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ACCOUNT OF PRACTICE

Student accounts of action learning on a DBA Programme: Learning Inaction

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Abstract

This account of practice sets out the action learning experience of three doctoral students on the same DBA programme at a UK university. It also include the sense-making of a fourth member of the set. It explores the tension between their area of work and their engagement in the action learning process and, in so doing, contributes to the ongoing debate about the relative priority of learning and problem-solving in action learning. The account narrates the students' personal accounts of their involvement with the action learning set, what they felt worked and what did not before reflecting on their personal contributions as hybrid practitioner-learners. Insights into the experience are offered up to illuminate the function and purpose of the action learning set within a management education programme.

Keywords: Action learning, management education, problem solving

Introduction

The utility of action learning within postgraduate programmes is a topic of growing interest (Mor Barak and Brekke, 2014, Stephens and Margey, 2015). This account of practice contributes to the emerging area of accounts of practice written by doctoral students (for example: Preston et al., 2014). It reflects on the experiences of an action learning set from a successful international Doctoral programme in Business Administration (DBA) from a UK university. It contains the accounts of three individuals, supplemented by

reflections from a fourth. The DBA programme attracts experienced managers and practitioners from both the United Kingdom and abroad, especially the Middle East. Students spend most of their time on the programme engaged in research activity. The faculty provide additional support at three week-long workshops over the three year period of the DBA alongside supervision support throughout the year. This account contributes to the ongoing debate about the priority of learning or problem solving within action learning.

Action learning is stated as a core element of the DBA programme. This reflects the general purpose of an education programme as a mechanism for developing students' critical reflection skills (Corley and Eades, 2004). The focus was on establishing small research groups that would help motivate team members, encourage sharing knowledge from experience, promote working together to tackle common challenges and develop our research topic (Cho and Bong, 2013).

At the first workshop, students chose which Action Learning Set (ALS) they wished to join. They also met together for the first time, supported by a facilitator from the faculty. At this meeting, the aims of the ALS were established, and the ground rules agreed for how the ALS would operate. While there is no single prescribed form or version of action learning (Pedler, 2008, Weinstein, 2012), ours appeared to follow many of the original principles identified by Reg Revans (Revans, 1986, Vince, 2008). This meant that the facilitator emphasised that each ALS was expected to be self-organising, autonomous and egalitarian, with each student taking a share of personal responsibility for successful operation (Willis, 2004). Therefore, at the end of this first ALS meeting, students were expected to make their own arrangements for keeping in touch between workshops, including the logistics for future meetings.

The overall size of the DBA cohort varied as students left or joined the programme, but was typically just over twelve students. Consensus and discussion led ultimately to two sets for action learning. One was based in the

Middle East, the other in the North West. At times the authors were members of the same ALS, at other times we were not.

Our aim in writing this article is to reflect on our experiences of the action learning process. All members of the set were invited to contribute to the paper but a number were unable to do so because of other commitments. The three reflective accounts shared are unashamedly personal. A further sense-making was added by a fourth set member. These reflect our own unique perspective on the value of the process – including our own roles in the successes and failures of the approach (Yeadon-Lee, 2013). In our reflection, we are mindful of our approach as hybrid practitioner-learners, studying for our DBA alongside demanding full-time jobs and our habitual occupational tendency to adopt the role of “solvers of problems”.

Uwem’s account

Our action learning set was made up of industry experts, organisational leaders and executive professionals across various business work-streams and named “DBA Cohort 3 Special”. Although there were eight members at the formation of the group, at the first, and subsequent meetings, it became evident to me that because of time commitments the eight member group was actually only going to be four active members. Due to the geographic location of the team members, we adopted the use of online virtual technology – Skype for our meetings and LinkedIn forum for discussions. The group initially met approximately every two to three months, and outside these meeting times emails concerning the minutes of the meetings and research updates were circulated. However, as the study programme timeline advanced, the frequency of meetings dwindled and meetings were no longer held as envisaged. In my opinion, this break down in the later stage of the programme can be attributed to some of the many barriers of action learning cited in Serrat (2010), which are time factors, varied levels of progress discussions and exhaustion. At the final DBA workshop meetings, an evaluation of the action learning set was done. This provided an opportunity for the group to

explore and reflect on what worked well and feedback to the external facilitators on perception of the process.

