**ACCOUNT OF PRACTICE**

**Developing Deep Group Reflection within a Critical Reflection Action Learning (CRAL) Set.**

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This account of practice describes how a manufacturing company in the North of England transformed their approach to problem solving and action through the use of a Critical Reflection Action Learning (CRAL) methodology. The company who had been in business for over 25 years, experienced problems due to a diminishing customer base and substantial changes in customer buying behaviour. The account presented here is based on a 12 session CRAL project I carried out as part of my PhD. Research at the University of Hull Business School (Shepherd, 2011). This paper describes how the organisation changed the way in which they tackled complex, messy problems through the adoption of a CRAL technique using their own hand drawn images as the focus for their individual, group and critical reflective efforts. As the action learning set improved their reflective practice, the group began to understand and untangle the complex links between the problems they were experiencing and the way in which the business environment had changed. The group completed the project with a more nuanced appreciation of the problems they experienced and developed their own unique problem solving style which mixed reflective questioning with emotional honesty.

**Keywords:** critical reflection action learning, deep reflection, wicked problems, SME, visual images

**Introduction**

This account of practice describes how a small manufacturing company based in the North of England used a Critical Reflection Action Learning (CRAL) methodology to transform the way they approached complex problems within their organisation. The CRAL group comprised of the company’s management team who met and reflected with one another every two weeks over a six month period. Traditional action learning sets often comprise of individuals from different organisations who meet and reflect on their operational problems; this CRAL set was different in that the group comprised of the senior management team who all knew and worked with one another throughout the week. In the set, each group member produced a hand drawn image to illustrate their organisational problem and then went through a process of individual and group reflection in an attempt to surface their assumptions of the problem and question the deeper roots of their issue.

This article provides an example of how CRAL can be used within action learning groups to change the way problems are both defined and tackled. It is useful for facilitator practitioners working with sets tackling complex, wicked problems with no obvious ‘solutions’. In this paper I demonstrate how a once simple process of ‘list making’ as a strategy for problem solving was transformed into a more nuanced, sophisticated reflective approach where problems themselves provided the starting point on a journey through critical conversations, reflection, action and group learning.

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Throughout each session I acted as group facilitator for the set, which enabled the participants to attend to the group reflective process itself and worry less about the mechanics of reflection. As a CRAL facilitator I allowed myself to be more directive than a traditional set facilitator and developed an instructional role where I guided group members through reflective cycles. In this role I actively challenged assumptions, posed provocative questions and encouraged the set to avoid reverting back to their usual unreflective, solution focused problem solving style. As a result of this facilitation method the group often concluded their sessions with a range of questions to reflect upon as opposed to a range of actions to carry out. This became more beneficial to the group as it had the effect of ‘breaking’ their habitual problem-reaction-solution impulse and led to more thoughtful, targeted action.

**Critical Reflection Action Learning**

The CRAL approach I used is a variant of Critical Action Learning (Fook & Gardner, 2007); in an attempt to define the different action learning approaches often used, Marsick and O’Neil (1999) identified three ‘schools’ of reflection based upon three general approaches to action learning. These approaches are known as the Scientific school, the Experiential school and the Critical Reflection school. Within each school the focus of research is different; the Scientific school for instance holds to the original tenets of action learning as proposed by Revans (1998); the Experiential school on the other hand is preferred by researchers adopting Kolb’s experiential learning cycle (1984), whilst the Critical Reflection school is favoured by researchers exploring their participants ‘taken for granted’ assumptions about the social world and the roots of organisational power (Rigg & Trehan, 2004). The main rationale for researchers using critical theories, according to Pedler (2005, p. 3) is that they:

help the action learner stand outside the prevailing social or organisational situation in order to see how it could be different and changed for the better.

Critical approaches are also used by researchers in their efforts to surface the power and politics inherent within both action and learning in a range of social systems. The CRAL methodology adopted in this study was useful to this particular set as it allowed the group to reflect upon a range of complex organisational situations and gave them the opportunity to ‘mull over’ a number of ‘wicked’ problems (Crul, 2014).

