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Action learning: how can it contribute to a collaborative process of pedagogical action research?

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Abstract

This paper explores the processes and outcomes of an action research project, which utilised action learning sets to explore the experiences of a community of academics, who promote pedagogical enhancement in a UK university. Five academics acted as participant action researchers in a longitudinal study exploring the issues they face within their community of practice. Action learning sets were used as the forum through which the participants could discuss the issues they face. The result is an interwoven fabric of action learning and action research, with participants utilizing their reflections on the action research process itself as a catalyst to achieve greater insight into the issues they sought to address through their action learning. This paper explores the themes that emerged from these reflections: choosing between seeking 'solutions' versus promoting discussion in the action learning sets, the complementarity of action research and action learning, the challenges of a collective mode of inquiry. Ultimately, we offer up the process of incorporating action learning sets within an action research project as a participatory approach that can engage colleagues in different roles to reflect on pedagogical practice. Our findings demonstrate both the potential benefits and challenges inherent in combining action learning and action research.

Introduction

Like many others, the genesis of the current research was our desire to better understand an element of our practice; specifically, the efficacy of our community of practice aimed at promoting pedagogical enhancement. To most academics, the natural choice for a practitioner who wishes to reflect on their own practice for the purposes of understanding and enhancing that practice in the way I've alluded to would be to conduct some Action Research (AR). First proposed by Lewin in 1946, the methodology and findings of action research have evolved in the last seventy years into a considerable body of scholarship on teaching and learning. However, during this time period a similar but parallel system of collective problem solving and reflection has emerged in the form of Action Learning (AL). Originating in Revans' observations on collaborative problem-solving meetings in Cambridge University (Revans 1982), the action learning set has become a widely utilized method for problem-solving and personal development in a number of professional environments including academia (Pedler 2011; McGill and Beaty 2001). Some have speculated that action learning and action research approaches could be combined, producing a synthesis which draws on the strengths of both (Dewar and Sharp 2007; Sankaran 2015; Stark 2006). And yet, examples in the literature of combined approaches are less common than unitary approaches

(employing AL or AR alone) and so it is unclear what merits the combined approach offers over the unitary. Furthermore, little is known about the potential for tensions between the different methodologies and goals of the two approaches.

In this paper, we will discuss the initial findings from a project which employed action learning sets within an action research framework to investigate the experiences of a group of academics in a university in the north-west of England. The group were all members of a community of practice known within their institution as the Key Practitioners (KP) initiative, who support scholarship, critical discourse, the sharing and development of practice, all in relation to teaching practice in their institution. The project involved a series of action learning sets which explored the issues they faced relating to their KP role. Thus, the aim of the action learning sets was to offer insights and guidance on the issues, while the goal of the action research, which evolved throughout the process, eventually focused on evaluating the effectiveness of the action learning sets in achieving that aim.

In the first section of this paper, we will critically evaluate the KP initiative as a community of practice (CoP), drawing on the work of Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015) in defining the nature of an effective CoP. We will consider the issues surrounding agency and identity within the KP initiative in the light of Appleby and Pilkington (2014) discussions surrounding the CoP as a vehicle for promoting agency. Finally, we will explore the origins and nature of Action Learning, including its complementarity with AR. Ultimately, we hope to establish the basis for our use of AL sets within an AR project so as to provide a mechanism for KPs to confront the issues they face and thereby come to a better understanding of the nature of their identity.

In the second section, we will explore the reflections of the KPs regarding the AL and AR processes. The products of the AL sets (meeting transcriptions, post-meeting reflections) are interrogated by the KPs in a series of narratives which filter those products through three different lenses revealing different tensions: between AL and AR, between discussions and solutions as the goal of an AL set and between individual and collective inquiry.

Communities of practice

According to their 2015 introduction to communities of practice, Etienne and Beverly Wenger-Trayner define Communities of Practice (CoP) as *'groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly'*. (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner 2015). They further elaborate that three elements are characteristic for an effective CoP; shared identity, active participation and pooled resources. Shared identity is defined by a shared domain of interest and shared competence in that domain. Active participation represents engagement by the group members in joint activities, discussions, mutual support and encouragement. Finally, pooling resources represent the development of a fund of shared resources, whether those are physical resources or a pool of skills and experiences.

