

ALARA CONFERENCES AND EVENTS: CREATING CONNECTION THROUGH PARTICIPATORY PROCESSES

Resource Document

By Deborah Lange¹

ALARA is a strategic network of people interested or involved in using action learning or action research to generate collaborative learning, research and action to transform workplaces, school, colleges, universities, communities, voluntary organizations, governments and business.

ALARA's vision is that action learning and action research will be widely used and publicly shared by individuals and groups creating local and global change for the achievement of a more equitable and, just and joyful, productive and sustainable society.

The purpose of this document is to create a learning culture at ALARA's conferences and events. ALARA aims to cultivate connections, and to engender participatory practices.

ALARA'S Purpose

1. To serve our members' action research and action learning practices, communities and fields of action
2. To build ALARA so it may promote AR and AL in multiple fields beyond the organization itself
3. To create the resources to actively co-operate with the global network of Action Learning and Action Research

It is fundamental that the actions of ALARA align with its purpose. The design of conferences and events need to reflect the values and beliefs of the organisation, and therefore ALARA encourage organisations with which it aligns to design events in this way.

Intentions

ALARA celebrates that all participants have valuable knowledge, skills and experience, and wants them to share these qualities in participatory learning practices so that personal and collective learning will occur. The intention is that this sharing will result in the generation and embodiment of new knowledge that leads to better, more conscious actions in the world.

ALARA events intend to bring about meaningful change through new understandings and building of communities of practice around Action Learning and Action Research.

¹ (Originally written in 2006 and updated in Oct 2012 by Deb Lange, with additions by Rosemary Shapiro-Liu, 2013, and further updated in 2014, 2016 and 2017 by ALARA)

Learning Design Overview

The conference or workshop needs to be seen as one part of three aspects of the networking and learning process:

- The **lead-up**
- The **event** itself and
- The **follow-through**.

In the lead-up and follow-through there can be networking and co-learning through a variety of methods, including online meetings, webinars, sharing of material and starting groups that will continue through the event and afterwards.

The event itself will have a mix of learning by listening, learning by doing, sharing through discussion and through multi-dimensional learning methods. It will be experiential. It is important that methods used in the event are followed through - that they are given adequate time, facilitation and support to be successful. The core value in the design of the event is the belief that each person has knowledge, skills and experience that is both valuable and useful to the other attendees. The core action is to ensure that successful sharing of the knowledge, skills and experience leads deepened learning, meaningful change and carefully chosen actions.

The conference or event needs time for:

- Setting personal **expectations** and expectations of one another and of the content;
- Personal **journaling or documenting**;
- **Support for people to create an action plan** (basically, reflection on action, plans for new action and ways of being supported in trying new actions).

By the end of such an event, the participants should be satisfied that they have:

- **Shared** their knowledge, skills and experience;
- Have **been exposed** to new or interesting action learning and action research practices;
- Have **chosen** in which areas they might amplify or accelerate their own practices; and
- Have **found people** with whom to learn or network if needed.

Multi-dimensional learning methods

The use of multi-dimensional learning methods is increasing globally. These developments are based on beliefs of the existence of multi-dimensional learning modalities. The following principles and intentions are based on this belief of multiple modes of learning to enhance our multiple intelligences. In order to honour the principles and intentions of ALARA and give participants the opportunity to feel that they have had a life-changing, or life-enhancing experience, multi-dimensional learning methods are encouraged.

1. The Action Learning Systemic Cycle is an integral part of the design and evaluation of conferences and events. There are opportunities for:

1. Being open, questioning
2. Pattern/sense making/reflection
3. Synthesising and enabling new learning to emerge
4. Creating applications in the world
5. Planning actions and new ways of working after the event

2. Individual and group learning

The whole conference and individual sessions offer the opportunity for:

1. Individual reflection
2. Group hub learning

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3. Collective whole group learning

3. Core elements

The event makes use of various types of sessions, with an action learning facilitator integrating the parts into a whole with introductory and continuity processes. The event might make use of:

1. Keynote sessions
2. Learning hubs for reflection
3. Parallel sessions that are experiential and informative
4. Cross-over sessions where lightning sharing from events that people have not attended fill them in on the gaps
5. Open space time
6. A coming together at the beginning and the end (of each day and) of the event to synthesise

4. All modes of learning are considered and included if possible:

1. Auditory
2. Kinaesthetic

5. Multiple realms and mediums of human experience are explored:

1. Physical sensory
2. Historical/psychological
3. Emotional
4. Spiritual

In addition, music, dance, art, nature, physical learning and sharing can be used, for example:

- **Arts based mediums are integrated; for example:**

1. Physical sensory: movement, dance, drama
2. Visual art/imagery: drawing, painting,
3. Sensory material: music, colour,
4. Imagination: Storytelling, poetry
5. Voice: singing, chanting

- **Nature based mediums are integrated; for example:**

1. If possible, there are workshops and experiential sessions occurring in the natural environment.
2. That experiential session/s occur by reflecting on the day with nature, e.g. walking outside in silence; being drawn to something in the natural environment, e.g. a leaf, tree, pebble, animal, clouds, water etc.; and through a process of deep connection, silent meditation with that natural element asking what that element is sharing, teaching, what is this element expressing, what does it want you to know?
3. Natural materials: seed pods, rice, grains, pebbles – perhaps natural materials collected sensitively from the area to contribute to a collective or individual sculpture or mandala making

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Appendix 1: Process Design Examples:

The following activities are examples of how to evolve and deepen the learning throughout events.

