Chronicle workshops – a participative method to develop workplaces

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1. Introduction

The Chronicle Workshop is a method to facilitate a group-based process centered around the shared history of that group (Limborg & Hvenegaard 2011; Gensby 2014).

The main inspiration for the method is the action research tradition (Svensson & Nielsen 2006) paired with narrative sociology (Berger & Quinney 2005). Action research has an inherent ideal of developing democratic research methods; hence, the participation of the objects of study is crucial. Often there will be a specific aim that gives the process its focus, be it improvement in the psychosocial work environment in a workplace, to prepare for a major change in an organization, or to implement new technologies in a team. Whatever the focus, there is always a pre-defined time-span to unfold and a coherent story constructed in order to qualify the path forward. The paper will explain how to conduct a workshop and the potential and limitations of the method.

2. How to do it

The workshop has three stages: preparation, implementation and follow-up.

To prepare a workshop the facilitators must select the participants carefully and in collaboration with the target organization. The selection criteria should ensure that the participants reflect the variation in the organization, or the group involved in the issue at stake. The group should be small enough for everyone to speak freely, and to allow the workshop to be conducted within the available timespan, usually around 10 participants. It is important to agree on the objective of the workshop and the expected outcome. The facilitators write a detailed program in advance and send a short version to the participants to inform them of the purpose and the time and location. There is no further preparation needed for the participants.

The workshop itself is usually either half a day or a full day. The room should have a large bare wall to set up the timeline and the sticky notes. The facilitators bring large ‘post it’ notes in different colors and pens; before the start of the workshop they will put up signs with dates or years on the wall to mark the timeline they have decided upon. The participants sit in a half-circle facing the wall, without tables. At the start of the workshop, the facilitators should explain the theme of the workshop and set the scene. Then follows a series of rounds, where the participants are asked to reflect upon different topics, one topic for each round (The typical topics are important events in the first round, the important agents in the second and the pros and cons of a given process as the third). At the beginning of each round, the participants reflect and write one event on each of their notes and then take turns to stick them to the wall and explain what they mean. Usually they are provided 4 – 8 notes for each topic. After each round the facilitators facilitate a discussion of the picture, they all see taking shape on the wall. Then follows a fourth round in which the participants in groups divide the story into chapters and give the chapters headings. Now they have a chronicle of the process and perhaps also a shared understanding of their mutual story/chronicle, as it emerges from the many narratives of the participants. Or at least their past dilemmas and conflicts will have become transparent. The last part of the workshop is an analytical process in which their chronicle is analyzed in the light of the topic of the workshop. For instance, the participants can discuss factors that supported or inhibited the progress of a significant event in small groups.

During the workshop someone needs to record what the participants say about their notes as well as the discussions. Likewise the timeline should be photographed regularly. It is easiest if an assistant has the task of recording and documenting the workshop, perhaps on a laptop, so that the facilitator(s), can focus on facilitating. The data can then form the basis for a written account of the chronicle to give to the organization or it can be analyzed further as a part of a study. The data supplements interviews well.
3. A chronicle workshop in 'the Firefly'

In an on-going project for the child-care workers' union we investigate best practice for inclusion of children with special needs in day care institutions. It is a burning issue in Denmark due to the high proportion of children in day care combined with a recent change in the government’s policy in favor of inclusion of more children with special needs in normal day care institutions.

The project is a qualitative multi-case design, it encompasses 10 day care institutions and the main method for building the cases is chronicle workshops. The chronicle workshop in a kindergarten unit named ‘The Firefly’ is illustrative of the kind of knowledge a chronicle workshop can create, and will thus serve as our example.

The workshop had six participants, all had experience with at least one of the past inclusion processes in the unit and all professions working with childcare were represented, as was the management.

The first workshop focused upon one specific child, and the story of his time in the institution. The timeline span from ‘beginning’ (first encounter with the child), over ‘midway’ to ‘end (i.e. the child leaves the institution)’ and the participants were asked to individually reflect on what the actual events were in the process and write them down on post-it notes. The participants then took turns to place their notes on the timeline and briefly explain them. In the same way, the participants wrote notes with the names of the significant agents in the process and placed them on the timeline and lastly they did the same for the successes and failures they remembered from that particular inclusion process.

In the second workshop, they performed the same actions, but their focus was on another child and another inclusion process that took place after the first.

In the process, the group realized that their approach to inclusion had changed in the five-year period the workshop covered. Initially their focus was on the child to be included and their strategy was to shield him and to shield the others from him, when he occasionally reacted violently. In the second phase, their focus had shifted to the child’s relations, and they tried out different strategies. In the last phase - now we are at the end of the second inclusion process - they had found a different approach that led them to focus on their institution’s ability to include, and they asked themselves what kind of institution they needed to create in order to include these children. To illustrate their new approach one of the participants told a story from their last inclusion process: Four boys come to the caretaker and told her that the child had thrown stones at them. Her response is to tell them that their little group seems to need someone who is good at throwing stones very far, and the child happens to be good at that. That led the boys to start playing with the child, who is thus included in the play. Thus, the participants of the described chronicle workshop are now conscious of the special way they include in their institution as an outcome and their learning process has become visible for all as well.

The visualization is the key that makes the analytical process transparent and accessible for all participants regardless of their analytical competences. The specific events are often the driver that helps the participants identify the passing of one phase to another in their story. In our example a decision to include the children’s parents actively, helped the participants to identify a shift in their focus towards relations.

This reflects the definition of reflective practice (Schön 1983): ‘the capacity to reflect on action so as to engage in a process of continuous learning’. The learning practice fits the reality of professionals from practice-based disciplines such as childcare well. The chronicle workshop highlights the double loop learning of modifying the goals in light of experience (Argyris & Schön 1978) that the participants might have developed without verbalizing it before the workshop.

4. Limitations of the method

A parallel to the double learning loop is Edgar Schein’s definition of organizational culture (Schein 1992): ‘A pattern of shared basic assumptions learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration’. Schein’s definition is a widely popular and simple depiction of culture as consisting of three layers; artifacts, values and beliefs and in the core; the basic assumptions. The outer layers, derived from the basic assumptions and the analytical effort is to clarify the basic assumptions. Schein’s culture model is from the tradition of ‘integrated functionalism’ as opposed to more dynamic models (Martin & Frost 1996), and its root in integrated functionalism means that Schein’s model favors consensus and tends to
become instrumentalist – Our singular organizational culture is the reason for the present state of affairs and directs the future actions in the workplace, so to speak.

Here lies also the weakness of the chronicle workshop method; as it promotes consensus it also disguises the power games and discrepancies that are part of the history of any group. Hansen and Pedersen have in a detailed analysis of the recorded data from a workshop showing how a strong underlying discourse shaped the story of a workshop as it developed and silenced the participants who initially expressed conflicting views (Hansen & Pedersen 2014).

Thus the more stories or discourses already available about the group or their core tasks, the more skilled the consultants must be if the group is to benefit from a chronicle workshop.

Another limitation is that the method requires that the group has a shared history, this means that sectors where people work project based, or independently are less suited.

References


