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**Effective Action Learning Sets: An analysis of participant experiences**

**Annie Yeadon- Lee**

**A thesis submitted to the University of Huddersfield  
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for  
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

**University of Huddersfield**

**January 2010**

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I dedicate this thesis to the memory of Richard Graham. He always wanted me to write something about action learning, I hope he would be pleased with my endeavours.

## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis examines an under researched area in the field of action learning: how learning set participants experience action learning and the effectiveness of action learning sets. Through the adoption of a qualitative research approach, which utilised unstructured interviews with learning set members and employed a grounded theory approach to analysis, the thesis thus provides a unique insight into action learning practices and group processes, the latter significantly adding to knowledge in the field of organisational behavior. The research presented, which traces the connections between the research process, methodology and the ongoing development of analysis, also adds to existing knowledge in organisational research methods.

Within the thesis, a number of significant issues concerning group processes within action learning sets are discussed. Through analysis of the data it is shown that differing hierarchies exist amongst set members and that these affect the contribution that individual members make to the operations in the set. Furthermore, trust is shown to be vital to the effective working of the set, with members needing to feel psychologically and politically safe before they will self disclose. Finally, member's self disclosure is revealed to be located on a continuum ranging from comfort to discomfort, with a possibility that some set members may actively engage in dissimulation as a way of reducing cognitive dissonance in self disclosure.

Analysis within the thesis also provides a unique insight into action learning practices. A discussion of the findings reveals several significant issues in relation to both set members and facilitators. These include the effect of the location of the set, member's expectations of the facilitator's role and the extent to which these expectations accord with the facilitator's style of facilitation. Analysis of this latter point directly adds to the body of literature concerning the skills of facilitators in action learning sets.

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## **Chapter One – Introduction**

### **Introduction to the live issue**

It has taken some time to come to a point where I could begin to articulate what it is that I wanted to research. I started my academic career as a college lecturer. One of the duties within that particular role was to facilitate part time student's learning, either by tutorials or seminars. In these settings each student took his or her turn to describe what their work related problem was. The rest of the group supported the individual by listening, encouraging and questioning in an effort to help them to find a solution to their own problem. What I did not know is that we were engaging in a rudimentary form of action learning and that I was facilitating an action learning set. At the time I was unaware that this process had a name to it, coupled with a distinct philosophy. I simply engaged in what I saw as the facilitation of learning groups, in which we all listened to the presenter's ideas. I then encouraged the group to work together to help the individual find their own way forward with their issues. This is the basis of action learning.

I left that particular college and went to teach at The University of Huddersfield Business School; in the Department of Leadership and Management. Here I had the good fortune of attracting the attention of one of the Principal Lecturers there at the time; Richard Graham. Richard was a devotee of Reg Revans, the founder of action learning. He was totally immersed in action learning programmes and the facilitation of action learning sets. At that time and to some extent now, facilitating action learning was almost seen as 'dabbling in the dark arts'. The idea of facilitation seemed to be at odds with the general work of the department at that time, with most of our colleagues having only a basic understanding of what we did. Anne Brockbank (2006:5) describes a similar situation, she said:

“The term facilitation was rather unusual in higher education and I found that I had to justify what I was doing to many colleagues who challenged the whole idea of facilitation. The

term was seen as floppy and ill-defined and unsuitable for higher education”.

However, it was something that I enjoyed and certainly wanted to have a greater involvement in.

At that time Richard had created an Institute for Action Learning within the University and had just started a Masters (MSc) in Management by Action learning for a client in Hong Kong. He asked me if I would like to be involved with some of this work, offering to mentor me, which in reality meant throwing me in at the deep end, with him saying ‘watch what I do and then have a go’. Action learning over the next couple of years seemed to come into its own. The department won two very lucrative contracts with a local authority. The Local Authority in question had commissioned a Diploma and Certificate in Management and wanted action learning as an embedded philosophy with in both programmes. I was asked to be the director for both programmes; I gladly accepted this invitation as I saw it as another opportunity to engage in the action learning process. My academic life at that time was very rich as I was also playing an active role in the delivery of the departments Master of Business Administration (MBA) which facilitated interesting contrasts in terms of teaching and learning and the opportunity for me to bring in my ideas on action learning which were supported by the then programme director. So I was surrounded by the things and people I cared about.

However, the situation changed with Richards’s untimely death in 2006. Here I found myself in a position of having to carry on with our work, which by now involved managing and delivering an MSc in Professional Leadership by Action Learning and Inquiry for the Health Service for another school in the University; an MSc in Management by Action learning within the Business School and the two contracts with the local authority, coupled with the task of wrapping up the contract in Hong Kong. It was difficult to carry on without Richard, he was a very dear friend and I missed him both personally and professionally, and there was certainly still so much I had to learn from him. My way forward was to develop a deeper understanding of action learning, partly as a way of dealing with his death and partly, as a way of developing the confidence to ‘go it alone’.

I read copious amounts of literature; books and journal articles, but generally I found myself dissatisfied. There was something in the literature that I wanted to know and I wasn't entirely sure what it was, but I knew it wasn't there. It troubled me that there were so many assumptions about the nature of facilitating groups, in particular action learning sets. Literature would make reference to a form of tacit knowledge that the facilitator should have; that as a facilitator I had to create trust (Harvey and Drolet, 1994; Hoy and Tshannen-Moran, 1999) in the set for it to be effective, that I should ensure that there was a positive psychological climate (Koys and Decotis, 1991; Jones and James, 1979) where everyone felt able to contribute, that the set members should feel comfortable in disclosing both personal and political information to other set members, and having achieved all this, the set should then be an effective one (Dindia, 2002:169). I was troubled about how I would know how to do this, and how would I know when the set was effective; was it when they all successfully passed the programme, if they all contributed to the set discussions, all attended or what?

I decided that rather than take the word of writers and academics that may or may not have been a member of an action learning set and who would have 'inside information' that I could use, I should ask people who had been members of an action learning set. Was this the something I wanted to know but just couldn't pin point? I decided to look for literature that captured the voices of set members, their thoughts and feelings about their experiences of being a set member and how successful or otherwise their action learning sets had been. There was a distinct silence in this specific area of the literature, other than the occasional article here and there acknowledging participants' views (Bourner and Frost, 1996; Mumford, 1996; Robinson, 2001; Hoban, 2004; Lee, 2006), but nothing specifically dedicated to hearing their voices and opinions on what they had considered had made an effective action learning set. This perspective just hadn't been considered in this specific way. Former set members who had a unique insight into this experience were essentially voiceless. Lee (2000:96) who wrote from a set member's perspective on action learning said:

“If action learning is to develop further we need insight into

the factors that can help and hinder, without stifling creativity. It is only through sharing our perspectives that action learning can be fully explored.”

This was good advice from Lee that I was about to take. There is a plethora of academic and practitioner’s perspectives on the subject, with differing stances taken, but I felt there was an opportunity to add to the body of literature that offers a differing perspective in understanding of the group dynamics. Sanders et al (1997:86) states:

“We think that it is of practical benefit to understand the taken for granted assumptions that we have about the way the world works. Only if we have such an understanding can we examine these assumptions, challenge them if we think appropriate, and behave in a different way.”

My perceived view, that there was an absence of participant’s voices on the issue of perspective, then became my ‘live issue’. The next task became one of establishing exactly how I could turn my thoughts on this live issue into something that would eventually become a worthwhile thesis. I remember toying with various titles, trying to tease out a sentence that would capture the essence of what it was I was trying to find out. Titles included: How do facilitators understand what is happening in an action learning set? How do facilitators understand the dynamics of the groups they facilitate? How does trust develop in a group learning set? What do participants view as being the most important psychological constructions that contribute to the development of an effective action learning set? This was then translated into: What is essential for the experience to be described by the student as being an effective action learning set?

At this stage it became apparent to me that what I wanted to find out was what was an effective action learning set, what factors contributed to it, how would I recognise it, but the views would be from the actual set members themselves. It all became very clear, almost too simplistic. The question had to be: From a set member’s perspective, what creates an effective action learning set? with a thesis title of: Effective Action

Learning Sets: An analysis of participant experiences, thereby capturing the essence, exactly, of what I wanted to find out in what seemed to be a deceptively easy way. The next stage was to consider the literature that I thought would be useful in this field.

### **Current Literature in this field**

Within the field of action learning, literature has historically been dominated by the contribution of academics, researchers or practitioners, with learning set participants' views remaining largely an under researched area. Smith and O'Neil (2003:66), in an article entitled "A review of Action Learning literature 1994- 2000" said that:

"By far the most active publication category is Action Learning Practice. Case reviews and research related pieces top the category, with preparation, design and implementation well covered".

Where participant's views have been acknowledged it has focused on their experiences of the whole process as demonstrated by Bourner and Frost (1996), in an article entitled "Experiencing Action Learning". The thesis addresses action learning from the experiences of the learning set members themselves, and primarily considered reflections, feelings and outcomes as experienced by the set members. The article is largely a review of the process as opposed to a specific consideration of the participants' views of effectiveness of the learning set. Bourner and Frost (1996) further developed this theme in an article entitled "In their own words: the experience of action learning in higher education". However, other than adding a contextual dimension, i.e. that of the University, the outcomes were largely the same; a holistic view of the whole experience as lived by the set members but not a view of the effectiveness of the set from the participant's view. This thesis addresses what is seen as a shortfall in this body of literature, with participants' views being at the forefront of the dissertation, mirroring the underpinning philosophy of personalisation within learning, in that the learner and his/her views and needs are of primary concern.



At the start of this thesis I find it useful to capture the breadth of this field by diagrammatically representing it by means of a Venn diagram (Venn, 1880). The three overlapping circles represent what is concerned to be the background elements of the issue and are the focus of a literature review which comprises of the following elements:

- Part One – The Learning in Action Learning
- Part Two - Group processes in Action Learning
- Part Three - The Action Learning context

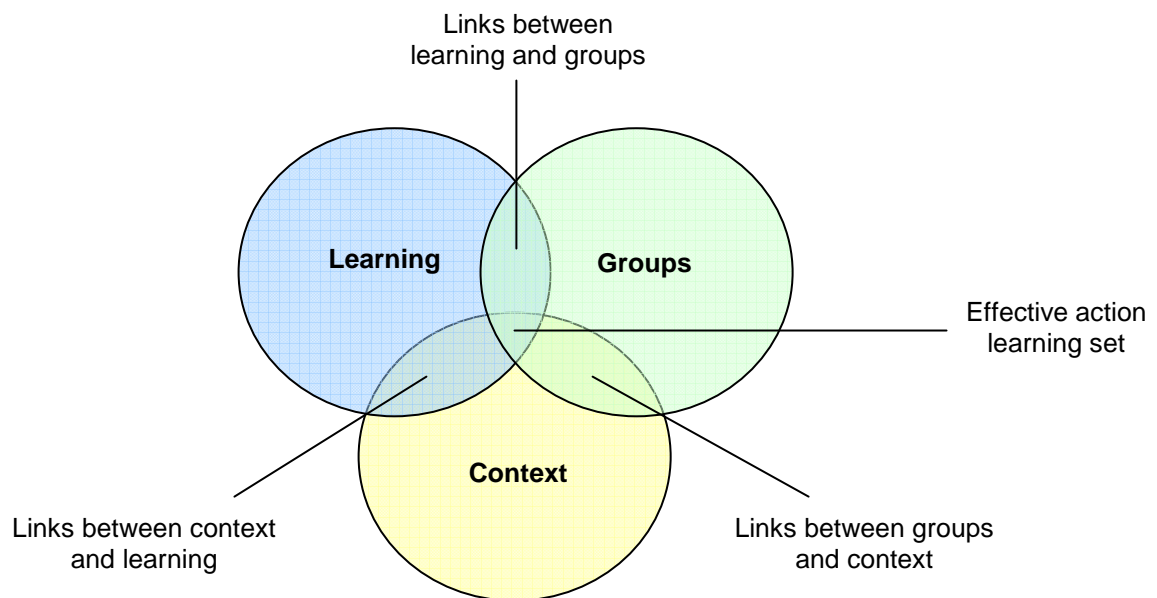


Figure 1 Venn diagram of the thesis's central issues

The core then is a distillation of all the preceding elements that have an influence on the central issue of effectiveness of action learning sets from the set member's perspective and becomes the contribution to knowledge.

## **Research Methodology and Methods**

### Methodology

As a person with limited experience of carrying out research, I decided to read around this subject in the role of researcher as opposed to that of a teacher. I wanted to determine what would work for me as opposed to what would help others understand what they were doing. I found it useful to consider Saunter's (2003) Research Onion (in Chapter Five), which represents the spectrum of research possibilities using the metaphor of an onion. It was helpful to consider what I wanted to research and my own particular style and preferences for both researching and learning. I decided to use grounded theory as the primary methodological principle. The rationale lay firstly in the notion that, in this particular aspect of action learning literature, very little knowledge of participant's views on what makes an effective action learning set are known.

Pauleen et al (2007:228) define grounded theory as:

“An inductive process, in which concepts, insights, and understanding are developed from patterns in the data. It is this inductive process that allows for the development and articulation of theories or models in situations where little previous experience or knowledge exists.”

Yoong (1996:35) also states:

“The choice of grounded theory for the analysis and articulation of raw experience is supported in situations where there is little previous research in an area, when the focus is on human experience and interaction, when there is a high degree of applicability to practice, and when there is a need for contextual interpretation.”

In the context of this thesis I am researching a group of individuals who have largely been voiceless. I see this as the primary aim of the thesis to give a voice to their experiences of being an action learning set member. However, I do appreciate that the issue of giving a voice to the participants in any form of research can be viewed as being problematic. Fine (2002:18), for example, wrote that giving voice “involves carving out unacknowledged pieces of narrative evidence that we select, edit, and deploy to border our arguments.” As a researcher I understood that I was likely to have biases so needed to be mindful of that in the way I carried out the research, ensuring that what I reported was representative of the set member’s views and not an edited version that suited my understanding of the process.

### Method

Data collection tools consist of unstructured, in-depth interviews with former action learning set members. The interviews were loosely designed in order to illicit rich and detailed accounts of participant’s experiences and views about being an action learning set member. Given that little is known about action learning from the view of participants, the interviews were not based on a predefined list of questions. Rather, a conversational style was adopted that allowed relevant topical areas for discussion to emerge. As appropriate to grounded theory, thematic analysis and theoretical sampling were continuously used across all of the data collection stages.

Theoretical sampling (Glaser & Strauss, 1967:45) can be defined as:

“The process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes, and analyses his (sic) data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop his (sic) theory as it emerges. The process of data collection is controlled by the emerging theory.”

A thematic analysis approach is adopted in order to code data relating to group processes and the effectiveness of action learning that are common in all interviews and, in order to draw conclusions about the holistic views set members hold. A more detailed discussion of both methodology and method can be found in Chapter Five.

## **Contribution to the body of knowledge**

The results of this thesis make a contribution to both the fields of organisational behaviour, action learning and research approaches concerning action learning. This is fully discussed in Chapter Eight.

## **Thesis structure**

I found it difficult to conceptualise what the structure of this thesis would be like. Over the years I have become accustomed to the structure of the traditional Master of Business Administration dissertation; latterly I have also become accustomed to the Masters dissertation in Professional Leadership which is delivered using an action learning approach and is reflected in the style of the construction of the dissertation. I therefore am in a position of choosing between two opposites in terms of style and approach. The traditional MBA structure is:

- Introduction;
- Literature Review;
- Methodology;
- Findings and Analysis; and
- Personal Learning.

When I started to plan and write the thesis I was struck by the possibility that at first glance the work may feel a little disjointed, both to me the author and to the respective readers in that elements of the thesis e.g. the literature presented in this field may feel staccato; somewhat remote from the story of my journey. I therefore felt that I wanted to meld all the elements together in a way that have both flow and meaning whilst still capturing the work as a journey with two imperatives: first, to deal with the focus of the thesis which is to determine what the views of former action learning set members are on the issue of what makes an effective learning set and second, to demonstrate my emerging skills and knowledge as a researcher. To resolve this I used Cresswell's (1989:57) 'zig-zag' method to not only capture the data I needed but also to act as the structure to the thesis and to allow myself to be part of the process. Cresswell (1989)

discusses the zig-zag approach as a process of moving backwards and forwards into the field to collect data, whilst simultaneously developing and writing up the findings from the previous forays into the field in terms of developing a literature review and refining the data collection methods. In some respects, this adds to the richness of the journey but the structure also has a purpose:

- to demonstrate new knowledge; and
- to demonstrate the learning process.

I could have chosen to collect all the data from the various themes in such a fashion, however, I made a conscious decision not to do that because I wanted to demonstrate transparency throughout the research and allow the learning process to be demonstrated.

The periods in between data collection interviews were influenced by the work of Pauleen et al (2007:232) who wrote that:

“The extended period between each block of fieldwork provided time for transcription and analysis of the interview data. The in-between periods were also used for reflection, interpretation and strategy building. These reflective periods, which are built into the action research cycle as well as the grounded theory method.”

As a new researcher, it is important to reflect upon what has occurred in the previous field trips, consider what has been learned and how that learning impacts upon the subsequent approach to data collection.

I appreciate what I've said above seems very straightforward when read as an introduction. However, as the reader moves into the thesis (and certainly I am finding when writing) this is actually quite a complicated process in which it is easy to become lost. So it may be helpful to provide a road map, which helps navigate the journey; written in the form of chapters, intended to bring clarity and demonstrate the

interconnectivity of the various stages in research. The structure of the thesis will look like this:

#### Chapter One - Introduction

This chapter is concerned with the overall aims of the thesis and is an introductory chapter. The nature of the live issue is introduced and then supported with a rationale for the choice of this live issue and discussion of the research approach that will be used.

#### Chapter Two - Personal and Professional Biography

The chapter discusses my personal and professional biography that starts with the absence of any real success in my early years, my entrance into teaching and subsequent introduction to action learning. The chapter also considers my action learning practice and uses both my Myers Briggs Typology Indicator (1987) and Belbin (1981) preferred team roles to inform the biography and underpin how I practice action learning.

#### Chapter Three - What is Action Learning?

This chapter discusses what action learning is and the chapter provides differing definitions. The chapter then moves on to describe the origins of action learning, how it works, the language that set members use when engaging in action learning and differing approaches to action learning. A discussion then takes place that explores the differences of action learning to that of other groups, to ensure that the reader has a clear understanding that an action learning set is very different from a group. The chapter then discusses differing views on the effectiveness of action learning sets.

#### Chapter Four - Deconstructing the Action Learning Context

This chapter reviews the literature in a general sense. The literature considers three specific elements and is of a contextual nature:

1. Learning in action learning – considers the relationship of action learning and learning in general, with specific reference to adult learning.

2. Group processes in action learning – considers the general nature of groups and is divided into four broad domains:

Group Formation

Group Structures and Processes

Group Control

Group Effectiveness

3. The action learning context – considers the environment that action learning takes place in. Within this section both the individual and physical domains are discussed.

#### Chapter Five - Research Methodology

This chapter is concerned with both the methodology and method that have been used to carry out the research. The chapter introduces the rationale behind the choice of research methodology used in the research process within this thesis. The 'Research Onion' (Saunders et al, 2003:83) was influential in informing both the approach to the research methodology and method in this thesis and structuring of the chapter.

#### Chapter Six - Analysis of the Pilot Interviews

This chapter is concerned with the pilot interviews, both the background to the use of pilot interviews and the subsequent analysis. The data collected focused on the question "What is it like being a member of an action learning set?" and is in two parts. Firstly, thematic analysis which was carried out in order to determine the themes that emerged from the pilot interviews. This was accompanied by a literature review that unpacked those themes. Secondly, theoretical analysis was used in order to determine the questions for the next round of interviews. The chapter concludes with six questions that were used in the next round of interviews where four interviews were carried out.

#### Chapter Seven - Analysis of the First Round of Interviews

This chapter is concerned with the analysis of the first interviews and uses both thematic and theoretical analytical approaches. Thematic analysis identifies new themes or concepts; appropriate literature is included that unpacks these themes.

Theoretical analysis then informs the questions that would be used in the subsequent five interviews.

#### Chapter Eight - Analysis of the Second Round of Interviews

The focus of this chapter is the analysis of second interviews and considers five specific themes and areas of interest I believe to be important in determining the views of the effectiveness of action learning sets: (a) status and hierarchy in action learning sets; (b) trust in action learning sets; (c) disclosure of personal information; (d) facilitation; and finally (e) the impact on the individual's job performance.

In relation to each theme, conclusions are drawn and questions of the data are asked at various stages. Each section is concluded with a summary that draws the important points together. The chapter then considers my reflections on the research process.

#### Chapter Nine: Findings and Conclusions

The focus of this chapter is to draw together the data gathered from ten interviews on the subject of former set member's experiences of being in an action learning set. The chapter discusses the salient points of the all the interviews, focussing on addressing the aim of the thesis which is to examine the issue of effective action learning set from an analysis of participant experiences.

The chapter progresses with a section that explains how I view the contribution this thesis makes to the existing body of knowledge regarding the fields of organisational behaviour, action learning and research approaches concerning action learning. The chapter also considers the perceived limitations of the thesis and what further research can be carried out as a result of completing this research.

#### Chapter Ten – Learning and Reflections

The final chapter acknowledges my role as a learner in this process. It discusses what I have learned about the research process, about myself and the process of learning to learn. The chapter concludes with my reflections, both backwards and forwards on the research journey.



## **Chapter Two – Personal and Professional Biography**

### **Introduction**

In this chapter I introduce myself in terms of my background as a second chance student. I think it's useful to say a little more about me, my background, how I entered the teaching profession and how I view my own practice of action learning. To enrich this I have overlaid this biography with my preferred group roles (Belbin, 1981) and my Myers Briggs Typology Indicator (1987). I have also considered the role reflexivity plays in this thesis.

### **Early years**

I didn't do very well at school, in spite of the fact that I enjoyed it tremendously and look back with fondness. I actually left my County Secondary Modern school with very little to show after duly turning up everyday for all those years. The objective for me was to be with my friends. I managed to scrape through with a couple of CSEs and an O Level grade D in Art and left to work in the local factory on my Careers Teacher's advice. Quickly becoming bored with the factory (in spite of making lots of friends and experiencing my first strike action, in which we, the workers stood outside the factory until the management agreed to reinstate the five minutes they had attempted to take off our afternoon tea break) boredom got the better of me and I decided to leave the factory.

I applied to become a Police Cadet with the West Yorkshire Police Force and because of an absence of the desired entry qualifications; I took and passed the entrance test. My service in the Police only lasted one and a half years. Training was good, lots of sports and fun, but the reality of an inner city police station in Leeds wasn't me. I had become very disillusioned at an alarming rate, my intentions were to both serve and work with the public, but I couldn't fit in with a culture that was supposedly doing that, I was at odds with the espoused theory and the theory in action (Arygris and Schon, 1974) in the Police Force at that time and resigned a few months before I was due to become a 'real' police officer.

A period of clerical work, internal auditing and self employment followed with a combination of night school and day release, I found myself with a BTEC National Certificate in Business. I passed, to my surprise, with an overall Distinction. This was followed by a Bachelors Degree in Management and Administration. At this point I began to realise that something was either missing or about to begin.

A large part of the internal auditor's role had been training people on financial and administrative systems and the use of equipment such as tills and accountancy machines. I found that I really got a buzz out of watching people become accomplished at the things I had taught them. At this stage I had begun to realise I was in the wrong job, I should be teaching people and that I wanted to be in an environment that was dedicated to doing that. The decision to leave a well paid, secure job, where I was both liked and respected, to go into a world of relative poverty and insecurity as a full time student was a difficult one, but I knew it was right for me. I left the commercial world and started as full time student on a Post Graduate Certificate in Education.

### **Entering teaching**

My early years in teaching consisted of teaching anything that established members of staff didn't want to teach, this ranged from; the Elements of Banking to Equestrian Finance (I had two horses and had been an auditor, so the section leader thought I was the appropriate person). As time went by I was able to develop both my style of teaching into a more participative one with less emphasis on a didactic approach as I had been asked to become more involved in seminar work and tutorials. This was a real turning point for me as I felt that I needed that level of involvement with students to be at my best.

