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Article

ACCOUNT OF PRACTICE

Making facilitation work: the challenges on an international DBA Action Learning Set

Abstract

This account relates my experiences as facilitator of an action learning set on a DBA cohort comprising international students and myself. It outlines the reasons for my selection as facilitator and describes my initial expectations and assumptions of action learning. I chart the difficulty in separating the "what" of my own research from the "how/why" of the action learning set. The account discusses my experiences as a new facilitator and my attempts to engage fellow students in the set in order to gain a collective benefit. I reflect on the challenges encountered in progressing the action learning set caused by a lack of common understanding within the set of the expectations and potential benefits of an action learning approach, and also the feasibility of maintaining a successful action learning set separated by geography, time zones, and language. The account also discusses the practical, technology-supported approaches to facilitating the action learning set.

Keywords: action; learning; facilitation; international

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Introduction

This account of practice describes the action learning set (ALS) which I began to facilitate in October 2015. The ALS was a subset of a Doctorate of Business Administration (DBA) cohort. I enrolled on that cohort and started the DBA programme at the same time as the ALS I facilitated.

The DBA is delivered by the Business School of a post-92 university and every year the cohorts comprise mainly international students, with high percentages from outside Europe. The cohort had its first five day workshop in September 2015 which covered topics such as induction, orientation, introduction to research, and feedback on initial proposals submitted by the students. There were 12 students in the cohort and two home students including myself. As the week progressed there were discussions from the DBA tutors as to how the cohort could be supported, and support itself, after the workshop finished, and each student returned to their own country. The other home student is also a member of staff of the University, albeit not the Business School, and she and I were asked if we would act as facilitators for two ALS's to which we agreed.

Using Action Learning

From the start of the doctoral programme, an emphasis was placed on the need for the cohort to become self-directed learners, to move away from being simply taught how to do something, how being a doctoral student entailed self-reflection, and how it required adapting one's previous learning styles and habits. Stevens-Long, Schapiro, and McClintock (2012) discuss this transformative learning, linking it with postformal thinking and arguing that doctoral students achieve postformal thought by problem finding. This problem finding requires the doctoral students to be able to recognise different views, standpoints and conflict. Previous students on the same DBA programme have described how there was an emphasis on action learning (AL), and how it was intended to help in dealing with common challenges and knowledge sharing (Mendonça, Parker, Udo, & Groves, 2015). Similar emphasis was placed on the doctoral students being scholarly practitioners, different from PhD students, as these doctoral students were full time employees of a wide range of organisations. This form of doctoral education therefore should enable the students to reflect "on data, feedback, research, study, and findings of best practices, thoughts, and beliefs to form the basis for future action" Coleman and Alford (2007, p. 40). While not explicitly discussing AL, Coleman and Alford (2007) describe several shared characteristics shared with AL in the leadership programme they are researching; collaboration, critical discussion, critical self-reflection, and importantly, how students on that programme have to engage in collaborative reflection. If traditional learning is essentially an individual activity, doctoral students of management should be exposed to team-oriented learning activities (Dent, 2002). He goes on to discuss how doctoral programmes should have an emphasis on "teaming and interdependence both in the learning process and in the nature of what is learned" (Dent, 2002, p. 143). Gray (2007) highlights the differences between reflection, critical reflection, and critical self-reflection, concluding that a limitation of management education has been the emphasis on individual perspectives, while instead an approach that is more collective will be of greater benefit. Given that the literature recognises that doctoral education should involve transformative learning, critical self-reflection, and collaboration, it can be argued AL appears to be a suitable approach to learning on a doctoral programme.

My role

One of Revans's (2011) key assumptions identifies the potential need for a facilitator to 'launch the set quickly into its discussions' (p.12). My expectation was that the set would share this objective and that my role of facilitator would largely be a case of starting a learning process through discussion points, and then the proactivity and self-motivation of the ALS would develop itself. Enabling the members of an ALS to develop their critical learning process requires reflection, and it can be argued that these skills requires both training and facilitation (Gray, 2007). In an ALS with an emphasis on critical reflection, Marsick and O'Neil (1999) identify the learning coach [facilitator] as having a more interventionist, challenging role than in other interpretations of AL. They go on to discuss the possible approaches of the learning coach and conclude that the learning coach/facilitator does not intervene during the set's meeting, but follows up any meeting with observations, and discussion points (Marsick & O'Neil, 1999). O'Neil (1999) discusses characteristics required of the learning coach which include authenticity, insightfulness, and a desire to see others learn. In order to facilitate reflective learning, Ollila (2000), while discussing leadership programmes, maintains that there has to be training on how to reflect; logically a facilitator who is attempting to engender similar developments in the ALS members would also require training on reflection. Gregory and Romm (2001) provide a useful discussion of the different levels of intervention, if any, that a facilitator can take and ask how can the discussion not be dictated by the extent of his/her participation. They conclude that this cannot be avoided but it is best that the facilitator has to make decisions throughout the process while being sensitive to the partiality of their role.

