LJMU Research Online

Vaughan, H and Jolliffe, P

 Action learning as a catalyst for change: the wicked problem of employment with a chronic health condition

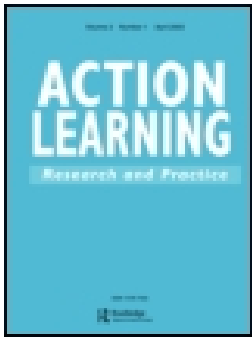http://researchonline.ljmu.ac.uk/id/eprint/15666/

Article

Action learning as a catalyst for change: the wicked problem of employment with a chronic health condition

Hannah Vaughan & Tricia Jolliffe

Published online: 16 Oct 2021.

Submit your article to this journal ⬈

Article views: 5

View related articles ⬈

View Crossmark data ⬈

Action learning as a catalyst for change: the wicked problem of employment with a chronic health condition

Hannah Vaughan and Tricia Jolliffe

Business School, Liverpool John Moores University, Liverpool, UK

ABSTRACT

This account of practice focuses on using action learning (AL) from both the facilitator and student experience during the dissertation stage of a postgraduate degree to resolve wicked workplace problems. The action learning process was used to explore and create a catalyst for change through research that explored the wicked problem of Inflammatory Bowel Disease (IBD) in employment. The action learning set (ALS) comprises seven postgraduate students and a facilitator who never met the students in person and instead virtually adapted meetings by using Zoom, owing to the coronavirus pandemic. A WhatsApp group including all students and the facilitator was significant in providing an engaging space for help, support, and motivation.

Introduction

The account explores the role of action learning (AL) as a catalyst for change in the wicked problem of employment with a chronic health condition, Inflammatory bowel disease (IBD). The context is the dissertation stage of a master's qualification in Human Resources (HR), which uses AL. Seven students (all HR practitioners), engaged in the six action learning set (ALS) meetings to explore HR problems critically. Each student came to the set to solve their own individual wicked organisational problem. Although the set members were similar in age, this was by chance rather than design. Thus, the students were trying to solve real-life problems and were like a homogeneous group advocated by Revans (Ram and Trehan 2010).

The students initially decided on their topic choice and research design via a constructionist process with Tricia, the facilitator and peer group in the ALS. In this account, we focus on Hannah's insider epistemology research from an intrinsic (personal) and extrinsic (workplace) standpoint and Tricia's role as the facilitator. Through support from the ALS, Hannah decided to explore others' employment challenges, like her, living with the chronic health condition, IBD. Hannah desires that workers and employers understand the demands of living with the chronic health condition, IBD.

CONTACT Hannah Vaughan ✉ hvaughan02@yahoo.co.uk

Regarding AL, the sets would typically meet face to face, but owing to Covid-19, AL meetings were held online through the use of Zoom. An online application called Canvas was used for all communication. Students uploaded their work and feedback on their peers' work, whilst the facilitator, Tricia, uploaded input and other supportive guides such as the meeting slides. Additionally, a WhatsApp group including all seven students and Tricia provided a high communication and engaging space for all. Students often liaised daily, offering help and support by discussing ideas, motivating one another, and keeping the momentum alive. Moreover, all group participants shared personal things happening in their lives, such as a new job or worries they may be feeling, enabling a safe environment and creating personal bonds between all students and Tricia.

Context and theory of ALS and IBD – the wicked problem

In this paper, we use the term 'wicked problem' to explore working with the condition IBD. Rittel and Webber (1973, 155) first coined the term 'wicked problem' to distinguish between social and science problems. They identified ten defining characteristics including a problem that is difficult to define; does not have a definitive solution and is unique. In their view wicked problems have porous boundaries, resulting in them being open, for example, to various solutions. Edmondsone, Lawless, and Pedler (2019), in this journal, contributed to the definition, sharing how wicked problems tend to be political in nature, recognising the inevitable constraints within. They concurred with Rittel and Webber (1973) that wicked problems need to be continually addressed due to their boundaried position in time, place, and history.

