

Learning (and Staying) Together Beyond the Classroom: experiences of action learning sets

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Introduction

Action Learning (AL) is a group-based technique that gets its name from its core process, and that is converting the part of the learning process known as ‘reflection’ into real and specific actions. This paper reviews the application of AL in two very different and novel (for AL at least) educational contexts.

The original AL process was formulated in the late 1940s by Reg Revans - an educator and developer with a distinguished background in scientific research - who observed that the business and management education then being offered was not effective in helping people and organisations acquire the skills, attitudes and behaviours required to address real concerns and problems in organisations. In his view there was something missing from the process, for while managers were being rigorously trained to apply ‘academic knowledge’ (‘formal’ or ‘programmed knowledge’ as he called it) to problems, they were not being trained to apply any personal or collective insight and experience to them (Weinstein, 1985, p44). That ‘something missing’ Revans referred to as ‘questioning insight’ (Revans 1989) – the process Pedler calls ‘asking “discriminating questions”’ (1991, p.285) - and it is this kind of questioning that lies at the heart of the AL process. By systematically questioning, and being enabled to question, one’s own and other people’s understanding, assumptions and experience of particular issues and problems, conditions for an effective learning experience are created, Revans believed, particularly when allied with professional experience in different ‘mixes’.

However, in AL the point of the process is not learning for its own sake but learning so that through informed, deliberate action, some issue is resolved, something obscure is understood or some problem not necessarily solved but, perhaps, is made less intractable. That is why it is known as ‘action’ learning and as such it is practiced today in many different settings in the commercial, public and voluntary sectors as well as in staff and student development programmes in higher education. It may take a number of different forms but the key thing - no matter what the setting or format - is that most who use it in practice find that problems and issues, when tackled with AL, become more amenable to resolution.

Revans used the word 'Set' to name the groups who practice action learning as he wanted to signal that there was difference between the particular work that such sets undertake and other forms of psychoanalytically-influenced 'problem-solving' group work. Now AL Set work is a very specific form of group working that participants will not usually have encountered before, and while, over time, a number of different 'flavours' of AL have developed (Marsick, 1999; O'Neil & Marsick, 2007; Pedler *et al.* 2005) there are certain common practices through which AL may be identified.

Each member of the group is given time to present their issue / problem to the other members. While they are doing this they are known as the 'presenter'. The role of the other group members is to support that presenter in finding ways of dealing with their own self-defined issue through empathetic listening and skilful questioning. Every presenter is recognised as the expert on her own issue, and group members should not seek to solve the presenter's problem but assist her to consider different angles of action. The presenter commits to action points at the end of their presenting period. Then roles are exchanged where the 'presenter' becomes part of the group again and, in turn, supports other presenters. ALS meetings occur with time gaps in between to allow for progress review.

There are many possible outcomes of AL including:

- further development of essential communication skills (questioning, summarising, reflecting etc.);
- development of problem-solving skills (the best recognised methods of problem-solving start with exploration not with action);
- development of group skills (the unwritten, but agreed, rules of interaction);
- development of action-planning skills (AL Sets are focussed on 'action');
- development of both personal and group reflection skills (the functioning of AL Sets is based on this).

The following brief case studies illustrate just two of the uses to which AL has been put in London Metropolitan University. These studies have been chosen because they demonstrate how AL may be used to great effect in problem-centred 'territory' which is not its native habitat.

Case Study 1: Using Action Learning Sets to Support Japanese Undergraduates in an 'English for Academic Purposes' module

This case study looks at the students' experience of an action learning set incorporated into an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and study skills module at undergraduate level, first piloted in 2006/7.

The students were from seven universities across Japan, one of which was a leading Japanese institution (Kamada University). Most had completed at least two years of

undergraduate study in their home university. The programme has different entry points and routes through, but usually, depending on their English language level, students come for one year and take a six-month pre-sessional English/EAP language course, followed by one semester of certificate level undergraduate modules.

If, like Hofstede (1991), you view culture as a kind of ‘mental programming,’ then like all overseas students, they frequently have different ways of conceptualising knowledge or processing information. Hence, there can be compatibility problems (around learning styles, autonomy, modes of participation, for example), that have to be considered, as do our own preconceptions about what students from Japan are like: quiet, shy, passive, hard-working, wealthy, uncritical, respectful, most of which descriptions are, from my experience, untrue.