Meetings held during the action learning set were facilitated by a de facto group leader, who seemed to adopt the role by virtue of being more focused than others on ensuring its success. The adopted strategy was for progress updates to be given by each team member at the commencement of the meeting followed by a discussion on a pre-selected topic. Each of the set meetings lasted about one and a half hours, and the subject of discussions varied but mainly focused on issues pertaining to challenges faced in the research and the research methodology. Actions were also taken at the meetings and individuals reported back on progress/accomplishment on their actions to the rest of the team at the following meeting. By the time of the third meeting of the action learning set, meetings became fragmented with individuals progressing their respective research studies at different pace. Such variation can easily be construed as a problem or perceived failure of the action learning set. However, Pedler (2011) and Gold (2014) assert that a reflection on actions and outcomes of the process captured through descriptions of what is done will be present in relation to what is right, good and valued. Hence, a broad assumption can be made, that team members acted most of the time on best practices seeking to progress both their individual career and research study.

A positive observation from the action learning meetings as it progressed was a sense of engagement by members in the academic discussions. Participants felt empowered with the advancement in knowledge and were confident to peer review research articles and topic areas. Importantly, these feelings grew with hope and clarity of what needed to be done to complete the research programme of study. However a continued conflict between the suitability of meeting time and collective active commitment of all group members to the action learning set remained. Irrespective of these barriers, the meeting facilitator and active group members were keen to convene the meetings and enhance collaborative working and learning. A significant issue encountered during the dwindling phase of the group meetings was the lack of

willingness of individuals to “ring-fence” time for the action learning set meetings. It was also noted that the priority of this learning activity, particularly for working professionals, was impacted as pressures from respective professional work commitments increased. Rescheduling the meetings was found to be problematic, and absentees from the meetings did not make a discernible difference as the meetings and discussions progressed.

A number of authors have maintained that action learning is a widely accepted approach used as a powerful tool for learning and development across organisational sectors including healthcare, government, educational and business environments (Boshyk and Dilworth, 2010, Waddill et al., 2010, Johnson, 2010). Whilst I am convinced of the practical benefits of ALS as an organisational expert, the very dynamics of our ALS provided me with an alternative view that AL did not appear to work for everyone on the course. My personal experience with the ALS was fruitful while it lasted, as I was able to enrich the quality of my research knowledge through exchange of ideas and listening to academic discussions during the meetings.

Anthony’s account

Academic discourse in the English language is often a luxury that distance learners or researchers have to sacrifice, an observation particularly relevant to me as a British overseas student in the Middle East. My expectation from the ALS was a community of research practitioners with a common language to share issues, understanding and lesson learned (Brown and Duguid, 1991; Wenger, 2000). Reflecting on my research journal from this period, the cohort participation in the action learning sets was disappointing. My fellow researchers expressed difficulty in attending the pre-scheduled teleconference calls and, although the coordination of all the meetings was supervised and formally documented, the group *‘forming’* stage was never established (Tuckman and Jensen, 2010). Notwithstanding, I personally gained significant benefit from contributing to the action learning set and encouraged members within the cohort of the importance of conducting personal validation of their research.

