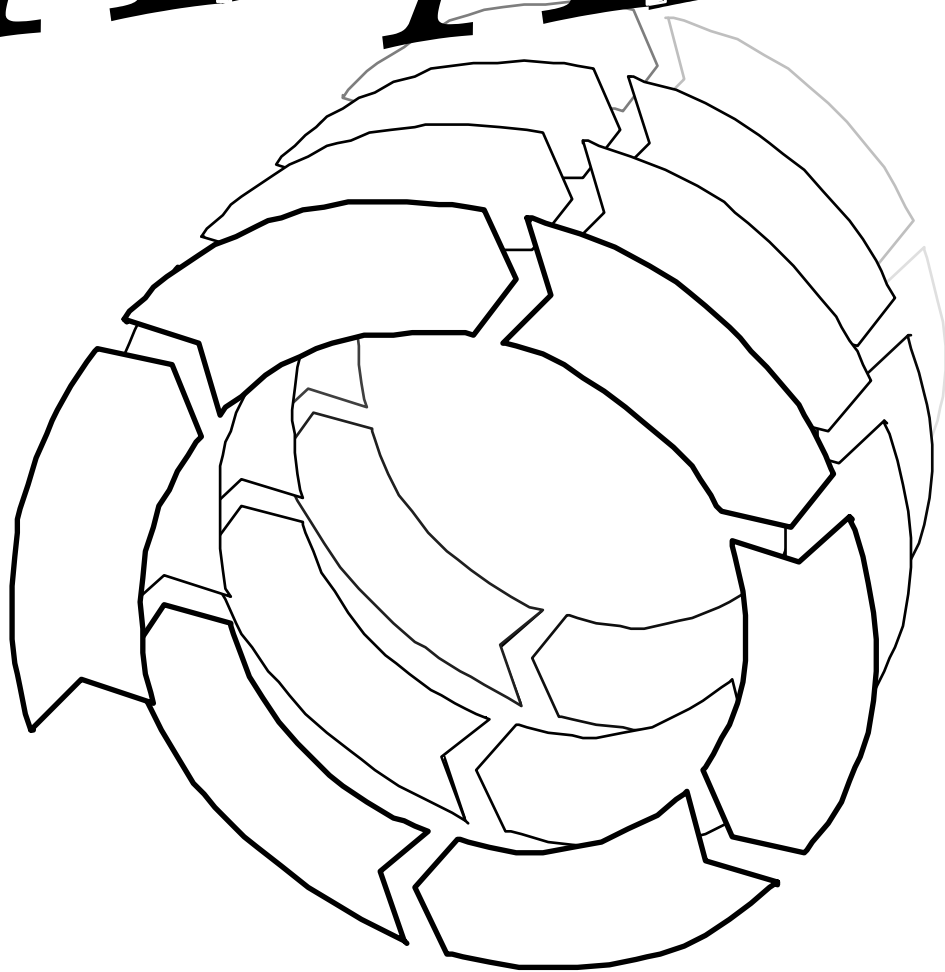


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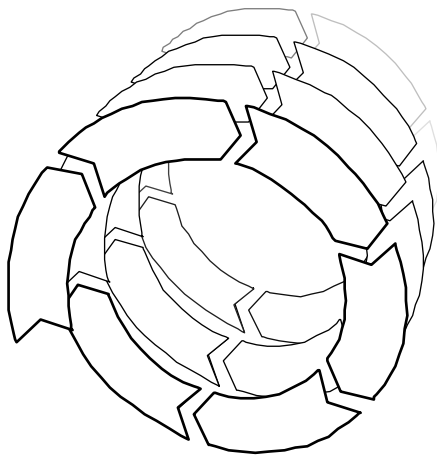
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Editorial

In this issue we provide two articles on action learning from the UK. Both discuss action learning within the context of higher education. We are grateful to Jean Lawrence of the International Foundation for Action Learning (IFAL) for encouraging these contributions.

Harvey Frank, from Huddersfield University in Yorkshire, discusses the value of action learning as an approach to management development. By drawing from reports of managers on an MA Programme, he provides valuable insights into the role of learning sets and learning logs.

Trix Webber and Suzanne O'Hara, from the University of Brighton, discuss issues involved in forming learning sets within management education programmes. They argue that set-forming processes that are participant-led are more aligned to the fundamental leaning philosophy of action learning.

In "Bookshelf" we announce new resources on action research in the form of new books, a book series, a workbook for participatory action research and a journal.

We welcome your personal contribution to ALAR in the form of project reports, articles, personal profiles, letters to the editor, book reviews, network news or identification of resources for action learning and action research.