I am a full-time member of staff with 19 years' experience in higher education in the United Kingdom. I work in the Business School and am a programme leader who then line managed a team of eight academics. My commercial background is in information systems and management. The tutors on the DBA programme are peers and colleagues, and one of the tutors, who is very active in the area of AL research, explained to me her reasons for choosing me as a facilitator. They included that I was already an academic member of staff and I understood how postgraduate study progressed. I also made some inferences, perhaps incorrectly; that I was a safe pair of hands, and that I was local which made meetings between me, the other facilitator, and the tutor easier to arrange. Being on a DBA programme in a school in which I am also a member of staff poses certain issues. The workshops are delivered by my colleagues, my submitted assignments will be marked by those staff, the academics I line manage are aware I am undertaking the programme, and other colleagues in the School are also aware that I am studying the programme. Within the programme itself I am keen to be participative and therefore a key outcome I wanted as facilitator was positive feedback from the ALS members.

The Action Learning Set

I was the facilitator and a member of the ALS which also comprised one Polish student working in Germany, and four students from the United Arab Emirates. My research adviser at LJMU holds monthly meetings with both facilitators to discuss individual progress and the ALS's development. During the September workshop the other ALS members and I met briefly to discuss how we would progress the set once we returned to our different countries and day jobs. I proposed initially that we could try some online collaborative tools, and suggested Google Hangouts as the

first option. I have used Hangouts successfully previously, and it lends itself well to collaborative work as it fully utilises the Google platform through video and audio conversations, real-time shared documents and different levels of access for participants. In the days immediately after the first workshop I sent emails to all the set members asking for their Google addresses so that I could set up the 'hangout', and I proposed that for the first session, as a basis for discussion I would make available my notes on a textbook I had read about carrying out research. Indications of what was to follow were soon apparent. Three of the set never replied, two confirmed and at the arranged time for the online meeting only one member participated. We spoke by video for perhaps twenty minutes and then finished the meeting. By most evaluation methods, this was not a successful ALS meeting.

For our second event, I contacted the set members, explained how the online meeting had worked technologically, but not in any other way. I posited that perhaps a more useful way forward would be to make our research questions available to the set, and then we could critique each other's work. I thought this better for two reasons; it would be directly beneficial to each member of the set, and also it did not require coordination for the members all to be online at the same time (we are in three different time zones, with different working days) and the work could be done offline. There is little resulting information to evaluate; I loaded up my research questions, pointed out some weaknesses in the questions myself and waited for feedback from the set, but got none. No other set member uploaded any questions, and no member commented on the work I had loaded. Following those incidents, the cohort has had another workshop which all students attended. Again, the programme tutor has expressed a desire to see the ALS being active. I have spoken with the member of the ALS who participated in the first event. He stated that he failed to see any benefit to him in participating in the ALS. We openly discussed how we struggled with the notion of participative collaboration when our DBA subjects were so different from each other.

It is not possible to confirm why neither of these attempts produced positive outcomes without interviewing the set members. The following are reflections on the factors which I believe affected participation in the ALS.

While there is a cohort of DBA students, the process of obtaining a doctorate is largely a solitary exercise. Cohort students attend annual five day workshops but aside from those we have no formal contact. Any student's individual progress, or lack of it, on the DBA has little or no bearing on that of another student. There might appear to be no explicit incentives for participating in the ALS. Marsick and O'Neil (1999) discuss the characteristics of the ALS having individual challenges as opposed to a team challenge and conclude that group or team projects are the norm.

My previous experience of AL was in a taught postgraduate course over a decade ago. I am not aware of any of the set's members having experience, expertise, or knowledge of AL, its objectives or its execution. These are questions that should have been asked of course, but we need to determine who should be asking those questions, the tutors, the facilitator, or the set members, or perhaps all of those.

Revans's (2011) choice of word, supernumerary, for the facilitator is noteworthy as by any definition it implies a role that is excess, not requisite, surplus or even redundant. He states also that the set should become independent from that role as quickly as possible. This separation cannot be possible in the sets formed as part of this DBA. I am also a peer of the DBA students, I too am seeking that common, but not shared, goal. This set is not a group of students on either an undergraduate or a taught postgraduate degree course; they are not completing the same

assignments but instead are completing individual assignments which must have common characteristics.

The suitability of Action Learning

The intentions of AL as a developmental method are clearly desirable. The literature demonstrates many positive experiences of transformational learning whereby practitioners gained new levels of critical reflection and insight into their practices; Coleman and Alford (2007), while investigating the effects of participation on students' growth, discussed how students noted changes in their core beliefs which arose from reflection and participation. The DBA cohort under discussion here meets many of the criteria which AL is designed to address: the students need to enhance their learning skills, their goals share the same characteristics, and the learning acquired is unique to each participant (Yoong & Gallupe, 2001). If this ALS is not centred on a shared organisational goal, why have an ALS? Building a successful set could imply that the resulting output is a single jigsaw image, reflecting the efforts and shared goals of the set. Is this an ALS or six individuals each of whom could use AL as a method of progressing their learning, and solving their relatable, but individual, problems? If the latter is the case, the set would need to be approached differently and I believe the facilitator would need a greater level of experience than I possessed.