As a mechanism for influencing practice within an organisational context, CoPs are acknowledged for their value in helping to connect people in organisations that are seeking to build a flexible or 'agile' delivery (Webber 2016). Effective CoPs are thought to offer support, build capability, reduce the duplication of work and encourage better practices. Ultimately, a CoP acts as a 'mature community' benefitting members, the organisation and

their practice (Lave 1991). Webber (2016) also argues that CoPs can be an invaluable way of breaking down organisational silos because of their cross-organisational, interest-led and bottom-up approach.

While an effective CoP can be an essential tool for breaking down barriers within an organization, it can be just as vital to break down any barriers within the CoP itself. This can be achieved through what Pyrko, Dörfler, and Eden (2017, 390) refer to as the '*trans-personal processes of thinking together*'. In essence, they argue that traditional CoPs are not created but instead emerge voluntarily through a process of people sharing their knowledge and identities via collaboration in tackling an issue or question. Pyrko, Dörfler and Eden argue that such collaboration is necessary to truly share knowledge.

The key practitioner initiative

The Key Practitioner (KP) initiative is an institutional initiative launched in 2015 within the UK university at the centre of this research. The initiative focused on pedagogical enhancement within the faculty of education and was conceived as one element of a wider approach to professional development already established in that university, based on a devolved system of CoPs. In contrast to many other universities, where pedagogical enhancement is a centrally organized process led by a dedicated team, the KP initiative would utilize a decentralized approach. Pedagogical enhancement schemes would be instigated and supported by teaching and research practitioners, the eponymous 'key practitioners', located within the various departments across the faculty. The definition of a Key Practitioner, given in guidance on the initiative is: 'an experienced academic who has a specific interest in advancing learning and teaching'. Their role was to contribute to advancing learning and teaching, as well as supporting and embedding practice as a locus for professional development of academics within the faculty.

As a new group, in their first few years of operation, the KPs have struggled with two existential issues that confront most new groups, the issues of agency and identity. It should be noted that a sense of agency was envisioned as an important element of the KP role from its conception. KPs were intended to see themselves as having the responsibility to promote and support pedagogical enhancement. KPs were to be proactive in identifying enhancement needs as well as directing their own professional development, and hence developing their professional capital (i.e. their worth as employable professionals). In this regard, we can see how the KP initiative draws its inspiration from the CoP model. Indeed, Barnett (2008) argues that within the current 'supercomplex' environment of Higher Education, generating a sense of agency around an academic's sense of identity, learning and action should sit at the heart of academic CoPs. Appleby and Pilkington (2014) go further, arguing that a key element of critical professionalism in education is the need to develop a sense of agency as a counter to a sense of powerlessness that many educational practitioners experience in the face of changes introduced by policy and organisational management.

And yet, for many of those who first joined the KP initiative, the concept of academic leadership proved troublesome. They voiced concerns, about the basis for their 'expertise' or 'insight' with regard to pedagogy; on what basis could they claim to advise other practitioners on their pedagogy? Inherent in that question is a deeper question about the KP identity; what is a Key Practitioner? As an attempt to resolve this question, some of the KPs embraced the identity of a 'guide'. They sought to gain agency by establishing the foundations for their

claims to insight based on their own research or the critical evaluation of published research. Others eschewed any claim to insight or guidance; instead, embracing the identity of a 'facilitator' and deriving their sense of agency from encouraging discussion and creating spaces for reflection on practice. This latter approach could be seen as very much in keeping with the post-modern framework that inspired the concept of the CoP (Pyrko, Dörfler, and Eden 2017); which dismissed 'expert knowledge' as an attempt to use the ownership of knowledge as a source of power. By contrast, the 'facilitator' identity for the KPs echoes Appleby and Pilkington (2014) discussion of critical professionalism in education. They argue that professional practitioners learn through dialogue 'in and around' their work practices and that professional communities need to enable this process, a view which echoes Eraut's (1994) model for professional learning in the workplace.