Will the future of management development involve action learning? - Harley D Frank

Abstract

Shows how the solving of difficult management problems, and the process of self-development and learning can be advanced by the use of action learning (AL). Highlights some of the multiple benefits for organisations of using AL. Discusses two fundamental aspects of the AL method - set meetings and keeping learning logs - and provides reports on their experiences from managers who have taken part in the Huddersfield University Action Learning programme. Initiatives for further research are indicated, as well as implications for those carrying out action research.

Introduction

The Brighton Open Space Conference on the Future of Management Development provided a unique opportunity to explore and discuss current methods of management development and cast a realistic eye on its future viability. A thought provoking session organised by Margaret Neal (Neal, 1995) suggested that while new forms of management development are going to be needed, the outlook for support of existing activities is not favourable. Employers are only prepared to support programmes which they see as relevant to the developing nature of their organisations, and to the emerging needs of their managers. Programmes must also represent good value. So long as management development is characterised in board rooms as yet more conventional

training delivered by yet more expensive experts, cutbacks will be inevitable. In a period when the future of management development is being actively debated, it may be worth considering methods which are both clearly relevant to the needs of organisations and can deliver exceptional 'value for money.'

The Open Space Conference provided an opportunity to look at one such method, that of Action Learning (AL) (Frank, 1995). AL is a method that seems to have been around for some time, but many managers are uncertain exactly what it is. When asked, some may recall that a chap named Revans recounted how he had used it with a group of managers in the Coal Industry (Revans, 1982) who each were facing difficult management problems in their respective pits; problems that had no obvious solutions, problems where even the true nature of the problem itself was uncertain. Using AL, the managers were able to make considerable progress on their respective problems. From a management perspective, AL proved to be a powerful and effective method to enable individual managers to solve difficult problems. Since then, a growing range of organisations and individuals have become involved in using AL. As a method for solving tough or 'messy' management problems (Ackoff, 1981) AL is particularly relevant and effective.

This feature on its own, would commend AL to many organisations. However, AL has a second benefit which many managers find particularly useful for their own personal development and career prospects. This is its potential for advancing individual development, not as a result of attending a conventional management development programme or course, but as a by-product, an added dividend, from the very efforts they put in to solving a live management problem facing their own organisation. Put simply, it can enable managers to learn how to become better managers.

Action Learning as a method of management

In common with other management development methods which require active involvement, AL can seem difficult to explain to those who have not experienced it at first hand. However, there are sources available which provide useful discussions, these include Revans (1983), Pedler (1991), McGill and Beaty (1992), Inglis (1994), Weinstein (1995), Pedler (1996) and Passfield (1996). In his description of AL, Revans draws a clear distinction between Programmed Knowledge (P), already existing information and 'know how', and Questioning Insight (Q). If the solution to a problem is already known, then the course of action to follow will be reasonably clear and should pose few major problems for an experienced manager. Considerable managerial work involves applying "P" type- knowledge to issues. Where the AL method proves effective is in addressing 'Q' situations where ready-made solutions are not apparent, or do not exist, or where the nature of the problem is itself unclear. These types of situations are all too familiar to most managers today: managing uncertainty, managing change, managing recurrent lapses in quality. Ready-made solutions do not exist for situations like this; this is where AL comes into its element. The experience with working managers who have joined the Huddersfield MA Programme in Management by Action Learning support this point. The work they have undertaken with their organisations has addressed a wide range of challenges and uncertain situations, all highly relevant to advancing the business and interests of their organisations.

Solving the organisation's problems

What sorts of situations have these managers addressed? To what extent were these the kind of problems for which ready-made solutions were not apparent?

These are a few of the problems:

Example 1

Within a large engineering company, taking charge of a Remanufacturing Department which produced reconditioned components for a growing world wide market. Known locally as “that garage down the road”, it was under-resourced and neglected by senior management. Although he was technically competent, the new manager had to address complex human resource and technical issues to transform the Department into a profitable operation which came to be well regarded by other managers.

Example 2

Refocussing the operations of a small venture company operating within a large university after the original start-up manager had left and the enterprise was in danger of running out of steam. Strategic analysis and extensive reorganisation led to the eventual development of a new marketing initiative which increased consultation activities by the lecturers, benefiting both the university company and the lecturers. In the process, attitudes of many lecturers and senior academics to undertaking consulting work had to be turned around.

Example 3

Helping a large District General Hospital (which had become a Trust) to meet a performance target which had eluded it for some time: reduction of the time patients spent waiting to be seen in the busy out-patients department. In her role as manager of the out-patient department, the nurse involved faced a difficult challenge, not least how to encourage senior consultants to alter their behaviour.

Example 4

A long-time employee in the carpet industry who had worked his way up to the position of Quality Manger, set himself the challenge of winning for his firm the newly

constituted Environmental Quality Award (BS 7750). He faced considerable opposition, primarily from within the firm, but eventually won through gaining the first environmental award given to a UK carpet manufacturer.