They are often seen as coming from a reproductive or ‘convergent’ educational culture. For example, in their own educational context they are rewarded for following the master or mistress, reproducing what he or she says and, subsequently, are penalised in UK higher education institutions for an apparent (but often misperceived) inability to critically engage with their subject. For instance, a lecturer made the following comment, quoted from one of the reflective essays by the students on this course:

‘Almost all Japanese students are shy, so they do not come to ask what they did not understand.’

This was mentioned by a bright student with a good level of English, who was very nervous about the seminars and couldn’t follow everything (her anxiety got in the way of comprehension). In a group seminar, when asked to sum up the topic she was unable to speak and struggled to understand and the teacher then made this remark, which she rightly felt was discriminatory.

It was issues such as these, and their performance on their undergraduate modules, that were a concern. Student feedback from module questionnaires and in class sessions over the last five years frequently flagged up insufficient speaking practice or not enough writing, and no matter how we changed the emphasis, it did not seem to be giving them what they needed or wanted.

Action Learning offered a student-centred approach that also fits well with diverse cohorts, as (McGill & Beatty 2001) argue, as it enables the teacher to focus on the learners’ contexts and needs. Instead of the usual pattern of detailed analysis of educational needs and then finding strategies and material to match them, the participants are given the space to explore what they needed, moving beyond the comfort zone of the language class. This provided a range of possible approaches to questions that were close to them, as Johnson (1998) argues, and, more importantly, the opportunity to make mistakes, learn from them and make more. It was also

interesting to explore how a group usually viewed as from a convergent or reproductive educational background would respond to a non-didactic, non-hierarchical approach to learning.

Action learning seemed to meet these requirements. Firstly, it addressed the problem of survival on their undergraduate courses, as this was the most critical and problematic area. Secondly, it provided them with a support group that would help them learn from each other. It would also be good language practice, which would indirectly help with their problems in seminars. Finally, there were also two aspects of AL that seemed especially intriguing. The first concerns what seems to be at first glance like a contemporary re-working of Socratic method, which used questions and reflection to engage in a form of group Platonic dialogue. Similarly, the AL set is premised on what could be called a collective Socratic disavowal of knowledge, i.e. that there is no master with the answer, but rather that participants are trying to uncover what was perhaps always already known within themselves, through a dialogic process. Secondly, there are echoes of classical Freudian psychoanalysis, using sign language and word association as a means of peeling away of layers - not a talking cure here, but directed at greater self-awareness and understanding.

In the AL set there were seven participants and one facilitator, and attendance was good. Although we had done preparation (using triads), read introductory readings on AL and they had drawn up their code of conduct, this was a new and unfamiliar learning experience, and the participants were nervous. Their responses are illustrated with quotations from their reflective essays.

Initially they were quite resistant, and there was a lot of silence; silence was a problem for the tutor but not for them. Culturally, they had less of a problem with silence; however, as M said, 'I felt embarrassed to speak about personal things.'

There is something about the unconscious nature of the process and unravelling of an AL set; it takes time to understand what is happening, and participants don't usually get a sense of its significance until the end. For example, as Z said in her essay, '... they listened attentively ... asked me open questions ... which made me feel fed up & blamed .. And also realised that I was really trying to look for my real reason and problems from my subconscious and I was talking to myself with questions [which the] participants asked me but not with the participants.' Similarly M said, 'We reflect ourselves [on] ourselves by asking from other people.'

What did become apparent was how the actions had a deeper impact on their lives as a whole. This underlines how the learning went beyond the classroom and into their lives. For example: X took part in a learning exchange with a native English speaker, which gave her confidence. She wrote her 'brain became English mode'. She also learned about the culture through the people - simple things, such as she started talking to her landlady a lot more, helping her to understand a strong

regional accent. M chose to learn three words a week, which at first glance did not seem that substantial, but it worked and had an impact on other areas; she started writing a diary of reflections on her life,' and became a very reflective student. H began planning his future career after graduation. For H, '... ALS has an aspect of awareness learning... ALS is easier to approach than seminar or other discussions for a non expert of a language'. Talking about his actions, H said, 'I grew accustomed to doing it (actions)'.