In the context of this research Edmondsone, Lawless, and Pedler (2019) debated if a personal problem can be deemed a wicked problem but concluded that the multi-agency effect of wicked problems must be considered. IBD is a personal problem for Hannah, however, she also has a life and a job and thus, there is a multi-faceted effect. We decided that the issue could be deemed a wicked problem once a worker becomes employed by an organisation as the issue becomes a multi-faceted shared problem. For example, when considering a worker suffering from IBD there can be effects on job satisfaction/retention/career development for which the employer will need to make allowances.

The advantage of using the theoretical construct of 'wicked problem' offers the opportunity to consider the 'full landscape' of the situation (Lavery 2018). However, Ritchey (2013) argues that additional issues arise when delving into a 'wicked problem' due to their unpredictable nature, and according to Hannigan and Coffey (2011), one solution may not be 'one size fits all'. However, even though the 'wicked problem' may be intricate and lack clear solutions, these aspects should be the driver behind seeking answers (Savulescu 2018).

IBD – What it is and its impact on the worker

Inflammatory bowel disease (IBD) is an umbrella term used for a group of chronic illnesses that cause inflammation, ulceration and swelling in the intestines. Crohn's Disease (CD) and Ulcerative Colitis (UC) are two prevalent conditions that are part of the IBD family, and symptoms include fatigue, anaemia, diarrhoea, vomiting, appetite loss, weight loss,

abdominal pain, and ulcers. As the illness is incurable, medications such as steroids and immunosuppressants are regularly prescribed, and in severe cases, surgery is needed to remove parts of the intestine or fit an ileostomy bag (The Richmond Clinic 2018).

IBD may affect an individual's professional life in many ways. A survey completed by 1314 people found 32% of individuals with UC and 40% of those with CD felt IBD affected their career options (Crohn's & Colitis UK 2011). Furthermore, IBD may increase an employee's absenteeism, reduce productivity, and induce stress or anxiety in the workplace due to the nature of the disease. To enable continuity in employment, adjustments may be required, for example, providing workspaces close to toilet facilities; leave for medical appointments, and flexible working. However, once the condition is disclosed stigmatisation may occur due to lack of understanding (Crohn's & Colitis UK 2017).
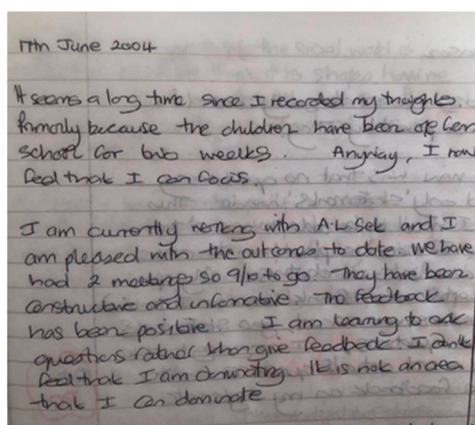
Action learning process

Action learning helped with understanding the different methodological approaches in this research. The students initially decided their methodological route via a constructionist process with Tricia, the facilitator and peer group in the ALS. The iterative process of dialogue and written feedback encouraged students to test their theories and take a critically reflective stance towards their methodology. For example, by discussing where they would source their participants and how many were needed. Hearing Tricia's advice and the plans and timeframes of the other students acted as guides to ensure the correct time frames and the number of participants were included in this study. Furthermore, set members received regular feedback, e.g. on their research questions. The AL process also helped prompt students to set deadlines, e.g. when to start interviews and when to have all interviews completed.

AL guided Hannah throughout her methodological approach. Hannah decided to use qualitative methods to explore the wicked problem of IBD regarding the workplace and its effects on individual careers. After discussing with Tricia and her peers, Hannah felt this was the best approach for her research. The qualitative approach adopted semi-structured interviews to thoroughly explore the problem through hearing first-hand experiences. However, Hannah had to consider the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on her study. Due to some IBD patients being classed as extremely clinically vulnerable, Hannah had to decide the safest way possible to conduct the interviews. This issue was highlighted in the ALS, and upon reflecting on Tricia and the other student's ideas and her own, Hannah decided to interview participants via telephone.