Example 5

As part of a national initiative to upgrade museums, one of the people who joined the Action Learning MA Programme was appointed as Registrar of a large municipal museum with the specific brief of raising its standards of collection management so it could qualify for national registration. After a hectic year of improvement activity with demonstrated achievements, the museum's bid was turned down. It was at this point, facing disappointment, that the new Registrar's AL project really began. Considerable new improvements were eventually achieved in what proved to be a long-running change initiative.

These situations presented each manager with queries, and with continuing uncertainty, as they sought to make sense of what was happening and to chart a course of managerial action which would bring them through to some sort of understanding of the problem and resolution of the situation.

The AL method proved highly suited for undertaking managerial work where established guidelines and conventional wisdom were lacking.

For organisations concerned with achieving results, enabling its managers to use the AL method to address key problems can pay dividends.

Developing the manager

Organisations value managers who can achieve the sorts of results described above. But the AL method has other benefits. In our experience, the AL method has proven to be a powerful engine for management development. The surprising thing is that, compared to some management

development programmes, with AL, the development process seems to occur without the individual being told that it should happen, or being enjoined to return to their job with a trainer's words ringing in their ears and a glossy course manual of good practice tucked into their brief case.

If AL is so useful as a method for management development, what makes it so? In the AL method, as it has been used on the Huddersfield MA Programme, two key types of experiences have emerged as central to the process of individual development which the managers have experienced. One is set meetings, the other the keeping of learning logs.

Action learning sets

A central feature of the AL experience are the set meetings in which individuals meet regularly. A key point stressed by McGill and Beaty (1992) is that set meetings are not intended to be advice surgeries to which managers bring their problems to receive "good advice" on how to solve them. The AL approach suggests a far more effective method: ask a set member to recount to the other set members the live problem they are currently facing as a manager - a situation which is troubling them, a problem for which they do not have an answer. The other set members, after careful listening, proceed to ask questions: for example, "Why do you think your boss is refusing to consider your proposal?" "What is making you uneasy about the Quality Programme?" "What could you do about it?" "What is stopping you from doing it?" "Have you considered that part of the problem may be you?" etc.

Asking questions like this, instead of offering good advice, can have several benefits: the set member is led to reflect on the problem, to reflect on their own involvement in it, often coming to view the problem from a different angle or perspective. Being led to develop an approach to a problem which has seemed insoluble, formulating a possible course of action growing out of questioning by set members, and one's

own reflections, is likely to motivate a manager in ways that receiving good advice can seldom do. In addition, the manager with the problem will know more about the detailed context and nature of the problem, and what is feasible, than most well intentioned advice givers ever can. Espousing a listening and questioning cycle for a set is one thing, getting managers who are used to giving advice to subordinates, and being given “good advice” by their seniors, is quite another. Our experience was that most set members did not find it easy to act in this way. Their tendency to slip into advice giving was pervasive and strong even when they intellectually understood how they should act. However, set meetings proved productive and effective, after set members had experienced several set meetings where timely interjections from the facilitator helped to establish cycles of listening and questioning.

The experience of taking part in set meetings constituted a key element in the personal development of the AL managers. In the Huddersfield Programme, sets were limited to no more than 6 persons who undertook to meet normally every 2 weeks for three hours. Over a period of 11 months, the members met for a set meeting on over 20 different occasions (for six summer weeks no meetings were scheduled). Each set was facilitated by the author, or by his colleague who originated the Programme, Richard Graham.

The way any given AL set operates depends on several factors, not least on the facilitator and what they bring to each meeting: their view of the AL process and their view of their own role as facilitator. Many individuals around the world now have experience in acting as AL set facilitators (O’Neil, 1996).

What is it about the AL sets that seems to foster management development? Accounts written by the managers on the Huddersfield Action Learning MA Programme provide some useful insights into the process.

The act of trying to explain a situation or problem to others, and hearing oneself do it, can lead to a new understanding:

Sometimes people can talk themselves round to solving their own problems when they are given the opportunity to air them. I felt I did this on at least one occasion; a possible solution came to me as I was still outlining my problem.

... having to explain to the set the reasons why and how I would do something made it easier for me when I got back to work to realise what it was I wanted to do and to be able to “articulate my expectations”.

Without realising it, questioning another set member can lead you to question yourself.

Quite often I would find myself playing devil’s advocate to one of the other set members, using some of my own experiences to push my arguments forward. It occurred to me that when I was doing this I was not purely questioning his problem, but questioning one of my own. The reason I think this happened was that I never really acknowledged {at the time} that I had a problem in some of these areas, and it was my line of questioning that made me aware of it. Over the past 12 months this proved to be quite valuable learning.