At this point I had left the College and was teaching at the University of Huddersfield and, as I said in Chapter One, meeting Richard Graham took my professional life to an all time high with my introduction to facilitating action learning sets.

## **Personality type**

Given the above backdrop, I feel it would be appropriate to introduce some indication as to how I see the practice of action learning and combine my biography with a view of my action learning practice. To add extra layers to the critique of my work and to gain a better understanding of my history and practice I have included both my Myers Briggs Typology Indicator (1980) and Belbin (1981) Inventory Score, the background to which is discussed in detail in Chapter Four, Page 67.

### Belbin (1981) Inventory Score

The Belbin (1981) Inventory Score considers what your preferred roles are in a group. My preferred roles are the Resource Investigator and the Team worker.

The Resource Investigator (RI) is characterised as being an enthusiastic extrovert who is good at communicating with people both in and out of the organisation. They are natural negotiators and are adept at exploring new opportunities and developing contacts. Although they are not a great source of original ideas, they are effective when it comes to picking up the ideas of others and developing them. They usually receive a warm welcome from others because of their out going nature. Resource Investigators have relaxed personalities with a strong inquisitive sense and a readiness to see the possibilities in anything new. However, unless they remain stimulated by others their enthusiasm rapidly fades.

The Team worker (TW) is characterised as being one of the most supportive members of a team. They tend to be mild, sociable and concerned about others. They have a great capacity of flexibility and can adapt to different situations and people. They are perceptive and diplomatic. They are good listeners and generally popular members of a group. They operate with a sensitivity at work, however, they can be a little indecisive in difficult situations.

### Myers Briggs Typology Indicator (Briggs Myers, 1987)

The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) assessment is a psychometric questionnaire designed to measure psychological preferences in how people perceive the world and make decisions. These preferences are derived from the typological theories

originated by Carl Gustav Jung, as published in his 1921 book *Psychological Types* (English edition, 1923). The original developers of the personality inventory were Katharine Cook Briggs and her daughter, Isabel Briggs Myers. They began creating the indicator during World War II, believing that knowledge of personality preferences would help women who were entering the industrial workforce for the first time to identify the sort of war-time jobs to which they would be suited. The initial questionnaire grew into the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, which was first published in 1962. The MBTI focuses on normal populations and emphasises the value of naturally occurring differences. Briggs Myers (1987:2) wrote that the premise in psychological type is that:

“Predictable differences in individuals are caused by differences in the way people prefer to use their minds.”

The premise is that when an individual uses his/her mind they are involved in one of two actions: Perceiving and Judging.

Perceiving involved taking in information and within this Jung observed that there are two opposite ways of perceiving; sensing and intuition.

Judging involved organising information and coming to conclusions and within this Jung observed that there are two opposite ways of judging; thinking and feeling.

An individual uses these four processes daily in both their internal and external world. The external world was known as ‘extraversion’ characterised by people and experiences, the internal world as ‘introversion’ characterised by inner processes and reflection.

The four basic processes of sensing, intuition, thinking and feeling, used within both an individual’s internal and external world would give eight possible ways of using their minds. Jung (1923) believed that the individual has a natural preference for using one kind of perceiving and judging and that they are either drawn to an internal or external world. As Briggs Myers (1987:3) concluded, the MBTI indicates the differences in people that result from:

- where they prefer to focus their attention - Extraversion or Introversion;
- the way they prefer to take in information – Sensing or Intuition;
- the way they prefer to make decisions - Thinking or Feeling; and;
- how they orientate themselves to the external world - whether they primarily use a Judging or Perceiving process.

The MBTI then uses letters to represent the preferences, (See Appendix 2). In my case, I am an ENFP (Briggs Myers, 1987:6) which profiles me as:

E – Extraversion preferred to Introversion:

ENFPs often feel motivated by their interaction with people. They tend to enjoy a wide circle of acquaintances, and they *gain* energy in social situations.

N – iNtuition preferred to Sensing:

ENFPs tend to be more abstract than concrete. They focus their attention on the big picture rather than the details, and on future possibilities rather than immediate realities.

F – Feeling preferred to Thinking:

ENFPs tend to value personal considerations above objective criteria. When making decisions, they often give more weight to social implications than to logic.

P – Perception preferred to Judgment:

ENFPs tend to withhold judgment and delay important decisions, preferring to ‘keep their options open’ should circumstances change.

Briggs Myers (1987:7) created a thumbnail sketch of an ENFP which characterised an ENFP as being:

“Warmly enthusiastic, high spirited, ingenious and imaginative. Able to do almost anything that interests them. Quick with a solution for any difficulty and ready to help anyone with a problem. Often rely on their ability to improvise instead of

preparing in advance. Can usually find compelling reasons for whatever they want.”

### **Action learning practice**

The choice to use both the MBTI (1987) profile and Belbin (1981) Inventory Score is an interesting point, prompting the question, why am I including differing forms of psychometric testing in the biography, whilst rejecting a quantitative approach in the way I have approached the research process? I think that the answer lays in the instruments themselves, in that both profiles of me do, in my opinion, actually represent how I would like to see myself and hopefully how I am seen by others, I suppose I am somewhat seduced by the notion, in this instance, as they appeal to my qualitative nature because of their richness of description, which in general, allows a real sense of the person to come through. I am aware that instruments of this nature do not have universal appeal for a variety of differing reasons, but in this instance I feel they are an improvement on what could be a rather dry biography.

As both an RI and TW I am a sociable individual who values time with people and particularly enjoy working as a member of a team and in particular an action learning set. This compliments my MBTI profile of an ENFP whose primary mode of living is focused externally. I absorb things primarily via my intuition which I feel that I use when working in action learning sets. I would say that this is almost a form of tacit knowledge (which is discussed in greater detail later in Chapter Eight, Page 219) that affords me some understanding of what is happening in the set and what emotional states the majority of the set members are in.

Linked to intuition, feelings are a big part of my decision making processes. I moved from industry into education twenty years ago because I intuitively felt that it would be a more beneficial environment for me. It allowed me to grow in the way that I wanted, having left both the private sector and self employment because the emphasis was too narrow for me; profit at all cost.

Intuition plays a big part when interviewing prospective students for either of the University's Masters programmes by action learning. I am aware that some of the decision making process, in that particular context, is based on intuition, feeling that the prospective candidate will or will not both enjoy and benefit from action learning. As an ENFP I feel that I occupy a world that is full of possibility, the RI in me wants to explore opportunities and I often become very passionate and excited about the possibilities in my life, both personal and professional. I was excited when Richard first approached me to work with him. He described action learning in such a way as I felt both intrigued and inspired by its possibilities, both for myself and for the people I would meet and work with, the RI in me good at networking both inside and outside my organisation. As I said in Chapter One, action learning was not entirely new to me, I just hadn't recognised it as being action learning. I therefore understood the type of commitment I would be undertaking and met this with the typical enthusiasm of both a TW and ENFP. This enthusiasm has always given me the ability to inspire and motivate others, however this must be worked at in the final stages as RIs do have a tendency to lose interest after fascination has gone. This is a challenge that I accepted at the start of my relationship with action learning, and I constantly look for ways to re-invigorate my interest in it. Historically it has been through developing and managing programmes that have adopted an action learning philosophy. Latterly, whilst maintaining a strong bias to both teaching and course leadership, research in this area has entered the equation, giving what I feel is a more rounded and complimentary feel to my scholarly endeavours.

ENFPs generally have a love of life, seeing it as a gift, both true in my case, but I also view it as a journey in which experience is the primary goal. This was a major factor in my choice of research approach, seeing grounded theory as starting from the ground upwards, the primary aim was to give a voice to what I felt were a neglected group of people, offering them the opportunity to reflect upon their experiences and for me to learn from them. However, because of my absence of research ability and the desire to complete a doctoral qualification, I could view this as an experience in my personal journey and not feel constrained by needing to prove or disprove a particular hypothesis. I could also look to develop my writing skills and develop an authorial voice which, in smaller pieces of work such as the dissertation, I wrote for a

Masters in Change Management, I didn't have either the scope or the confidence to do so.

My secondary mode is internal, where I deal with things according to how I feel about them, or how they fit in with my personal value system, I have started this. I feel that my personal value system revolves around the principles of honesty and fairness. In terms of how this manifests in my action learning practice I would characterise it as being a 'humanistic approach'. I see respect for the individual set members as paramount with honesty and fairness as underpinning principles, which I am willing to both demonstrate and endorse by my own actions, e.g. listening skills. As a TW I feel that I have good listening skills and make a huge effort to listen without prejudice, always maintaining a respect for difference. I also listen to hear what is not being said, intuitively feeling that the presenter may have more to say or may be avoiding saying what they want to actually say. Each learning set starts with a couple of minutes devoted to each set member reflecting upon their time in between set meetings. In this time they briefly discuss both their positive and negative experiences, as a way of demonstrating their mental and emotional state, almost like an emotional barometer. This then indicates to the rest of the set how they are feeling, which is useful to know in terms of their impending performance in the set. It is accepted that I take part in this and on the first instance demonstrate this to the set. This I feel has a positive effect on the set and helps create a climate of both respect and trust as I feel that a psychological climate of trust in the set is both essential and desirable (see Chapter Four, Page 88) in which set members feel respected and can trust one another.

In terms of a facilitation approach, typical of ENFPs, I do not believe in controlling others, therefore I prefer to use what Heron (1999) describes as a co-operative mode of facilitation (see Chapter Seven, Page 154) to groups in general, but particularly action learning sets. Particularly when Revans' (1982) preferred learning set was not controlled by the facilitator. Here, as the set facilitator, I am co-operative and want to share power regarding the learning process with the set. I bring the skills of a TW which include tact and diplomacy, which are particularly useful when trying to maintain harmony in the set without suppressing the natural energy within the set. I encourage the set to become more self-directing in the various forms of learning and



do this by conferring with them. I prompt and help the set members to decide on the programme in terms of starting the day by collectively deciding on the agenda for that set meeting, in which any member is at liberty to place something on the agenda. With regards to the role of advice giver, I will share my own opinion but stress that is only one among the set and is based on knowledge of the process and not contextual knowledge, reminding set members that they are experts on their own context so their opinion is likely to be more informed than my own.

However, I do feel that my practice is constrained by the academic imperatives that I must adhere to in my role as leader of an action learning programme, and, additionally as a module leader within that programme, with assessment being the most problematic. It is problematic to be part of the set when ultimately I have to make assessments on each of the set member's written work.

### **Clarification of a reflexive approach**

This next section clarifies my understanding of reflexivity and describes why I think it is important for the reader to understand the role that my autobiography plays in this thesis. The primary rationale for this section is to ensure that both I and the reader have an understanding of who I am and my position in relation to the research carried out.

Thompson and McHugh (2002:16) said that:

“A reflexive approach allows anthropologists to reflect upon themselves as researchers in and out of the field so they may have a better understanding of how their experiences shape the way they view the research or situation.”

### Why it is important to the thesis?

The question I asked very early on was how could I include the story of my own growth and development as a novice researcher and why would that be important? To some extent an understanding of me and who I was would help the reader understand the perspective I was taking and both my understanding and practice of action learning. This chapter reflects my learning, thoughts and feelings as I experienced them throughout the life of the research project. As such a reflexive research approach has engendered a conscious effort to both understand and acknowledge preconceived ideas, prejudices and bias the researcher may have. Therefore the role of reflexivity is important in the context of this thesis as I have chosen to locate myself in the story of giving voice to others, it is important that the reader has an appreciation of whom and what I am and that I have a voice in the story too.

#### *Developing an understanding of myself*

In writing my autobiography, I acknowledge the inherent problems with this, one being my attempt to bracket a Business School process of acculturation that may potentially limit possibilities and thus engenders the emergence of a positivistic paradigm. Acknowledging this dominant paradigm of positivism in business schools and business generally, there is generally a difficult marriage with the philosophical stance of interpretism. As I have chosen to use an interpretist approach in the form of grounded theory it would be natural for me as someone who is interested in reflective practice and self development to see how I develop into what could be seen as a challenging paradigm of interpretism

#### *Developing openness to other ways of seeing*

In this research journey, I would be immediately challenged by the issue of becoming open to other ways of seeing or viewing things, which is a fundamental necessity for the development of a reflexive approach to carrying our research.

#### *Transformative moment*

As the thesis unfolded I was able to demonstrate how I was developing, both in terms of skills and knowledge as a researcher. This was evident each time I returned to the field and my confidence and interviewing abilities grew (see Chapter Ten for

elaboration on this). I would reflect on what went well and what did not and the respective learning from that, creating what Davis (1999:10) described as a 'transformative' moment that occurred in my journey. Day (2002:4) describes a similar perspective:

“Like many researchers, I originally described my research project as a journey. However, as my sociological practice developed, I broadened the metaphor to encompass not one but two constructed journeys. While my research interests clearly focused on the outcome of finding out more about peoples' use of technology as an element of organisational communication, I also wanted to critically explore the research process itself as a complementary journey of discovery. In charting this second journey, I have documented significant moments of the transformation process as I progressed beyond being a novice Researcher.”

Davis (1999:11), in discussing the transformative moment, locates it in the act of writing and the writer's subsequent insight into self. He quotes Lukinsky (1990) as saying:

“This notion works on the idea that our lives have meaning for us that may not be readily evident to us but that seeing accounts written, we succeed in speaking to ourselves, and as a consequence, are being transformed.”

Citing Brookfield (1994:204) David (1999:11) adds:

“There is an explicit claim that the act of writing itself will be transformative; and on the other, that through a self-reflexive orientation, the auto-biographer will be attempting to notice, and account for transformation, while acknowledging that the process can be experienced *'as a contradictory reality, at once troubling and enticing.'*”

In the context of the thesis, there is a continuous process of reflection and reflexivity that works well in giving voice to former participants, whilst giving a voice to myself through a process of reflexivity.

### **Chapter summary**

The chapter has discussed a personal and professional biography that starts with the absence of any real success in my early career, my entrance into teaching and subsequent introduction to action learning. The chapter also explored my action learning practice and used both my Myers Briggs Typology Indicator (1987) and Belbin (1981) preferred team roles to inform the biography and underpin how I practice action learning. The chapter discussed the role that my autobiography plays in the thesis, in terms of the reflexive approach that was used and why.

The next chapter considers what I see as being the important contextual elements that are central to this thesis. The chapter includes a discussion on learning and how that relates to the principles of action learning, what group processes are involved in action learning and the contexts in which action learning takes place.

## **Chapter Three – What is Action Learning?**

### **Introduction to action learning**

This chapter discusses what action learning is and provides differing definitions. The chapter then moves on to describe the origins of action learning, how it works, the language that set members use when engaging in action learning and differing approaches to action learning. A discussion then takes place that explores the differences between action learning sets and that of other groups, to ensure that the reader has a clear understanding that an action learning set is a very different form of group. The chapter then concludes with an evaluation of action learning.

Reg Revans is credited with being the founder of action learning, paradoxically, however, he never characterised what he understood by the term ‘action learning’, preferring to suggest it was about “teaching a little and learning a lot” (Revans, 1984). As Weinstein (1995:32) said, “it means different things to different people” suggesting that there is an absence of universal consensus, therefore leaving it open to differing interpretations.

Notable definitions include that of Pedler and Boutall (1991:7) who defined action learning as being:

“A method of management and organisational development. Over several months, people working in small groups tackle important organisational issues or problems and learn from their attempts to change things.”

They continued to say:

“Action learning works by bringing people together to act on the problems and issues facing them and to learn from that process.”

Rimanoczy (2007:247) described the process of action learning as:

“A form of learning through experience, by asking questions of each other, the task being the vehicle for learning.”

Brockbank and McGill (2004:185) offer an all embracing definition which I believe captures the absolute essence of action learning. This has been very influential in the way I both practice and understand action learning. They state:

“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. The voluntary participants in the group or ‘set’ learn with and from each other and take forward an important issue with support of the other members of the set. The collaborative process, which recognises set members’ social context, helps people to take an active stance towards life, helps overcome the tendency to be passive towards the pressures of life and work, and aims to benefit both the organisation and the individual”

### **Origins of action learning**

As said earlier, action learning can be traced back to the 1920’s and the work of Reg Revans. Revans was born in 1907, the son of a marine surveyor. He has been described as an ‘academic, administrator and management consultant’. He studied astrophysics at Cambridge University and worked at Cavendish Laboratories, Cambridge, alongside Nobel Prize winners, who shared puzzles and questions with him about their work.

At this stage, Revans began developing his thinking on the role of the non expert in problem solving and distinguishing between knowledge and wisdom. He began working in the field of education and from there he became the Director of Education

for the National Coal Board (1945-50). It was there he began his work in developing action learning.

Notable influences on Revans at that time included Trist and Bamforth (1951) who were working in the area of socio-technical systems, notably the Longwall Coalmining study for the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations. Trist was very influenced by the work of Kurt Lewin (1946), writing in the USA, who is noted for the development of 'T' groups (Sensitivity or Laboratory Training Groups) in which group members use feedback, problem solving, and role play to gain insights into themselves, others and groups. The goal of this approach was to change the standards, attitudes and behaviour of individuals. Marrow (1964:25) wrote that 'T' groups are "a special environment in which they (participants) learn new things about themselves... it is a kind of emotional re-education." As such, there are similarities between the work of Lewins' 'T' groups and Revans' action learning sets in that both held a common view of self understanding, re-education and change. However there is little crossover between the work carried out in the USA and the UK so the focus of this thesis is the work carried out in the UK.

Revans strongly held the view that the key to improving performance lay with the practitioner, as opposed to the expert. He developed the concept of action learning as a process when the individual, known as a 'set member', analyses his or her own actions with the assistance of a small group of people, usually five or six, known as an 'action learning set'. Revans described this set as being "Comrades in Adversity" engaging in support and challenge through what he described as "Insightful questioning" (Revans, 1982). He saw questioning as the key process in action learning and when considering their problem or issue, each individual should think about the following questions:

- What am I trying to do?
- What is stopping me from doing it?
- What can I do about it?
- Who knows what I am trying to do?
- Who cares about what I am trying to do?
- Who else can do anything to help?

Revans (1982:720) states:

“A manager faced with trouble... ought from time to time to assemble a few comrades in adversity for all to learn with and from each other how better to define what everyone is trying to do, what are the separate obstructions to getting it done, and what particular courses of action may be helpful in doing it.”

This next section covers what is generally accepted as being the important aspects of an action learning set, in terms of what is actually involved in running an action learning set.

### **How action learning sets operate**

I have been facilitating action learning for some years now and I have often been asked the questions: What is it like in an action learning set? How do they operate? Is there a formula or a process that you follow? I suppose one possible response is: It depends on the day, the group, and the location, how they are feeling and how I'm feeling. It therefore becomes quite a challenge to be able to give a straight forward answer to these questions. It can be quite difficult to describe what actually happens, certainly in a way that captures the power of action learning and the impact it can have on some individuals. Accepting this, there are certain features of an action learning set that seem to be fairly consistent across both the practice and literature in this area.

#### How the set works

Smith and O'Neil (2003:64) provide what I think is useful as a framework for considering how an action learning set actually works. They include the following elements:

#### *Roles in the set*

There are three distinct roles that are played in an action learning set when it's in operation. These include the presenter, the enabler and the facilitator. Usually there is



one person presenting, one facilitating and the others are enabling (sometimes called supporting). The role of the facilitator is to help the group learn through focussing on the action learning process. Berry (1993:23) gives a useful definition of the term facilitation, he said:

“The essence of facilitation is a willingness to take responsibility for the whole, seeking to enable each individual to contribute as appropriate. Subject-matter expertise on the part of the facilitator is less useful than an ability to identify where the expertise lies, and to create space for it to come into the group's awareness. At their most basic level, the prime skills of facilitation are listening, questioning, clarifying and summarising, in a style which fosters the involvement and commitment of all.”

The facilitator is not a teacher or an advisor on the problem or issue, but encourages self-learning by individuals and the group. The enabler's role is to help the presenter with his or her problem by encouraging the presenter to talk about their issue and challenging the presenter in order that both understand the issue. Lee (2006:93) in an article describing her experiences of having been an action learning set member recalls the importance of challenge in action learning sets she attended, she said:

“Challenging as a concept can have aggressive or competitive connotations. Within the set however it was a healthy and necessary activity that prevented the action learning set from becoming an insular discussion group or quasi therapy. If there was consensus in the set there would have been nothing to learn and develop from each other. We had to learn how to think critically and evaluate without being critical of the person.”

#### *Participants bring a problem to the set*

Each student would have a problem or 'issue', as both Richard and I preferred to call it. The word 'problem' can have a somewhat pejorative sense to it, in that it is

something that is viewed as being a negative. So I prefer the term ‘issue’, which suggests something that is organic, that grows and develops. If the issue is a puzzle that has a limited number of ‘correct solutions’, similar to that of a jigsaw, then action learning is not the most appropriate forum for this. The kind of issue which lends itself to an action learning set is problem based, and has no one ‘right answer’ and there are many ways in which it could be considered. Issues may be complex, multi-faceted and messy. In the past I have found that because of the complexity involved when the set member starts the process of action learning the issue isn’t clear and may evolve into something entirely different from what was originally considered. So part of the issue is not being quite clear what the issue is, however, it should be;

- Both work related, and something which affects the individual personally;
- Something for which the individual has some level of responsibility;
- Something that they are able to influence; and
- Something that is realistic to get movement on within the time scale of the set programme.

*Participants meet in small groups called sets*

Membership of the set is voluntary. The set meets on a regular basis, weekly or monthly. The set consists of individuals, who Revans (1982) described as being “fellows in adversity”, who have the objective of learning about their issue through the challenge and support from the other set members. Pedler (1996) suggests that the focus on learning occurs at three different levels:

1. Learning and reviewing their particular problem.
2. Learning about themselves as learners.
3. Learning about the process of learning itself linked closely to Kolb’s (1984) learning cycle.

*Participants meet regularly usually over a fixed period of time*

Learning sets usually meet on a regular basis depending on the arrangements of each set. The sets that I facilitate at the University meet once per month for a full day. In

my opinion, this allows sufficient time to action any points that have been agreed, whilst allowing a time for reflection, and any movement on the live issue.

*Problems are relevant to each person*

Each person is given a certain amount of airtime that is totally devoted to them. In my experience this has been around 30 – 45 minutes. In that time the whole learning set devotes its energies to that particular person and his or her live issue. Weinstein (1999:110) argues:

“The value of action learning is that the airspace gives you the opportunity to focus on:

- Your story, and not just a history of a series of events;
- Your experiences, and not just facts and figures;
- Your anecdotes, not just a progression of events;
- What you felt like and not just what was happening;
- Your metaphors (to help you understand) and not just the facts.”

I have always felt that because the live issue is entirely relevant to that individual, then a degree of time is needed for them to describe the issue, what action they may or may not have taken, how they understand the issue and perhaps, how they feel about it, because ultimately, it is their issue. Weinstein (1999:110) offers examples of feedback she had had from set members on how they perceived the value of airtime. One set member is quoted as saying:

“If you only consider ‘internally’, in your own thoughts, your mind can lead you down all sorts of pathways. But somehow as you speak, your voice can give you away. And others are listening, and can spot the flaws, where the gaps are, and will pursue you down the alleys you are following. Eventually, the trick is to learn to this your self, having others listen will add an extra dimension.”

### *A supportive environment*

The philosophy that underpins action learning is primarily a humanistic one, where such values as support, trust and safety are paramount. As such this approach focuses on the human element of learning, concerned with the subjective nature of each individual and their unique view of the world. McLeod (1998:447) describes the central aim of a humanist approach is the creation of a ‘cultural island’ where set members feel able to experiment with different behaviours, share experiences and receive feedback from others in a setting that is outside everyday life and thereby allows greater freedom. Smith (2001:35) said that action learning:

“Permits risk taking within a psychologically safe environment, much like the safe practice area we choose when learning to ride a bike.”