**Hand drawn images and set facilitation**

In a previous article I described the methodology for using hand drawn images as the focus of critical reflection (Shepherd, 2016). The methodology itself is quite simple and involves participants thinking of an organisational problem, drawing a representation of the problem and then cycling through reflective processes to explore the problem in a deeper way. Creating images representing organisational problems is a powerful technique which has the ability to surface within the group a range of unconscious attitudes, assumptions and emotions that often generate new insights into the problem (Vince, 2001).

The CRAL set in this study met twice a month over a period of six months. Each session lasted just over an hour and had an identical structure. I began each session by asking the set to agree on an organisational problem they all shared and would like to reflect upon. I gave each person a pen and gave the group one sheet of white A1 sized paper. I asked the group to draw their interpretation of the problem on the paper. At the end of this exercise the set had created four different hand drawn images which represented their interpretation of the problem.

I created a three-step facilitation technique aimed at leading set members through a number of different reflective conversations. I developed the technique to help participant’s surface different aspects of the same problem. In step one the set members reflected on their images by themselves, as individual reflective practitioners. Step two (group reflection) required the rest of the group to ask questions about the image, to reflect on the image meaning from their own point of view and to offer different interpretations of the image to the artist. In step three, often a difficult step for set members to engage with, I facilitated critically reflective conversations with the whole set aimed at questioning their taken-for-granted assumptions about elements of the problem and challenging their usual problem solving approach. It was within this reflective process that set members began to change their understanding of the problems they had and began to appreciate the limits of their current problem solving methodologies, which had proven ineffective in the face of the ‘wicked’ problems they now encountered within the new business environment.

At the end of the session I would invite set members to describe the action they intended to take on their problem in the coming two weeks before we next met. Often set members were not prepared to initiate any immediate action on the problem as their reflective conversations had surfaced more questions than actions. I felt that this was a useful part of the process especially for this organisation who in the early stages of the project were quick to offer half-baked solutions to their problems without any depth of analysis or problem definition. When the group did take action on their problems the action itself seemed to be more appropriate and more effective than their usual efforts.

**Introducing Hopkins Manufacturing Ltd.[[1]](#footnote-1)**

Hopkins Manufacturing Ltd. is the name of a Small to Medium Sized Enterprise (SME) based in the North of England specialising in the design, manufacture, build and installation of custom made bedroom and bathroom suites. The company is over 25 years old and owned by its Managing Director Steve Smith. Hopkins Manufacturing employs 50 full-time employees, mostly machinists, cabinet makers, plumbers and electricians.

The CRAL set at Hopkins comprised of Steve Smith, Rachel Brown (Operations Manager) and George Brewer (Design and Manufacturing Manager). This account is based on a project I carried out with the organisation as part of my PhD. studies at the University of Hull Business School (Shepherd, 2011). Hopkins were very keen to be involved in this CRAL project as their business was experiencing unusual pressure due to reduced income streams brought about by low customer numbers and poor customer conversion rates.

**Organisational issues**

Hopkins suffered financially due to a lack of customers both browsing their showrooms and making large item purchases. Traditionally a customer would spend some time visiting the showroom looking for the bedroom or bathroom suite they desired. As they browsed, commissioned salespeople would convert their interest into high end sales. With a lack of browsing customers in the showroom there were fewer customers to convert into sales, meaning Hopkins were now relying on their loyal and established customer base to renew their bedroom and bathroom suites. This line of income was also diminishing; however, as in the climate of ‘austerity’ established customers were prepared to keep their older suites a little longer.

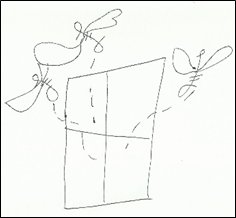
The management team were perplexed at this state of affairs; they could not understand where their browsing customers had gone and why traditional customers were not converting their old suites as quickly as they had done in the past 25 years. It was clear that Hopkins had to act in some way, but opinion was divided as the best course of action to take. Should Steve pump money into promotions to encourage new customers? Should he begin cost cutting and shed experienced and loyal staff? or should he embrace new technology by investing a large sum in a substantial website?

**Hopkins original problem solving approach**

In the early CRAL group sessions I was able to witness the management team’s lack of problem solving capability and paucity of reflective conversations. The set seemed to be very keen to ‘pounce’ on an organisational problem and arrive very quickly at a conclusion. Sometimes the group agreed the problem itself was insurmountable and became dejected and confused.