Another factor discussed within the ALS was methods to source participants and the number of participants needed to enable an appropriate amount of data. Initially, Hannah was aiming to interview six participants. Still, Tricia outlined that recruiting more participants is a good contingency plan, especially if individuals decide to withdraw from the study last minute. Therefore, Hannah decided to recruit more people to take part. Moreover, Hannah desired to use 'insider research' and discussed this in the ALS. The outcome was to adapt the method of 'insider research' as Hannah has been diagnosed with a form of IBD known as Crohn's disease. She is an insider in respect of her personal health to the study population (Dwyer and Buckle 2009). Being an 'insider' to participants has benefits such as 'authenticity' building trust

and rapport between the researcher and participants. However, Hannah was conscious about over relating to individuals, especially when they had similar experiences, to aim to avoid potential bias.

Tricia as facilitator

I (second author) and set facilitator began my PhD using Action Learning within a set at the Revan Institute, Salford in 2004. I found my reflective notes that illustrate my development in using questioning. I found the role of questioning in learning fascinating and understanding the benefits for HR postgraduate students (Patricia Harrison 2006).

Like this study, I have annually supported postgraduate students, who during the final stage of the master's journey, engage in six ALS meetings to create and develop their individual projects. All students worked as HR practitioners. As part of the master's programme, students had successfully completed a research methods module and ethical process.

Unlike other years when the AL meetings would be face to face, owing to Covid-19 all the meetings were online. Thus, I did not meet any of the students face to face. Initially, I was anxious about the impact of only working online. However, I became conscious to use my knowledge from researching machine learning (Harrison, Nichol, and Gold 2020) to maximise the use of technology. We used three forms of technology: WhatsApp, Zoom and Canvas Team. Our WhatsApp Group called Team Tricia for the period of approximately seven months from 6 March 2021 utilised 101.4MB. WhatsApp provided a safe platform to share emotions. Zoom was utilised for the six meetings where we were able to share converse, critique and share information. All participants engaged in critically reflective practitioner behaviours (Reynolds 1998), reviewing and providing peer feedback. The commitment to produce and review each other's work was instrumental to the process. Canvas Team (a web-based learning management system) enabled this process, where all work and feedback were uploaded. This required trust as all members of the set could see the facilitators and peer feedback. The positive benefit of the iterative, rolling process of support and challenge from the written work moving

backwards and forwards between the workplace and the set meetings encouraged both support and challenge.

However, it must be recognised that the programme is constrained by being part of the offering of the university, for example, the research had to be completed within the university timescales.

Hannah as action learning set member

I, Hannah (first author) recently finished studying a postgraduate degree in Human Resource Management. For my research project, I decided to explore workplace wellbeing and IBD, as I was diagnosed with Crohn's disease, a form of IBD, over ten years ago. Since then, I have undergone numerous medical procedures; trialled several types of medication; and dealt with adverse side effects, some of which have resulted in hospitalisation. The disease regularly impacts my life, and I feel one significant drawback is that I can only work part-time. I have also encountered mixed responses in my working life because of my condition. Because of this, I was intrigued to hear others' workplace experiences who suffer from IBD. I felt it would be beneficial to both employers and individuals to raise awareness and encourage HR professionals and management to be aware of the condition's implications and what steps could be taken to support individuals to not only continue in employment, but also achieve career progression.

During the research project, I was placed into an ALS that consisted of other students I was familiar with but were not in my friendship group. The set, led by our facilitator Tricia, enabled us to follow the process of AL. I feel I have benefited from AL, not only in my work but also as a person. Upon starting my master's degree, I suffered from imposter syndrome, believing that my knowledge and skills were not as good as peers on the course. This caused me some anxiety, and I felt reserved, especially in lectures, or sharing my work. However, observing other members present their work to seek advice from Tricia and the group I felt supported and safe, because I witnessed how the ALS listened and gave advice in a supportive and non-judgemental manner. This encouraged me to interact, contribute, be vulnerable and tackle my insecurities. For example, the first ALS was virtually adapted because of the coronavirus pandemic, and in the meeting, we discussed our chosen research topic. This triggered feelings of anxiety for myself, as I was worried my topic would not be interesting or relevant. Hearing other group members discuss their research subject and the valuable feedback they received

from Tricia and our peers put my mind at ease. Initially, I had chosen to research invisible illness in the workplace. Still, after discussing this with the ALS group, I reflected and decided to be more specific in my research and chose to focus on the invisible illness of IBD.