While questions regarding the basis for KP agency or the nature of the KP identity may have remained unresolved, this did not prevent the KP initiative from functioning and flourishing; achieving a meaningful impact on the pedagogical enhancement of the education faculty and spawning similar initiatives in the other faculties. The devolved nature of the initiative gave rise to a wide variety of new practices and programmes and it was the decision by a sub-group within the KP initiative to explore the KP initiative, followed by the decision to use action learning sets which ultimately produced the current research.

Action learning and action learning sets

Initially conceived by Revans in the 1940s, the Action Learning (AL) methodology emerged from his observations of a group of academics in the Cambridge University Laboratory collaborating on a problem and learning from each other (Revans 1982). At its heart, the AL process sees action as an essential element of learning, whether that is represented by existence of a problem which demands action to resolve it or that ideas or solutions which emerge from the process should speak to a specific course of action (Sankaran 2015). An action learning 'set' is a meeting involving a small group of practitioners and a facilitator. Individual practitioners bring problems relating to their practice to the meeting, and the group seeks to provide insights, support and guidance on the problem by posing questions, offering encouragement and engaging in discussion (Pedler 1996). Thus, AL sets bear some similarity with Problem-Based Learning (Barrows 1996) with the main distinctions being that AL sets tend to be used in professional environments and the problems are actual issues the practitioners are currently facing as opposed to hypothetical issues.

An often-debated issue in AL is whether the value of an AL set is derived from finding solutions to problems that can be implemented or lies in the discussion that is held irrespective of whether a solution is identified. Garratt (2011) makes the case for a solution-focused approach to AL whereby problems are posed, solutions are advised and implemented before being monitored. Thus, to Garratt, AL is a linear process with a clear outcome, the solution. In contrast to this, Revans (1982) states that the emphasis of AL should be on the learning that is born out of the discussions. To Revans, the questions and the responses are what matters while finding answers or solutions is a secondary concern.

Given that the AL approach encompasses dialogue, reflection on action, support from peers to explore workplace challenges and problem-solving (Pedler 1996; Revans 2017), it seemed an ideal format for exploring the nature of the KP role. This gave rise to the question as to whether we should consider ourselves engaged in an AL process or an AR process, or

both. Given their apparent similarities, there has been a good deal of previous debate as to whether they are complementary or competing approaches (Pedler and Burgoyne 2008), should one be considered a subset of the other (Raelin 1997) and what insights each can offer to an educational practitioner wishing to gain an insight into their own practice. At the time we knew little of the discourse surrounding the complementarity of AL and AR approaches. Instead, we adopted what, in retrospect, may have been an idealized set of expectations regarding the compatibility of the two approaches. In this plan, the AL sets would allow us to both structure the qualitative data collection of the AR project whilst also offering participants a potential immediate benefit of being able to find resolutions to professional issues with which they were currently wrestling.

Context

The participating KPs, comprising five volunteers from a total of 16 KPs, were all academics based in the faculty of education with requirements to both teach and conduct research. They were drawn from a variety of different departments within that faculty; including, education studies, early childhood and initial teacher education. They were at various levels of experience in academia, ranging from a few years to a decade or more. The group was coordinated by two senior colleagues, both of whom were national teaching fellows employed by the university to lead the KP initiative, one with a background in professional development and the other a background in academia. Formal ethical approval was granted following a review by the university ethics committee. The research group formed in response to an invitation from one of the senior colleagues to all the KPs; inviting them to participate in the AL sets, proposed as a new method for KPs to discuss the issues they face and support each other. All members of the group were provided with a full outline of the planned research before consenting to participate.

There were six AL sets which took place throughout the year. In each AL set, two of the KPs would bring an issue to be discussed by all those present with one of the senior colleagues acting as facilitator. The issues represented a variety of concerns: from practical problems regarding the delivery of a course to more abstract issues regarding the challenge of balancing different roles. The session time was split evenly between the two issues, but beyond that there were no strict rules as to how the discussions were managed with each session being allowed to find its own structure and format. This approach went to the heart of the participatory AR philosophy behind this study, with a focus on self-led and participative, reflective inquiry by KP themselves into their own practice and identity. Toward the end, there was a review meeting where the entire group met to discuss their views on the purpose and value of the AL sets. Following each AL set, all of those who participated were encouraged to circulate a post-hoc reflection on the session to the other KPs via email.