Bourners et al (1996:13) described the action learning set as “a safe place to explore self and project” with respondents in Bourners’ research saying that:

“... the set provided a safe place to check things out”

“... provided an opportunity to learn in a safe environment and a safe place to examine ones own weaknesses”

“... a feeling of ease and comfort when I knew all the people of the action learning set could be trusted”

“... offered a safe place to check out ideas, theories, solutions etc., because of the confidentiality and trust.”

### The language of action learning

Action learning encourages set members to use a particular type of language, particularly in relation to the use of questions that supporters pose to the presenter. These are questions that encourage the presenter to enter into dialogue and reflection

with the set, rather than argument and recommendation from other set members. Enablers must remember not to offer advice in response to the presenters' issue, nor to judge what is being said. This is sometimes a difficult concept to remember, particularly when a set is just getting started. Over the years I have seen a tendency of set members who are managers to move into a role of problem solver, forgetting that that is not the point of the learning set. The aim of the questioning is to help clarify and deepen the presenters' understanding of the issue, thus enabling the presenter to challenge their own previously held assumptions and perspectives on their live issue. McGill and Brockbank (2004:228) cite typical questions for the enablers which include:

- What did you know....?
- How do you feel...?
- What were you aware of ...?
- What would make a difference...?
- What helped you....?
- What got in your way....?

Lee (2006:93) similarly describes the type of questions and the language that was used in an learning set she was a member of:

“We would ask, ‘Why did you do that?’, ‘How do you know that?’, ‘Why did you think that?’ One example of challenging relates to our debate about evidence and truth, research credibility and rigour in relation to research and professional practice. This was a dominant theme in our set and reflected contemporary health service interest in evidence based practice.”

The general understanding of the facilitator's role is to help the set learn as a whole, he or she is not an expert in the subject matter but is usually familiar with the group processes so helps the set to help itself.

### How are action learning sets different from other groups?

In both organisations and society as a whole we are members of a variety of differing groups. At work, they include formal meetings; usually chaired by an individual and governed by an agenda. A seminar with a specific message to get across by means of pre-prepared material, pre-prepared questions and issues to explore by the group. Outside work, for example in sport, they can include a team, led by a captain with specific roles in the team and a set objective, in the case of sports; to win. Another example could be a support group will have an intention to support as opposed to challenge.

Fox (1986); Jessup and Valacich (1993) and Nunamaker et al (1991) describe a number of challenges that typical groups address. These issues include: group size citing examples of the difficulties of getting large groups together and coordinating their input, in contrast the action learning set is usually restricted to a maximum of eight members. Air time at traditional meetings can be fragmented, with the more vocal members claiming the most airtime, therefore not distributed equally amongst all members of the group.

#### *How is action learning different from a 'chat' with friends?*

Action learning sets formalise the process of reflection. They become deliberate acts of reflection that are supported by allocated time, time in which the presenter has the full attention of the set members, whose role it is to both support and challenge where appropriate. They do that by listening without judging and therefore will not advise, instruct or tell the presenter what to do.

### **Evaluating action learning**

This next section gives an insight into the issue of evaluating action learning programmes. In seeking to evaluate the success of an action learning programme, the focus here is the evaluation of the effectiveness of the actual programmes themselves. This particular issue has attracted a range of differing views and approaches. It is quite acceptable that most organisations or sponsors would want to evaluate the extent to which the objectives of a planned programme of learning have been successful.

In terms of immediate benefit to the organisation, Revans (1984) cited in O'Hara et al (1996:16) said that the colliery managers of his original project worked collaboratively, meeting regularly to discuss their individual progress. At the end of three years, it was found that annual output per person in the mines of these managers had increased by over 30 per cent compared with a national average too small to detect. With this, action learning had proved itself to be both an invaluable and effective process. However, the extent to which the increased output is directly attributable to action learning is an interesting question in its own right.

Success or effectiveness has been historically evaluated from differing perspectives. These have included the achievement of intended/unintended outcomes (Weiss, 1996). In some respects the University sees an intended outcome of the programmes that I run. Firstly, students complete the programme and secondly, the successful passing of the award by as many students as is possible. There is usually a benchmark figure for programme leaders to measure the relative success of the programme against. In contrast to Owen & Rogers (1999) who see achievement of intended/unintended consequences as a measure of success. In the case of my students, the intended consequences will vary from individual to individual and may include a change in a person's behaviour (Buchanan and Huczynski, 1997) or how the individual views the world (Ramsden, 1988) or ultimately benefits both individuals and communities (Owen & Rogers, 1999; Guba and Lincoln, 1989 and Kushner, 2000). In evaluating the success of action learning programmes, McGill & Brockbank (2006:238) argue that all the perspectives of effectiveness from differing stakeholders, which would include participants views on the effectiveness of their action learning set is not explored. They argue:

“Evaluation methods have inherited a tendency to positivism in the search for objective truth, which means they fail to appreciate the range of perspectives as well as the range of implicit and explicit stakeholder values that a broader approach is likely to capture.”

Patton (1990) goes beyond evaluation methods such as tests, grades and examination and suggests interviews and observations as some of the possible ways of evaluating learning.

Garvin (1993) proposes that learning in the organisation can be measured using learning and experiences curves and their effect on hard measures such as costs, productivity and pricing forecasts. Garvin also discussed the time delay in the realisation of learning, suggesting the following three stages are applicable:

- |                       |   |
|-----------------------|---|
| 1 <sup>st</sup> Stage | Cognitive: new ideas, expanded knowledge and new ways of thinking |
| 2 <sup>nd</sup> Stage | Behavioural: new beliefs and new actions                          |
| 3 <sup>rd</sup> Stage | Longer term outcomes and results.                                 |

Suchman (1967) provides some good examples of what to ask in a programme evaluation. These are points of concern for all stakeholders in the evaluation process and are likely to include the programme designers, facilitators as well as the participants themselves. Suchman's ideas included:

1. Evaluation of effort assesses input regardless of output and asks the questions: "What did you do?" and "How well did you do it?"
2. Evaluation of performance focuses on the results of the programme and asks the question: "Did any change occur?" and "Were the objectives achieved?"
3. Evaluation of the adequacy of the programme. Participants may experience considerable changes as individuals, but this may have little change in a wider organisational context.
4. Evaluation of efficiency is concerned with alternative ways of achieving the same outcomes, i.e. are there better ways of delivering this programme that are more efficient.
5. Evaluation of the process focuses on the operation in terms of "What works and how?" and "What doesn't work and why?"



In summary, there are differing perspectives on how the process of action learning is evaluated. However the actual effectiveness of the learning sets themselves remains under researched.

### **Chapter summary**

In this chapter I discussed the concept of action learning and have provided differing definitions as a starting point. I included what I consider to be definitions that give readers a good understanding of action learning, noting that I am particularly drawn to the definition written by Brockbank and McGill (2004).

I then briefly traced the origins of action learning; placing Revans as the founder in an historical context. I then considered what I see as the ‘nuts and bolts’ of action learning; how it works and the language that set members use when working together in the learning set so the reader understands what it feels like to be in the set .

I then engaged the reader in a discussion that explores the differences of action learning to that of other groups, endeavouring to ensure that there is a clear understanding of what an action learning set is, how it is very different from a group. This is an important point to understand and to assist that, the next chapter discusses the concept of group processes as a way into understanding the general nature of groups, with the unique nature of an action learning set still being bourn in mind.

The issue of the effectiveness of action learning was considered, accepting and acknowledging that action learning can be both a costly and time consuming process in the short term. Therefore, both organisations and individuals will naturally seek a return on their investment.

The following chapter considers differing contextual variables that underpin action learning, which includes; the learning in action learning, group processes and the context in which action learning takes place in.

## **Chapter Four - Deconstructing the Action Learning Context**

### **Introduction**

This chapter gives a general overview of what I see as the important contextual elements that are central to the thesis. The chapter begins with a discussion that describes the nature and practicalities of action learning and then moves on to discuss three central elements of action learning, which are:

- Part One – The Learning in Action Learning
- Part Two - Group processes in Action Learning
- Part Three - The Action Learning Context

### **The Learning in Action Learning**

I am aware that there is a wealth of literature in this field and it is tempting to simply critique learning theory in a general sense, primarily as a way of navigating through the literature. I was at pains to steer away from that and include only literature that I found to be useful in explaining my understanding of action learning as a learning process and what I thought had been influential in the learning process. Unpacking the differing definitions of action learning, as shown on Page 38, offers a way into the literature that I see as underpinning action learning whilst simultaneously retaining it as the focus. The main issues included from the definitions, as I see them are:

- The learning process.
- Learning as opposed to teaching.
- Individual development; learning within the individual.
- Social learning; connected and separate knowing.
- Learning from experience; reflection in and on action

## **The learning process**

Prior to discussing differing approaches to learning, it is useful to consider the term 'learning' in its own right. A dictionary definition of learning cited in Brockbank and McGill (1998:19) defines learning as:

“To get knowledge of (a subject) or a skill in (an art etc.) by study, experience or teaching.”

Knowledge is defined in a variety of differing ways including the work of Davenport and Prusak (1998:5) who write:

“Knowledge is a flux mix of framed experiences, values, contextual information, and expert insight that provides a framework for evaluating and incorporating new experiences and information. It originates and is applied in the minds of knowers. In organisations, it often becomes embedded not only in documents or repositories but also in organisational routines, processes, practices, and norms.”

Other definitions put learning into a broader context, for example Ramsden (1988:271) defines learning as about individual change, stating that:

“Learning should be seen as a qualitative change in a person's way of seeing, experiencing, understanding, conceptualising something in the real world.”

This was later refined by Barnett (1992:4) who stated that:

“Learning is a human process which has an effect on those undertaking it”.

Learning is defined by Buchanan and Huczynski (1997:107) as meaning:

“The process of acquiring knowledge through experience which leads to enduring change in behaviour”

Brockbank and McGill (2004:19) discuss learning at three levels based upon the work of Bloom (1964). These include:

“Cognitive learning that results in knowledge; conative learning that results in action and changes in the world; affective learning alters appreciation of the self in relation to self and others”.

### **Learning theories**

It is important to say that in my opinion this area of study is complicated and I think that one possible reason could be due to the differing approaches taken towards the subject. In order to deal with that complication I feel that it is useful to consider learning in the context of three main groups. There are the *behaviourist* theories, mostly of the stimulus-response variety of differing degrees of complexity. There are the *cognitive* theories, based on a different view of the nature of knowledge. Additionally there are those theories that have been called *humanist*; these rely on various analyses of personality and of environment.

The behaviourist theories, which are often seen as conformist, range from a simple reinforcement of the desired responses through to an exploration of the many different possible responses. The cognitive theories can talk at one extreme of the discipline of the subject and at the other end of the continuum of open discovery learning. The humanist theories, which are often seen as liberationist, can describe the importance of role imitation in attitudinal development, on the one hand, and the freedom of the learning group on the other. In my opinion the humanist theories are the ones that provide the platform for the learning in action learning.

## **Transformational learning**

Transformational learning is learning that an individual engages in as a way of making sense of their life situations. Cranton (1994:22) describes transformational learning as evolving "into a comprehensive and complex description of how learners construe, validate, and reformulate the meaning of their experience."

One of the reasons it is important in action learning is because, as adults, we try to make sense of our worlds, how we look at ourselves, our work situations, family and friends and the world in general. When the individual critically examines their views, or meaning schemes (specific beliefs, attitudes and emotional reactions) that are based upon both cultural and contextual experiences, they must engage in critical reflection and expose themselves to alternatives, and, as a consequence, review how they see things. The individual, then, has transformed some element of how they make sense of the world or reframed it in an action learning sense.

Mezirow (1995:50) is credited with the development of this school of thought and devised a useful framework that considers each stage of transformation that clearly resonates with the philosophy of action learning. He described the first stage as 'experiencing a disorientating dilemma' and is usually triggered by a problem or challenge. The next stage he described as one of 'self-examination' in which the individual identifies their problem or challenge, possibly work-based or indeed may be life based. This is typically a problem that has never been experienced before. The individual will usually enter a phase in which they reflect critically on this problem (McGill and Brockbank, 2006; Mezirow, 1990). Critical reflection often transforms perspectives drawn from an individual's life experience, which may be flawed because they have been "filtered through unexamined views, which may distort a person's understanding of the situation" (McGill and Brockbank, 2006:47). As said above, that can have a disorientating effect on the individual. The next stage is a 'critical assessment of assumptions'. Anderson and Thorpe (2004) quoted in Pedler (2005:5) distinguish critical reflection from other forms of reflection in that it "is concerned with questioning assumptions". Mezirow (1991:167) wrote that:

“Perspective transformation is the process of becoming critically aware of how and why assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand and feel about our world; changing these structures of habitual expectation to make possible a more inclusive, discriminating, and integrating perspective; and finally, making choices or otherwise acting upon these understandings.”

The focus is social rather than individual and involves working with others in either a formal or informal setting which includes the action learning set. At this stage the individual will receive support and empathy thus encouraging the individual to recognise that others have gone through a similar process. In the case of action learning, the individual is encouraged to ‘explore options’ as part of a learning set process and eventually ‘formulate a plan of action’ and then finally to ‘reintegrate’.

### **Experiential learning**

Experiential learning is learning through reflection on doing, which is often contrasted with rote or didactic learning as briefly described above. Experiential learning focuses on the individual actually carrying out a task and experiencing what is actually involved in doing the task; things that may not be apparent when the task is simply theorised about, as opposed to simply reading about how the task should be completed. The result is firsthand knowledge, as opposed to simply of reading or hearing about others' experiences. However, though the gaining of knowledge is an inherent process that occurs naturally, for a genuine learning experience to occur, there must exist certain elements. Kolb (1984) said that knowledge is continuously gained through both personal and environmental experiences, stating that in order to obtain knowledge from an experience, certain conditions must be met:

1. the learner must be willing to be actively involved in the experience;
2. the learner must be able to reflect on the experience;
3. the learner must possess and use analytical skills to conceptualise the experience; and

4. the learner must possess decision making and problem solving skills in order to use the new ideas gained from the experience.

Experiential learning engages the learner at a more personal level by addressing the needs and wants of the individual and requires qualities such as self-initiative and self-evaluation. For experiential learning to be truly effective, it should employ the whole learning process, from goal setting, to experimenting and observing, to reviewing, and finally action planning. The process facilitates the development of new skills, attitudes or in some instances, entirely new ways of thinking. At this stage it is useful to consider Kolb's (1984) learning cycle below:

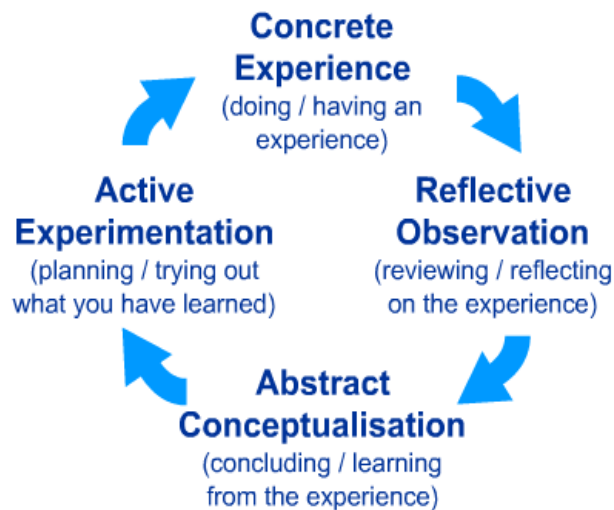


Figure 2 Kolb (1984) Experiential learning as a resource of learning and development

As can be seen from the diagram depicting Kolb's (1984) learning theory, it shows four distinct learning styles sometimes known as 'learning preferences', which are based on a four stage learning cycle. Kolb (1984) includes learning, in this cycle, as a central principle in his experiential learning theory, typically expressed in four stages in which 'immediate or concrete experiences' provide a basis for 'observations and reflections'. These 'observations and reflections' are assimilated and distilled into 'abstract concepts', producing new implications for action which can be actively tested in turn creating new experiences. Kolb (1984) said that ideally this process represents a learning cycle or spiral where the learner moves through all stages, i.e. a cycle of experiencing, reflecting, thinking and acting. These reflections are then assimilated (absorbed and translated) into abstract concepts with implications for

action, which the individual can actively experiment with. Kolb's model therefore works in the following way:

1. Concrete Experience (CE)
2. Reflective Observation (RO)
3. Abstract Conceptualisation (AC)
4. Active Experimentation (AE)

### Learning Styles

Honey and Mumford (1982) built a typology around the above sequence, identifying individual learning preferences for each stage. These learning preferences were referred to as: Activist, Reflector, Theorist and Pragmatist respectively and are demonstrated in Figure 3, overleaf, and described in greater detail below:

#### Activitists (Do)

- Immerse themselves fully in new experiences.
- Enjoy the here and now.
- Are open minded, enthusiastic, flexible.
- Act first, consider consequences later.
- Seek to centre activity around themselves.

#### Reflectors (Review)

- Stand back and observe.
- Cautious, take a back seat.
- Collect and analyse data about experience and events, slow to reach conclusions.
- Use information from past, present and immediate observations to maintain a big picture perspective.

#### Theorists (Conclude)

- Think through problems in a logical manner, value rationality and objectivity.
- Assimilate disparate facts into coherent theories.
- Disciplined, aiming to fit things into rational order.
- Keen on basic assumptions, principles, theories, models and systems thinking.



## Pragmatists (Plan)

- Keen to put ideas, theories and techniques into practice.
- Search new ideas and experiment.
- Act quickly and confidently on ideas, gets straight to the point
- Are impatient with endless discussion.

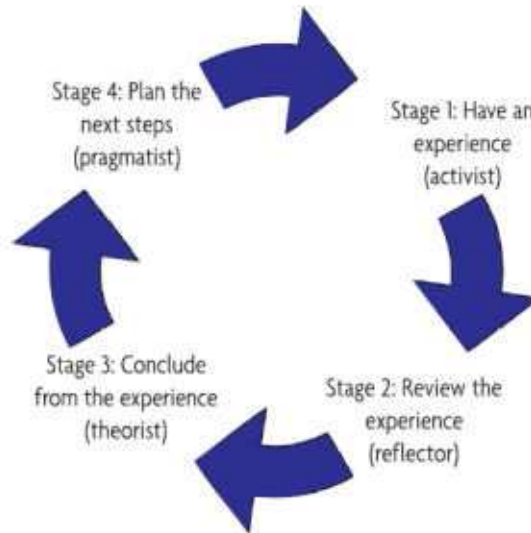


Figure 3 Honey and Mumford (2000) The Learning Cycle

In terms of the relationship to action learning, the most important element is the relationship between action and change. Learning takes place by reflecting on past experiences and the ability to reflect forward and construct actions for the future. Ingram et al (2002:127) support this by saying:

“The real world managers inhabit is messy, full of conflicting messages, politics, conflict and challenges with no ‘right’ answer. It is a world where the action learning approach, starting from the ‘question’ or challenge at work, fits well. Thereafter, the manager draws in those concepts and theories that may help with the action taken, and assesses this ‘programmed knowledge’ for what it adds rather than a thing of beauty in its own right. Intuitively,

we all know that our most powerful learning is from experience.”

Subsequently, in the context of an action learning set, each individual will leave the set meeting with an action plan for change as demonstrated by both Kolb (1984) and Honey and Mumford (1982). A set member goes through these stages with the assistance of members in the learning set. When presenting, he or she reflects upon past action, what went well and why and conversely, what did not go so well. From this information actions for the future are formed and then tested in the context stated, with a view to reflecting upon the actions taken. At this stage the individual is able to learn from those actions and the cycle continues until the presenter feels a satisfactory outcome has been achieved.

Both Kolb’s (1984) and Honey and Mumford’s (1982) principles align with the idea of both single and double loop learning. McGill and Brockbank (2004) wrote that single and double loop learning were originally based on the concept of feedback loops in control engineering, and then adapted for learning through improvement by Argyis and Schön (1974).

### *Single-loop learning*

Single-loop learning is primarily concerned with small changes that are made to specific practices or behaviours. This is based on previous experience, what McGill and Brockbank (2004:107) call “day-to-day maintenance learning” and is mirrored in Kolb’s (1984) learning cycle, as previously discussed. From an action learning perspective, the set presenter will work with the set on improving things without really examining or challenging individual’s underlying beliefs and assumptions, the objective being minor improvements and asks the question: Are we doing things right? The diagram below illustrates single loop learning.

## Single Loop Learning



Figure 4 Single loop learning (Cognitive Design Solutions)

Available at: [www.cognitivedesignsolutions.com/KM/Learning.htm](http://www.cognitivedesignsolutions.com/KM/Learning.htm) [Accessed 04/01/10]

### *Double-Loop Learning*

In contrast to single loop learning, double-loop learning is focused on why a solution works and considers an individual's actions based upon their assumptions. Whilst seeking clarification of the individual's understanding of the situation double-loop learning is concerned with larger change that calls for a reframing of the situation and asks: Are we doing the right things? Looking differently at things that we are perhaps a little over familiar with or haven't considered for a while, what McGill and Brockbank (2004:122) describe as the 'taken-for-granted (TFGs). This can be described as single learning, and with the opportunity to work through with action learning and then move on to the presenter questioning his or her assumptions, is a way of moving on from single loop learning to double loop learning. These ideas cause an individual to start to reframe their ideas and engage in 'transformative learning' ultimately creating new ways of understanding. The diagram below illustrates how single loop learning moves into double loop learning.

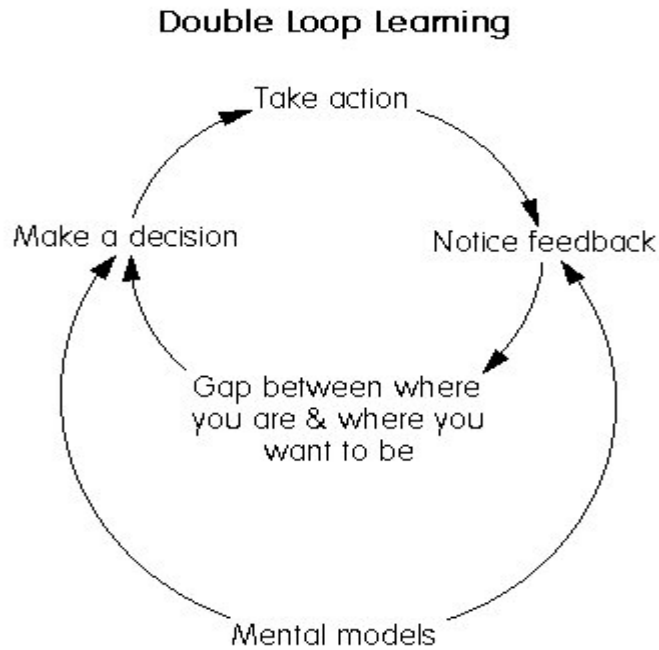


Figure 5 Double Loop Learning (Cognitive Design Solutions)

Available at: [www.cognitivedesignsolutions.com/KM/Learning.htm](http://www.cognitivedesignsolutions.com/KM/Learning.htm) [Accessed 04/01/10]

Argyris et al (1985) concept of Action Science begins with the study of how individuals create decisions and how actions are designed to achieve intended consequences and governed by a set of situational variables. How those governing variables are treated in designing actions are the key differences between single loop learning and double loop learning. When actions are designed to achieve the intended consequences and to suppress conflict about the governing variables, a single loop learning cycle usually ensues. However, when actions are taken, not only to achieve the intended consequences, but also to openly inquire about conflict and to possibly transform the governing variables, both single loop and double loop learning cycles usually ensue.

#### *Triple loop learning*

This level involves shifting or transforming the context or point of view entirely. The question being: How do we decide what is right? This level requires an individual or organisation to examine their own values and principles that guide actions and decisions. Triple loop learning looks at the whole context and examines the inter-relationship between problems and solutions and the pattern that has created the current context. Understanding the values and assumptions that lie below the patterns

of actions allows the individual or organisation to question whether these values and assumptions are locking them into a recurring cycle in which today's solutions become tomorrow's problems. It is through triple-loop learning that the individual or organisation can determine how they need to be different to create transformational change. Triple loop learning involves 'learning how to learn' by reflecting on how individuals learn 'in' and 'on' action.