These are suggestions and can be modified as a result of collaborating / conversing with the conference/event organizers about the intention and content of the program.

Option 1: Visual Art

Participants can have available materials to reflect, play and learn with, for example:

Art materials could be made available where an ongoing, developing mural of individual and collective learning could organically grow. This mural could in a space where people can walk past to add their imagery, poetry, paste collages and stories, etc.

This activity could roll out as a learning journey: i.e. a mural over the consecutive days of the events

Mural for Day 1

Mural for Day 2

Mural for Day 3

Option 2: Integration of learning through movement, story, dance, play: A Symphony of Learning

At the end of each day, people could be invited to form groups and integrate their learning through movement, story, dance, play. These groups could remain the same each day for this process. This would also add an element of connection with a small family of people. 6-10 people in each group.

The sequence of these ideas can be designed over any timeframe.

Example for a 3-day event:

Each day could have a theme that develops with the conference themes and integrates learning modalities.

Day 1: the emphasis on seeking out new knowledge, being open, questions, and stories of what brought people here and what they are seeking.

This could be recording as an oral story, writing poetry, creating a movement, dance, drawing a symbol or an image

Day 2: the emphasis on seeing patterns, making sense of the information, knowledge from the conference and the people and the environment

Day 3: the emphasis on what has been learnt, what could be applied, new questions. On the final day, the groups could share their Symphony of Learning with another group and involve the other group in their creation.

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Option 3: Silence to allow new ideas to emerge

There could also be a time for silence in the program, daily. This allows synthesis, reflection – my experience in conferences is that many people feel full up with information – and silence and stillness allows this to settle and let new ideas to emerge.

Option 4: Nature for reflection

One or more experiential session/s could occur by reflecting on the day:

- With nature e.g. walking outside in silence; being drawn to something in the natural environment e.g. a leaf, tree, pebble, animal, clouds, water etc.;
- Through a process of deep connection, silent meditation with that natural element asking what that element is sharing, teaching, what is this element expressing, what does it want you to know?
- And sharing this reflection with a partner.

Nature for creating a mandala

If the natural materials that have been used for the reflection are able to be collected e.g. a pebble, seedpod, etc., they may be used to create a nature mandala as a symbol for the conference. Or the participants could be asked to sensitively bring something from their environment to the conference that they will join together and create a mandala from all of the participants' contributions.

Option 5: Beginning the conference/event each day

Song and dance are wonderful ways to connect and create community. To develop the community of the conference a circle dance, or dance of universal peace, and/or a chant or song could be danced/sung together.

Option 6: Ritual for Opening and Closing the conference/event

A ritual honouring the land and all of our past teachers and all of us as teachers and learners could be created for the conference opening and closing.

Option 7: Celebration

In the evening arts based activities could be applied to celebrate and create community e.g. dance, storytelling, poetry readings, theatre.

Option 8: Visual Imagery and Music

Evocative images of nature and the planet portraying the themes of the conference could be played in the foyer or main room. Participants could be invited to record symbols, poetry, creative writing after being immersed in the imagery and music.

Option 9: Open Space and Conversation Cafes

“Open Space” time and conversation café time as the design for conferences/events or integrated into the design.

Option 10: Circle Dialogue

Circle dialogue or an “Elder Circle” designed as an integral part of an event.

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Option 11: Invitation to Participants

Participants can be invited to prepare to co-create the learning culture prior to attending. An outline of ways they can contribute can be prepared and forwarded in their conference material e.g. bring percussion or musical instruments, symbols from their “place” in the world etc.

Option 12: Learning Culture Hosting Team

A Learning Culture Hosting Team can be gathered together prior to the conference and/or during the conference to nurture the conference/event learning culture throughout the conference.

Option 13: Using open space to offer a mix of co-learning and didactic learning

The conference concept can be turned on its head. After introductions and expectations sessions of the conference, and perhaps one keynote address, the participants can proceed to workshops. These can be open-space driven, with a 'voting process' where time slots are allocated to ideas that people want to work with. The agenda is drawn up publically, for instance, as four half hour sessions, with four concurrent sessions (16 sessions in all). People proceed to the area of their choice for discussion. There is a 'conclusions' page from each. These are fed to the speakers, the pre-planned sessions, for the next day, and those speakers or workshop facilitators weave the information that has come out of the open space sessions into their workshops, taking up the areas that are most useful for discussion. So, the event starts with open space and moves to more formal interventions. For more information about this, contact rosemary.shapiro.liu@gmail.com

Concluding

The above are only sample brief outlines of processes. These processes can be enriched if there are other elements to be inter-woven into any program.

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