As the sets developed, active listening assumed increasing value to the members:

I personally gained a lot in set meetings from listening to other people’s problems.

{My experience in the set} ...has made me more aware of how important it is to be able to listen and yet contribute to a group situation.

The different backgrounds of the managers in each set also constituted valuable sources for learning:

I took particular value from the ever changing balance between work and learning which the set concentrated on. I was the only Local Government Officer within the set and I found this very useful to me in providing insights into private organisations and assisting to break my Local Government mould.

I found the experience of sharing views, thoughts and feelings, strategies and personal philosophies of life in different organisations extremely interesting. Particularly so because many of the people in the set were in the very management positions that I was concerned with developing in my own organisation.

The group climate which arose in the sets did a lot to create a shared commitment for individual development, which in turn, fostered individual learning:

The set provided each participant with a safe confidential platform built on trust. Initially this was largely a result of the climate generated by Richard, our facilitator, who soon let it be known that it was “our” set. A rule of confidentiality was the only formal set rule, but I soon detected a secret contract which was established between all members. It stated that members would help each individual achieve success in their projects, their learning and the MA course. This would become reality because each set member shared common goals and wanted to contribute to the success of the others.

The atmosphere of openness and trust in the set gradually encouraged me to be more open and honest ... I learnt what I could do to improve relationships {at work} by changing my own behaviour. The non-judgmental climate encouraged me to realise that my own evaluation was the only meaningful judgment of my own development.

Encouraging set members to ask questions and to be honest legitimised personal feelings as an 'OK' topic for the managers to acknowledge in the set:

By regarding project performance as more than just a skills based activity, but one which also involved the whole person ... personal attitudes and emotions were exposed and sometimes challenged. At this level, feelings were as important as facts, and learning to feel, as important as learning to think ... By moving into this level the set became an effective problem solving unit and a forum for change.

Commitment to the set, gaining the interest and approval of its other members became a strong source of motivation for members:

The set encouraged me to generate action plans and achieve targets. As a presenter {at the set} I was eager to achieve my action points so I could report to my set, details of successes and action.

On occasions, particularly in the first months, for some members, set work proved frustrating:

At today's set, we agreed an agenda, but time keeping still atrocious ... Some set members will not shut up.

As the sets developed in the following weeks the potential of the AL process emerged, and with it a spirit of enthusiasm and creativity:

At tonight's set meeting it looked like we were going to get away early until Harley got his pen and flip chart out and got M. to draw an organisational diagram - that's when it got interesting and M. demonstrated how he was "managing through people" and not doing all the {non-managerial and technical} work himself. I was most impressed... The set was now functioning like a group of "comrades in adversity". The discussion, while being effectively guided by the facilitator, was not

being chaired. The discussion was free flowing, interesting and set members made the extra effort to ensure that the needs of the set members were being attended to. This was action learning, but not as I had conceived of it. We had evolved our own reality of action learning.

Learning logs

Another activity which many of the managers found contributed to their learning and self-development, was the keeping of a Learning Log. Set members were recommended to keep one, although it was not a requirement of the Programme. As most, but not all, of our managers had no previous experience of keeping a log, useful sources were recommended which they could consult for guidance. After a time, most evolved a personal format that best suited them, much as the logs themselves remained as personal documents to each manager.

A major purpose of the learning log was to get the individual managers in the habit of reviewing and reflecting on what they were doing:

For me, I can identify the learning log as a major source of my development and personal change. Prior to discovering learning logs I would tend to rush around from one activity to another and rarely review what I was doing.

For some, the learning log also helped them to recognise how feelings which could affect their work, were related to actions:

The learning log helped me to identify my own values and feelings related to my actions. By describing my feelings after experiences I was able to understand how and why I felt as I did.

In keeping their learning logs, most of the managers drew on the concept of the Learning Cycle put forward by David

Kolb (Kolb, Rubin & McIntyre, 1979). The four steps identified by Kolb provide a useful framework for keeping a log:

1. Do (having concrete experiences);
2. Review (observation and reflection);
3. Learn (formulating abstract concepts and generalisations);
and
4. Apply (testing applications of concepts in new situations).

The main tool for personal reflection was the learning log which focused on Kolb's learning cycle. Writing up the log meant going through the cycle. ... As a relatively weak reflector, it formalised the practice of reflecting and forced me to reflect on my actions.

{From my learning log} I noted my preference for concluding and so distorting the learning cycle. I recognised in me a compulsion to reach an answer quickly. This resulted in a tendency to jump to conclusions by circumventing the review stage, where uncertainty and ambiguity are higher. Being aware of this tendency I can now focus and force myself around each stage in the learning cycle.