### **Reflective Practice**

Reflective practice is a continuous process and essential to action learning. It involves the individual considering important events, sometimes referred to as 'critical or significant incidents' in their life experiences. As defined by Schön (1983), reflective practice involves thoughtfully considering one's own experiences in applying knowledge to practice while being coached by professionals in the discipline. It has been described as an unstructured approach directing understanding and learning about oneself and is applicable to all. It is commonly used in health and teaching professions.

Dilworth (1996:46) states:

“Action learning contains a reflective component. It is insufficient simply to act. The learning is in the reflection on action and in the renewal that comes from then adapting future actions based on that learning.”

Accepting that, it is a fairly wide belief that reflective practice is an unstructured process however, there are some key elements in the process, which include:

- Knowing that Propositional learning or 'text book' learning as it is very often referred to. Acquired through formal learning situations such as lectures at university or college.

- Knowing-in-action

The experience of professional practice. Schön (1983) referred to this as “knowing-in-action” and is the knowledge that is learned from doing whatever it is that has been taught to the individual e.g. accountancy, medicine, law etc. For example the individual who has been taught this in a pedagogic manner. When they describe this knowledge it then becomes “knowledge-on-action” or something that is known about. In summary, “knowing-in-action” is actually performing the action, and talking about the performance is “knowledge-on-action”. By describing the individual’s “knowing-in-action” brings them to understand their “knowledge-in-action” which can be used in the action learning set to “reflect-in-action”.

- Reflection-in-action

Schön (1983:68) described reflection in action as a situation in which:

“The practitioner allows himself to experience surprise, puzzlement, or confusion in a situation which he finds uncertain or unique. He reflects on the phenomenon before him, and on the prior understandings which have been implicit in his behaviour. He carries out an experiment which serves to generate both a new understanding of the phenomenon and a change in the situation.”

As this occurs when the individual is in the middle of an action the individual will usually start to engage in intrapersonal communication and ask themselves a series of questions as a way of ‘thinking on their feet’ about the action in which they are currently engaged. McGill and Brockbank (2004:96) cite the following examples of the types of questions to include:

“Is what I am doing at the moment appropriate?

Do I need to alter, amend change what I am doing at the moment?

Am I on the right track?

If I'm not on the right track, is there a better way?"

- Reflection-on-action

This is when the individual reflects after the action has been performed, defined by Fitzgerald (1994:67) who said that "reflection-on-action" is:

"The retrospective contemplation of the practice undertaken in order to uncover the knowledge used in practical situations, by analysing and interpreting the information recalled."

### **Learning in Action learning**

Action learning combines all the aspects of reflection as identified above and is, therefore, a continuous process of learning and reflection. This is supported by set members who work with the individual presenting with the intention of getting action on issues of concern to those individuals, often described as 'movement' on the live issue.

Revans (1983) formulated the following explanation of the learning process, using the equation:

$$L = P + Q$$

L meaning learning through the engagement in some form of action, P referring to programmed knowledge, which essentially is traditional teaching, lecturing and or some form of formal instruction and Q, is the ability to ask questions in order to fully explore issues, which Revans referred to as "questioning insight". The forum for these questioning insights to take place was called an action learning set i.e. a group of people working with each other using questioning insight. Revans (1981), cited in Pedler et al (2003:3), never really specified what actually happened in action learning sets, suggesting that it was more about "teaching little and learning a lot".

Action learning is therefore a process which brings individuals together to seek solutions to problems and, in doing so, has the effect of being either task focused,

which is of immediate benefit to the organisation, or developmental, which has the immediate benefit to the individual involved. Action learning is an approach to teaching and learning that I have used in the context of my university for the last eight years. I have noticed that over the years the focus of the learning sets has been one of Continuing Professional Development for the individual. This has been reflected in the number of dissertations that have had the individual's developmental needs at the forefront. The task or issue has tended to be the vehicle for the individual to act as a way of developing themselves. These differing ways include both experiential learning and transformational learning.

This section has acted as a road map through a complex area of study and, where both possible and appropriate, has made specific reference to the implications for the process of action learning and the action learning set. The next section considers the group processes that inevitably exist within the set itself.

### **Group Processes in Action Learning**

“The group is a jealous master. It encourages participation, indeed demands it, but it demands one kind of participation, its own kind and the better integrated with it a member becomes the less free he is to express himself in other ways” (Whyte, 1955:331).

This particular part of the chapter considers the internal dynamics of groups in a meta sense. It focuses on four main elements of groups, these include:

- Group formation
- Group structures and processes
- Group control



## Group formation

The term 'group' is widely used and has numerous differing definitions. Cartwright and Zander (1968) cited in Rollinson et al (1998:293) identify eight differing definitions of the term. It therefore becomes important to define what I understand a group to be and what the important elements of the term are. There isn't a universally accepted definition of the term 'group'. Schein (1980) cited in Rollinson et al (1998:293) defines a group as:

“Any number of people who interact with each other; are psychologically aware of each other; perceive themselves to be a group; and purposefully interact towards the achievement of particular goals or aims”

One implication of this definition is that it excludes people who just happen to be in the same place at the same time, as they are not psychologically aware of one another, for example, people waiting at a bus stop. Buchanan and Huczynski (1997:187) refer to these as being 'aggregates' of individuals i.e. “a collection of unrelated people who happen to be in close physical proximity for a short period of time”. However, they also wrote that it is possible to turn aggregate groups of people into groups, for example, if a disaster occurred, such as the hijacking of an airplane, or a burning sky scraper, in those contexts, that group of people are likely to become a group and a common cause would emerge i.e. to stay out of danger. Secondly, the definition states any number of people can be a group, but there has to be more than two people. However, as the group becomes larger, it is unlikely to remain as a group, as 'subgroups' often emerge. In this instance people cease to be psychologically aware of members in the larger groups, but psychologically aware within membership of their own smaller subgroup.

### *Formal and informal groups.*

The managerial literature on groups tends to differentiate groups from the perspective of being either formal or informal. Formal groups are usually located in an organisational context, performing functions that are decided upon by the organisation. Mullins (2002: 469) writes that “groups are created to achieve specific organisational objectives” and are concerned with the coordination of work activities,

referring to the instances where people are brought together formally for a specific purpose or task in the context of an organisation. Buchanan and Huczynski (1997:190) define a formal group as

“Those groups in an organisation which have been consciously created to accomplish the organisation’s collective purpose. These formal groups perform formal functions, such as getting work done, generating ideas, liaising, and so on. The formal group functions are the tasks which are assigned to it, and for which it is officially held responsible.”

The nature of this purpose or task dictates both the relationships they have in the organisation and the position they occupy within the organisation’s framework. These groups tend to have a degree of permanency about them although the occupancy of differing individuals may change from time to time. Formal groups within the organisation can be differentiated in a variety of ways that include the individual’s position within the organisation’s hierarchy, the nature of the job role, qualifications that are required to perform the task, each aspect serving to differentiate that collection of individuals within the organisation as a whole from the work organisation, or main group as a whole. Usually, within the main group as a whole, smaller informal groups will emerge. Buchanan and Huczynski (1997: 191) define an informal group as:

“A collection of individuals who become a group when members develop interdependencies, influence one another’s behaviour and contribute to mutual need satisfaction.”

These are based upon personal relationships and friendships that people have with members that are outside the framework of the formal groups that exist within the organisation. These groups serve individuals’ social and psychological needs that are not involved within the formal tasks required by the organisation. Membership of these groups very often spans across the formal structure within the organisation. However, it is possible that a formal group may also be an informal group, for

example, a formal group of employees may be colleagues in work time, outside, in social time; the same group socialise together and become an informal group.

Elton Mayo clearly understood the importance of informal groups within an organisational context and he made a conscious effort to try to organise them as such. Mayo, cited in Buchanan and Huczynski (1997:195) liked to use the term “natural group”, referring to a group of between 3-6 members who, through working in the organisation, developed high levels of friendship and cohesiveness in these small or natural groups, stating that this process usually took between 6 -12 months to occur. Mayo believed that these groups would make working in the organisation more effective, whilst simultaneously meeting the psychological needs of the natural group members. A leader in a formal group is usually appointed via a formal process of some description, varying from context to context, in contrast to the informal group, where the leader is often agreed by consultation and consent of the group members themselves. This leader may also change, depending on the situation the group finds itself in, whereas, the leader in the formal group once again has a greater degree of permanency.

### *Group development*

It is interesting to see how the learning sets develop; to watch them grow and change is a constant source of both intrigue and interest. Each year as the academic machine winds itself back into action, teachers, lecturers and action learning facilitators meet differing groups, with differing individuals, with different needs, hopes and aspirations and yet the year and the development of the group seems to more or less follow the same pattern. Individuals are generally shy and reserved; gradually they grow in confidence, eventually in the main, they blossom into confident, questioning individuals who, in some cases, make friends for life with fellow members of their set. Tuckman (1965) and Tuckman and Jensen (1977) offer an explanation in relation to groups generally with their four-stage model of group development, then latterly, a five stage model. The stages of this model include:

1. Forming

The group come together and get to initially know one other and form as a group. Individual behaviour is driven by a desire to be accepted by the others,

and avoid controversy or conflict. Serious issues and feelings are avoided, and people focus on being busy with routines, such as team organisation, who does what, when to meet etc. But individuals are also gathering information and impressions - about each other, and about the scope of the task and how to approach it. This is a comfortable stage to be in, but the avoidance of conflict and threat means that not much actually gets done.

## 2. Storming

Jockeying for the leadership position is likely to occur. Individuals in the group can only remain nice to each other for so long, as important issues start to be addressed. Some people's patience will break early, and minor confrontations will arise that are quickly dealt with or glossed over. These may relate to the work of the group itself, or to roles and responsibilities within the group. Some will observe that it's good to be getting into the real issues, whilst others will wish to remain in the comfort and security of stage one. Depending on the culture of the organisation and individuals, the conflict will be more or less suppressed; however, it is still likely to be there under the surface. To deal with the conflict, individuals may feel they are winning or losing battles, and will look for structural clarity and rules to prevent the conflict persisting.

## 3. Norming

Eventually agreement is reached on how the group operates. As Stage 2 evolves, the 'rules of engagement' for the group become established, and the scope of the group's tasks or responsibilities are clear and agreed. Having had their arguments, they now understand one another better, and can appreciate one another's skills and experience. Individuals listen, appreciate and support one another, and are prepared to change preconceived views: they feel they're part of a cohesive, effective group. However, individuals have had to work hard to attain this stage, and may resist any pressure to change, especially from the outside, for fear that the group will break up, or revert to a storm.

#### 4. Performing

The group practices its craft and becomes effective in meeting its objectives. Not all groups reach this stage, characterised by a state of interdependence and flexibility. Everyone knows one another well enough to be able to work together, and trusts one another enough to allow independent activity. Roles and responsibilities change according to need in an almost seamless way. Group identity, loyalty and morale are all high, and everyone is equally task-orientated and people-orientated. This high degree of comfort means that all the energy of the group can be directed towards the task(s) in hand

#### 5. Adjourning

This process was added at a later date reflecting a more contemporary view of the way groups develop and is concerned with the process of the group 'unforming' that is, letting go of the group structure and moving on. This is about completion and disengagement, both from the tasks and the group members. Individuals will be proud of having achieved much and glad to have been part of such an enjoyable group. They need to recognise what they've done, and consciously move on. Some authors describe stage five as "Deforming and Mourning", recognising the sense of loss felt by some of the group members.

### Group structure and processes

#### *Hierarchy and status within groups*

The Oxford College dictionary defines the term hierarchy to mean "any system of persons or things ranked one above another" or in lay persons terms, a 'pecking order' of the group. Status is the social ranking that exists in groups. The social ranking can be based on a variety of differing things, depending on differing contextual and personality variables, these include; seniority, titles, power and salary or personal attributes such as confidence and intelligence.

#### *Power*

Power is a likely outcome of the learning set's hierarchy and a set member's position in the set. There are various theoretical models that seek to deconstruct the idea of power, these include French and Ravens (1959) five bases of power model. The social psychologists developed five categories of power which reflected the different bases that individuals rely upon either in a formal or informal sense. One additional base (informational) was later added. The power bases are:

- Positional Power

Also called "legitimate power", it refers to power of an individual because of the position and duties they hold within an organisation. Legitimate Power is the formal authority given to them by the organisation. It is often accompanied by various attributes of power such as uniforms, offices etc. This is the most obvious form of power.

- Referent Power

Referent power means the power of an individual's personality, a form of charisma and interpersonal skills of the power holder. An individual may be admired because of specific personal traits, and this admiration creates the opportunity for interpersonal influence. Here the person under power desires to identify with these personal qualities, and gains satisfaction from being an accepted follower. A good example of this would be the late Princess Diana who, occupying no official position within the monarchy, was able to exert her influence in the pursuit of charitable causes.

- Expert Power

Expert Power is an individual's power that is derived from the knowledge, skills or expertise of the individual and the organisation's needs for those qualities. Unlike the others, this type of power is usually highly specific and limited to the particular area in which the expert is trained and qualified.

- Reward Power

Reward Power depends upon the ability of the power holder to gift valued rewards. It refers to the degree to which the individual can give others a

reward of some kind such as benefits, promotions pay increases or additional responsibility.

- Coercive Power

Coercive Power means the application of negative influences onto others. It might refer to the ability to demote, exclude or to withhold other rewards. It is the desire for valued rewards or the fear of having them withheld that ensures the obedience of those under power.

- Information Power

Information Power is derived from an individual's possession of important information at a critical time when such information is necessary to others.

### Group control

#### *Group influences on behaviour*

The group itself has a marked influence on an individual's behaviour. The most significant one is likely to be the impact of the code of behaviour upon the individual, causing them to modify or stifle their behaviour in order to fit in with the group. In the case of the formal group the rules of the organisation tend to dominate, whereas for the informal group, norms serve the same purpose. A norm is usually an "unwritten rule", this is not to suggest that norms don't exist in groups of people in a formal setting, both rules and norms are likely to be present, as discussed in Chapter Two. The norms in groups can be viewed as similar to that of a "code of practice" that constitutes proper group behaviour in accordance with how that particular group define proper behaviour. It also has the impact of being able to predict a person's behaviour, having the effect of engendering trusting relationships within the group.

Different groups will derive their own unique ways of ensuring conformity within the group. As written earlier, it is usual for the action learning set to agree ground rules early on to achieve conformity. Asch (1951), in researching conformity carried out an experiment where a group of six members were asked to describe the length of a vertical line. Five of the members were instructed to give a wrong answer, leaving the

sixth member in a position of either agreeing with or contradicting the other members of the group, over one third of the respondents agreed with the group's incorrect statement. In these experiments the parties involved were unknown to one another, therefore adding a great deal of weight to the idea of the conformity effect. Similar experiments in this field (Sherif, 1936; Milgram, 1965) demonstrate the power the group has over the individual. Group size becomes a factor, these experiments demonstrating that the greater the size of the group the harder it becomes to exert an individual opinion that contradicts that of the group; the more group members the harder it becomes.

Wilfred Bion makes a valuable contribution to the field of groups and group processes. He focused on group dynamics and was associated with the Tavistock group. His seminal work in 1961 entitled "Experiences in Groups" was an important guide for the group psychotherapy and encounter group movements beginning in the 1960s, and quickly became a seminal work for applications of group theory in a wide variety of fields. Bion argued that within every group, there are actually two groups present:

- a 'work' group;
- a 'basic assumptions' group.

#### *Work group*

A workgroup is concerned with the task of getting the group's assigned task completed. In the context of an action learning set, the primary task is ensuring that every set member leaves that particular meeting with an action plan of what they intend to do before the next action learning set meeting, the work task being the process the set will go through ensuring that each set member accomplishes the task.

#### *Basic assumptions group*

Based on the tacit underlying assumptions on which the group's behaviour is founded, Bion identified three basic assumptions:



- Dependency

The aim of the group is to attain security and have its members protected by one individual, the leader. In the context of the action learning set, the humanistic perspective taken in my practice would view the set facilitator's role as one of protecting all set members from both psychological harm and in some instances, political harm.

- Fight/Flight

Bion viewed this as behaviour that was directed towards the task. The group behaves as though it is meant to preserve itself at all costs. Contextually, there is a sense when set members have bonded that the set should extend its life after the task is completed, which may be characteristic of an effective set. To what extent this would occur in all sets is difficult to estimate.

Fight is characterised as aggression. The group may be aggressive and hostile as part of its self preservation. The focus of this aggression may be on the facilitator if he or she is not liked or respected as they are viewed as a threat to the preservation of the set. Contextually there have been instances when the facilitator has been either discharged or made redundant from the set. Revans was an advocate that sets should be self directed, viewing the facilitator as being rather a hindrance than help.

Flight is characterised by a move away or avoidance of the task. Avoidance techniques may include: chit chatting, telling stories or arriving late, all activities that are intended to delay commencing the task. Contextually this may occur naturally as the set move from one presenter to the next, the in-between chatter simply acting as an interval away from a sustained period of concentration. At an individual level there is the possibility that the set member moves through a period of uncertainty about the task and then engages with the process of reframing where it is likely that story telling will become a feature as the presenter attempts to familiarise the other members with the subtleties and nuances of their particular live issue.

- Pairing

The group has met for the purposes of reproduction, not in a biological sense. Two people, regardless of gender carry the task through to its completion, whilst the remainder of the group listen eagerly and attentively with a sense of relief and hopeful anticipation. In the context of the action learning set, this may not always be obvious to see as the set should work as a whole. However, one notable exception may be a situation where a dyad occurs, a situation where one set member is so attuned to the live issue of the presenter that a relationship forms between those two individuals through the life of the presenter's air time. This may spill over into the social time the set has together but will be amplified during the business of the set.

### *Group norms*

As individuals bring with them a differing range of experiences and expectations it is important that the learning set develop a set of ground rules that should be agreed by all. Jones and Gerrard (1967) cited in Buchanan and Huczynski (1997:245) state that:

“Social norms are the expected modes of behaviour and beliefs that are established either formally or informally by the group...Norms guide behaviour and facilitate interaction by specifying the kinds of reactions expected or acceptable in a particular situation.”

The above definition refers to the norms or rules that a group uses for appropriate and inappropriate values, beliefs, attitudes and behaviours. These may be explicit or implicit. If they are expressed in explicit terms they can be described as ‘ground rules’; the stated rules that, the group, or, in the context of this thesis, the action learning set will adhere to. Failure to follow the rules can result in severe punishments, including exclusion from the group. They have also been described as the customary rules of behaviour that coordinate our interactions with others. The social norms indicate the established and approved ways of doing things, of dress, of speech and of appearance. These vary and evolve not only through time but also from one age group to another and between social classes and social groups. What is

deemed to be acceptable dress, speech or behaviour in one social group may not be accepted in another.

Deference to the social norms maintains one's acceptance and popularity within a particular group; ignoring the social norms risks becoming unacceptable, unpopular or even an outcast from a group. Social norms tend to be tacitly established and maintained through body language and non-verbal communication between people in their normal social discourse. Individuals soon come to know when and where it is appropriate to say certain things, to use certain words, to discuss certain topics or wear certain clothes and when not to.

McGill and Brockbank (206:69) suggested the following such ground rules may be useful to consider in the context of an action learning set:

- Confidentiality
- Responsibility
- Being non-judgmental
- Absence of discriminating remarks
- Making of 'I' statements
- Commitment to the set
- Timekeeping
- One person speaks at a time
- Silence is okay
- Really listen to each other
- Constructive feedback
- Naive questions are legitimate
- Admitting need is legitimate
- Attention to process

McGill and Beatty (1995:37) add to this the rule of confidentiality and assert that:

“Confidentiality is a ground rule at the basis of an effectively working set. Only when there is complete confidence in this

can a member truly explore their feeling and possible future actions.”

Robinson (2001:69) reinforces the idea of confidentiality and offers the following comment from a student who was a member of an action learning set:

“There was certainly an atmosphere of confidentiality there so we felt we could discuss issues and people did. Quite personal things because the nature of the course was that to a certain extent you are talking about something very personal to people and I felt that people did do that. It was quite successful, the confidentiality and the support element that was achieved.”

I think that ground rules are useful in the context of the set. When I first meet with a new action learning set, after introducing ourselves, our first task is to establish a list of ground rules that the set want to use. This is carried out in a consensual way; each member is invited to offer a rule to the set. These rules have largely mirrored McGill’s and Brockbank’s (2006) suggested list, but from my experience the following have been suggested by set members:

- Respect for non disclosure

The individual may not want to disclose information, possibly because they feel that at an early stage of the group’s development they are not yet comfortable with the idea of disclosure. It may be for political reasons, political in the sense of the organisation. Bourner and Frost (1996:12) carried out research on people who had been members of an action learning set; one set member reported the following:

“...My feelings before the first set were mixed; part of me was excited about the new possible learning but part of me felt very scared. Did I really want my fellow managers knowing I had weak spots? Was this from “Big Brother” above needing to find out how we rated as managers? Did I really want or need the stress? We had been asked to bring a task to work on; my way out could be to produce a task that did not reveal any weak

spots. This would allow me to sail through without revealing anything about myself.”

- Attendance as a specific aspect of commitment to the set

Attendance, is a very specific way of demonstrating commitment to the set as opposed to simply commitment to the idea of the set. I have worked with a variety of managers in organisations on various programmes in the past. It has been frustrating for all when members have not attended learning sets, with absentees citing pressures of work, however, other set members who are likely to be equally as busy and may feel that there is an absence of commitment from the absentee, viewing once a month as reasonable and attendance as a must.

- Start the learning set by checking out members’ psychological states

This rule was suggested by a learning set that comprised of people from the National Health Service (NHS). When discussing this ground rule the person suggesting it said she felt it was important to understand the moods of the individuals before the meeting commenced as this may have an impact upon the group. If an individual was usually very talkative and contributed to the group, then it would be unusual if they were quiet at a set meeting. Similarly if an individual was usually supportive to other set members it would be unusual if they were quite the opposite. The impact of an individual’s mood may have an impact upon the group.

- Equal air time

In starting the action learning day an agenda is drawn up by the group. Set members put onto the agenda items they wish to discuss and an approximate amount of air time is allocated to each individual to ensure fairness to all. This is a way of ensuring that everyone gets to be heard and there isn’t a rush at the end when set members have become tired, with the possibility that their contribution isn’t as enthusiastic as at the start of the day. The next ground rule however does add, in my opinion, to the sense of fairness is the action learning set.

- Start with a different person each time

As stated above, a sense of fairness is important to both people in general and the learning set, so by starting the set with a different presenter each time, ensuring that each person receives appropriate support.

- Be as honest as possible

Revans (1998:30) discussed the idea of “what is an honest man (sic) and how can I become one?” Honesty can work at two levels: being honest with others, or arguably, being honest with yourself. In the context of an action learning set, honesty may be initially a difficult concept, however, being honest with ourselves is the key to self development. If an individual lacks self awareness and is not honest about their actions, assumptions and mistakes, then the capacity for self learning will be limited and certainly the view of the issue will be distorted. Being honest with others, whilst maintaining and demonstrating respect for them and their viewpoints, is an important prerequisite for building trust and openness in an action learning set.

- The process includes questioning, reflection, discussion, and debate

The learning from these encounters usually is at three levels. Pedler (1996) cited in West and Choueke, (2003:216) says that learning through action learning allows the set member to learn at three differing levels: first they learn about the problem they’re addressing. Second, they learn about what they’re learning about themselves and thirdly, they’re learning about the process of learning to learn and to transfer that learning to other situations.

- Participants carry out action between set meetings

At the end of each learning set the individual set member has decided upon an action plan. This plan is a guide as to what is to be achieved before the next action learning set.