From my viewpoint the effectiveness of the action learning set was curtailed due to the following reasons:

- The formal structure of the ALS requested each fellow cohort member to provide a progress overview and forward a monthly action plan. I perceived that the format of the ALS meeting was deemed too business structured. For example, my fellow students were uncomfortable in expressing their rate of progress and disliked the formal system of recording progress (minutes of meeting).
- As an overseas student, I was optimistic that the DBA students would want to collaborate, share experience and knowledge within the teleconference action learning set. However, due to the structured format of the ALS meeting, the collaborative nature of the group failed to disseminate the experiences and lessons learned from the DBA journey.
- The research students were often unavailable, even though the dates of the teleconference were defined as the first Saturday of every month.
- Due to the low number of participants, opportunities to relate action and reflection were inadvertently not placed on the agenda or debated within the set. For example, there were often low numbers of contributors to the ALS meeting. The consequence of poor ALS attendance prevented opportunities to include discourses on the explanation of metaphysics or the difference between ontology, epistemology and methodology.

It can be argued that the action learning set needed to be a synergy of ideas, that relates to theory and practice (Ramsey, 2008). As a consequence of the lacklustre performance of the action learning group, a web-based discussion group was formed on *'LinkedIn™'* to encourage social validation integration. A range of topics were placed on the web-based chat group to encourage personal and social validation. Regrettably, the interest from the cohort

remained significantly limited and the group was closed after a period of five months.

Roger's account

When I started my DBA, I was pleased to hear we were going to use Action Learning Sets (ALS) to support our learning journey. I had a very positive experience of action learning during my Executive MBA programme between 2008 and 2010. It was an integral part of the learning journey and I had made a real commitment to my set. I had a sense of shared purpose, that I belonged to something bigger than myself. I genuinely felt that I was working with people who I wanted to help through the MBA journey and, who I believed, were genuinely committed to help me through too.

Unfortunately, although my overall DBA experience has been very positive, my experience of action learning was not as good. Not negative, just without any real value. It felt like an add-on to the learning journey, and a fairly meaningless one at that. It inspired no sense of commitment in me, to the extent that I felt no desire to intervene to make things better when they were not going right. I was quite happy to let my ALS wither on the vine. Given these two contrasting experiences, I thought it might be interesting to share my thoughts on why in one setting action learning worked for me and in another it did not. This may be of value to those thinking of using action learning in their own practice.

During my MBA, our ALS was allocated on arrival. We were sat together and were immediately encouraged to create an identity for ourselves – a team name and a motto to symbolise what we stood for. In our first workshop, we worked as a group on an exercise, as indeed we would for each monthly workshop during the two-year programme. In between workshops, we shared the reading for our assignments and held a weekly call to discuss what we had learned. The ALS felt purposeful and directed – a direction that came from us as members of the set.

By contrast, on the DBA our ALS was introduced midway through our first workshop. We chose our own groups and were then given the time to agree the logistics for our next meeting. Other than that, action learning played no real part in the workshop. Our set had no identity and no joint working to conduct. As our research was all very different we had only a limited syllabus to bring us together and, although we shared the process milestones inherent in a DBA, because we progressed our work at different speeds these were not necessarily undertaken at the same time.

I do not believe that I ever established any commitment to my ALS on the DBA. I never felt that the set had a sense of purpose and, given the very high level of absenteeism from both face-to-face and virtual meetings, I believe this view was shared by most other members. Consequently, whenever I attended a meeting I had a general feeling of drift and aimlessness that had the effect of reinforcing my disinterest and making it less likely that I would bother to attend the next time.

From a personal point of view, I believe the ALS on the DBA would have worked better if a sense of identity and purpose was established right up front. Once we had chosen our sets, I believe that encouraging us to sit together during workshops, to work together on exercises and to create some symbols of that identity, for example through a name, would have helped establish that action learning was an integral part of the experience. From the perspective of purpose, while the absence of a shared syllabus somewhat limited the scope for joint learning, a focus on using the ALS to work through the processes we had to go through would have helped create some meaning. Without this identity and purpose, I believe action learning will only provide limited value to those involved.

Reflections

The three accounts were from the most common attendees at our ALS meetings. However, even between these, there are tremendous variation. To an extent, attendance reflected the different levels of commitment felt towards

the process. Given these different levels of commitment, it is perhaps not surprising that we had differing views about the value of the ALS. As the fourth member of the set and the least frequent attendee, I agreed to contribute to this AoP by reflecting on the three accounts and relating them to contemporary discourse.

