a core portion of the topics and there are potential negative risks if a child had their name mentioned or attributed to something unfavorable. There is also the concern of unsupported suggestions and fallacies being purported. These concerns would require screening of content and a means to remove improprieties. My hope is that further research and inquiry into existing forums might help direct me to a solution for these concerns.

**Continuous process…**

Craig (2009) states that, “The characteristics and components of action research and the process itself are continuous inquiry, reflection and continuous improvement” (Craig, 2009). This explanation clarified multifaceted nature of Action Research. Initially, I was sparked by my emotions, thought up an idea, and expected a result. I had a very simplified view. Now I have seen the multitude of idiosyncrasies, the reformulation of ideas, the re-examination of my process, the readjusting, and the testing of my new ideas. Even though my goal has not been obtained, I have made movements bringing me far from my initial goal of educating others through mere presentation.

**What’s next…**

My next steps are to continue my research with other active forums. I will continue looking into ethical dilemmas and methods to deter them. I will continue to work on creating, and then carrying, my informational pamphlet to facilitate my difficulty engaging in dialogue. I remain cognizant of social school events and have identified companions that might accompany me. I intend to remain fluid in defining my goal as I recognize the vast evolution from my initial informational piece to the possibility of a communicative forum. Remaining open to allow for changes and adjustments and redirection have brought my idea to what I consider a broader application with more possibility for success. Though my initial goal to promote self-harm awareness remains important, it can be addressed on a larger scale, inviting other unknowns to light. It is comforting to now understand that mistakes and failures do not define my work, rather they are sources of information to further direct it. Action research asks the researcher to allow the time to understand the necessity of each small step to guide the process through its evolution. *The Emo Project* has evolved over time, and will continue to move forward.

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