### **The Action Learning Context**

I thought that it would be useful to divide the contextual elements into three parts, these comprise:

- The nature of the environment (differing contexts of the sets);
- The nature of the set (culture, norms and goals); and
- The nature of the individual (knowledge and expectations)

The nature of the environment (differing aspects of the action learning sets)

*Action learning in the organisational context*

Action learning has been carried out in the following settings; Executives in a textile company (Lewis, 1991); managers in a private hospital (Miller, 2003); supervisors in an electronic firm (Boddy, 1991); healthcare professionals in hospitals (Winkless, 1991; Lee, 2006); university students in a Diploma of Religious Education (Robinson, 2001); insurance agents attempting to improve the quality of their service (Schlesinger, 1991); and university students in health care education (Wade & Hammick, 1999). Action learning is increasingly being used in educational contexts such as schools to support the process of teacher learning (Yuen & Cheng, 2000). Lawson et al (1997:225) argue that the type of organisation that would value action learning sets is one that values questioning, the premise on which action learning exists. The organisation's culture should be one where personal development is respected, employees are both trusted and have a fair amount of autonomy and there is belief in problem ownership. Employees are supported from within their organisation via their line-manager and lastly, the action learning set is not seen in negative terms such as a "therapy group." Bunning (1997:268) said:

“The context in which action learning takes place is typically within the organisation itself, midst a cultural support for learning as opposed to more traditional classroom based learning approaches.”

Bourner and Weinsten (1996:59), in a study of the pitfalls in implementing action learning sets, discuss the problems of organisationally based action learning sets and

the use of an on-site location of the set. One of the respondents in the study is quoted as saying:

“Deciding to hold set meetings at a venue away from the office may sound pedantic but it creates an important “boundary”. At the office there is always the likelihood that set members will be called away – something for which they are indispensable always seems to occur on set meeting days! One set member recounted with some irritation how, “almost always on the dot of 11 am” one of his set colleagues received a phone call from his secretary, calling him to some vital meeting, whereupon he left!”

### *Politics*

Politically, which is revisited later in this thesis, the set could also be constrained; particularly if the set members are part of the same section, division etc. McGill and Brockbank (2006:48) state:

“Where sets are formed, they are usually recommended not to have set members in line relationships with each other. Where this does occur, it is essential that the facilitator negotiates the arrangement with the set and the set members concerned so that line issues are considered outside of the set.”

Corbitt and Martz (2003:16) also argue:

“People come to meetings with hidden agendas and behaviours, such as fear of expressing ideas in front of superiors. These issues along with many other factors such as culture and gender tend to inhibit full and open participation at meetings.”

### *Competition*

In a situation where members of the same organisation are together in a set, the problem of competitiveness between them can occur with “point scoring” replacing



the support that an action learning set requires and usually provides. When this happens the set typically becomes dysfunctional. Lawson et al (1997:226) quote an example of this:

“One member of the set confessed that the main reason that she had joined the set was to stop fellow managers at the same level as herself getting ahead of her.”

### *Confidentiality*

Issues of confidentiality may arise as another concern when all set members are from the same organisation. In such cases the safe environment where a set member can speak freely may be compromised.

### *Baggage*

Another problem that can arise when all the set members are from the same organisation is that they can bring “baggage” from their employment histories. As Lawson et al (1997:226) write:

“One example that we encountered was where a participant explained that the main obstacle to her achieving her goal was a “bloody stupid system” that she was obliged to operate. The air froze over in the set meeting when another member of the set revealed icily that it was she who had set up that system!”

### *Impression management*

Impression management is concerned with the extent to which employees are willing to compromise the impression that others have of them and the lengths that some employees will go to in order to create the right impression. Edmondson (2002:2), for example, argues that:

“People are (both conscious and unconscious) impression managers – reluctant to engage in behaviours that could threaten the image others hold of them. Although few of us are

without concern about others' impressions, our immediate social context can mitigate – or exacerbate – the reluctance to relax our guard.”

She goes on to list specific risks to image that people face at work: being seen as ignorant, incompetent, negative, or disruptive which may be problematic in a learning set where line relationships exist amongst set members. Ignorance in that if set members ask questions or seek information for clarification with respect to the presenter's live issue they run the risk of being seen as unable to understand information given. Incompetence in terms of admitting mistakes: when reporting on actions taken in between learning sets there may be occasions where the presenter reports negatively on an outcome, for example, admitting to making a mistake, as such the individual may be viewed as incompetent.

#### *Action learning in the University context*

For some time academic institutes have resisted the idea of action learning. Lawson et al (1997:226) said they felt that that action learning is “threatening to an institution which sees its core role as disseminating knowledge”. However action learning has started to form part of the portfolio of programmes offered, certainly at my own institution, the University of Huddersfield. The increased growth and development of action learning has been in accordance with changes in higher education with a focus on capability as well as knowledge. The growth in the number of management programmes run as partnerships between higher education and particular companies is evidence of this, again referring to my own University, in particular, my own department. Partnerships have been forged with the National Health Service, Local Authorities and the Fire Service, offering management development programmes that use action learning as an underpinning philosophy. However, offering action learning programmes in universities is not without its problems. They can include:

- *Issues with stakeholders*

O'Hara et al (1996:17) said that transferring action learning from its origins into other settings can create tensions between the major stakeholders involved in the scenario, in the case of a university, these stakeholders involve:

- The manager who enrolls for an action learning based qualification expects both a qualification and the subsequent learning needed to achieve that qualification. Also they expect it to last beyond the life of the course.
  - The sponsoring organisation expects increased managerial ability that can be used directly in the context of the organisation, thus ensuring that it receives a good return on capital invested.
  - The University expects to improve its ways of contributing to the success of both business and the economy by developing managers whilst simultaneously maintaining standards of education.
- *The impact of assessment*

The use of action learning as part of a qualification programme may impact on the open relationship needed between the facilitator, who is usually a tutor and the set members. Because of the anxiety that assessment usually creates, when assessment occurs set members may regress to the old relationship of student/teacher dependency. Lawson et al (1997:227) wrote:

“One of us recalled a time when she was a member of an action learning set that was part of a course leading to a qualification. She remembers the comment of one of her colleagues in the set: “We are like tortoises. They [tutors] tempt us out of our shells with a piece of lettuce, then they chop off our heads!”

Therefore action learning, whilst offering a more ‘grown up’ way of learning in which the set member is encouraged to think for themselves and be confident in their thoughts and deeds, still suffers from the anxieties that arise from the assessment process. This can ultimately lead to set members mistrusting a facilitator who encourages independent thought and action. The assessment process may trigger old

memories of school or 'night school' and old behaviour patterns which threaten the independent culture of action learning sets.

### The nature of the set (culture and climate)

#### *Organisational culture*

Schein (1992) cited in Hare and O'Neill (2000:31) viewed culture as the basic assumptions and beliefs shared by members of a group or organisation and are categorised into two areas: (a) espoused beliefs and (b) underlying beliefs. Espoused beliefs are the values professed by the organisation (e.g. "equal opportunity," "freedom of speech," etc.). Underlying beliefs that individuals hold are the result of learned responses to problems of survival in the external environment and to problems of interactions in the internal environment. These beliefs are often held within the individual at a subconscious level and when reinforced by behaviour become part of the culture of the organisation. This hidden culture of the organisation impacts performance, social will, and social contracts within the organisation. If the espoused organisational values are not the same as the individual's underlying beliefs, then mistrust, deception, and disillusionment may result for the individual. Given the pervasive nature of culture, the members of an action learning set from an organisation with an unsympathetic culture can have difficulty accepting the alternative culture of the learning set and certainly have issues with the questioning nature of action learning. Action learning flourishes when the organisation's culture demands action alongside learning. Newton and Wilkinson (1994:11) discuss the idea of action learning and cultural fit, saying that action learning brings its own problems in terms of the 'culture fit' of the approach in the organisation in which it is being used. Pedler and Boutall (1992:10) comment:

“...it may not always fit the organisational style or culture and involves certain risks, ‘opening a can of worms’ as one participant phrased it.”

#### *Organisational Climate*

Although the concept of organisational climate is closely linked to that of organisational culture, in reality it has been around for a lot longer and can actually be

traced back to the work of Lewin (1946). The term climate is difficult to define and can be easily confused with discussions of the weather. Reichers and Schneider (1990:22) define organisational climate as "the shared perception of the way things are around here". Rollinson et al (1998:563) define climate as:

“A characteristic ethos or atmosphere within an organisation at a given point in time which is reflected in the way its members perceive, experience and react to the organisational context.”

From the above definitions it can be said that climate is ‘felt’ by individuals, an expression of how they experience the climate, but may not be able to articulate what they think and feel about it, other than to say, it’s good, bad, cold, chilly, hostile etc. This often forms the way an individual behaves in that they react to the climate that surrounds them (Schneider, 1983). They may feel that being part of that environment is rewarding which will sustain their involvement. A positive climate exists when the set members perceive they are valued and treated well by all the set. A positive climate is far more likely to develop into a cooperative instead of a competitive atmosphere and by establishing a positive group climate of trust, openness and directness. Ozelik et al (2008:189) state that:

“...whereas culture is dynamically stable and usually held in place by a network of socialisation practices over generations, emotional climate is more subject to change and dependent on existing leadership styles and administrative policies. A new leader with a different management style could change the emotional climate of an organisation in a relatively short period of time, even though the culture of the organisation might remain the same.”

The above discussion enables climate to be seen as an individual experience concerned with how individuals feel in relation to the organisation in which they work. Glick (1985) draws attention to climate at both an individual level and group/organisation level, with the individual level being referred to as the

‘psychological climate’ (Koys and Decotis, 1991) and the latter as the ‘organisational climate’.

### The nature of the individual (knowledge and expectations)

#### *The individual and how they learn in a group*

This element of the literature review considers the individual and how they learn in a group setting. Issues of concern are the nature of individual learners, their prior experiences of learning and resultant expectations of the learning process. Knowles (1973:43), in discussing adult learning says, “the learner is self-directed but has a conditioned expectation to be dependent and to be taught”.

#### *Set member expectations*

O’Hara et al (1996:19) said of managers entering the world of academia:

“Even autonomous, senior managers seem to fall rapidly into the mode of ‘dependent student’ when entering academic premises.”

This type of behaviour based upon experiences of school and a pedagogic approach to learning is identified in Chapter Two. It takes both time and patience to deal with this set of ingrained expectations in order for these managers to maintain the autonomy that they have, that they enjoy in more familiar organisational settings. The expectations of the dependent students often revolve around being told what to do, and not being asked “what do *you* think you should do?” as is the language of action learning discussed in Chapter Two. Additionally, participants have to expend more effort getting to know one another in a much more intensive way than required during standard part-time or evening attendance. This can often lead to frustrations and a feeling of ‘*when is she going to get on with it*’, or ‘*I could be doing x, y or z*’, so they inevitably experience some discomfort while the set is forming.

Bourner and Weinstein (1996:54), in discussing the pitfalls of implementing action learning programmes into organisations, drew attention to the expectations of learners, citing the following that illustrates the conflicting preconceived ideas between an action learning set facilitator and in this case, his group:

“His first doubts appeared when, despite his usual preparation with a new group, only half of the group arrived with problems or projects to work on. His doubts grew when, in a discussion of the absence of projects, one of the group explained, with support from some of the others, that they really wanted to be told the secret of effective management. In promoting action learning the practitioner had said “You’ll learn how to be effective managers” and this was heard as “You’ll be told how to be effective managers”. The clear preconceptions of the group about what they wanted from the programme had deafened them to a necessary rudimentary understanding of action learning”.

### **Chapter summary**

This chapter provided a general overview of what I see as the important contextual elements that are central to this thesis. The chapter began with a discussion of the learning that takes place in an action learning set. The focus of discussion revolved around the idea of learning as opposed to teaching and how adults learn within the learning set as the central theme. General group process theory was discussed locating my own experiences to remind the reader that the purpose of this thesis is to develop a link between group theory and what happens in the learning set. The final part of this chapter considered the differing contexts in which action learning takes place. Here I attempted to differentiate between organisational and university settings and discuss the attendant issues of concern within each context.

The next chapter considers both research methodology and research method in relation to addressing the issues of what participants think makes an effective action learning set. The chapter introduces the rationale behind the choice of research methodology used within this thesis and describes the role that Saunders et al (2003:83) Research Onion played in the research process. The chapter then discusses Grounded Theory as the dominant research approach.

# Chapter Five – Research Methodology

## Introduction

This chapter introduces the rationale behind the choice of research methodology used in the research process within this thesis. The ‘Research Onion’ (Saunders et al, 2003:83) was influential in informing both the approach to the research methodology and method in this thesis and structuring of this chapter.

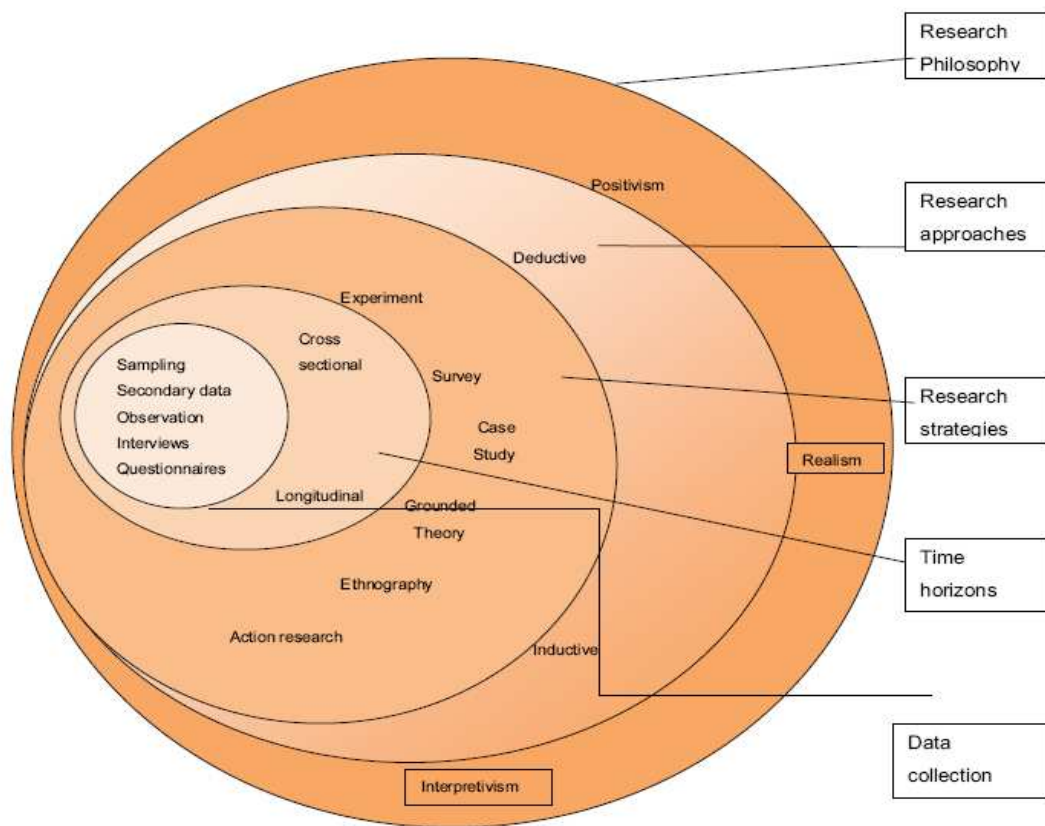


Figure 6 Saunders et al (2003) Research Onion



Saunders's (2003) model above depicts an onion; and each layer of the onion represents a layer of the research process. Starting at the outside with the research philosophy then working towards the centre of the onion outlining the research process which includes; research approaches, research strategies, time horizons and finally data collection methods. This model depicts a very comprehensive overview of the research possibilities and subsequent approaches enabling the researcher to construct an approach that comprises both methodology and method and ensures that there is a 'research fit' with the aims of the thesis.

### **Research philosophy**

The outer layer of the onion focuses on the research philosophy and differentiates between positivism, realism and interpretivism. In the social sciences, positivism refers to approaches to research that model themselves on approaches developed within the natural sciences. Positivist approaches tend to be concerned with generating research hypotheses and testing theories and largely involve the adoption of quantitative methods such as surveys. Saunders et al (2003:83) write that, "positivism is law like generalisations similar to those produced by the physical and natural scientists". Realism is an approach to research that is, "based on the belief that a reality exists that is independent of human thoughts and beliefs" (Saunders et al, 2003:84). The aim for researchers taking this approach is to minimise researcher influence on the research being undertaken and adopt appropriate research methods and techniques to uncover objective 'facts' and truths. Interpretivism stands in contrast to both of these approaches in that it is less concerned with the discovery of 'facts' and more interested to capture the views, attitudes and perspectives of research participants and understand their life-world from their point of view (Bryman and Bell, 2003). These perspectives reflect the way that an individual thinks about the development of the knowledge they produce through their research and also the creation of that knowledge.

The approach I adopted in this research was largely developed in relation to my research aim - to explore participant's views and experiences on the effectiveness of

action learning sets and to understand my own development within it. I was largely influenced by the work of Janet Parr (1998), a feminist writer who writes about her experiences as a researcher in the area of mature women returning to study and discusses how this impacted on the way she carried out her research. What impressed me about her work was how she located herself in the research process, acknowledging that the women she was interviewing were not dissimilar to herself and her background as a student returning to study in later life. Her knowledge about her research area, based on her own personal and lived experience, resonated with my own position as a researcher. Like Parr, I too was researching an area in which I had personal, real life experience – in my case, as an action learning facilitator. As Parr makes clear, it is not possible in such situations, to take a neutral stance to the research, as would be required in positivist and realist approaches. However, my early approach to this research did, initially, have very positivistic influence through drawing on my academic knowledge in this area. I had created a theoretical framework that I imagined would guide the data gathering process. In other words, I initially adopted a deductive stance towards the research, where data would be gathered according to a pre-defined set of ideas across number of elements. These elements are depicted in the form of a Venn diagram (Chapter One, Page 17). The model comprised the following elements:

- The learning process.
- The group.
- The learning context.
- The individual and how they learn in a group.
- How the group functions in a learning context.
- The learning process in context.

From this model I developed a series of research questions that had, upon reflection, a very positivistic underpinning to them and would have guided the students back to the above theoretical framework, therefore limiting the creation of new knowledge in this subject area. As positivism is rooted in natural science, the starting point is theory, followed by the development of an appropriate hypothesis, data collection and subsequent hypothesis testing. I therefore felt that this would be problematic in that I

was researching a subject or phenomenon that was unique to each individual, so by implication this would tend to be more subjective in nature. It seemed to me that as the research would inevitably deal with internal emotions, feelings, thoughts and expressions that it would be more appropriate to consider another approach to the research. This, together with my research aim, which is to explore participant's views and experiences of being in learning sets, and also my own position in relation to the topic under study, where I am an action learning set facilitator, led me to conclude that an interpretivist approach would therefore be the most suitable.

### **Interpretivism - Background**

'Interpretivist' philosophy underpins the research framework adopted in this thesis as this it accepts the unique nature of individuals and the inherent complexities within them. Interpretivism has more utility as a research approach as opposed to positivism, as rich insights into the nature of individuals are lost if the research focuses on the quest for 'laws and generalisations' in the same way as the natural sciences do (Saunders et al 2003). The roots of interpretivism lie in both phenomenology and symbolic interactionism. As social actors, individuals interpret experiences in unique and differing ways. Phenomenology refers to the way individuals recognise and make sense of the world. Symbolic interactionism refers to the way we interpret and create the social world around us in that we interpret the actions of others around us and attribute meaning to their actions. Research that adopts an interpretivist approach tends to be qualitative rather than quantitative in nature.

### Interpretivism - Qualitative Research

Denzin and Lincoln (1994:2) define qualitative research as:

“multi-method in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them.”

I considered that a qualitative approach to this research would be a better reflection of who I am in the research process. As an individual who struggles with procedures and guidelines, a qualitative, interpretive approach would ensure that I felt that the research would be a journey of discovery, enabling a story to be told, as opposed to merely following steps in a pre-ordained process which would be intellectually disappointing. Creswell (1998:18) discusses the reasons for engaging in qualitative research and cites an interest in writing as being one of the reasons to engage in the research process. He writes:

“The writer brings himself or herself into the study, the personal pronoun “I” is used, or perhaps the writer engages a story telling form of narration.”

### **Research approaches**

In the second layer of the onion, Saunders et al (2003) differentiate between ‘deductive’ and ‘inductive’ approaches. A deductive approach concerns the way in which theory is applied to research data, that is, when the researcher gathers data to test or develop a theory or hypothesis. This approach tends to be employed in research that adopts a positivist framework, as outlined above. In contrast, an inductive approach concerns the way in which theory is developed from the analysis of data, rather than imposed upon it. This approach tends to be used in interpretivist research where a qualitative methodological approach is adopted. Creswell (1998:14) argues that:

“One undertakes qualitative research in a natural setting where the researcher is an instrument of data collection who gathers words or pictures, analyse them inductively, focuses on the meaning of participants, and describes a process that is expressive and persuasive in language.”

## Research strategies

Saunders et al (2003) suggest several main research strategies. These are the experiment and survey, which tend to be used in quantitative research, and case study, grounded theory, ethnography and action research, which tend to use qualitative approaches, either in whole or part. Creswell (1998) adds phenomenology to this list. The authors suggest that these are not discrete approaches in and of themselves and can be used in any combination. This thesis uses 'Grounded Theory' and autobiography as the principle research strategies.

### **Grounded theory**

Grounded theory was developed by two sociologists, Glaser and Strauss (1967). Their collaboration in research on dying hospital patients led them to write the book 'Awareness of Dying'. In this research they developed the constant comparative method later known as Grounded Theory. The purpose of a 'Grounded Theory' is to 'generate or discover a theory'. Grounded theory is often cited as being the prime example of an inductive approach to data collection (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Theory can be generated in differing ways, through observation, interviews, member's individual narrative accounts, learning logs from set members and extracts from a research diary. Pauleen et al provide a useful definition that acknowledges the absence of experience or knowledge in the subject area, seeing grounded theory as an appropriate research approach in such circumstances, they wrote:

“An inductive process, in which concepts, insights, and understanding are developed from patterns in the data. It is this inductive process that allows for the development and articulation of theories or models in situations where little previous experience or knowledge exists... In situations where very little is known about the issues facing participants, and where great amounts of data are primarily gathered in an unstructured format, grounded theory provides a method for analysing and articulating the data in ways-theory, models that

are practical and relevant to the situations in which the data emerged.” Pauleen et al (2007:229)

Therefore Pauleen et al (2007) were very influential in my decision to use grounded theory as the principle methodological approach in this thesis because I am dealing with an area in which individuals have remained largely voiceless, therefore, there is little knowledge of participants’ views on what makes an effective action learning set. As Yoong (1996:35) states:

“The choice of grounded theory for the analysis and articulation of raw experience is supported in situations where there is little previous research in an area, when the focus is on human experience and interaction, when there is a high degree of applicability to practice, and when there is a need for contextual interpretation.”

This is an exploratory approach that is intended to explain a phenomenon. The intent of a grounded theory or study is to generate theory. Data is collected, and from that, various themes are extracted, giving issues to follow up in subsequent field work (Glaser and Strauss,1967). The data is analysed as the research progresses, and from this data, a conceptual framework is developed that guides subsequent work, the approach being ‘grounded’ in the data collection process. Strauss and Corbin (1990) cited in Saunders (1997:349) emphasise the following points in this approach:

- that grounded theory is an inductive approach;
- the theory emerges from the process of data collection analysis;
- therefore you do not commence such a study with a defined theoretical framework;
- instead, you identify relationships between your data and develop questions and hypotheses to test these; however,
- you will need to commence this strategy with a clear research purpose.

Locke (1996) argues that grounded theory is particularly useful for research into organisations and organisational issues. Certainly where an alternative view can be utilised within established fields such as group effectiveness and leadership, and when coupled with a case study approach (Hodkinson and Hodkinson, 2001). Thus, creating a research approach that further develops existing theories in terms of new thinking.

Critiques of grounded theory have focused on its status as theory asking the question “Is what is produced really theory?” (Thomas and James, 2006).

### **Autobiography and auto-ethnography**

Lejeune (1989:4) cited in Davis (1999:1) defines an autobiography as being a:

“retrospective prose story that a real person relates about his or her own existence, in which he or she gives emphasis to his or her individual life, and to the history of his or her personality in particular.”

Butler (2009:295) describes auto-ethnography as:

“a qualitative research methodology that emphasizes a more personal, almost intimate level of study. It renders the researcher-participant opportunities to explore past and present experiences while gaining self-awareness of his or her interactions and their socio-cultural effects.”