I feel AL has positively influenced me as I have developed my emotional intelligence, especially regarding my confidence. For instance, I often questioned if the work I'd produced was incorrect, doubted my understanding of tasks, and had worries of being judged. But being part of a supportive group where I felt safe contributing and receiving feedback allowed me to appreciate the benefits of sharing. I found it rewarding to share my ideas for my methodology chapter with the group, which helped one of my peers with their methodological approach.

Furthermore, Tricia and other group members helped me understand the research more critically and in greater depth. For example, I anticipated that I would struggle most with the literature review. However, talking through my concerns and receiving feedback from Tricia and my peers helped me develop my skills and knowledge in this area. I also constructively viewed my ALS group work and feedback. This enabled me to reflect upon my work differently. As the research was carried out during the coronavirus pandemic, Tricia ensured that this did not impact the ALS meetings and the level of support that we received from herself and each other. Relationships were maintained by holding regular Zoom meetings and using a WhatsApp group, which I feel the group made the most of as we were constantly in contact offering support and advice. I found this helped, especially when I lacked motivation as keeping in contact kept the momentum going. However, because of the pandemic, I have not met Tricia in real life. Still, I feel working remotely has not been an issue thanks to Tricia's continued support and guidance throughout the AL process.

The wicked problem discussion and conclusion

The AL process used in the context of a postgraduate research dissertation had high level outcomes throughout the student journey. The fact that students used non-confrontational and non-judgemental questioning helped them to feel confident. The process enabled them to ask questions and challenge pre-existing assumptions in their HR role and learning style. Moreover, the AL process of openness and honesty meant that the students could share their written work and student/facilitator feedback. By engaging in peer feedback, the students developed new ideas and language that improved their writing. However, in the workplace, we know that employees are more likely to engage with knowledge hiding or knowledge hoarding rather than knowledge sharing (Anand, Centobelli, and Cerchione 2020). Stock et al. (2021) highlights the importance of knowledge sharing in regards to the correlation between the aspects of unpredictability and performance. It is thus imperative that close interaction between the facilitator, in this case, Tricia, and the student is encouraged to achieve a sense of support, yet independence. The students were researching real-life problems in their workplace so there was pressure to achieve a positive outcome for themselves and their organisation.

Furthermore, as the research was carried out at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic in the UK, the AL process, with its inherent ability to adapt, provided an excellent supportive platform for the student learner. For example, the students had to adapt their research

methods/approaches to ensure that they were conducted safely. As we mentioned, all contact was online or using e-learning and social media platforms. Fortunately, this worked exceptionally well for this group. However, it is important to exercise caution as it cannot be assumed that all groups will engage as effectively.

For Hannah's research, the use of AL to investigate the 'wicked problem' of IBD from an employee perspective has uncovered the dilemma for employees and provided practical solutions for employers. The discussions and feedback given in the ALS meetings, such as the importance of conducting a pilot interview to analyse if changes to questions were required, or discussing the best ways to analyse results from the interviews enabled Hannah to make informed decisions to obtain rich data and find practical solutions. Reflecting back Hannah feels using AL in her journey of conducting postgraduate research was valuable in achieving the outcome of her research and the positive influence AL has had on her emotional intelligence.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Hannah Vaughan is a Liverpool John Moores University graduate who has completed an undergraduate degree in Business Management and a Masters' degree in Human Resource Management with CIPD advanced level standards. Hannah works in Human Resources and is an associate member of the CIPD.