Thus, the project was envisaged as a series of 'nested' levels of analysis and reflection, each with its own purpose but also in a Gestaltian sense contributing to a larger whole. At the most basic level, the AL sets would offer a chance for the KPs to collaborate and reflect on a series of issues they were facing in their current practice. At the same time, the process operated at a second level which involved conducting participatory AR whose aim evolved over the course of the project. Initially, the aim of the AR was to interrogate the KPs' experiences associated with the identity and practice, but over time this evolved into an

analysis of the effectiveness of the AL method in enabling the KPs to better understand and resolve the issues they face.

In addition to the developments in aim of the AR, another emergent property of the process was the forging of a third level, where reflections on AL process were found to connect with the questions regarding the KP identity and agency that were discussed earlier. In this way, the development of aim for the AR came full circle; beginning with a focus on exploring the KP experience, then switching focus to evaluating the effectiveness of the AL process before eventually arriving at a point where the two aims merged, and one provided insights on the other.

Analysis

In terms of data each of the AL sets, including the review meeting, were recorded. Transcriptions of these recordings, supplemented by the post-hoc emailed reflections, were the data produced by the AL sets. Following the final AL set, the entire group met to discuss how to proceed with the AR study. Everyone was invited to share their perspective as to what insights the AL and AR processes had generated. It was agreed that each member of the group would focus on an insight of their choice and create a written reflection on that insight drawing on the data generated by the AL sets and related scholarship. Each member was free to use their preferred method of analysis when analysing the data, with most using some variation on thematic or discourse analysis. In addition, a constant reiterative process through the analyses and writing of this paper enabled collaborative member checking throughout. This paper will offer an analysis of these narratives, an approach which has been effectively used elsewhere in participatory action research to explore lived experiences within professional development contexts (Cardiff 2012; Stuart 2012).

What follows are the written reflections of the two facilitators and two of the KPs, each focusing on one of the insights mentioned earlier.

Lin and Ruth – facilitators' views on tensions between action learning and action research

Right from the start, I was keen that our project would result in a study that was robust enough to be publishable. As I explained at one of the initial meetings, while there was no guarantee of publication, I was hopeful we could agree that publishing would be a general aim of the project. Why was this so important to me? I think that without dissemination, a project, no matter how good, will perish unless it is shared with the wider academy. I was also keen that the KPs would get some tangible output from the time they had invested.

Before I got too carried away with a focus on publication, my colleague Ruth with whom I share the responsibility of coordinating the KP initiative, reined me in with a challenging counter-argument. Would busy academics really want to engage with such a project if all that it produced was the possibility of some form of dissemination/publication? She suggested instead that it needed to be a project in which taking part was of practical benefit to them regardless of any outcome; hence, she proposed adopting an action learning approach. This she felt would also align more effectively with the espoused purpose of the KP initiative,

namely for colleagues to act as influencers of change through facilitation and enabling dialogue.

For myself, as one of the facilitators rather than a KP, the process of completing this project revealed a tension between action research and action learning. While I do acknowledge that there is a degree of overlap between the two activities, there are important differences; for example, as Zuber-Skerritt says:

both include active learning, searching, problem solving and systematic inquiry [. . .] Action Research is more systematic, rigorous, scrutinisable, verifiable, and always public (in verifiable or published written/electronic forms'). (Zuber-Skerritt 2009, 6)

Collaboratively, the KPs agreed that as an AR project the research process should combine qualitative data and reflective learning. The qualitative data took the form of transcripts from meetings of the KPs which were facilitated as action learning sets (Revans 2017). When considering this process, we asked ourselves why we should conduct the meetings as AL sets. AL sets, in their structuring, combine two characteristics of professional and practitioner learning: the processes of reflection on/for action (Kolb 1984; Gibbs 1988), and dialogue undertaken with and supported by peers (Appleby and Pilkington 2014). Alongside this, AL sets offer a powerful tool for learning and change focused on practice and situated within organisational work contexts (Pedler 2011; McGill and Beaty 2001). We felt that the ALS format would benefit the KPs and the AR project by offering:

- (a) structure to the process shaping the AR project;
- (b) a process that offered value to the KPs in their role and work whilst also allowing them to explore the key questions associated with the study;
- (c) a model for learning that would enhance their effectiveness and learning as practitioners providing also a problem-solving orientation to the meetings.