In reviewing the literature in this field, it could be said that, in essence, autobiography and auto-ethnography are essentially the same. The researcher considers his or her life experiences as a backdrop to the research, and uses the research process as a way of developing self. As discussed earlier, by using a reflexive approach within grounded theory and auto-ethnography, I was able to gain a greater insight into my evolving research ability and understand the impact I may have on the research process.

The thesis provides a reflexive account of the effects of undertaking research, both on the participants, who were former action learning set members, and on the researcher, in this instance myself, as a novice researcher. Within I have sought to provide an “insider account” of my own experiences of carrying out the research, and its apparent effects on my personal development. I thought it important to both myself and the reader, that there was an understanding of who I am, the development process of myself as a researcher, and the reasoning behind the decision to locate myself in this work. Haynes (2006:207) illustrated this when she wrote:

“To understand my own sense of self within the research project, I made use of autobiographical narrative as a means to examine my own ontological and epistemological being...”

I first outline the aims of the thesis and its context within the area of action learning. I also place myself in the context of the research with some autobiographical background recounting my early experiences of unsuccessful schooling, of being a second chance student, working in the private sector, ultimately arriving in education and my early experiences of group facilitation which I viewed as a rudimentary introduction to action learning. I then outline in more detail the personal aspects of my character that define who I am as an action learning practitioner which worked alongside this research project. Secondly, I locate the research project within an autobiographical and auto/ethnographic research methodology which complements the primary research approach; that of grounded theory and adds a degree of intimacy and reflexivity. I then discuss the centrality of the role of the researcher in qualitative research and expand on the personal and professional development issues addressed within this project. By locating the project theoretically and empirically within the context of learning and action learning, I am able to show how I was able to explore these aspects of my personal development. Finally, in Chapter Ten I was able to draw out some conclusions concerning what I learned about the whole process of conducting this research, writing a thesis and thinking behind my own action learning practice.



## **Limitations of Autobiography and Auto-ethnography**

The limitations to this form of research include the perception of others that it may not be scientific enough; with researchers needing to prove that the research included a scientific perspective in order to demonstrate credibility. Hannabuss (2000:99) captured the essence of these concerns when he said:

“Some of the older ones are very defensive about research which is not quantitative enough, and make elaborate cases for qualitative methodology and evidence as being valid and reliable, despite the absence of, say, statistical sampling or an experimental research design. More recently, the case for qualitative research appears to have been made, although, even now, the threat of “scientism” appears from time to time. Recurring still is the fear of not being objective enough, of allowing subjectivity to creep in, of not paying enough attention to the distorting effect of the interviewer on the interviewee”.

Davis (1999:18) adds that there is:

“the potential in the genre to misrepresent, or at least present a partial version of the ‘truth’, however that is defined”

He viewed the limitations as falling into three distinct categories: the nature of the data, and the decision the autobiographer makes in deciding what and what not to include. Davis (1999:19) cites Connelly and Clandinin (1988) who wrote:

“Autobiographical writing is a particular reconstruction of an individual’s narrative, and there could be other reconstructions.”

Davis (1999:19) himself added:

“And even when other voices are allowed to impinge on the narrative, they do so with the ‘invitation’ and ‘permission’ of the autobiographer.”

Interpretation is both in the hands and the minds of the autobiographer. Here Davis describes the differences between rich narrative that captures the essence of the context, the autobiographer in the context and the complexity of that particular situation. In contrast to something that simply describes events in a very one dimensional way. The writer gives control of the text when it reaches the reader. The writer has one interpretation; the reader may have a completely different one.

Doloriert and Sambrook (2009:27) cite Coffey (1999) and Atkinson (1997) who, in my opinion, are particularly robust in their opinions of autobiographical research. They wrote:

“We also note its’ critics, for example Coffey (1999) refers to auto-ethnography as self-indulgent and narcissistic; Atkinson (1997) criticises it for being a romantic construction of the self, a vulgar realism, and hyper authentic.”

Following on from the above thoughts on the perceived limitations that this form of research may have, Chang (2008:54) warns auto-ethnographers of the pitfalls that they should avoid in doing auto-ethnography, saying that:

“(1) excessive focus on self in isolation from others; (2) overemphasis on narration rather than analysis and cultural interpretation; (3) exclusive reliance on personal memory and recalling as a data source; (4) negligence of ethical standards regarding others in self-narratives; and (5) inappropriate application of the label auto-ethnography.”

My rebuttal to these criticisms is influenced by the thoughts of Horsfall et al (2001:3). They argued the case that there should be learning from not only the contextual outcome, but also the process itself, they wrote:

“edginess regarding 'telling it like it is', admitting dilemmas, mistakes, difficult relationships, struggles, or less than perfect practices of research. However, if these things are not openly talked about we cannot learn from them, and others coming after us are discouraged when they encounter their own research realities.”

I would argue that in order to develop a deeper understanding of the research process it is important for me to show how I had experienced the research process, choosing not to hide my fears, concerns and disappointments as this type of narrative makes a valuable contribution to the research domain. Certainly, at grass roots level, I would also argue that the same principles used in positivism were also used here, i.e. in that the evidence was systematically gathered in that reflections were gathered at the end of each stage of the research process. There was a consistent attempt not to romanticise the reflections, in that they were carefully considered and presented in an objective way.

### **Ethical considerations**

It is standard practice in all form of social science research that there is a consideration of the ethical issues involved in the research. This next section considers such issues and makes reference to this research where appropriate.

#### Over view of ethics

Ethics is based upon two main positions; the deontological versus teleological stance. The deontological view argues that the end can never justify the use of research which is unethical. They consider rules and duties, for example, the act may be considered the right thing to do even if it produces a bad consequence, if it follows the rule that

“one should do unto others as they would have done unto them” (Mackie, 1990). Teleological views argue that the ends served justify the means (Macklin, 1982; Murphy and Dingwall, 2001), essentially it becomes a struggle between what is good and what is right.

Ethics committees are concerned with conventional “ethno” ethics and there are substantial academic literatures, research and organisational policies that explore, advise and regulate this. In the case of this thesis registered at Huddersfield University’s Business School, the School’s policy states:

“Research in the business School is underpinned by our shared research principles that are rooted in diversity, enterprise, ethics, and governance. Our research groups illustrate our priority subject focus for research and enterprise growth.”

### Operationalising ethics

Diener and Crandall (1978) cited in Bryman and Bell (2003:539) list four areas of concerns for researchers, which are:

1. Whether there is harm to participants;
2. Whether there is lack of informed consent;
3. Whether there is an invasion of privacy, and
4. Whether deception is involved

### *Harm to participants*

Harm entails a number of facets, these include: physical harm, harm to participants development or self esteem, stress, harm to career prospects or future employment or inducing subjects to perform reprehensible acts.

In terms of the research carried out for this thesis I was aware that the thesis would ultimately become a public document, particularly if it was ever to be published. With this in mind, I was careful to maintain both anonymity and confidentiality, as some of the content of the interviews could be harmful to the interviewees were it to

be read by someone with the intention of harming the interviewee, for example, in a political sense. Interviewees names were changed and new ones were invented (Cavendish, 1982). When other people were referred to in the course of the interview, that name mentioned was replaced with four X's and if a place of work was mentioned, the name of the organisation was replaced with 3 X's. I informed the participants that this would take place in an effort to encourage them to speak freely by assuring them of both anonymity and confidentiality.

#### *Informed consent*

Each participant was informed of the nature of the research when the initial contact was made. They were also informed of their role in the research process which was simply to talk about their experiences of being in a learning set. I assured them, in accordance with the principles of action learning, that it would be confidential. This conversation was repeated when I actually met them for the interview.

#### *Invasion of privacy*

In terms of invasion of privacy, the focus of the interview was about their experiences of being in an action learning set. They were simply asked what is it like to be in the set and the questions that were asked largely followed their lead. The latter interviews did have more prompts in them; however, any person refusing to answer a question would have had their decision respected.

Permission to tape the interview for transcription purposes was also sought and assurances given that this data would remain confidential throughout the whole proceedings.

#### *Whether deception is involved*

Deception occurs when researchers claim their research is something that it is not. A classic example of this would be the 'Milgram' Studies, in which the participants were told they were administering electric shocks to other participants, when in fact they were not. This is an extreme example, however it does serve to illustrate the point of deception, whilst drawing attention to the issues relating to covert research methods and ethical dilemmas involved in that approach. Bryman and Bell (2003: 545) although not excusing, try to offer an understanding of this stating that:

“Researchers often want to limit participants understanding of what the research is about so the participants can respond more naturally.”

The Social Research Association (SRA) guidelines cited in Bryman and Bell (2000: 546) state:

“It remains the duty of social researchers and their collaborators, however, not to pursue methods of inquiry that are likely to infringe human values and sensibilities. To do so, whatever the methodological advantages, would endanger the reputation of social research and the mutual trust between social researchers which is a prerequisite for much research.”

In summary, there are clear ethical considerations involved in carrying out research. In this respect, I feel that I have duly considered the ethical perspectives involved in research generally, and have consequently acted in accordance with the Business School’s policy on research. I am confident that as a researcher I have acted responsibly, mindful of the rights of the individuals who took part in this research.

## **Data Collection Methods**

### Sampling

Bryman and Bell (2003:93) define sampling as:

“The segment of the population that is to be selected for investigation. It is a subset of the population. The method of selection may be based on a probability or on a non probability approach”.

### *Sample population*

Clarifying a sample population of this type is problematic. To my knowledge there is no known statistic or contemporaneous list of people who have attended or are currently involved in action learning sets. To some extent my population had to comprise of people that were either known to me or to my colleagues. This meant that I started with a convenience sample of people that were known to myself and my colleagues. Initially this comprised the following:

MA Management by Action Learning: 2 learning sets equating to 12 students.

MSc Professional Leadership: 5 Learning sets equating to 30 students.

Therefore the sample population was 42 in total.

In light of the sample size I thought that a non probability, or non probabilistic sampling, as is often referred to, as the appropriate approach to take, and the sampling methods would be a combination of both convenience and purposive sampling, later on I would use critical case if necessary.

### *Convenience sampling*

Bryman and Bell (2003:105) define a convenience sample as “one that is simply available to the researcher by virtue of its accessibility”. This is the approach that I took in the pilot stages of the data collection (which is discussed at length in Chapter Six), it became simply a case of whoever was available for the pilot interviews. I was fortunate in the respect that I had access to two interviewees who had different jobs, in different sectors of employment and were on different programmes, so were not known to each other, who were available for interview.

### *Purposive sampling*

In this sampling approach the researcher uses his or her judgment to determine the composition of the sample group, based on an assessment of who will give the best responses and meet the objectives of the research (Saunders et al 1997:145). This type of sampling was used in the subsequent interviews after the pilot. Here specific issues arose and I used my own judgment as to who would be suitable to interview and therefore maximise my chances of gathering the type of data that I needed.

### *Critical case sampling*

Patton (1990) also discussed the idea of the extreme case and the critical case, stating that it was useful in considering who should be included in the interview sample, this was appropriate when it came to one of the interviewees who I asked to re-interview, which will be discussed in Chapter Eight. Patton (1990) cited in Saunders et al (1997:145) discusses the idea of the extreme case and argues:

“Extreme case sampling focuses on unusual or special cases on the basis that the data collected about these unusual or extreme outcomes will enable you to learn the most and answer your research question(s) and meet your objectives most effectively.”

Critical case sampling allows the researcher to select interviewees on the basis that they can offer a unique perspective, they are important because they can offer a differing insight that will be useful in relation to the research objectives. This was in fact the case, when one interviewee was asked to be re-interviewed because she opened up a new issue that I wanted to pursue further, but rather than extend the interview that day I wanted to reflect upon the content of her interview and then re-invite her along with new sample members.

### **How the data is captured**

#### Interviews

It would seem quite appropriate to use interviews, in that interviews form part of our usual life, referred to by Silverman (1998:113) as our ‘interview society’. He remarks:

“Interviewing provides a way of generating empirical data about the social world by asking people to talk about their lives, in this respect interviews are special forms of conversations”.



I decided to use interviews face to face with individuals as opposed groups or telephone interviews and carried out two pilots (discussed in detail in Chapter Six). The rationale for choosing interviews lay in the consideration of my own preferences. I prefer talking to people as opposed to writing to people and I also prefer face to face contact, as opposed to on the telephone contact, I feel I get a better sense of what the person is thinking and feeling when face to face with them as, so little of what is communicated is actually said by actual oral communication in contrast to that of body language and facial expressions.

On deciding upon using interviews, I then needed to decide what type of interview to carry out. There are a variety of differing types, these include; structured interviews, unstructured interviews, intensive interviews, in-depth interviews and so on. Bryman and Bell (2003:17) define a structured interview as:

“A structured interview, sometimes called a ‘standardised interview’, entails the administration of an interview schedule by an interviewer. The aim is for interviewees to be given exactly the same context of questioning. This means that each respondent receives exactly the same interview stimulus as any other. The goal of this style of interviewing is to ensure that interviewees’ replies can be aggregated and this can only be achieved reliably if those replies are in response to identical cues. Interviewers are supposed to read out questions exactly and in the same order as they are printed on the schedule. Questions are usually very specific and very often offer the interviewee a fixed range of answers (that type of question is often called closed, closed ended, pre-coded or fixed choice). The structured interview is the typical form of interview in social survey research.”

They continue to define an unstructured interview as where:

“The interviewer typically has only a list of topics or issues, often called an interview guide or aide memoire, that are

typically covered. The style of questioning is usually informal. The phrasing and sequencing of questions will vary from interview to interview” (2003:119).

I elected to use an unstructured interview format which is accompanied by a list of topics that I wanted the interviewees to address. This decision was influenced by the work of Saunders et al (2003:87) who, whilst discussing inductive approaches, give an illustration of a suitable data gathering method. The example they discuss concerns collecting data on absenteeism in a DIY store. The researcher did not have a predefined list of questions to ask employees but simply asked them about their experiences of working at the store in order to obtain a ‘feel’ for what was going on, so gaining a better understanding of the issue of absenteeism. This way of gathering data seemed to me, to be particularly suitable for my research, as little is known about the area under investigation: to explore participant’s views and experiences on the effectiveness of action learning sets.

My major concern, as outlined, was the experiences of the learning set members. It seemed to me to be crucial to the research process that the approach to the interviews supported that view. I wanted the interview approach to be as centred on the interviewees as possible in order to hear their views, consequently I wanted the interviews to be more like informal conversations. This decision was based on my readings of Holstein and Gubrium (1995) who were dissatisfied with the traditional approach to interviewing, a situation where the interviewer asks the ‘right question’ and the interviewee gives the ‘right answer’ and that knowledge is a creation of an effective process that can be both measured and validated. They suggest that interviewing is a social process and meaning is generated by both parties as a collaboration. Holstein and Gubrium (1995:2) argue:

“Typically, those who are curious about other persons’ feelings, thoughts, or experiences believe that they merely have to ask the right questions and the others reality will be theirs. Studs Terkel , the consummate journalist qua sociologist, says

he simply turns on his tape recorder and asks people to talk. Of his brilliant interviewing study of attitudes and feelings about working, Terkel (1972) writes: There were questions, of course. But they were casual in nature... the kind you would ask while you're having a drink with someone; the kind he would ask you. In short, it was a conversation. In time, the sluice gates of dammed up hurts and dreams were open (p.xxv).”

### Interview questions

As stated above, in both the pilot and actual interviews I used an unstructured interview technique. In the pilot interviews and first phase of interviews I started by simply asking the open question “What is it like to be a member of an action learning set?” Bryman and Bell (2003: 343) state that:

“There may be just a single question that the interviewer asks and the interviewee is then allowed to respond freely, with the interviewer simply responding to points that seem worthy of being followed up.”

In order to operationalise the thesis focus: Effective Action Learning Sets: An Analysis of participant experiences, I needed to use an open question in order to encourage the interviewee to tell his or her story. This question, in my opinion, had the benefits of:

- a) not being overly complicated or threatening, so as to build up the interviewee's confidence when telling their story, and
- b) it allowed for unusual responses from the interviewees, issues that might arise that may not have if I'd have used a closed questioning technique.

This was very useful for me in exploring new ideas and certainly assisted in the development of the next stage of the data collection process.

## **How the data is analysed**

The next section discusses how the raw data is coded in order to create meaning. I also consider the issue of how much data is required before a category is saturated.

### Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis refers to an analytical process whereby the data gathered is organised into relevant categories or themes. These terms are used interchangeably (Bryman and Bell, 2003). Analysis of the data then takes place across these categories or themes as the data is compared for similarities and differences. Braun and Clarke (2006:79) define thematic analysis as:

“a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organises and describes your data set in rich detail”.

Braun and Clarke add (2006:82):

“A theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set.”

The above definitions and perspectives describe a task that seemed very straightforward. However the reality of trying to make sense of the data was not as straightforward as at first glance. Braun and Clarke (2006:82) clearly articulated my immediate concern when I set about the analysis by asking “What counts as a pattern/theme, or what size does a theme need to be?”. The absence of clear guidelines was problematic, as Braun and Clarke (2006:3) highlight “Thematic Analysis is widely used but there is no clear agreement about what thematic analysis is and how you go about doing it.” However Aronson (1994:1) added:

“The first step is to collect the data. Audio tapes should be collected to study the talk of the session or of an ethnographic

interview. From the transcribed conversations, patterns of experiences can be listed. This can come from direct quotes or paraphrasing common ideas.”

Antaki et al (2002) cited in Braun and Clarke (2006:78) argues that there is “an absence of clear and concise guidelines around thematic analysis.” Reading this was reassuring. I therefore felt it would be a question of interpreting that information in a way that I found appropriate, so I decided to follow Bryman and Bell’s (2008:554) advice. In relation to analysis of the pilot data, they said “the themes and subthemes are a product of thorough reading and re-reading of the transcripts or field notes that make up the data.” Recognising this, I realised I needed to carry out analysis as soon as the data was captured, and not let the impending analysis build up and become an onerous task. I therefore made a first attempt to code this thematically using Jankowicz’s (2000:241) general framework that describes a method that can be used in order to make sense of the unstructured data I had obtained. The method posed a series of questions that I found useful in order to organise my thoughts and analysis, and which I subsequently used in the first analysis, within that I then used my own judgement.

Coding, very briefly, is “generating an index of terms that will help you interpret and theorise in relation to your data” (Bryman and Bell, 2003:436). Two important elements of coding are open coding and axial coding. Cresswell (1998:57) define open coding as a situation where:

“The researcher forms initial categories of information about the phenomenon being studied by segmenting information. Within each category, the investigator finds several properties, or subcategories, and looks for data to dimensionalise, or show the extreme possibilities on a continuum of, the property.”

Strauss and Corbin (1990: 96) cited in Bryman and Bell define axial coding as “a set of procedures whereby data are put back together in new ways after open coding, by making connections between categories”. The down side of this is by reconstructing sentences in order to allocate data to specific categories, the essence of what was said

may be lost. I read the procedures involved in axial coding. I began to feel there was an attempt to introduce a scientific process that in my opinion was not relevant to my work. The point of this thesis is to find out what participants feel makes an effective learning set, so by removing elements of sentences, there was a danger this was inevitably going to take away the voice of the interviewee in order to meet with the criteria of a specific methodology, so I acknowledge axial coding but chose to use open coding.

### Theoretical Saturation

At this point in the research I'd started to ask the question, how many interviews did I need to do? This is usually a question that is asked of me when I'm supervising Master's students. I have usually tritely replied, "as many as is necessary". In trying to take my own advice, I found this response somewhat lacking. In searching for guidance on this I thought it would be useful to be clear on what is meant by the term 'saturation'.

Morse (1995:147) argues that "Saturation is the key to excellent qualitative work... but there are no published guidelines or tests of adequacy for estimating the sample size required to reach saturation". Guest et al (2006:60) similarly comments:

"Although the idea of saturation is helpful at the conceptual level, it provides little practical guidance for estimating sample sizes, prior to data collection, necessary for conducting quality research."

Guest (2006:65) asked the same question as myself:

"We wanted to find out how many interviews were needed to get a reliable sense, a thematic exhaustion and variability within our data set. Did six interviews, for example, render as much useful information as twelve, eighteen, twenty-four, or thirty interviews? Did any new themes, for example, emerge from the data gathered between interview thirteen and interview thirty?"

What Guest (2006:60) carried on to do was review twenty four research methods books and seven databases, the result being no real guidance as to sample size. They found limited guidance as to sample size, stating that Bertaux (1981) had said that fifteen is the smallest acceptable sample size in qualitative research. In contrast to Morse (1994: 225) who said approximately thirty five for grounded theory studies in contrast to that of Cresswell (1998 ) who said between five and twenty five for a phenomenological study and between twenty to thirty for a grounded theory study. Interestingly Kuzel (1992: 41) cited in Guest (2006:61) recommended six to eight for a homogeneous sample and twelve to twenty when “working for disconfirming evidence or trying to achieve maximum variation”. Guest (2006:61) concluded by saying that “none of these works present evidence for their recommendations”.

I concluded that it is a matter of academic opinion and probably the answer that I give my students “as many as is necessary” was not quite as trite as it sounds and therefore, is perhaps the approach that I needed to take, until in my opinion a category or theme is saturated.

### Coding: General issues

This next section addresses the general issues that are involved in coding, starting with concerns that I had as researcher when the first transcript actually landed on my desk. As a new researcher, I had made a point to look for literature that helped me both understand how to carry out research. Specifically, literature regarding the operational aspects, but literature that also considered some of the more basic issues, such as what may be my concerns about the process, how I may feel about certain issues, things that a more competent researcher may not even give a second thought to. I found Bryman and Bell's (2003:435) guidelines useful when considering the initial preparation for coding. These include:

#### *1. Code as soon as possible*

As grounded theory suggests, coding should be carried out as soon as possible. There are two reasons; the first being that it helps with understanding of the data and how that relates to theoretical sampling (or in this thesis, thematic analysis in the first

instance and then theoretical sampling in the second instance). Secondly, so the researcher isn't overwhelmed with data to analyse when all the interviews are finished. I must admit, on receiving the first transcript back from typing I did have a sense of panic in considering the time it would take to analyse, multiplied by the number of interviews I had carried out. I was initially overwhelmed by it all, so I arranged that my typist would send each transcript as it was typed, not keeping them all until the batch is completed. This helped me pace the work, avoiding becoming overwhelmed by the prospect of it all, interesting as it was.

2. *Transcripts should have a thorough reading prior to commencement of coding*

Bryman and Bell (2003:435) advise that the transcript should have a thorough reading prior to the commencement of coding. This was actually quite difficult, there was inevitably a strong temptation to code on first read, but I understood that that would not be a good idea in that preconceived ideas of the meanings within the transcript may be formed too early and other issues within the data may be missed.

3. *Don't worry about generating too many categories*

Thirdly, do not worry about generating too many categories. As with open coding, the objective is to break down the transcript into manageable elements i.e. concepts and then categories, after exploring all the possibilities in all the transcripts. This was encouraging for me as I did not want to be restricted as to the number of categories that emerged from the transcripts, I wanted to be able to create as many possibilities in order to get a full understanding of the themes within and then work with them to formulate the core categories for the next interviews. From this I was able to consider the substantive theories that began to emerge, then ultimately created the final categories to add to the formal theory in the areas of organisational behaviour and action learning (Bryman and Bell 2003:431).

Again, as an inexperienced researcher I found Lofland and Lofland's (1995) framework for developing concepts helpful, cited in Bryman and Bell (2003:435). They give a general sense of the varied meanings within the transcript. Lofland and Lofland (1995) compiled a series of general questions, and some of these I found useful in initially dealing with the typed transcripts. Of immediate use were two questions:



*a) What is this item of data about?*

This question made me consider the nature of what I was reading. What the interviewee was trying to tell me in the telling of their story of their experiences of being a member of an action learning set.

*b) Of what is this topic and item an instance?*

This question made me consider the idea of open coding in terms of what themes, topics, concepts were emerging and how they linked to one another and could be turned into categories.