The value of the log soon became apparent to the managers:

I developed a system of simply logging events, and briefly outlining my thoughts. At a later date I was able to look through my entries and reflect on what happened ... It was quite surprising the amount of knowledge and experience I was achieving. Being conscious of this learning enabled me to better utilise it in future situations. Also it gave me more confidence in my own ability.

In addition to providing insight and learning, the logs came to be used in thinking through and planning future management actions:

The log was the catalyst for making learning from experience a systematic process, the discipline of the log was vital for maximum learning. After having gone through {the cycle} many times I was able to visualise and simulate the process in my mind, often before writing it up. The log also helped me to proactively plan my learning. In the "Managing Across Context", which involved complex interpersonal skills, the log helped me to integrate the skills for a common effect or synergy.

In writing up the log I had to focus on the complete learning cycle and this in particular formalised the process of reflecting and hence learning. I very quickly found that experiences can be viewed differently even a few days later. I found myself going back to people and issues with alternative suggestions: "I have been thinking about it and ..." A simple statement but it is heavily underlined in my log. In compiling the log I feel I have become much more insightful about situations and my behaviour in them and I have learned how to learn from everyday experiences.

Managers who have been on the AL MA programme have come to regard the learning log as a tool to inform their management actions, and as a method for continued learning:

I still keep a very brief learning log and will reflect on its contents on a fairly regular basis. It really does help me to recognise what I have learned and how I might apply it in the future. I find it hard to imagine not doing it.

Conclusions

This paper began by highlighting what many regard as the uncertain future of management development.

Organisations and individuals are increasingly finding they want management development activities which not only increase the potential of their managers, but show clear payoffs to the company or organisation in the work these managers perform. All too often, with management development programmes the payback period for the company remains unclear or non-existent. With AL, the payback process begins when the development activity begins, and gains momentum as time passes.

AL is being used in a wide variety of organisations, often supported by an experienced facilitator. Its use on academic higher education courses seems to be growing, particularly on postgraduate management programmes. Research on the use of AL in British Higher Education has identified at least sixteen degree programmes in which it is being used (Frank, 1996). Typically AL is included as a component of a more traditionally taught course, but at a few universities, AL is relied on as the major method of learning. Basing an entire management degree around the AL method will probably only make sense if the people entering it have some prior academic training and experience in management. Issues such as this, and the question of the relative value to an organisation of a manager with a traditional MBA compared to a higher management degree earned through the AL method, are intriguing questions, but lie beyond the scope of this paper.

The widespread use of action research to help solve problems in organisations (ALARPM, 1997), as distinct from using AL, raises further interesting questions. In attempting to solve problems facing organisations by using action research, is sufficient concern being given to the learning that researchers and organisation members may experience (Dixon, 1994; Frank, 1997) ?

In this article, we have shown how the solving of difficult management problems, and the process of self-development and learning can be advanced by the use of AL. Two types of experiences have emerged as central to the process of individual development: set meetings and learning logs. Accounts from managers who have taken part in the Huddersfield AL Programme, cited in the article, support the value of these experiences in their own development. It should be borne in mind that the success of the process may be affected by other related factors as well. Further research suggests that other processes which contribute to the significant learning that underlies AL, include 'double loop learning' and coming to see oneself as being part of the problem (Frank, 1998).

As a method of staff development, AL acts as a catalyst running alongside the daily work of the manager but without creating a major hole in training or staffing budgets (Pedler & Boutall, 1992). Action Learning contains the promise of enriching an organisation and at the same time enriching those individual managers who are prepared to come forward to try it out.

Acknowledgment

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About the author

Dr Harley Frank is the author of a number of articles on action learning. The above article is drawn from his research and experience as tutor and set facilitator on the MA in Management by Action Learning Programme at Huddersfield University in Yorkshire.

Harley is an academic with teaching and research experience in management, action learning, organisational behaviour, behavioural studies, action research, and medical sociology. He has a Bachelor of Arts degree from Cornell University. His PhD in sociology from London University (LSE) involved a systematic study of decision making in a psychiatric hospital. Harley has taught at Boston University and Bradford University. He has carried out action research in inner London. In his most recent post he was Senior Lecturer in Management Development in the School of

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Forming action learning sets in management education programmes - Trix Webber and Suzanne O'Hara


Abstract

This paper explores the process of forming action learning sets in the context of higher education programmes. The assumptions underlying different approaches, and the messages they give to participants about roles, responsibilities and programme aims, are explored. The conclusions drawn are firstly that set facilitators need to be clear about their own philosophy of learning and adopt an approach to forming sets which is aligned to this. Secondly it is argued that set forming processes which are participant led offer the most valuable learning opportunities.