It was therefore important that the process that framed the AR project should achieve the above whilst also generating relevant data for addressing what I saw as our primary aim for the research; namely, interrogating the KPs' perceptions and experiences associated with the identity and practice of the Key Practitioner initiative. In the event, the use of AL sets also generated a number of tensions for the participants and ourselves as leaders of the AR study.

One of the tensions for me was that I was always concerned whether what was going on in the AL sets was really AR. I was not sure that it was AR in the sense that I understand it (see Zuber-Skerritt 2009). As I saw it originally, our AR project sought to investigate our own practice, deepen our reflection but also to engender some change. The reality of our project was that we collaborated, we shared, and we learned, but what action was taken, or will be taken, remains unclear at the time of writing this reflection.

Another tension for me was the question of how to evaluate the level of progress that was being made. In my post-hoc email reflection after the review meeting I observed:

I am still intrigued by the relationship between action learning and action research and was aware that in the meeting I was pushing the research agenda - part of which is driven by my concern that having asked you all to invest time in this process that you get something of value over and above the insights that having such a space in the action learning sets provides.

This encapsulates my concern over progress, in the sense that I felt that the AL was possibly taking priority over the AR. Some of the issues that the KPs were focused on appeared to be of the moment; practical problems that they wished to explore. I was also slightly frustrated at what I saw as a slow pace. But, as Ruth reminded me this was in the nature of a study being undertaken by such busy people. Indeed, regarding the general question of progress, Ruth's perspective was different as her emailed post-hoc reflection shows:

I was not as worried about progress as Lin was I confess, because I know that action learning sets are a process and need to be repeated several times to allow reflection and impact to come through. For me they have provided a valuable mechanism if not focus for our reflection on the KP work, and I was strongly aware from the meeting that you were all engaged in a lot of very deep, considered and careful thinking about what being a KP means.

The two extracts from our written reflections above encapsulate some of the distinctions between AL and AR; with the needs and priorities of the AL reflected in Ruth's perspective and the needs and priorities of the AR reflected in mine.

Ruth further responded to my concerns by saying that one of the points that she had in mind when suggesting we used AL sets was that the iterative reflective and interrogatory elements of AR and reflective learning would be enabled and mirrored in the AL process. Ruth also felt strongly that as AR at its most effective involves repeated cycles of action and study, they would also be components mirrored by the AL process. This did indeed occur in the AL set that Ruth facilitated, in that participating KPs reflected on how they had progressed actions from previous AL sets they had attended, although their reflections on such progress had to be prompted. Ultimately, Ruth believed the AL and AR processes could be complementary. As she put it in her final emailed reflection:

Furthermore, from the perspective of professional learning I was concerned to support the KPs by providing a process that could benefit them as agents of a change and in their own development. Hence from my perspective I felt action learning sets provided a powerful mechanism for generating data in a form that would encourage the metacognitive step backwards involved in interrogating identity, practice and meaning.

Thus, in Ruth's estimation, I struggled with the AL approach because I saw action learning only in the sense of problem-solving and/or enhancing one's reflective thinking. My goal in supporting an AR approach was to ensure a systematic investigation that was rigorous and verifiable. This, Ruth indicated, would be achieved through the analysis of the data informed by the questions of the study, and is the starting point for this paper.

Elizabeth – the action learning set as a space for discussions and/or solutions

One of the key aims of AL is to make connections between learning and action through a reflective process (McGill and Beaty 1995). McGill and Brockbank (2004) reiterate this by highlighting that '*action learning is a continuous process of learning and reflection that happens with the support of a group or set of colleagues, working on real issues, with the intention of getting things done.*' (p. 21). However, the way in which an AL set should approach 'working on real issues' and 'getting things done' is one that caused much discussion in our group. This included tensions around whether posing questions or suggesting solutions is the purpose of the AL set. Behind these tensions, there may be differences in what individual

participants perceive as useful and what they expect to gain from their participation which then may also explain their different preferences for discussions and/or solutions.