How do you reflect on ‘lack of customers’?.....

The drawing in Figure 1 is an early image drawn by Steve which underlines the matter-of-fact, black-and-white thinking typical within the team in the early part of the project. When asked what the image represented Steve replied:

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It’s money flying out of the window isn’t it?

**Figure 1:Flying out of the Window**

At other times the group convinced one another the problem could be solved by taking direct action on the issue. This inevitably led to a suggestion by one of the set that the team create a list of jobs-to-do which they would work through in order to solve the problem in hand. This approach, I was told had worked for the management team for the past 25 years. In those times sales were high and the only problem within the business was managing ‘lead times’ between the construction of a bedroom or bathroom suite and its installation into a customer’s home. These older style issues were logistically taxing, but quite unproblematic and not at all messy or wicked. The comment below by Steve is typical of the conversations the group engaged in when reflecting on their problems in the first few sessions of the CRAL project:

Well I think if we sat down and wrote a list, we’ve probably got about ten different projects going on…maybe what we ought to, I mean it must be, it must be creating a bit of pressure, maybe we ought to write a schedule or a program?....

If Hopkins were to thrive in the new business environment, which was changing faster than the management team’s worldview, then a new reflective language and a new appreciation of complex, wicked problems would be required.

**Asking reflective questions**

As I facilitated the set, I always encouraged the group to engage with the images they drew as a way to help them begin reflective conversations. In the early stages I was less concerned about the group taking action as a result of the sessions, as this was too much like their old problem solving style. Slowly the group came to understand how to reflect using the three stages of reflection I taught them. Over the course of a few sessions the group began to have reflective conversations with one another. In this excerpt Rachel poses a number of reflective questions encouraging Steve to question his sales approach:

…I just wonder whether the picture you drew reflects the way you deal with the customer, [do you think to yourself] how am I going to close this sale, why are they not buying, why do they not want this offer?.....does that [attitude come across] to the customer?

This type of reflective questioning had the effect of opening up conversations and allowed the group to begin to surface the interlinked ‘wickedness’ of the issues they were dealing with. Eventually the group began to connect the wicked problems they experienced with other issues. Their current lack of customers, for instance was connected to their methods of advertising and promotions. Issues of low production in the manufacturing department were connected to problems of poor time management in the whole business (Figure 2). Later in the project the group reflected upon the multi-faceted problems emerging from their potential investment into an online ‘web shop’ which some of the team were reluctant to commit to in the current economic climate:

Rachel- I do feel that it would be a good idea to discuss the web shop as I think that there are other issues that will emerge once we start discussing it. I am left wondering when or how we get the shop going…

George- The web shop is a good one to talk about really as in we need to know what products to put on, what advertising, the transportation and lots more, how are we going to get it started?

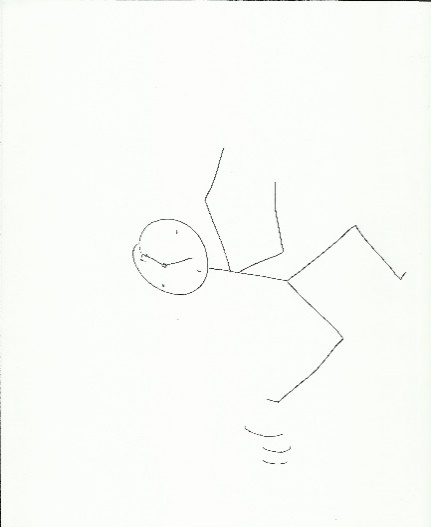
Steve- that’s true and it’s probably good that we discuss it because the way I see it, we all see it in different ways, I do think maybe it’s worth it…

**Pausing for reflection**

In the middle stage of the CRAL project the Hopkins group began to become more mindful of the images they drew. Members of the set would often look at their drawings and pause for a moment or two before responding to a group members question or reflections of the image. The pauses were quite pronounced and I felt were indicative of the way in which the Hopkins team were unconsciously allowing themselves to slow down the pace of their problem solving efforts in order to allow new ideas and insights to emerge within the set.