Questions posed by action learning in higher education

The value of Action Learning to management development in companies is well recognised but until recently its use in higher education (HE) has been limited. Higher education institutions are now increasingly offering Action Learning based management courses (see Frank, 1996 for a review of these) and some of the challenges which Action Learning presents to HE have been explored (O'Hara, Webber & Reeve, 1996 and Naftalin, 1996). This article aims to contribute to that exploration by clarifying some of the issues involved in the choice of process for forming action learning sets. While the topic is discussed with reference to action learning and management education, the arguments are

equally relevant to other situations in which groups of adults come together to learn and solve problems.

At the start of management education programmes which involve action learning, participants must divide into learning sets of between five to eight people. As the set is such an important part of Action Learning, the process of set formation can be a fraught experience. Participant anxiety arises from perceptions that being in the 'right' set could make the difference between passing and failing the course, as set members will be mutually dependent on each other for success in a variety of ways. The following are some of the questions that the set forming process has triggered in the minds of participants we have worked with ¹: 

What level of commitment will set members have?

Will set members have the intellectual and knowledge resources necessary for success?

How good are people's feedback skills?

Can their judgement be trusted?

How far can I share my problems?

How open do I want to be?

Will I get on with these people?

Do I want to work with these people?

Facilitators have their own concerns. Some of the questions we have asked ourselves are listed below:

How do we get the programme off to a good start?

How do we model the process of action learning?

¹ See also Bourner, T., and Frost, P., 1996. In their own words: the experience of action learning in higher education, in *Education and Training*, Vol.38, No.8, pp. 22-31.

How do we take care of 'vulnerable' participants?

How do we develop autonomous learners?

Might participants be damaged by the set forming process, so that the safety of the set is jeopardised?

What if sets simply do not form?

Have we opted for the best set forming process?

What if participants leave the programme as a result of this process?

It is no wonder that set formation can raise the anxiety levels of all involved. An informal survey of other set facilitators suggested we were not alone in our concerns.

Approaches to forming action learning sets

We would suggest that there are four basic approaches to forming action learning sets.

1. Random allocation.
2. Facilitators manage and control the process.
3. Facilitators base the outcome on participant choice.
4. Participants manage and control the process.

The key factor in choosing between these approaches is belief about the roles and responsibilities of learners and facilitators of learning. Below we describe typical variants of these four approaches.

Random allocation

In this option facilitators assume responsibility and decide on the composition of sets. This can be done by, for example, passing round a hat with different coloured tickets in it. Participants are asked to take one ticket and the colour they select determines set membership. Set advisers are allocated in the same random way.

Facilitators manage and control the process

Here facilitators meet before the start of an action learning programme and determine the composition of sets, using agreed criteria. Examples of these criteria might be:

- gender balance;
- managerial level and experience;
- splitting up managers and 'managed' from the same organisation;
- a spread of organisations;
- splitting up people who know each other;
- geographical distance.

Facilitators base the outcome on participant choice

Using this model, participants have some choice about their fellow set members. In one version which we have used in the past, participants write down the names of one person with whom they would like to work with and one person with whom they would not like to work. Facilitators collect the names and sets are formed using a grid system, taking these preferences into consideration.

Participants manage and control the process

Here participants take responsibility for managing the process of set formation. Typically the whole group meets together and facilitators explain the options for set formation. Facilitators help the group as it considers and evaluates the different methods it might use to determine the composition of sets. The facilitator role is to ensure that:

- the advantages and disadvantages of each method are considered;
- the implications of each method are acknowledged;
- the group is not 'railroaded' into a particular course of action;

- the process is chosen as the result of a consensus decision.

Once the process for set formation has been agreed, the facilitators leave the room and the participants work together to determine their sets.

An alternative, more directed approach, is that facilitators determine a particular participant led method, rather than explore options.

Implications and underlying beliefs

Random allocation

Any random method is based either on the belief that no one can manage the process and so it might as well be left to chance, or that set composition is not important enough to warrant time and energy. A perceived advantage is that this method avoids the discomfort of anyone having to make choices about inclusion and exclusion of individuals.

We would argue however, that working effectively with groups and interpersonal processes is an important aspect of management. This is reflected in the desired learning outcomes of educational programmes. Linked to this is the ability to step out of the 'comfort zone' when necessary. The random approach to set forming undermines the achievement of this learning outcome by sending the unspoken and powerful message that interpersonal processes are unmanageable and/or unimportant. In addition, avoidance of discomfort within the process may well produce problems if participants find themselves in sets with those whom they perceive as the 'wrong' people.

Further support for random grouping comes from the argument that it mirrors many work situations in which people have little choice of group membership and have to find ways of working together. The belief here is that education should be like work. This argument falls down however, when one considers the very different purposes of each. The overriding purpose of higher education is surely to

maximise the personal and course specific learning and development of the individual. Engaging in group processes offers participants valuable learning opportunities which are denied if such activity is avoided. Rather than try to mirror what happens at work, education should, in pursuance of its own purpose, provide the opportunity to try out new approaches and behaviours. People should be capable of doing different things as a result of management education, not just doing the same things better.