Initially, the set was of the opinion that we were not seeking to provide any new theoretical insight into the AL process but were writing in the hope that our accounts would be of practical value to universities or others who use, or are considering using a similar action learning approach in the future in management education. During the writing process, this opinion was challenged by a number of members of the group. One member stated that on reflection, he was participating in the paper to “inform the viva voce internal and external examiners that an academic paper had been published in a respectable journal.” In other words, he was seeking to obtain institutional legitimacy (Whitehead and McNiff, 2006), surely an example of participation for the purpose of problem-solving rather than learning. This point of view was perhaps reinforced by a discussion that summarised the perceived benefits of the ALS:

Table 1 Summary of perceived benefits of the ALS to different participants

Perceived Benefits	Anthony	Uwem	Roger	Cath
The ALS created a sense of identity	No	No	No	No
The dissemination of knowledge was effective	No	No	No	No
Ability to communicate using a multi-media platform	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Platform to allow a discourse on research	No	No	No	No
Useful for networking	Yes	Yes	No	No
Increased confidence as a doctoral candidate	No	Yes	No	No
Increased readiness to take responsibility for own learning	No	Yes	No	No

The themes selected as being evaluative of the value of the ALS arguably reflect the practitioner roles of managers and engineers and are implicit of the

ALS being viewed as a means to an end rather than an end in itself. At this point in our journey, the consensus was that our experiences could best be seen as an example of 'learning inaction' (Vince, 2008). The individual reflective accounts draw attention to how consensus-bound discourses dominated and potentially limited our experience of action learning, (Lawless, 2008). We believed that our method of organisation restricted our ability to consider, let alone tackle, our individual problems and issues collectively through the ALS (Anderson and Thorpe, 2004).

The fourth group member (Cath) reflected on the need to integrate our account into the ongoing debate on action learning in doctoral education and to contextualise our contribution to knowledge within the themes of contemporary discussion. Indeed a recent editorial raised the issue of priority of problem-solving or learning (Rigg, 2015) which led to a discussion on the fundamental purpose of seeking publication for our account. The composition of the team having two engineers and two managers perhaps made the prioritisation of problem-solving over learning inevitable. The process of writing our account of practice brought our learning into a much sharper focus than had any other activity within the previous three years. The authors who chose to participate became fully engaged in terms of attendance, participation and discussion as well as much increased activity in objective setting and meeting deadlines. We found ourselves in a cycle of problem solving. As we reflected on the problems we had encountered in the coherence of our ALS, the process appeared to promote learning within the team which led in turn to radical improvement in the performance of the team and, on publication, to arguably higher quality solutions (Leonard, 2014, Rigg, 2015).

Outcomes

This paper has documented the sense-making journey of one ALS of DBA students. The intensely personal accounts have been supplemented with a shared reflection in an attempt to contextualise them both within the emerging body of published accounts of practice, as well as within the ongoing debate

on the priorities of action learning. In the spirit of our engineering and managerial backgrounds, we present the following conclusions as to why we feel that our particular ALS did not function as anticipated.

- Our ALS was initially hampered by a lack of clarity about how action learning could support us in our new roles as doctoral researchers, exacerbated by limited face-time with and therefore trust in each other.
- Because of this, we lacked a clear purpose which meant that we 'reverted to type' as managers and engineers and became focussed on the lack of task, eventually concluding that the ALS was only really useful as a mechanism for reporting progress.
- Only when this focus led us to stumble over a task that forced us into reflection on our learning (writing an AoP for publication as a means of proving our institutional legitimacy), did the group really commit to each other and fully engage in the action learning process.

We share these observations as our contribution to the ongoing debate on learning and action. Our perspectives may be of use to students, supervisors and administrators of doctoral level programmes as they seek to embed action learning into the DNA of their programmes in the future.

About the authors:

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