### Coding – Specific Techniques

The discussions above helped me to understand the ‘bigger picture’ in relation to coding but I then moved to the more specific aspects of coding: the how to do it. I realised that within all the transcripts there was copious amounts of useful data that I needed to understand in order to be able to start the process of identifying concepts and then categories before theorising about participant’s views on what makes an effective action learning set. However, it became like a puzzle as to how to unlock the data that existed within the transcripts. Again, I turned to the literature to inform my actions.

Prasad (1993) cited in Bryman and Bell (2003:430) used the idea of ‘concept cards’, a technique for identifying important concepts within the data. Elements that relate to a particular theme are put together under a specific heading on the concept. Maintaining the concept card is an iterative process that allowed me to pace my work and, as said previously, not become overwhelmed by the process. It also allowed me to return to transcripts after initial analysis and revisit to look for more concepts that I may previously missed. Figure Seven is an example of a concept card that was used to analyse interviews on the theme of organisational turmoil related to work computerisation.

<b>Data Source</b>	<b>Organisation Member</b>	<b>Incident, quotation, opinion, event</b>
Field Notes No. 7, Pg.3	Project Manager	Discussing possible resistance to computers: 'Yes...we have got to pullout all our weapons to fight this thing out. But until we win...It's going to mean confusion'.
Interview No.8, Pg.23	Receptionist	Describing the first two weeks of computerisation: 'What I hated was the anger and well the confusion. It was almost like my divorce all over again...blaming each other and mistakes every minute'.
Interview No.24, Pg.8-9	Senior Manager	'I finally know what army generals feel like...that's exactly what it was like. Fighting people all the time...the girls, nurses, Joe, and the big brass at Paragon...and not knowing where the next attack would come from'.

Figure 7 Prasad (1993) Concept Card (cited in Bryman and Bell, 2003:430)

I used this idea as a method of analysing my data, given it offered the opportunity of adding to data as the research moves forward. My initial headings included:

- Data Source  
In the pilot interviews I used the terms 'Interviewee number one' and 'Interviewee number two'. I carried on using this as a way of differentiating the people who took part, so as to make them anonymous. I simply number them in the order that I interviewed them. In terms of locating the comment in the transcript, my initial response was to quote the page number that the quotation was on.
- Quotation  
My primary data collection method was interviewing so I thought that it was relevant to use the term 'Quotation'. Originally, each person interviewed was

given an interviewee number, from which they could be identified to me, but remained anonymous within the thesis. However, when I arrived at the analysis of the second phase of interview I became unsettled with this, reflecting in action (Schön, 1983), I asked myself “Is what I am doing at the moment appropriate?” and “Do I need to alter, amend change what I am doing at the moment?” McGill and Brockbank (2004:96). It then became obvious, if I was researching the experiences of former set members, then why refer to the interviewees as numbers, it felt like I was about to miss the point of my whole work and not give voice to their contributions. So I went back and replaced all the identity numbers with a fictitious name, which felt a lot richer in terms of the story line. I then, for ease of referencing, recorded each page number in case I needed to refer back to the original transcript.

- Memos

Bryman and Bell (2003:432) discuss the idea of notes that researchers write for themselves and for other researchers that they are working with. They serve as reminders as to what the terms used meant, things that they need to remember and ‘provide the building blocks for a certain amount of reflection’. I found them particularly useful as a way of pulling out thoughts that could be developed into themes and concepts and also as a way of not losing my train of thought and having to waste time going back through the transcripts.

- Concepts/Themes

After the transcripts had been coded, various patterns, themes and concepts began to emerge. At this stage, I needed to decide what to do next in terms of what possible areas to explore further. The literature refers to this process as ‘theoretical sampling’. Glaser and Strauss (1967:45) define theoretical sampling as:

“The process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects codes, and analyses his (sic) data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop his theory as it emerges.”

In order to keep the train of thought I added a final column to capture the likely areas I may follow up on and entitled it Concept/Theme. In considering the headings that I used, I was able to see how thematic analysis is further developed into theoretical sampling in which new themes were decided upon, coupled with appropriate questions and narrative to support decisions as to whether some themes would be discarded or saturated. This process is known as ‘theoretical saturation’. Theoretical Saturation refers to the process of the continuation of sampling theoretically until a category has been saturated with data. Strauss and Corbin (1998:212) cited in Bryman and Bell (2003: 330) argue that:

“This means (a) no new or relevant data seem to be emerging regarding a category (b) the category is well developed in terms of its properties and dimensions demonstrating variation, (c) the relationships among categories are well established and validated.”

How the concept card template looked

*First Interviews*

**What about the expectations of set members prior knowledge?**

<b>Data Source</b>	<b>Quotation</b>	<b>Memos</b>	<b>Concept/Theme</b>
Int. 3, Pg. 3	“Oh I don’t know, I didn’t look at it from that point of view. I think I had my own expectations that people would have prior knowledge, and it weren’t because of positions they held in organisations, but because they all had	Expectations based upon academic knowledge	Hierarchy

	degrees already.		
Int. 4, Pg. 6	“Yes, on the degree really I mean I did a diploma years and years ago at Leeds but that was on addiction studies but it was the same process you start here and finish there and it’s the same for a degree, you start here and finish there.”	Expectations based upon having a degree	Expectations of learners
Int. 5, Pg. 1	“Umm, I don’t recall that we had to have any to be honest.”	No expectations	None

### Chapter summary

This chapter has considered both the method and methodology used in this thesis. The chapter introduced the rationale behind the choice of research methodology selected for this thesis. The ‘Research Onion’ (Saunders et al, 2003:83) was influential in informing both the approach to the research methodology and method adopted for the research. This was influenced by grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss,1967) and autobiography. The primary approach to data capture was through unstructured interviews. The chapter also reviewed the ethical implications of the research.

Chapter Six moves on to consider the pilot interviews that were carried out as the first part of the data capture process.

## **Chapter Six - Pilot Interviews**

### **Introduction**

This chapter is concerned with the analysis of two pilot interviews. These two interviews were carried out over a two week period in June 2008. One interviewee, Geraldine, is female and the other, George, is male. Both work as middle managers in different areas of the public sector; one local government and the other healthcare. Geraldine discussed experiences of being in a learning set facilitated by Richard Graham and George's responses were based on being in a set on the University's MA in Management by Action Learning, facilitated by one of my other colleagues.

Geraldine's interview lasted thirty five minutes and George's lasted fifty minutes. In both cases one question was asked: "What is it like being a member of an action learning set?"

Thematic analysis was carried out in order to determine the themes or concepts that emerged from the pilot interviews; this was accompanied by a literature review that unpacked these themes. Theoretical sampling was used in order to determine the questions to be used in the next round of interviews. The chapter concludes with five questions that were used in the next round of interviews where three interviews were carried out.

### **Background to the pilot interviews**

The term pilot study can be used in two different ways in social science research. First, it can refer to feasibility studies which are "small scale version or trial runs done in preparation for the major study" (Polit et al, 2001: 467). However, a pilot study can also be the pre-testing or 'trying out' of a particular research instrument (Baker 1994: 182-3).

These are important reasons for undertaking a pilot study, but there are additional

reasons, for example, convincing funding bodies that your research proposal for the main study is worth funding. Thus pilot studies are conducted for a range of different reasons.

Jankowicz (2000:231) is of the opinion of piloting the work is to:

“Ask the questions you intend to ask, in the form that you intend to ask them, of a small number of people taken from the same population as your sample, you then analyse the answers in the way you have planned to do, to see if the results are likely indeed to give you the kind of information which you are seeking.”

De Vaus (1993: 54) advises, "Do not take the risk. Pilot test first." I thought that this was good advice as carrying out a pilot has distinct advantages.

The pilot study should give notice about where the main research project could fail, where the research approach may not be followed, or whether proposed methods or instruments are inappropriate or too complicated. I wanted to find out how the interviewees would respond to the initial open question of “What is it like being a member of an action learning set?”. For example, whether or not there was sufficient scope with this particular question and whether it would allow the conversation to flow without any real prompts from me, other than the usual polite utterances that we are expected to make in the course of a normal conversation. I also wanted to find out whether it was sufficiently innocuous to be non-threatening in order to give the interviewee enough confidence to talk comfortably to me about their experiences.

In addition I wanted to obtain a feel for what it is actually like to carry out a research interview. Interviewing for research purposes was not something in which I had a great deal of experience and I felt a little nervous at the prospect of it; a bit out of my comfort zone. Bryman and Bell (2003:170) discuss the idea that a pilot interview can provide interviewers with both experience of the interview process and “infuse them with a greater sense of confidence.” I was heartened when I read this, feeling a sense of comfort that this can be an issue for many researchers.

I was also a little wary of using a digital recorder, largely because it is not technology I use in my everyday life. However I am mindful that there are distinct benefits to using this equipment. It would allow me to not be overly concerned about writing down everything that is actually said so I can give consideration to how it has been said, specifically relating to the issue of body language. Additionally, I can listen very carefully, and ‘hear’ what the interviewee is saying, picking up points where necessary, listening for inconsistencies, anomalies etc. I have, however, noted that it is also sensible to maintain the skill of taking notes, creating a mind map whilst listening, there may be someone in the future that doesn’t want to be recorded, for a variety of differing reasons, or in extreme circumstances, the machine malfunctions.

Finally a pilot was useful for considering the location of the interviews. The choices were the interviewee’s place of work or somewhere else selected by the interviewee, which has the advantage of being more convenient for the interviewee, but risked being interrupted, or to arrange a meeting room within the University, which was preferable for me as it was highly unlikely that we would be interrupted.

### **Pilot Sample**

Lunsford et al (1995:105) describe a pilot sample as being “where only a small portion of the total population is sampled, and attempts to generalise the results and conclusions for the entire population is made”. As discussed in the previous chapter, the pilot sample population comprised of two people who had experience of being members of action learning sets at Huddersfield University. They were a ‘convenience sample’, students who were accessible at the time and both myself and my colleague, who had facilitated one of the sets, felt that they would be willing to engage with me in my research.

My rationale for having two pilot interviews was a desire to start the interview process for real, feeling that there was enough in the experience of the two, to find out about the interview process and what problems may come to light from two interviews.



The two who were asked to take part in the interviews were both former students as discussed earlier. Both interviewees successfully completed their programmes, which I thought would be more appropriate because they are no longer students in this university and would hopefully be able to speak freely. Here I am reminded of the work of Habermas (1972) in writing about critical management theory perspectives in research. He described what he termed as an ‘ideal-speech situation’ in which the interviewer aims to empower the interviewee through ‘democratic social relations’. However, as these individuals were now former students then the power difference was removed and the individuals would be able to speak freely.

### **Interviewing Skills**

Kvale (1996), cited in Bryman and Bell (2003:350), proposes a list of ten criteria for a successful interview. From that list I found the following as useful prompts to remember during the interviews:

- Clarity: ask simple easy short questions and don’t use jargon;
- Gentle: let interviewees think, give them time to finish, tolerate pauses;
- Sensitive: listen attentively to what is being said and how it is said; Finally, and probably the most important one for me to remember;
- Balance: Don’t talk too much or too little.

I am aware that by electing one primary question means that a balance needs to be struck between the tension of tolerating pauses and the temptation to fill the silence with prompts to ensure that I am not tempted to lead and, inadvertently, elicit my own opinions.

### **Pilot Interviews – Introduction**

On the issue of process, I decided that on the first interview I would need to use a digital recorder in order to gain a verbatim transcript of the interview. I would also construct a mind map that would capture the main points of the interview. In the

second interview I would not use the digital tape recorder; I would simply make notes either in linear format or by creating a mind map. This strategy would then allow me to make an informed decision as to which would be the best method in terms of data recall and the ease of the subsequent analysis.

### First Interview

I telephoned George to ask if he was willing to take part in the interview, I told him that the only thing I would ask him was about his experiences of being a member of an action learning set. He asked if I was able to come to his place of work because it was easier for him and I agreed to do this. I arrived on the day of our interview five minutes early in order to compose myself before going into his organisation. We chatted in his office for about thirty minutes whilst drinking tea. George is a former student of a colleague of mine so our conversation was largely about his career after he completed his Masters degree. I then asked if we could start the interview. I asked if it was okay to use the tape recorder and reassured him about confidentiality, informing him that a secretarial colleague of mine would be typing the work. Other than her, myself, my supervisor and examiners would have access to the work; he was fine with using the digital recorder.

The digital recorder was placed on the table between us, ensuring that it would pick up both our voices and I began by asking the question “What is it like to be a member of an action learning set?” As George began to speak I immediately started to construct a written mind map on paper that captured some of what was said. I wrote down what he said making a conscious effort not to start coding the data whilst actually in the field. I was also mindful that I should comment as little as possible, other than to probe a little deeper into some issues or seek clarification where needed. I was also able to observe the body language that he displayed, hopefully being sensitive to non-verbal clues that the interviewee may be giving off. George appeared to be relaxed and able to tell the story of his understanding and feelings of being a member in an action learning set; there was both emotion and passion in his voice when he talked about the change he had undergone as a result of being a member of the action learning set.

## Second Interview

The second interview was arranged purely by chance, at a time when I was about to try and locate a suitable candidate for the next interview. Geraldine was a former student on the MSc Professional Leadership by Action Learning and Inquiry and had contacted me by chance because she wanted to study for a Professional Doctorate and wanted some advice from me. I emailed back and agreed to meet with her, asking if she would mind me interviewing her in relation to her experiences of being a learning set member; she agreed. We agreed to meet at the University, in a meeting room that I booked. Similar to George, we chatted about her career and her desire to study for a Professional Doctorate. I then asked if we could start the interview, she agreed. I started the interview by asking her “What is it like to be a member of an action learning set?” As before, as soon as she began to speak I began to make notes, on this occasion not recording the interview by means of a digital recorder. I listed her points in a linear format, choosing not to draw a mind map as before. This wasn’t a conscious decision, something that I had planned to do, I just decided upon it on the spur of the moment.

She was very relaxed and spoke quite quickly at first; almost excitable about the process she was involved in. She was animated with some of her points and I felt she needed to ensure that I understood what she was saying. The interview lasted for about thirty five minutes. I thanked her for her time with this.

### **Analysis of the pilot interviews**

The data I obtained took the form of two conversations, in that the interviews were unstructured, and were the thoughts of two individuals reflecting upon a common experience. The data was in the form of a transcript from the George’s interview, and a page of notes and bullet points from the second interview. Appropriate to the methodology of grounded theory I took a thematic/theoretical sampling approach to the data. I identified the following themes:

1. Expectations of set member’s prior knowledge based upon job role.

This was an issue that came out in only one of the interviews and was concerned with the expectation from others that this individual has the appropriate knowledge to accompany that particular role. As George highlights, this is a situation where possibly there is pressure placed upon individuals to be ‘seen to know’.

*“...I thought initially people were very guarded and maybe even myself, because you’re senior managers in the organisation, it comes back to discussions we had earlier on about ‘you’re expected to know’ and ‘you should be at that sort of level’...”*

*“I would never have said that in my work environment, I might do now because I’m confident, I’d say to peers ‘I didn’t understand that, explain that again’, if you’d asked me that before I’d not have said that. There’s an expectance that I should know, because I’d feel embarrassed in front of my peers, they’d be like ‘you don’t understand?’ and in reality is the majority of people in the room don’t understand to, they just daren’t speak up and I’m sure you’ve had that experience, where you’ve said something in a meeting and someone goes ‘I don’t understand that either, say it again.’”*

2. Expectations of set member’s performance in action learning set.

George felt that *“you have to be more personal”* he added:

*“I think that sometimes... if you’re being lectured to you tend to just listen to it and then you go away and you have to write an assignment or whatever, but when your actually in that [Action Learning] environment you actually have to be more personal, because it’s a more relaxed environment, you don’t know these people.”*

These comments possibly relate to the expectation of both personal and professional aspects of the individual set members and a willingness to discuss these personas. This may be linked to his experiences of group size, i.e. in a small group so members may be inclined to discuss what they wouldn't ordinarily discuss in front of a larger group. It may also relate to the style of facilitation, that encourages a more holistic and personal approach, others remaining within the professional domain.

### 3. Disclosure of personal information.

Allied to the point above, is the issue of disclosure and the creation of a psychological climate, where set members can begin to trust one another and feel empowered to engage in differing levels of personal disclosure. George illustrated that by saying:

*“I would say part way through the actual process people were absolutely seriously honest with each other, to the point that XXX was talking about issues relating to her family, there were things like XXX talking about issues relating to his time in Ireland, which I think had been locked away in their minds 40 years, and maybe they'd consciously not had someone to talk to or maybe its easier to speak to people you don't really know.”*

Geraldine began to discuss the nature of what was being disclosed, she said that *“personal problems were brought in.”* and felt that:

*“The sets shouldn't be used for the purpose of consulting individual's on their personal problems and it should remain focused on work related issues.”*

In contrast, George said:

*“...it sounds awful but at some points, even for me, it gets like a bit of a therapy session in the sense that you get out of your system all of the bogey men and all of the issues that are behind your mind. I suppose at one time I would never have said that, I would never have talked to a group of people about how I felt.”*

He added:

*“I saw maybe 3 or 4 people at times reverting to tears because of how they were, what they were talking about and how things that had bothered them, and they became a little bit distracted by what they were learning as at times is it was about them as individuals, because they were talking about their personal experiences in life and obviously it came back to the reason we were there and then it formed a bit of a line and at times I think that even I talked about my personal life.”*

These differing perspectives suggest that there are opposing views as to what should be disclosed in the action learning set.

4. The action learning set facilitator.

Geraldine felt that action learning is a:

*“sophisticated way of learning and may not meet the needs of all the set members and it needs a skilled facilitator, someone who has an understanding of groups”.*

Accepting that, Geraldine felt that that action learning is different to other forms of learning, she identified one aspect of facilitation; skills, is there any other issue in relation to skills that needs to be explored further?

5. Personal confidence.

Both interviewees reported that being a member of an action learning set had had positive impact upon their levels of confidence. Geraldine felt that she had a stronger level of self belief and had “*the confidence to explore work alternatives*” and that she had experienced “*personal growth*” and was “*...starting to believe in themselves...*” as a result of the experience of taking part in an action learning set. George added to this by saying:

*“I think the whole process is about the Goleman, emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence took it right down to the heart of you and made you try to understand yourself and you could never get that unless you did an action learning set. Actually I think that what it does is it allows you to understand yourself. You saw me over a matter of 12 months plus, my confidence was quite low, although I maybe displayed confidence sometimes, I wasn’t always confident but to a point that when I came away my confidence was far far stronger.”*

### **Reflecting back on the pilot interviews**

In discussion of their own fieldwork, Pauleen et al (2007:232) write that:

“The extended period between each block of fieldwork provided time for transcription and analysis of the interview data. The in-between periods were also used for reflection, interpretation and strategy building. These reflective periods, which are built into the action research cycle as well as the grounded theory method”

I was heartened when I discovered the above work of Pauleen et al (2007) as I intuitively felt that I needed to reflect upon the experience I had had of actually doing the first interviews. I needed to locate the experience into the thesis that would add continuity to the story of the research but would also form data for me to analyse and learn from and form a strategy for the next interviews.

The reflections were primarily concerned with the experience of data collection in order to adopt the approach that I was most comfortable with and would give me a richer set of data. The following excerpts from my research notes consider my thoughts and conclusions on the pilot interviews:

- The data obtained in the first interview was in the form of a transcript taken from the digital recorder. The data from the second interview was in the form of a page of hand written notes. In comparing the two sets of data, I felt that the transcript gave me more confidence as I could read the transcript, listen to the actual interview and be sure of what was actually meant by the interviewee. As the data in the second interview was in the form of notes, I only had my memory and interpretation of my notes to guide me. As a result, I was only fairly confident that I had got my recollections correct. Additionally, the data I had gathered from the second interview took the form of bullet points, therefore preventing me from including actual verbatim quotes, which I felt would give a richer feeling; almost being able to hear the person speaking to me again. In some sense this is the actual point of this thesis; to be able to hear the voices of action learning set participants on the issue.
- The digital recorder gave me the confidence that I needed in George's interview; I wanted to be sure that I would not miss any of what was actually said.
- By using the digital recorder I was also able to consider the body language of the interviewee because I wasn't overly concerned with missing the precise meaning of what was said. I then annotated my notes with a general comment on their non-verbal signals with such comments as 'very relaxed', 'spoke with enthusiasm'. Any part of the conversation that I couldn't really remember was addressed by reading the transcript and listening to the interview tape and hearing the interviewee's voice.



- Transcription of the tape and notes was easier when the interview was recorded. I felt more comfortable being able to go back and read the transcript. Summarising the main points in order to draw conclusions was easier when I had a full document to refer to. It ensured that I had fully understood the precise meaning of what was said.
- The choice of venue was influential. I felt the second interview was easier at the University because I had booked a meeting room and could ensure that we were not disturbed. On the first interview the Secretary came into George's room before the actual interview had started and there was always a possibility that she would return because he hadn't said that we didn't want to be disturbed. There was a sense of *this is works premises, therefore this is works time*.
- When writing up the main points of the two interviews it was easier to 'translate' George's as I was able to give extended verbatim quotes that clearly demonstrated the point of discussion. In contrast to that of Geraldine's, where I wasn't able to quote her fully in order to demonstrate the richness from the interview.
- The emerging picture was one of action learning being a positive experience. I noted that both interviewees spoke with enthusiasm about action learning, often reinforcing their thoughts with what I perceived as positive body language; positive expressions, animated smiles, almost a fondness and nostalgia attached to the memory. As stated earlier, after each interview I made a written note of what I had observed. In doing this I was, at a later date, able to remember the whole interview, i.e. what was said, how they sounded and how they appeared during the interview.

### **Reflecting forward to the next phase of interviews**

I decided to use the digital recorder, as it give me confidence in that I wouldn't miss

anything and I could include quotations from the actual interview, I felt that it was important not to miss the opportunity to include extended verbatim quotes in the analysis. I would also make notes in either a linear format or by using a mind map to accompany the transcript, these would be used as prompts in case there was anything I needed to refer back to in the course of the interview, for example, any questions that I may want to ask or to elaborate on a point.

Wherever possible I would carry out the interviews at the University. This would ensure that we would not be disturbed.

### **Chapter summary**

The following areas were the ones that I identified as being relevant to follow up in the first round of formal interviews:

- Expectations of set members' prior knowledge
- Expectations of performance of set members in the action learning set
- Disclosure of personal information
- The facilitator
- Personal confidence

I intended to ask the same opening question again: "What is it like to be a member of an action learning set?" When appropriate, I would interject with questions that addressed the main themes that emerged from the analysis of the pilot interviews. This would ensure clarification of points and build on the richness through further discussion of each question as and when appropriate. It would also ensure that the interview would be relaxed and that a conversation would take place as opposed to a semi structured interview which may limit the richness of the data emerging.

At this stage I was still concerned that I did not influence the interviewees by using leading questions, so I would introduce each question in as neutral a way as I could by simply prefacing each question with "What about..." as the questions became appropriate in the course of the interview.

The questions were:

What about the expectations of set members' prior knowledge?

What about the expectations of performance of set members in the action learning set?

What about the disclosure of personal issues?

What about the facilitator?

What about personal confidence?

The next chapter is concerned with the analysis of the first interviews and again uses both thematic and theoretical analytical approaches. It discusses new concepts that were identified and appropriate literature is included to unpack these themes. Theoretical analysis then informs the questions that will be used in the following interviews.

## Chapter Seven – Analysis of First Interviews

### Introduction

This chapter is concerned with the analysis of the first round of formal interviews in the field. Three interviews were carried out over a two week period in October 2008. All three interviewees were female; Mary, Alice and Jenny and worked as managers in different areas of healthcare provision, two for the National Health Service (NHS) and one for a private healthcare provider. The sample comprised of students on the MSc in Professional Leadership by Action Learning and Inquiry and had worked with either myself, in the case of Jenny and Mary, and Alice in the case of Richard. The sample was selected by using a purposive approach as all the interviewees had completed their programmes successfully. I felt that there was no compromise and interviewees would be able to speak freely. Through first hand knowledge, or vicariously through conversations with Richard about student progress, I had a view on their ability to be able to successfully contribute to an action learning set. I therefore made the assumption that they would be able to do the same in an interview situation in that I hoped that they would be as honest and as candid as they had been in the action learning sets.