Facilitator led

The facilitator led 'criterion' variant gives facilitators complete authority to make decisions on the assumption that they are the experts who 'know best'. This may feel comfortable because it aligns with participants' past experiences of formal learning and so meets their expectations of being directed. In our experience however, a major task within higher education is that of encouraging participants to take responsibility for their own learning. This often involves their letting go of the notion that people in authority always do know best. Allotting participants a passive role in set forming reinforces old behaviours rather than helping the uncomfortable but necessary development of new ones. Participants may then feel reluctant to take responsibility for improving the situation if sets experience problems during the course. The agenda is created where participants blame facilitators rather than use challenging situations to learn.

A further difficulty which we have encountered when using either random allocation or facilitator led approaches is that of rebellion. Participants co-operate until they see who they will be working with. They then begin to question the validity of the whole process, arguing that they are adults on an adult learning programme, yet they are being treated like children.

Facilitators base the outcome on participant choice

In terms of styles of managing, the third option is a form of benevolent paternalism. It offers a compromise between autocracy and participation, but ultimately the process is still managed by the facilitators. Participants are shielded from difficult decisions or confrontations. The final set composition is the result of a matching process which is not open and shared. Participants are passive recipients of 'expert' decisions and the 'old behaviours' referred to above tend to be reinforced. As with methods discussed previously, this approach misses learning opportunities associated with giving and receiving feedback and understanding interpersonal phenomena such as projection. Again there is a lack of responsibility since facilitators make any uncomfortable decisions.

The logistics of matching individual preferences for a large group also needs careful consideration, as permutations can become very complex. Facilitators will then face a lengthy task leading to delays in set forming. This can result in anger from the participants who hold the facilitators responsible for the problems with delivery.

Participant managed

The fourth approach, in which participants manage the set forming process, places them in the adult role of taking responsibility for a core aspect of the course. It is based on the belief that they are capable of managing any anxiety which might arise around issues such as inclusion and exclusion, personal needs versus group needs, assertion versus passivity and the surfacing of hidden agendas. This has the advantage of the process itself being a valuable source of learning. It also sets the agenda for participants to take responsibility for making the course work for them - to become independent learners rather than always looking to authority figures for solutions.

The problems of this approach tend to be associated with the risks involved. The exposure of people's feelings, which accompanies any sort of self managed group formation, can

result in participants feeling vulnerable. Fear of rejection may hinder, rather than encourage, learning. This could have a negative impact if a participant felt that the set was not 'a safe place' in which to learn.

Facilitators may experience anxiety as handing over responsibility sets a less predictable agenda for the course. They may also be exposed to personal feelings of exclusion or feel distress on behalf of participants who seem to be excluded. At a practical level there is the risk that participants may not be able to carry the process through and reach a stalemate situation which poses a dilemma for facilitators.

A further issue here is the question of how far participants genuinely are in control. It could be argued that at a higher level the facilitators are inevitably the architects of the learning experience, as it is they who determine the approach. What would happen, for example, if the participants chose to give control back? Would a response consistent with the participant led philosophy be to accept it or insist that participants retain responsibility?

Table 1 summarises the advantages and disadvantages of the four methods discussed.

Our own approach

Having tried all the methods discussed above at various times, our own approach currently is to identify set formation as the participants' responsibility and keep to this course even if problems occur. The rationale, which is shared with participants, is that our purpose is to work with them as a community of autonomous adult learners. We all therefore need to aim for processes which involve everyone sharing responsibility for creating the learning environment.

Table 1

Approach	Advantages	Disadvantages
random	<p>takes little time</p> <p>avoids discomfort of anyone having to make difficult decisions</p> <p>mirrors the work situation of having little choice of group members</p>	<p>misses opportunities for learning how to manage group processes</p> <p>undervalues the importance of group processes in personal and managerial development</p> <p>suggests that group processes are unmanageable so should be avoided</p> <p>possibility of rebellion</p>
facilitator managed	<p>meets participants' expectations of being directed</p> <p>protects participants from having to make difficult decisions</p>	<p>misses opportunities for learning how to manage group processes</p> <p>inhibits the development of new attitudes towards education</p> <p>sets agenda for participants to take a passive role and blame rather than use situations to learn during the course</p> <p>possibility of rebellion</p>
facilitators base the outcome on participant choice	<p>choice protects participants from having to make difficult decisions</p> <p>participants are consulted</p>	<p>misses opportunities for learning how to manage group processes</p> <p>inhibits the development of new attitudes towards education</p> <p>time consuming for facilitators</p> <p>participant choices may not be possible</p>
participant managed	<p>set forming process is a source of learning</p> <p>sets agenda for participants to become independent learners</p>	<p>risks feelings of vulnerability or anxiety in all concerned</p> <p>risk to set effectiveness</p> <p>risk of stalemate</p> <p>time consuming</p>

We believe that this is consistent with the role that set advisers take during the life of the action learning sets.