Tricia Jolliffe is an experienced lecturer and research in the Human Resource Academic Department at Liverpool John Moores University. Her specialist research areas include Action Learning, Roma, Precarity, Profession, Labour Turnover, Spirituality, Machine Learning, and HRD. She is a Chartered Fellow of the CIPD and a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy. She worked at Webster University, Geneva, Kingston, and Bournemouth University and has extensive HR consultancy experience, including prior employment with Siemens. Tricia developed the HR Professional Student Network in 2015, Liverpool Roma Employability Network (LREN) in 2017, and Roma Education Aspiration Project (REAP) in 2018. In 2021, Tricia commenced an international project in Syria, India and the Philippines, studying the education and aspiration of females aged 18–30.

References

Anand, Amitabah, Piera Centobelli, and Roberto Cerchione. 2020. "Why Should I Share Knowledge with Others? A Review-Based Framework on Events Leading to Knowledge Hiding." *Journal of Organisational Change Management* 33 (2): 379–399. doi:10.1108/JOCM-06-2019-0174.

Crohn's & Colitis UK. 2011. "Crohn's, Colitis & Employment – From Career Aspirations to Reality." Crohn's & Colitis UK. Accessed June 1, 2020. www.lmfnorge.no>Admin>Public>Download.

Crohn's & Colitis UK. 2017. "Employment & IBD: A Guide for Employers." Crohn's & Colitis UK, Accessed April 10, 2020. https://www.crohnsandcolitis.org.uk/about-crohns-and-colitis/publications/employment-ibd-a-guide-for-employers.

Dwyer, Sonya Corbin, and Jennifer L. Buckle. 2009. "The Space Between: On Being an Insider-Outsider in Qualitative Research." *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 8 (1): 54–63. doi:10.1177/160940690900800105.

Edmondsone, John, Aileen Lawless, and Mike Pedler. 2019. "Leadership Development, Wicked Problems, and Action Learning: Provocations to a Debate." *Action Learning: Research and Practice* 16 (1): 37–51. doi:10.1080/14767333.2019.1568967.

Hannigan, Ben, and Michael Coffey. 2011. "Where the Wicked Problems Are: The Case of Mental Health." *Health Policy* 101 (3): 220–227. doi:10.1016/j.healthpol.2010.11.002.

Harrison, P. 2006. "Questioning in Action Learning: Rhetoric or Reality." *International Journal of Management Education* 5 (2): 15–20.

Harrison, Patricia, Lynn Nichol, and Jeff Gold. 2020. "Redefining HRD Roles and Practice in the Machine Learning Revolution." In *The Future of HRD, Volume 1*, 143–166. Cham: Palgrave MacMillan. doi:10.1007/978-3-030-52410-4_6

Lavery, James V. 2018. "Wicked Problems, Community Engagement and the Need for an Implementation Science for Research Ethics." *Journal of Medical Ethics* 44 (3): 136–164. doi:10.1136/medethics-2016-103573.

Ram, Monder, and KiranTreha. 2010. "Critical action learning, policy learning and small firms: An inquiry." *Management Learning* 41 (4): 415–428.

Reynolds, Michael. 1998. "Reflection and Critical Reflection in Management Learning." *Management Learning* 29 (2): 183–200. doi:10.1177%2F1350507698292004.

Ritchey, Tom. 2013. "Wicked Problems." *Acta Morphologica Generalis* 2: 1.

Rittel, W., and M. Webber. 1973. "Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning." *Policy Sciences* 4: 155–169. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4531523?origin=JSTOR-pdf.

Savulescu, Julian. 2018. "Wicked Problems, Complex Solutions, and the Cost of Trust." *Journal of Medical Ethics* 44 (3): 147–148. https://jme.bmj.com/content/medethics/44/3/147.full.pdf.

Stock, Gregory N., Jacob Chia-An Tsai, James J. Jiang, and Gary Klein. 2021. "Coping with Uncertainty: Knowledge Sharing in New Product Development Projects." *International Journal of Project Management* 39 (1): 59–70. doi:10.1016/j.ijproman.2020.10.001.

The Richmond Clinic. 2018. "Crohn's & Colitis Awareness Week: 1st–7th December … " *The Richmond Clinic*, December 4. Accessed September 6, 2021. http://www.richmondclinic.wales.nhs.uk/news/50012.