In this phase it seemed no longer important for the team to solve problems immediately, as they had always done; there was now more importance placed on uncovering hidden or taken-for-granted attitudes surrounding their problems. Action would emerge in this set only after the results of the groups deep reflective conversations had been processed and the messiness of their wicked problems acknowledged and thoroughly discussed.

Later on in the project the deliberate pauses allowed the group to connect their images to the emotion surrounding the problems they were facing. The connection between image, silence and emotion was not one that threatened the group; rather the silence was viewed as a way to further understand the messiness of each problem.

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Sometimes when the group reflected on wicked problems they instinctively reverted back to their old ways, putting forward simplistic solutions to the problem, becoming confused or being disheartened by their reflective efforts. As I began to understand the group’s process I encouraged the group not to look for solutions to the problem but to continuously ask more questions and reflect with one another. The following extract is my advice to the set as I noticed that their problem solving approach seemed to be reverting back to finding a simple solution to the issue:

**Figure 2: Time Management**

…don’t try to spiral down with your thoughts to try to get a solution, keep reflecting, keep asking questions like ‘what does this mean to me’? ‘How do I feel’? ‘What do I think about this’? And trust that something will fall out [of your reflections]

Afterwards the group commented on the power of this technique and how it surfaced a more useful understanding of the problem they were reflecting upon:

We usually have a discussion when you’ve gone, and so we did that and we all generally thought it was enlightening didn’t we? It made us realise what we have actually been doing all these weeks, to me it wasn’t really apparent until we did the last group, but all of a sudden I understood it a lot more and a light went on…it was when you said “you’re spiralling down to try to solve the issue” and immediately we knew we were; I think that was the key words wasn’t it?… I just felt at the end as if the answer just dropped out, it was good wasn’t it?

**Engaging with emotion**

Reflecting on drawn images within an action learning project often seems to stir up a number of emotional responses for some participants. The emotions some set members report feeling are often related to levels of anxiety. These emotions may be useful to the group if they can tolerate them enough to become the focus of the group’s reflection. Many people do not wish to surface their emotions which they may regard as uncontrollable, frightening or shameful; however, I have found that many set members engaged in long running action learning projects are more willing to connect with their emotions than set members reflecting in single, stand-alone session sets.

Towards the final few weeks of the CRAL project, the Hopkins group became comfortable enough with one another to speak about their emotional reactions to the images they created. Members of the set seemed keen to reflect upon the reason why their problems caused such reactions. Group members spoke about the anxiety they felt on a number of issues such as their customer base disappearing before their eyes or how anxious they were about investing money into a new and expensive web shop:

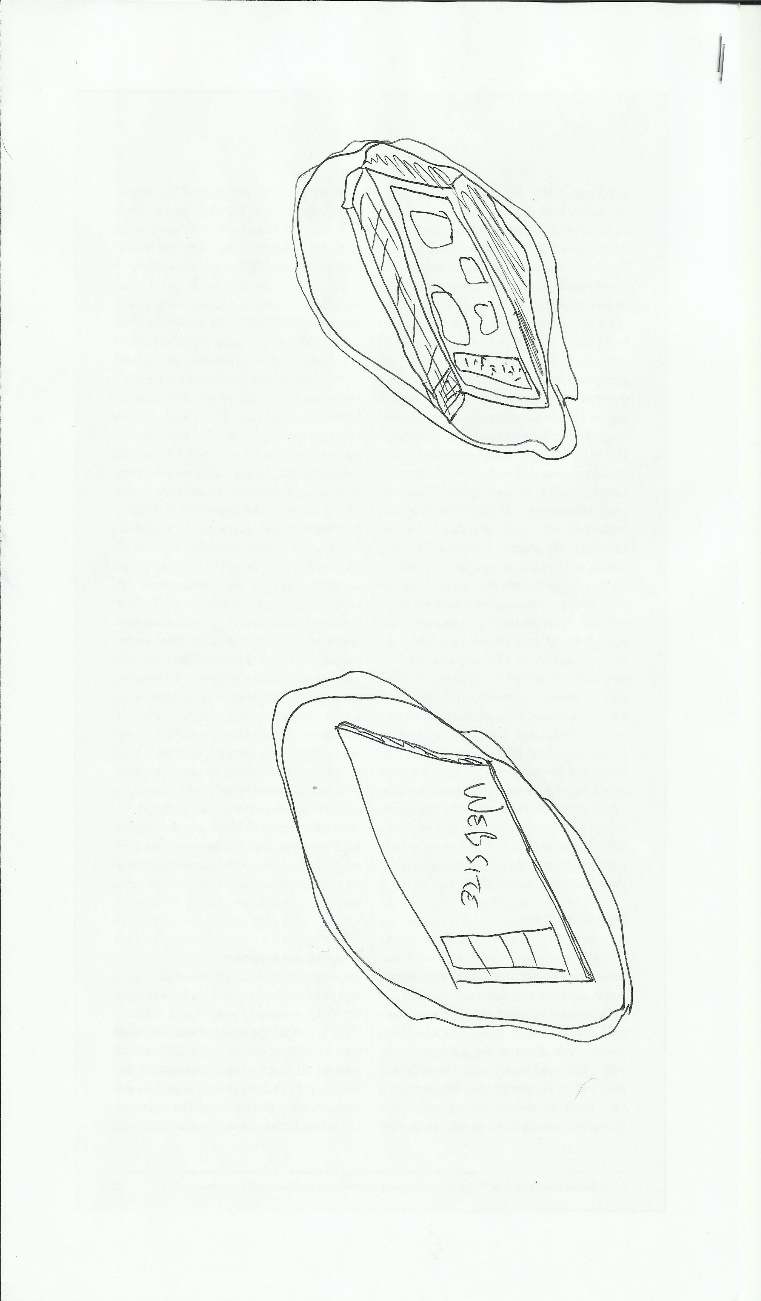
Gary- So what is the question you will draw [in this session]?