The benefit of collaboratively discussing and working on a real problem was something that was emphasised in the reflections by the participants, such as Ruth who said:

One of the things that came through for me was the value and importance of having the spaces within set structures for thinking things through and exploring aspects of our work. This is probably something we have missed in the (KP) meetings because we tend to have little time and a lot to share or big agendas to address.

This 'mutual interrogation of practice' was seen to support the presenting participant through their own reflection on practice. As Cathal pointed out:

Some of the benefit we get from these situations comes simply from having to organise our thoughts and present them, completely independently of any response anyone else makes.

Additionally, the 'mutual interrogation of practice' that occurred as part of the AL set also was seen to be of benefit to the discussants such as Alex who said:

I think this experience has helped me to develop my 'helpful questioning' rather than my tendency to jump in and give people 'the answer' (or at least my answer)! I will seek to develop this in my future practice as a KP, mentor and Head of Department.

While the discussions, collaborative work and interrogation of practice was considered beneficial, several issues arose from this. Alex indicated this when she noted the difference between 'helpful questioning' and her 'tendency to jump in and give people the answer'. Revans suggests that such questioning is one of the fundamental assumptions of action learning; '*problems require insightful questions*' (1998, 4). He argues that rather than solutions being known by experts, action learning deals with the resolution of problems where no single course of action is the goal and instead participants might deal with the problem in markedly different ways. Providing such 'insightful questions', rather than potential solutions, was something that many of the participants found challenging such as Lin who commented,

I think I jumped in too enthusiastically, offering potential solutions rather than exploring the issue in greater depth [. . .] It made me think how we can sometimes rush to solve rather than to listen [. . .] I did let my enthusiasm for doing some sort of pedagogical/action research project get the better of me in the end. 'Active listening' is very hard.

It may be that some of the problems that were posed by the participants in the AL sets encouraged a solution-focused discussion and response. With AL, it is important that the problem presented should not be one where the end point and the stages in between are clearly mapped out in advance because in this case the set would be of little help to the presenter (McGill and Beaty 2001). Nevertheless, in our reflections, it was suggested that not all the problems presented followed this guidance. While I touched on this when reflecting on my own presentation,

I presented my 'issue' as one which required a solution rather than a discussion topic. This is something for me to bear in mind when presenting at future action learning sets as I may attempt

to re-frame my position to encourage more discussion and exploration rather than prompt solutions.

Despite such negative reflections about solutions, they are not necessarily the enemy of action learning. Skipton argues that achieving '*great solutions to critical and urgent problems is the primary object and end state for action learning*' (2015, 2). Furthermore, proposing solutions may simply be a spur to discussion, as Babs put it:

Whilst listening to Liz's presentation of her issue, I felt I had proposed a solution rather than supported her to find her own way. Afterwards, I wondered whether this was not giving a solution but rather making a connection with my own experience and what was similar to her one and sharing this . . .

This notion, that in order to find great solutions, the participants in the AL set should make links to previous experiences before taking action, is something I found this to be a useful aspect of the AL set; which is something I commented on:

I found it very helpful to have a plethora of suggestions' and the suggestions 'prompted me to think more deeply.

In providing potential solutions, Babs here provided me with her previous experience in a similar situation and provides potential solutions for me to action. The learning from this can then be reflected upon and the actions refined in my own context.

As we have seen here, one challenge for participants in an AL set is, as Babs stated:

. . . how much to support/challenge/share and how much to stand back and enable the person to figure out their next steps.

In our experience, this support/challenge/sharing can be achieved by 'insightful questions', reflecting on previous experiences and posing potential solutions. However, we have found both tensions and challenges in doing this, such as; the challenge for presenters of how and what to share with the group; the challenge for listening participants in terms of how to question, respond and not dominate with their own solutions: and the challenge for all in negotiating their expectations of what they will gain from their participation in an AL set.