As mentioned, AL opens up a space for experimentation and failure. For J, to improve a literature essay, the first solution was to borrow grammar book, which didn't work, so he decided to attend the LDU drop-in sessions, which he didn't do, but it did help as he realised where his problems lay. For Z, her first time management action plan (daily schedule) didn't work. Although initially irritated by being questioned she suddenly realised the need to 'divide' coursework activities up across all modules. However, the participants liked the pressure of having to commit to and report back on their actions and found it very motivating: H, ' I thought the motivation of trying to improve the issue we had led to a better *life*, including study, and this was the most valuable aspect'. M wrote that there was, 'Positive pressure form other people'.

AL also presents certain challenges. There is a danger of setting very limited but achievable actions; there are cost effective implications as it is resource intensive, and AL can, if poorly handled, verge on bad group therapy. Facilitators do need to be aware of the dangers and damage that a badly facilitated ALS could have on the participants. To resolve this it is important to restrict the focus of the ALS and have access to expertise outside the set. As M wrote, '[AL] needs a lot of time and good relationships [among] the group members, and there is a little mental pain'.

Based on feedback from their essays and a class meeting, students found that it was hard to think of questions and also not to give advice. Asking helpful questions was very difficult and they found many questions embarrassing. But when asked if they would do AL again, they all said 'yes'.

In conclusion, Action Learning proved challenging to the participants and to the teacher, as it provides genuine insight into each other's lives and the learning process. But on the whole they all found the experience a positive one, which revealed how learning goes into their lives outside the academy.

Case Study 2: Using ALS to facilitate workbased learning on a Foundation Degree

Possibly the most fundamental challenge Foundation Degrees (FDs) bring is that of the integration of workbased learning. Wagner *et al.* (2001: 320) noted that on employment based routes 'developing critical perspectives on the workplace can put some students on a collision course with their employers and contribute to a

stressful working environment'. The extent of employer commitment and workbased support also varies greatly especially in smaller organisations. Houlbrook (2000: 542) found that although 'there was a kind of organisational blessing and trust of the students, this did not extend to active participation in the workbased project.' Workbased projects can too easily become exercises in the application of learning (as theory) to work rather than learning through work. Conversely, Aram and Noble (1999) make a case for seeing work experience in terms of the complexity of learning and broadening out the learning experience to include the affective domain.

'Learning is not a purely rational, intellectual process, but a participative, social experience involving reason, emotion, intuition, and interaction' (Aram and Noble 1999: 323)

Action learning offers an approach to embracing these issues that is both innovative and simple enough to fit into conventional academic frameworks. This case study is based on our experiences of introducing AL into a FD targeted at community workers and others active in local communities. The aim of the course is to enable participants to engage confidently and pro-actively in community development. The nature of community work implies a very specific emphasis on inter-personal skills. For managers and many others, interactions with people are not only the key aspect of their work but often the most complex. AL forms the basis of a first-semester, double module in workbased learning, serving to support workbased learning in the classroom. Students worked in sets with a tutor facilitator over a period of one semester completing AL-related tasks along the way (setting targets, completing learning logs) and are summatively assessed via a reflective document.

The student experience

With the first cohort of students on the module we set them up to work on a 'project' through the ALS. There was a tendency for students to choose a safe or easily executed project which appeared to relate to a perception that there was a link between success in their project and success on the module. This perception persisted despite our assurances that this need not be the case. So although students may have improved their immediate practice, the practical issues that were dealt with in the workplace and discussion in the classroom added relatively little to the outcomes. Therefore we made a change with the second intake. We dropped the word 'project' and focussed upon the development of a 'target' in relation to issues and problems at work. Students appeared to relate to this much more readily. The targets chosen had a sense of immediacy and personal relevance. We also noticed that during the semester targets shifted, often in dramatic ways, during or between sessions as the problem was explored and options considered. The module felt to us to be more useful to the students, with much more visible dynamic learning taking place during the module. We report below some other observations in relation to the experience of twenty one students taking the module, based on some data gathered via a questionnaire and focus group.

With regard to the question, **‘What skills did you develop through this process?’**, students’ responses fell into the following categories:

- listening;
- awareness of non verbal behaviour;
- problem-solving;
- questioning.

‘I feel as though I have developed better listening skills whereas before I was easily distracted and couldn’t stay tuned in for long. By the fourth week I realised that facial expressions and body language made a huge difference...I have learned to question in a way that did not propose a solution and have discovered how through my style of questioning to assist disclosure which took the presenter’s problem further and helped to find a solution.’