Rachel- ‘What are the anxieties beneath the launch of the web shop’

Steve- that’s good yes

I think that the group were more aware of their anxiety due to the fact that they were now frequently pausing and pondering over the images they had created before actually speaking and reflecting on them. In this extract the group adopt pauses and a little imagination to surface the anxiety they all feel around the web shop project.

Whilst viewing Rachel’s image, Steve is reflecting on the problems of the web shop. Rachel has drawn a computer screen with an uneven circle drawn around it (Figure 3). This becomes the focus of the group’s anxiety:

****Steve- It looks to me that you're looking at the website through a broken hole or something in a fence…(PAUSE)

George- A peepshow

Rachel- (LAUGHS) yes!

Steve- you couldn’t quite get to it could you, because we’re on the other side of the fence…

George- what does that feel like?

Steve- not good (LONG PAUSE)

Rachel- I don’t think the whole picture feels good, I think it really does..

**Figure 3: Hole in the Fence**

Steve- no it doesn’t (LAUGHTER)

Rachel- I feel quite unsettled

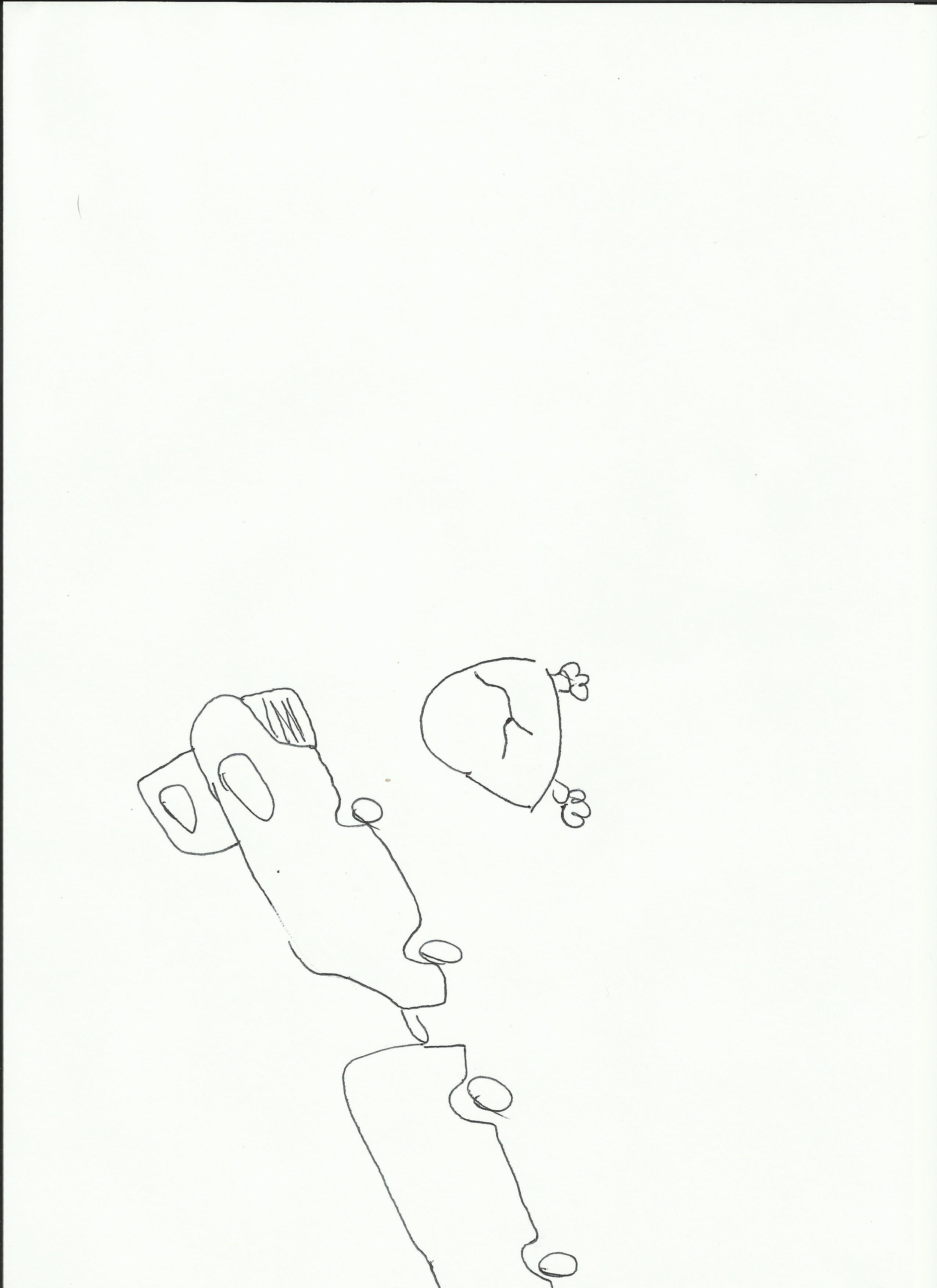
Steve- Yes

Rachel- It really does give a feeling of how everybody’s feeling which is really, really anxious, probably more anxious than anyone’s really said

Steve- yeah

Rachel- in respect of the whole thing

In the concluding weeks of the project the issue of the web shop and the question of investing a substantial amount of money into it came to the fore on a number of occasions. It was clear that the management team saw the development of a large multiple-use website acting as an online showroom and sales portal as a complex, messy problem. There were many issues to tease out before the team were confident in making any decision and acting upon their reflections.



In this extract Rachel and George reflect on both the logistical problems associated with the web shop with the anxiety around the whole project (Figure 4).

Rachel- I just find that really significant, although it’s a wash hand basin that's broken there, it looks very fragile and all I can see looking at the drawing is an eggshell, it does look very fragile and separate…. (PAUSE)