Insights

My role of facilitator clashed perhaps with Revans's (2011) key assumptions of AL; that the role is temporary, has a function only at the start of the ALS's formation, and that ties should then be cut with the set's members but I believe the role of facilitator to be complex. If, as Marsick and O'Neil (1999) describe however, the facilitator role can be more interventionist and ongoing, how do I balance that role against the outputs which I require as a member of the AL set? I believe also that my role as a lecturer clouded the way in which I undertook the facilitator role. I attempted to facilitate this set as I would have facilitated my own students; I set tasks, I coordinated their involvement, I requested and expected their own proactivity. Upon reflection, this approach was flawed in several areas: these are not my students, they are my peers, and we are not working on shared problems or goals. Neither do we have a shared understanding of the issues and problems involved in studying for a DBA. I do not believe that it was a question of authority but instead it was a question of relevance. In order for an AL approach to be used by the set, there needed to be a greater level of preparation between the research adviser and the set. Each of the members, including myself, are focused on our individual research topics. It appears a glib statement but I do not believe that I appreciated that AL is not about research, but is about learning. Holmes (2008) describes an ALS of which she was a member which bore similarities to mine; the set comprised members each studying towards a postgraduate qualification. She concludes that 'the facilitator needs to create a setting whereby individuals are quickly challenged to make sense of the dynamics of AL and to develop the relevant skills' (Holmes, 2008, p.252). She goes on to say that her approach to facilitating sets is now about preparing the set for ownership by the members and the facilitator's withdrawal. This approach is clearly sensible giver her requirements, but again I come back to my dual roles of facilitator and set member.

This duality causes me problems; how do I reconcile the role of facilitator with either of the above interpretations? One requires that the facilitator withdraws from the set, and the other, while ongoing, requires intervention. I believe that had I intervened in the set, and been more proactive in

progressing the set, it would have led to resentment from the other set members. Both sets comprised peers; we were all students enrolled on the same programme, whereas had I assumed the role of some kind of authority figure in the set, I believe that I would have overstepped the line from being a fellow student to being another academic, which I was not.

Conclusion

In order to bring some more focus to these experiences it is useful to discuss whether AL is an appropriate mechanism for students on an international DBA and my initial conclusions are that I see major challenges. None of these, however, are insurmountable, but do necessitate different approaches to planning. Much of Revans's (2011) discussion on AL centres on organisations and therefore the system boundaries in which the set operates are predefined. Similarly, the problems or objectives are often shared from which we can infer that the set members have vested interests in achieving the goals. For an international DBA there is no organisation; the university is incidental, the objectives of each set member are individual and indeed the nature of a practice based DBA often involves a home organisation for each student which is funding the study. This disparate mix of stakeholder involvement could place the focus very much on the end goal (obtaining the DBA award) as opposed to the students' learning experience to get there. Consequently, if AL is to be used with students, that initial contact with other set members and the facilitator is critical. Lowe (2010) however, describes her experiences as facilitator of an ALS in which the members were in similar positions but in different organisations. Her experience enabled a set to become 'a place of shared understanding, which helped to facilitate [the members'] learning and problem solving' (p.87). Lowe had, however, undergone an AL facilitator's programme which could be a beneficial approach in better preparing a facilitator for the role (p.85).

Logistically, there are challenges to facilitating an international set. My limited experience of AL indicates that it would be particularly beneficial in face to face sessions. I had hoped that the ease of access to free available online tools would overcome the lack of such sessions. While not underestimating these technological challenges, I do believe, however, that they are simply additional barriers to facilitating AL and not the initial barriers to engagement and participation. Also, none of the other set members had experience of those online collaborative tools. If AL is to be used in a cohort of geographically disparate students, it would be useful and necessary to provide some support and perhaps guidance on the tools available, while also stressing that these tools are enablers, and not solutions. Wilson (2010) states that effective facilitators use 'their presence' to achieve their task (p.292) but this presence is difficult to emulate on a geographically separated group. Wilson also undertook the role as facilitator as it presented the opportunity to achieve a formal qualification in ALS facilitation (p.288) and therefore was supported and guided in that role. I would conclude that AL has potential as an appropriate mechanism for learning, but this is dependent on key initiatives being put in place early in the learning process. This would include an explanation of AL, its applicability, and clear indications of the benefits to individual members.

My conclusions echo those of Mendonça and others (2015) who summarised some of their experiences of AL on a DBA programme as being impeded by a lack of understanding as how to AL could benefit their studies, limited by a lack of face to face contact and mainly a way of reporting progress.

The role of facilitator needs to be clarified, and the role's transient nature needs to be addressed. The conflict of being the facilitator and also a set member would need to be resolved.

From this experience, I believe that my role as a set member affected my role of facilitator. As a student on the programme myself, I approached the set with the opinion that if this approach is useful for me, it should be for the other members also. The lack of engagement suggests that this was not the case. It might be that a distance is needed between the facilitator and the shared goals.

Notes on contributor

Jack OFarrell is a DBA student in a post-92 institution. His current area of interest is the operationalisation of University educational policy.

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