Babs – first or second-person inquiry?

The question of whether we saw ourselves as expert practitioners in teaching and learning with solutions to proposed problems, or facilitators who guide others into knowing via the process of AR (Anderson and Cook 2020), arose as a key issue through the series of AL sets. Exploring this question, which is connected to raising awareness of different approaches to learning and teaching in the context of Higher Education, feels timely given the recent introduction of a national framework assessing its quality in England.

By exploring this question, we felt we were examining the intrinsic nature of the collaborative inquiry; was it to be diagnostic or confrontive (Coghlan 2019)? Diagnostic inquiry uses research questions to guide co-inquirers' causal thinking, which reflects a facilitator approach. In confrontive inquiry, however, each member of the AL set provides their own solution to the individual's stated problem so as to provoke awareness of a range of alternative perspectives, thus evoking expert status for each.

In practice, the functioning of the AL set therefore mirrored how each individual in the collective saw the process unfolding. Did each individual operate within a facilitative, dialogic approach to learning and teaching or were some individuals more comfortable with the notion of a more knowledgeable other with status of expert?

Lin: *It made me think how we can sometimes rush to solve rather than to listen – which has implications for the dialogic approach.*

Alex: *I think this experience has helped me to develop my ‘helpful questioning’ rather than my tendency to jump in and give people ‘the answer’ (or at least my answer!).*

And yet, fundamental to this question regarding the nature of the inquiry is the fact that these first-person individual responses were combined in the second-person response of the collective. First-person inquiry occurs when an individual seeks to improve their own practice by making themselves accountable for their own actions. It is, by necessity, intrapersonal and representative of that individual’s own perspective on learning and teaching; how this is translated in their practice and their personal priorities to enable student understanding. In this way, each of us have experiences and reflections that have shaped our identities as key practitioners in learning and teaching in Higher Education. In the learning set, however, we were exposed to second-person inquiry, where group interactions were key (Coghlan 2019). Therefore, each of us grappled with the notion of creating a new form of interaction that could leverage sufficient challenge without the imposition of a single solution.

Thus, the second-person inquiry methods inherent to the AL set meant that each session inevitably contained elements of both diagnostic and confrontive inquiry, the combination of which could be highly effective. For example, one member, Liz, found on the one hand that the use of suggested solutions (confrontive inquiry) created feedback to construct an action plan, providing, ‘*focus, direction and achievable targets*’. However, to Liz part of the value of the solutions was ‘*making a connection with my own experience, what was similar to her issue and sharing this*.’ This evidenced a diagnostic inquiry approach, using shared experiences as a guide rather than expert knowing.

In conclusion, on the question of whether we should propose solutions or pose questions in AL sets, the reality we found is that the second-person nature of an AL set results in a potential repertoire of approaches to enhancing our learning and teaching. If so, it may be that confidence in our expertise or the ability to manage such shared experiences is necessary to enable the letting-go-of-control required in such a democratic and collaborative facilitation of learning.

Conclusions

As we come to synthesize the various reflections and insights shared by the different contributors to this paper, a number of topics worthy of discussion emerge. Firstly, there is the extent to which the focus of the research has changed, as was mentioned earlier. Moving beyond simply noting the shift and attempting to understand it, we would argue that it is not by accident that our AR became as interested in the AL process as we were originally interested in the KP role and identity. The choice between ‘guide’ versus ‘facilitator’ was one of the key debates surrounding the KP identity, and bore an unmistakable resemblance to the debate in the literature over the choice between solutions versus discussion as purpose of AL

sets. As the parallels between the two issues became more apparent, it seemed to us that to study one was to study both, with any insights achieved applicable to both.