In response to the question of how genuine can sharing of responsibility be in the higher education system, where course aims and structures must be pre-determined, we would argue that within action learning programmes the sharing is real, since learning is problem led. Participants follow individual routes of enquiry and research within broad theoretical frameworks, rather than a set syllabus. A key factor is honesty in identifying the flexible and fixed elements.

Distinct from this is the question of how far the sharing of responsibility (and power) should go. Our current practice, for example, is for facilitators to choose which sets they will work with, rather than negotiate this with participants. The accusation of avoiding real sharing of power could be made here. The reasoning behind the procedure chosen is firstly that facilitators should be a resource available to participants during what is sometimes a difficult and anxious process. This would not always be possible if facilitators were themselves involved in the process. Perhaps more importantly, the interdependent relationship between participants and facilitators which we seek to establish, requires significant learning of new behaviours for participants. This takes time. If traditional authority figures (staff) are present during set forming, the tendency is to revert to the old behaviour of deferring to their wishes. Once the road of sharing responsibility and power has been chosen, how far to go down it is a constant issue. A genuine openness to change and willingness to review practices are probably the best guides.

The gap between participants' initial expectations of a university course and the reality of Action Learning is a further issue. Our experience is that managers expect to be taught, and their assumption is that their learning will be largely in the cognitive domain. The very nature of action

learning engages the whole person, the emotions as well as the intellect, by the intensity of focus on problems and constant challenge to personal ideas and beliefs. Our view is that an action learning programme will and must be emotionally challenging at times in order to achieve the objectives. Mintzberg (1996) among others has pointed out that managers need the qualities associated with this type of intense, personal learning experience and that this has been a neglected aspect of management education.

Underlying assumptions of this approach are based on a humanistic view that human beings have a growth orientation and will use experiences, even uncomfortable ones, to grow and develop. Taking control is akin to 'trying to do the growing for the plant'. Our approach to set forming is therefore aligned with a particular philosophy of learning. Others might find alternative practices more appropriate to their own courses and desired learning outcomes.

Techniques that help

The following suggestions relate to our chosen approach to forming sets. An underlying theme is the importance of clarity about one's reasons for working in a particular way with groups and being willing and able to share these with participants.

- the commitment of all the facilitator team to the chosen approach
- being explicit with participants about our own beliefs
- explaining the four different approaches and the reasons for our choice
- facilitating a group discussion on the different processes that the participants might use to form sets
- ensuring as far as possible that all options are explored before the participants decide on a process for set formation

- leaving the group once the above decision has been made
- being unobtrusively visible so that participants do not feel abandoned
- supporting each other during the process
- supporting participants through the process
- debriefing with participants in their sets to extract the learning from the process
- debriefing as a team

Although identified here in the context of action learning, techniques such as these are valuable in any group forming situation where participants will be substantially interdependent for achieving their goals over a period of time.

Conclusions

This article argues that set forming, which is often considered as a preliminary to a course, can be in itself a valuable source of learning if it is participant led. Further, it is argued that the benefits of participants taking responsibility for set forming far outweigh the risk of bruised sensibilities. Commitment to participant led approaches must however be accompanied by an awareness of the power of group dynamics and the skills to manage the consequences. While the particular context of action learning gave rise to this article, the arguments touch on much wider issues of the roles of course providers and participants in learning situations. Most important perhaps is the need to create a certain type of learning environment. Specifically this means an environment in which people develop through awareness of their own assumptions and beliefs about learning and an openness to these being challenged and changed.

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Daniel Selener has a PhD in Adult Education and Extension Education, and a Master's Degree in International Agriculture and Rural Development, both from Cornell University in the USA. He is currently the Regional Director for Latin America for the International Institute for Rural Reconstruction (IIRR).

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I wish to apply for membership of the Action Learning, Action Research and Process Management Association Inc.

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* My interests relating to action learning, action research, process management are:

* My projects relating to action learning, action research, process management are:

Do you wish to be linked with a world network of people with similar interest? Yes/No

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* This information will be included in our database and will appear in the annual network directory.

Please complete payment details overleaf

To apply for ALARPM membership, which includes ALAR Journal subscription, please complete the information requested overleaf and the payment details below. You do not need to complete the ALAR Journal subscription form.

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Cheques, bank drafts or money orders can be made payable to ALARPM Association Inc. in Australian dollars. Please return application with payment details to:

ALARPM Association Inc.

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