**Figure 4: Cracked egg**

George- well for me perhaps it kind of represents the anxiety for

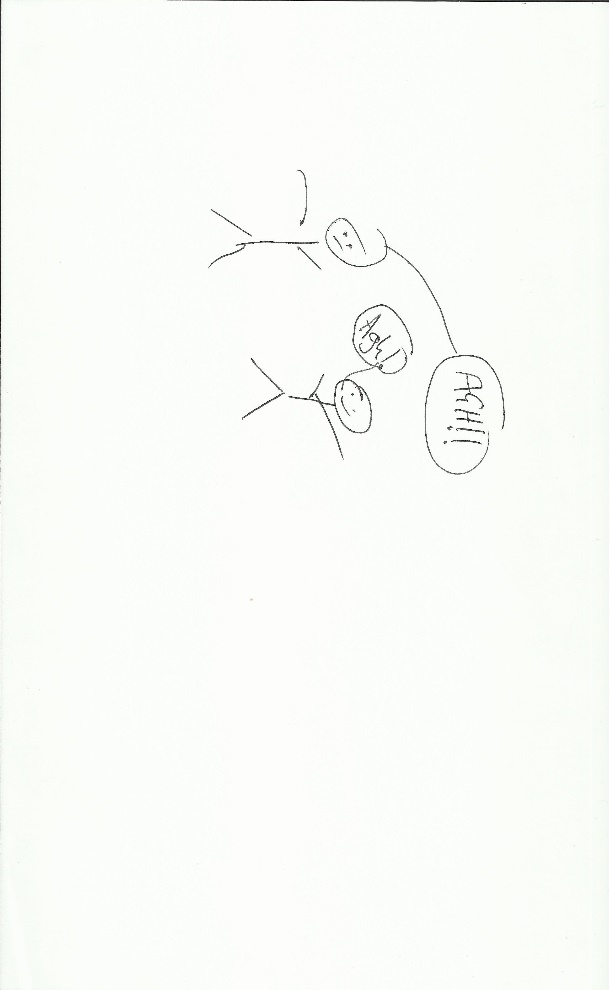
me of the web shop, probably not the delivery but the whole thing and where it’s going… whether it will be successful and the anxiety about the viability of it [all]…. (PAUSE)”

**Closing comments**

The research project came to an end after 12 sessions. I believed that the Hopkins group had developed their problem solving and action skills in a number of ways through their willingness to engage with critical reflection action learning. In the final session, I made time to interview each set member and asked them about their opinion of the project and what effect they felt it had on their organisation. In the extract below, Steve provides an insight into how he experienced the set:

I think from my point of view we are working more as a team, or we have been, but I think that’s changed, you do find yourself reflecting a bit and thinking a little bit differently I suppose, or trying to…. But I certainly feel quite happy about what we've been doing; I think it has brought us together to be able to discuss things more

George gave me his opinion as to some of the more uncomfortable issues surrounding the reflective sessions (Figure 5):

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Maybe it was a little bit uncomfortable at times, I have to say because you have to be very honest when you’re drawing, but you have to find a way to be honest without hurting people or offending anyone. I think I may have done, possibly, it hasn’t affected my working relationship but in the beginning it was awkward. In the beginning some of them were difficult, as they were personal as opposed to organisational

**Figure 5: Uncomfortable times**

George also gave me his opinion of the way the group reflected as an individual practitioner, as a group and through critical reflection:

I think it’s been quite interesting to actually to hear what other people say they can see things so differently from me and it’s interesting to understand that I have a completely different way to look at some things and come from a completely different angle, so I think it was quite interesting from the point of view that when you're all working together you're seeing it in one way and you assume everyone else is seeing it in the same way, but I think it’s quite a surprise to discover that that’s actually not correct.

After I finished the CRAL project Hopkins were still unsure about financing their web shop. Over the coming months the team carried on meeting and reflecting with one another in an attempt to confront more of their wicked problems and reach a conclusion in regard to their web shop proposal. Eventually Steve decided to invest a substantial amount of money into building a reduced version website, without the capability for customers to buy products online. The professionally produced site allowed potential customers to browse in high definition Hopkins’ full range of bedroom and bathroom suites in their latest styles and colours.

The new website attracted more customers than those who had traditionally visited the company showroom. Customers began to browse online for their bedrooms and kitchens and bookings for design, manufacture and installation grew. Steve and his team had navigated their way through a range of complex problems and emotions to finally address their biggest issue of all; how to invest in a substantial website that had the capability to increase visitor spending and bring the company back into full profitability.

**Conclusion**

This account of practice demonstrates how an organisation using critical reflection action learning were able to transform the way in which they problem solved through a process which used hand drawn images and a three step reflective approach to surface deeper reflection and change. Researchers may find this account of practice useful when working with sets struggling to engage with wicked, messy problems and who possess relatively limited problem solving or reflective skills.

CRAL projects are often intensive and can easily surface a range of power, control and emotional issues; for this reason I would recommend that researchers wishing to embark upon this form of action learning do so with great care and consideration. It is clear from my work with this organisation that the benefits of working in this way are many; however, the pitfalls of using CRAL as a methodology with some sets may be restrictive and not recommended.

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1. All identifying details in this study have been changed [↑](#footnote-ref-1)