How did you feel before you started the ALS?

Positive	25%
Negative	50%
Neutral	25%

‘I was saying to our course tutor I’m not coming to this ALS session ...I thought do I really want to tell them my problems? They might see me differently.’

Did the ALS help you with your work target?

Yes	83%
No	4%
Nil Response	4%

‘My target in many ways began to feel less significant as the sets progressed...at the time of setting my perception was that it was a realistic goal however by participating in the set as I practised dealing with situations my problem solving skills enhanced. This enabled me to become better at looking for solutions, at communicating...in turn this changes my perception of my situation which changed my target i.e. the way I was handling my situation.’

Comments

Ideally it is suggested that participants elect to participate in an ALS. However, the sets are key to the delivery of the module and all students are expected to participate in them each week. The students’ initial confusion and reticence to participate in the AL is understandable. It is largely the case that you have to have participated in an ALS in order to experience its benefits. Although it may seem

appropriate to spend time introducing and preparing students for the experience rapid emersion is probably the best strategy. As one student said:

'I think with the ALS for the first few you didn't think – oh well I liked that but as it developed and you started using the reflective thing outside the classroom it became a lot more useful tool that you can use in the workplace...'

Whilst no-one is expected to disclose more than they are comfortable with, the fact remains that ALS works on the principle of disclosure. Inevitably some personalities are more comfortable with disclosure than others and it is important to spend some time agreeing ground rules around confidentiality and equality. There was no expectation that everyone would contribute to each session and we did discuss what silence and non-verbal communication may contribute to the set.

The shifting of the target that occurs during AL reflects the process of development of problem-solving skills and the insights that presenters gained from the challenges and questioning of others. All students reported that the set helped them to rethink their situation through the eyes of others and that they were challenged and prompted into action. Sometimes this shifting perspective meant the target changed completely during the module – capturing something of the dynamic social dimension of the learning process. McGill and Beaty (2001:184) have noted that '[o]ften what is learned in action learning is not that which was anticipated. The value is in the development of the individual'. However developing trust and security takes time and we found it best to give each person two or preferably three presentation opportunities. One participant reported:

'The first time I presented I wanted to be open and honest about my issue but when I presented I chose a different issue that the one I really wanted aired. I was ready for the questions and had solutions in my mind and acted as if the feedback was of genuine help. On reflection it appears I cannot open myself up to strangers as the group was at that time. I preferred to talk about issues that I have already weighed up and know the progress to make... My next presentation was totally different. I was genuine and opened up a small piece of myself whilst explaining how I was feeling about the situation I was in and my progression to solve the issues. Playing different roles in sessions gave me an insight into how the process works but I had to participate

The students continue to respond positively to this module with a majority finding it relevant, challenging and enjoyable. There were also perceived benefits to the development of a seminar group identity and engagement with the course as a whole during the first semester. As one participant observed:

'Whilst other members presented their problems over the next few weeks I started to notice the difference it was making within the group. Everyone seemed more comfortable with one another.'

The tutor facilitation is important to establishing the principles of ALS. This is resource intensive; however, we have experimented with self-facilitating sets in an undergraduate study skills module. The tutor role is to circulate and monitor the groups and intervening occasionally to reinforce key principles. This is an approach we intend to explore further.

Conclusion

As these case studies reveal, AL can bring considerable learning benefits that have a wider impact beyond the classroom, including enhanced engagement, reflection, and problem-solving and interpersonal skills, developed around targets of personal relevance. These benefits are often appreciated only after ongoing participation in ALS, as the process is initially experienced as challenging, as participants grapple with issues of procedure, questioning and disclosure.

One of the major criticisms of AL has been that while it is avowedly not a therapeutic group technique, it nevertheless relies, to a great extent, on similar personal qualities of participants namely, verbal fluency, emotional intelligence and possession of relatively rich 'life experience' – personal and/or professional. These case studies demonstrate that in the hands of a skilful facilitator, those are qualities may be developed or enhanced 'in situ' and that in so doing, AL becomes a vehicle not only for learning but also for profound personal growth, even in situations where cultural and language fluency issues are to the fore.

The case studies also demonstrate that it is the willingness of participants themselves – with or without the intervention of a facilitator - to create and sustain relationships in AL Sets that is a key process dynamic and one which needs to be recognised, articulated and nurtured in all ALS activity.

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