For instance, our exploration of the choice between providing solutions and facilitating discussion suggests an initial tendency among KPs to assume that the preferences of others on this issue would mirror their own. Research by Ross, Greene, and House (1977) indicates that similar tendencies are widespread; which suggests that an enquiry into preferences on this issue among those we support would be a prudent first step for any KP or AL set facilitator. It has also led us to re-evaluate some of the actions we previously classified as providing solutions as potentially being more. For example, we found that relating an issue to our own past experience could be neither a claim to expertise nor an imperative to do the same but rather an attempt to build a shared understanding and common frame of reference. We also found that facilitation and discussion may be more complex than initially imagined. Far from being defined merely by the absence of proposed solutions, discussion requires important elements such as helpful or insightful questions and active listening. While some of these are established concepts, others need to be better understood and all represent potential skills to be mastered. This further suggests that dichotomies such as solution/discussion or expert/facilitator might also obscure a more nuanced understanding of the options available to KPs and AL sets. These insights have had a number of practical benefits, with several of the KP's noting that a deeper understanding of both the 'guide' and 'facilitator' roles has had a positive impact on their efforts to support their colleagues.

Another topic is the extent to which the AL process imparted any agency to the participating KPs, as enhancing their sense of agency was one of the reasons we favoured the AL approach. One insight we may offer on this issue is that this question of AL sets imparting agency may interact with that ever-present debate over the AL set as problem-solving activity or a forum for discussion. We would argue that a problem-solving approach, where one AL set participant proposes a solution which another participant accepted, results in increased agency in the proponent, but what of the recipient? There is a potential that this approach might lower their sense of agency by reinforcing the personal epistemological belief that answers exist outside themselves, provided by expert others (O'Siochru 2018). If true, this suggests if we wish to produce enhanced agency among individuals who seek support, they should be encouraged to view such proposed solutions as a spur to their own reflection; a means to an end and not an end in itself. Appleby and Pilkington (2014) argue that this sense of agency is even more important when allied to the current trend in Higher Education organisations of devolving decision-making and responsibility for performance in teaching and learning downwards in the name of 'academic leadership'. This argument would appear to be particularly apt in the case of the KPs, given the devolved approach to pedagogical enhancement taken by their university. The concept of agency is crucial and often undervalued asset for educational practitioners who in HE can often have considerable space for exercising independence in the decisions they make around teaching and learning. In acknowledging this, academics can begin to direct their attention proactively to their own formation as practitioners, developing their professional capital. This can be done at an individual level or via the CoP framework, with CoPs offering a potentially valuable support mechanism for fostering agency.

Another important issue has been the complementarity of the AL and AR processes, and in this respect there are two topics of note. The first topic stems from an insight which suggest that the combination of the two processes may produce role confusion. An example of this

can be seen in the way that the two most senior members of the group had a disproportionately low level of impact on the direction of the AR. One reason for this may be that both senior colleagues occupied the role of facilitator within the AL sets, eschewing leadership. However, this role may have spilled over into the decision-making in the participatory AR where they may have abdicated the rights to influence the direction of the research compared to other contributors. This suggests that it may not be easy to mentally compartmentalize the two processes and thus differences between them, in terms of aims or priorities, need to be noted and managed. A deeper exploration of the tensions and opportunities presented by combining these two roles is an avenue of future action research that we are considering.

The second insight relating to the complementarity of the AL and AR is the extent to which the lessons learned regarding second-person inquiry may be as relevant to AR as to AL. We found that the nature of the second-person inquiry in the AL sets challenged us to create a form of interaction where multiple participants could each contribute without each appearing to conflict with the others. In a similar vein, as a piece of participatory AR we are faced with the challenge of combining several voices in this paper in such a manner which is cohesive but avoids erasing their individuality. And yet if the voices retain their individuality, could this lead the paper to appear incoherent and the arguments or conclusions might appear to lack rigour. Commentators like Zuber-Skerritt (2009) have said that such concerns regarding the rigour, scholarship and public verification of the output are more suited to AR than AL which is aimed at producing practical solutions and not published outputs. This presents an image of AL and AR as pulling in opposite directions, potentially incompatible. However, our experience with this issue in the AL sets showed us that participants were able to synthesize contrasting and individualistic views. This led us to the conclusion that the ability to relinquish a need-to-control was essential to realize the full potential for collaborative facilitation of learning that AL can offer; an insight, we would argue, which could be applied just as much to participatory AR. Thus, our final conclusion on the complementarity of AL and AR is that, notwithstanding the complexities arising from a combination of the two approaches, such a combination offers the potential for a deeper understanding of both approaches.

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