All were approached by email informing them of my research interest and asking if they would agree to be interviewed here at the University. The interviews lasted between thirty to forty five minutes and, in all three cases, started with the open question “What is it like to be a member of an action learning set?” The rationale being that I wanted an easy question in order to help the interviewees feel comfortable and relaxed. The question was posed in what I hoped would be seen as non-threatening and an informal introduction, whilst establishing or re-establishing a rapport between us. Ellerman and Kleiner (1996:39) define rapport as “a relation marked by harmony, conformity, accord or affinity”. They state that:

“When two people are in rapport, they have the ability to understand the other person’s representation of the world. Interpersonal communication flows when rapport exists.

Understanding the dynamics of rapport enables one to remake the way the world perceives you, so that barriers to effective relationships are removed. Occasionally, two people ‘hit it off’ or, have an automatic feeling of rapport. However, this is not always the case, and it is at these times that it is important to remember that rapport is something that can be developed.”

Bryman and Bell (2003:122) commenting on the importance of rapport argue that:

“...very quickly a relationship must be established that encourages the respondent to want (or least be prepared) to participate in and persist with the interview.”

Ellerman and Kleiner’s (1996:39) statement suggests that I would be party into a conversation that would be a consideration of the other person’s world view which is what I felt that I needed to capture as grounded theory and the idea of discovery was the dominant research process here in this thesis. I would have to relinquish control of events and suspend my world view that would have inevitably been influenced by my academic background.

I was aware that developing rapport could encourage a degree of friendliness with the interviewees, and was mindful that it is important that that this is not stretched too far and it may compromise the quality of the data that I captured. As a result of my familiarity with some of the interviewees there may be a temptation to wander off course, moving into discussions that didn’t really have a link with the focus of this research. This could lead to poor data where the person being interviewed is aiming to please and so give the interviewer responses that they think they want.

### **Analysis of interview questions**

The interviews then further progressed with more in-depth questions to be used as prompts as identified in Chapter Six. To reiterate:

1. What about the expectations of set members prior knowledge?

2. What about the expectations of performance of set members in the action learning set?
3. What about the disclosure of personal issues?
4. What about the facilitator?
5. What about personal confidence?

The interviewees discussed their experiences of either being in an action learning set that led to an award, an action learning set that was organisationally based or in some instances, both.

The following is the subsequent analysis of the three interviews. When selecting the quotations included in the thesis I was aware that these would form the basis of the conclusions drawn. With this in mind I have included quotations that I feel are representative of what was said throughout the course of the interviews, and where possible, I have also included quotations that give opposite views, thus avoiding a situation in which I looked for things that endorsed my particular point of view.

#### What about the expectations of set member's prior knowledge

This concept emerged from George, one of the pilot interviewees who was discussing the dilemma of being a senior manager and the expectations of other organisational members that he had the appropriate knowledge to accompany that role. He stated:

*“...because you're senior managers in the organisation, it comes back to discussions we had earlier on about 'you're expected to know.'”*

Interestingly, the question, “What about the expectations of set member's prior knowledge?” generated quite different responses in the first round of formal interviews. Alice, for example, responded:

*“Umm, I don't recall that we had to have any to be honest.”*

When I asked Mary the same question I gave her some background to the question by telling her what other interviewees had said, she responded:

*“Oh I don’t know, I didn’t look at it from that point of view. I think I had my own expectations that people would have prior knowledge, and it weren’t because of positions they held in organisations, but because they all had degrees already.”*

Jenny also didn’t support George’s view, when asked the question she simply said “*um, no*” then discussed something completely unrelated to the question. As the interviews progressed, I became increasingly unsure as to the validity of the question as responses weren’t responding to George’s original thoughts. Reflecting on this, initially, the phrase ‘you’re expected to know’ resonated with the idea of learning at work, and expectations of knowledge placed upon people who are in positions of seniority. The issue was that a manager may have problems in publicly acknowledging they have deficiencies in the knowledge they need to be able to perform a task and how that may be problematic for those individuals subordinate to them.

Reflecting upon the previous literature and thinking back to the interview, the issue George may have been referring to could be the perception of a person’s position in an organisation and the impact it may have on the other action learning set members in terms of hierarchy or status within the group.

However, it was Mary’s comment on the possession of a degree that made me think about differences in the set which could be linked to the issues of hierarchy and power within action learning sets. In relation to groups in general, Buchanan and Huczynski (1997:209) state:

“Group members will be accorded different amounts of status and hence a group will have a status hierarchy. They will be able to exert differing amounts of power and thus a power structure will emerge. In examining group functioning, social scientists have found it useful to consider difference among

group members in terms of their liking for each other, status, power, role and leadership... We need to remember that all are closely related and operate simultaneously in a group setting.”

#### *Status or hierarchy in the action learning set*

Status or hierarchy refers to the relative rank based upon honor or prestige. Hogg and Tindale (2007:353) suggest that status relations can be differentiated into either ‘status structure’ and ‘status value’. Status structure refers to “ranked ordered pattern of influence and deference amongst a set of actors” whereas status value refers to the “actors’ shared beliefs or social representations”. Smaller groups may have symbols of status within them, for example, generally within youth culture status is demonstrated through clothing, mobile phones and footwear. However whole societies confer status in other ways that include; occupation, ethnicity, gender, educational level or social background (Hogg and Tindale, 2007). An individual can earn their social status by their own achievements such as the type of occupation they have, with some seen as more prestigious than others or a person can have status by their inherited position achieved through birth e.g. son/daughter. Weber (1947) developed various ways that societies are organised in terms of hierarchical systems of power. These included social status, class power and political power.

Status therefore will be accorded to an action learning set member in differing ways; firstly by virtue of their position within the organisation which is synonymous with rank or ‘formal status’ e.g. Chief Executive, Vice-President, Team Leader, particularly if the action learning set is an ‘in-company’ set that comprises members from one organisation. Status may also be conferred by their position in the group through perceptions of an individual social status or ‘informal status’ due to their occupation. Traditionally, higher status was conferred to doctors, lawyers and teachers, but as part of the dominant celebrity culture this has now been extended to other jobs such as footballers and popular music artists.

#### *Power in the action learning set*

Buchanan and Huczynski (1997:214) define social power as:



“The potential influence that one person exerts over another. Influence is defined as a change in the cognition, behaviour or emotion of that second person which can be attributed to the first.”

As a result of acquiring status in the action learning set, the member may have a stronger power base within the group and therefore be more influential. An example of this maybe the shaping of group norms as seen in the work of Lieberman et al (1973: 268):

“Powerful or highly esteemed members of small groups not only shape group norms in the first place, but tend to be more constrained by norms. They are seen as embodying the norms in their own behaviour, thus serving to establish the norms for others”.

Mary’s comment on the possession of a degree prompted me to consider the possibility of the ‘halo’ effect with respect to the possession of a degree. Buchanan and Huczynski (1997:57) describe the halo effect as:

“A judgement of someone based on a striking characteristic, such as an aspect of their dress, speech or posture. Haloes can be positive or negative.”

When one positive attribute is identified in an individual then it is likely that other attributes will be attributed too. The question then becomes to what extent do set members attribute certain facets or characteristics to an individual because of the presence of one facet e.g. a person’s seniority in an organisation and the perception of perhaps their intelligence, skill level, competence etc.

As a result of the above I decided that I would suspend the idea of the dichotomy between the learner and the expert and pursue the possibility of status differentials in

action learning sets, encompassing the idea of perceived equality and hierarchy, culminating with the possible impact it may have on members in set and their performance in the action learning set. I subsequently chose to ask a series of questions in the second formal interviews, which will be outlined at the end of this chapter.

### What about the expectations of performance of set members in the action learning set?

A key theme that emerged from the interviews is the issue of trust; with honesty, openness, confidentiality, reciprocity and vulnerability as associated themes. In support of the presence of this theme, West and Cheouke (2003: 216) maintained that:

“The fundamental principles of action learning are mutual support, trust, empathy and challenge in a safe environment where creative ideas can be tested and debated.”

The next section discusses what the interviews revealed about the themes followed by a discussion relating to the creation of a climate in which trust emerges.

#### *Trust*

The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary (1973:2374) defines trust as:

“Confidence in or reliance on some quality or attribute of a person or thing, or the truth of a statement;  
That in which one’s confidence is put; an objective of trust;  
Confident expectation of something; hope;  
The quality of being trustworthy; fidelity, loyalty, trustiness.”

Like many other subjects in the Management and Organisational Behaviour field, the literature on trust is extensive. Hoy & Tshannen-Moran (1999:186) wrote that “trust is a multi-faceted and complex concept”, while Harvey and Drolet (1994:18) write that:

"Trust is much like love - we know it when we see it, but we are not sure what creates it. Trust is not an act or set of acts, but the result of other actions or variables".

Bennis and Nanus (1985:43) see trust as "... the lubrication that makes it possible for organisations to work". Conveying the idea that trust is essential for effective group and working relationships, and that it trusts that brings people together, Dirks (1999:30) argues that:

"Trust is commonly cited as a hallmark of effective relationships. This is one issue which experts from psychology, sociology, management, economics, and political science tend to agree."

Bulach and Peterson (1999:2) add an interesting dimension to trust with the idea of confidentiality, seeing trust as "an interpersonal condition that exists when interpersonal relationships are characterised by an assured reliance or confident dependence on the character, ability, truthfulness, confidentiality and predictability of others in the group". Hoy and Tshannen-Moran (1999) conducted an extensive review of the literature on trust; they identified five facets of trust: benevolence, reliability, competence, honesty, and openness.

### *Honesty and Openness*

The Shorter English Oxford Dictionary (1974:979) defines a state of being honest as:

"Having good moral character, virtuous and upright; Sincere, truthful, candid; that will not lie, cheat or steal; Ingenuous; open, frank."

The same dictionary (1974:1452) defines openness as:

"The quality of being open; The absence of dissimulation, secrecy or reserve; candour, sincerity."

Bulach (1993:382) defined openness as:

“An interpersonal condition that exists between people when:  
(1) facts, ideas, values, beliefs and feelings are readily transmitted; and (2) the recipient of a transmission is willing to listen to that transmission.”

With regard to these facets, Mary was very clear about the expectations of her own performance and that of other set members, she states:

*“I think the only expectation that I had of how I ought to behave and how I sort of expected other people to behave is that you’re honest and open about what you’re thinking and dealing with...”*

This was in contrast to Jenny who said:

*“Well I wasn’t expecting it to be honest I mean thought we’d get the course information I did know that you’d sort of sit down and talk about things but I didn’t actually give credit to the nature of it if that makes sense?”*

Clearly there are two opposing views on the level of honesty and openness that should occur within the action learning set. There may be possible differing interpretations of what is meant by the terms honesty and openness, and the extent to which set members are prepared to be honest and open.

### *Confidentiality*

If set members are to be honest in their discussions within the learning set, there will be an expectation that will be a high degree of confidentiality in the set. This was important to Alice who said, *“there is that confidentiality between you all what you say within that room stays within that room”*. She continues by saying:

*“...to go in and to find out that you would be talking about your personal feelings and emotions and experiences I think we had to do a lot of ground work to start off with just to build up that level of trust and confidentiality really, that that was something that we could rely on from the others...”*

Cain (1998:159) wrote that confidential information is commonly said to be “secret information that is disclosed or entrusted on the understanding that it will not be divulged to a third party”, this was a clear expectation on the part of Alice who added:

*“...so to actually sit round a table and basically open your heart out and share very personal and sensitive information, I’m not a person that trusts easy so it was an element of who would be feeding this back to whom, to make sure that whatever was said in that room stayed in that room...”*

### *Reciprocity*

Maister et al (2000:26) added another facet to the notion of trust; that being reciprocity, saying that “trust is about reciprocity: you help me and I’ll help you”. They elaborate further by adding:

*“You must do something to give the other people the evidence on which they can base their decisions on whether to trust you.”*  
(2000:17)

As Jenny succinctly commented: *“what bit of personal tit for tat are you going to give up”* illustrating the expectation part of the relationship as a way of creating trust. Further illustrated by Alice who said:

*“...I knew that that was dedicated time that I could actually come, once I’d learnt to trust people, I knew that was time that I could actually come and talk openly and independently, but I*

*would actually get an independent response back because these were people that didn't know the situation I was in and didn't know the people I was dealing with so as a result it was a very honest response back and actually offered me guidance as to how I could manage situations and manage things and do things differently...*”

This also illustrates the point that trust needs time to develop and may not be present on the first meeting of an action learning set.

Mary added by saying:

*“...so as a result it was a very honest response back and actually offered me guidance as to how I could manage situations and manage things and do things differently...”*

Rosen and Brown (1996:75) wrote "Trust has two parts. Being trusting - the ability to believe in others - and being trustworthy – being worthy of others' belief in you." This was illustrated by Mary who said:

*“...it was that sharing of experience and you then learnt from other's responses it offered you an opportunity to reflect and go off and try something different that perhaps otherwise we wouldn't have tried, so it was that bringing together of different mind sets really, different personalities, different professions, offering a supportive role.”*

Here she acknowledges that trust is about sharing of experiences and the willingness to take risks based upon the perception that other set members have being honest with her. Within this there is an acknowledgement that she is prepared to offer to same approach to others and can be trusted in her dealings with them.

## *Vulnerability*

A common aspect of trust is vulnerability and the willingness of the individual to be vulnerable. Mayer et al (1985) cited in Dirks (1999:4) conceptually defined trust as:

“A willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that party.”

Without vulnerability on the part of the individuals, there is no real need for trust. Creating trust entails some personal risks, and this is the essence of trust. Maister et al (2000:24) argue that:

“If you’re not a little scared on occasion, then you’re not taking a risk. And if you’re not taking a risk, you’re not likely to create trust.”

This idea was echoed by Mary, who commented on the experience of first entering the action learning set:

*“initially a bit scary because you were coming into a situation with individuals that you didn’t know...”*

Similarly, Alice explained how she first found the learning set:

*“nerve wracking; it was the unknown I think to start off with...”*

There is an expectation that if the learning set is to work successfully then set members should be open and honest in their dealings with other set members, which for some may be problematic. Weinstein (2005:218) asked an important questions of this issue:

“Is total honesty always possible, even desirable? Are there times when it is appropriate to be ‘economical with the truth?’ What purpose does dishonesty serve? Are they protecting themselves from something or someone? What is the cost of dishonesty?”

There is a strong sense that honesty has to be present for success in this form of learning which involves a degree of trust. Yet as Maister et al (2000:24) state, for this to happen set members are required to take risks which may mean that they feel vulnerable in the early learning sets, proving to be a frightening experience for some set members to learn to trust.

### *The creation of trust*

Trust, it would appear, is one of the fundamental principles of action learning (Wheless, 1978), but this does not instantly emerge, it would appear that it develops over time and can be precarious. This next section discusses who is responsible for creating trust in the learning sets, how trust is created and, also, how it can also be eroded.

### *Who is responsible for creating trust?*

Bentley (1994) cited in Kirk and Broussine (2000:15) said that “the facilitator has to create ‘safety’ and ‘trust’ in the group, so that the experience is ‘non-threatening’”, adding:

“I can only create the circumstances in which they feel safe and gain courage to be honest.”

Cranton (1994) cited by West and Choueke (2003:223) states that facilitators should “build a trusting relationship with the set”. She further suggests that the role of the facilitator is:



“To encourage risk taking within a climate that promotes consistency, safety and the removal of negative feelings.”

Weinstein (2005:218), when reflecting on an action learning set she was facilitating, alluded to the idea that the creation of the psychological climate, namely a ‘safe place’, was her responsibility, saying that “I felt I’d created a safe place” for her learning set members, and, describing her experiences of a Polish learning set, said:

“...How willing these ambitious young managers, emerging from a society which for fifty years exhibited the antithesis of action learning values, would take ownership and talk honestly and courageously when the right ambience was created.”

The Collins Concise Dictionary (2000:27) define the term ‘ambience’ as meaning “the atmosphere of a place”. I’ve taken this to mean the group psychological climate, which Rousseau (1988:140) describes as: “essentially, climate is individual descriptions of the social setting or context which a person is a part”. The above authors believe that it is the responsibility of the facilitator to create a climate in which set members can be honest and open with each other, citing examples of individuals who have an historical aversion to the idea of trust, but believing that this can be overcome, signifying through that comment that with the appropriate environment most people will learn to trust.

Costa, (1998:231) however believed that:

“Trust comes to life when people bond, when they share an experience, crisis or success that strengthens links and confirms expectations of each other”.

Mary illustrated with the point:

*“...once I’d learnt to trust people, I knew that was time that I could actually come and talk openly and independently, but I would actually get an independent response back because these*

*were people that didn't know the situation I was in and didn't know the people I was dealing with so as a result it was a very honest response back and actually offered me guidance as to how I could manage situations and manage things..."*

One thing that is clear is that the establishment of ground rules at the start of the learning set aids the creation of trust. Alice stated:

*"He (the facilitator) did set some ground rules like the confidentiality nature and the fact that not to interrupt people in mid flow so there were some ground rules that we agreed as a group... What we did was, he opened it up for discussion and he wrote them down as people called them out and then it was agreed as set members which we felt we wanted."*

There was a period of time in which Alice's learning set did not meet because their facilitator, Richard, was away from the University due to illness. Alice reported on the changing levels of trust in the learning set within that period, she stated:

*"We had a period of time where we didn't meet for obvious reasons and I think we lost some cohesion there, and what I discovered was that some people were meeting outside the group but weren't sharing that information so it was almost as though little cliques were developing, which then made it, there was some quite uncomfortable scenarios and I didn't, well I hope I didn't get involved in any of them myself, but there was almost some conflicting situations between some of the personalities in the group that those original norms of mutual respect and freedom of speech I think we'd lost those by that point."*

Whitman and Stock (1958) cited in McLeod (2003:446) asked:

“Whether it is acceptable for members to meet outside of sessions, this issue will resonate in each individual member of the group in so far as it resembles similar issues to their own lives. One member may bring strong feelings about betrayal...”

Alice continued by saying:

*“I think that cliques were building, there were people that were actually going out for meals together but were actually not including others in that. It was perhaps three or four individuals that were meeting up I later found out.”*

For Alice, the sub set that had emerged had a direct impact upon the set, she said:

*“It changed; it changed as people started to get to know each other out of the set. I mean I prefer to keep myself to myself and you know my husband will say I’m quite a loner but I had been given a piece of work to do, going away doing the research and then handing it in and I’m not bothered about getting to know people outside of that and I don’t think that that was ever held against me and I think that when I see people in the set they still talk and are still amicable and there’s no sort of aggression or ill feeling there but I think for other people it perhaps wasn’t the same.”*

Early analysis of the interviews suggest that trust is an important issue within action learning sets and there are important facets of trust: honesty, openness, confidentiality, reciprocity and vulnerability that need to be present before the set can effectively engage in action learning. The creation of a trusting climate takes time and is a collective responsibility, trust can also be assisted by the creation of ground rules. In order to have a better understanding of this area I need to delve deeper into this area. I subsequently chose to ask a series of questions, based upon the above analysis, in the second formal interviews, these will be outlined at the end of this chapter.

## What about the disclosure of personal issues?

Central to the effectiveness of an action set is the concept of personal or self disclosure. This particular theme emerged from the analysis of the pilot interviews.

Dindia (2002:169) wrote that:

“Self disclosure refers to the process by which one person verbally reveals information about himself or herself (including thoughts, feelings and experiences) to another person”.

Personal-disclosure is a primary way in which individuals become acquainted with one another, and in the initial encounters they will reveal information such as names, place of work, where they live, moving onto thoughts and feelings as the conversation progresses over time (Dindia and Timmerman, 2003).

One of the roles in an action learning set is that of the presenter, as discussed in Chapter Two. This will inevitably mean that a certain amount of self disclosure will be involved for the presenter, in the hope that this disclosure will ‘beget’ disclosure from other set members, on the basis of a ‘trust attraction’ (Dindia, 2002:175). This occurs if the presenter reveals personal information about themselves as the other set members feel trusted. Jourard (1971:66) introduced the idea that disclosure is reciprocal and describes how:

“In ordinary social relationships, disclosure is a reciprocal phenomenon. Participants in dialogue disclose their thoughts, feelings, actions etc. to the other and are disclosed in return. I called this reciprocity the ‘dyadic effect’; disclosure begets disclosure.”

There is however a balance to achieve in the disclosing of personal information. McGill and Brockbank (2004:147) described self-disclosure as a ‘leap of trust’ but cautioned that:

“Too much self-disclosure is embarrassing. Too little and we

may find we do not relate to others and reduce our capacity to reflect upon ourselves in the set.”

McGill and Brockbank (2004:147) highlight four interpersonal aspects to being a presenter, namely *congruence*; a way of being genuine, being real, sharing feelings and attitudes as well as opinions and beliefs/judgements, *self-disclosure*; what we reveal about ourselves in the first person, the emphasis on “I” as opposed to “You” or “We” as a way of taking ownership of that statement, *managing emotion as a part of reflection* and *receiving feedback*; again as a part of the process in reflecting in a social learning context.

One of the skills of being a presenter is an understanding of yourself. As seen in Chapter Two, quite often an action learning set can be started by asking members to say how they feel at the start of the set, perhaps reflecting upon the time in between meetings and what has happened that may have been positive or negative for them. This requires the skill of understanding oneself as a part of understanding others, knowing what is happening inside and how that may impact upon how we may relate to others in the set. McGill and Brockbank (2004:150) cite the Johari window as a useful insight into how people relate to one another. The model is also referred to as a 'disclosure/feedback model of self awareness' and is concerned with the concept of knowing and not knowing one's own knowledge/feelings or inner self. The model is a cognitive psychological tool developed by Joseph Luft and Harry Ingham in 1955 in the United States, and is used to assist people in gaining a better understand of their interpersonal communication and relationships, whilst acknowledging personal barriers they may be subconsciously erecting thus preventing disclosure.

The Johari Window represents information: feelings, experience, views, attitudes, skills, intentions, motivation, etc. within or about a person in relation to their group, from four perspectives. The terminology refers to 'self' and 'others'. 'Self' means oneself, the person subject to the Johari Window analysis. 'Others' means other people in the person's group or team. The model comprises four regions, also known as areas, quadrants, perspectives or window panes as follows:

1. What is known by the person about him/herself and is also known by others - open area, open self, free area, free self, or 'the arena'.
2. What is unknown by the person about him/herself but which others know - blind area, blind self, or 'blind spot'.
3. What the person knows about him/herself that others do not know - hidden area, hidden self, avoided area, avoided self or 'facade'.
4. Unknown area or unknown self.

Interaction is dependent upon how much we as individuals are prepared to disclose to one another and how far an individual is prepared to disclose depends upon both personal and contextual matters such as whether they value openness or privacy, the values of the set, the norms of the set and what is felt appropriate to the set by the individual. McGill and Brockbank (2004:154) discuss the idea of appropriate disclosure and define appropriate as:

- amount (how much)
- depth (how deep)
- duration (how long)
- the target (to whom)
- the situation (time and place )

When asked the question about what was it like to be a member of a learning set and how they felt about personal disclosure, interviewees said that initially they felt a little uncomfortable with the idea. Mary, reporting that *“people were uncomfortable with it and straight away”* while Alice describes how at the first learning set meeting was:

*“a bit scary because you were coming into a situation with individuals that you didn't know”.*

At this stage it may have not felt to be an appropriate situation to disclose too much personal information, in terms of not enough time had elapsed for set members to feel comfortable. Thus members preferred to stay within quadrant 3; the hidden area of the Johari window because of fear of the unknown as illustrated with Mary's

comments:

*“Oh lets see, what was it like, from start to finish... nerve wracking, it was the unknown I think to start off with.”*

Jenny, when asked what it was like to be a member of an action learning set elected to discuss personal disclosure using the term “honest”, she said:

*“Well I wasn’t expecting it to be honest I mean thought we’d get the course information I did know that you’d sort of sit down and talk about things but I didn’t actually give credit to the nature of it if that makes sense.”*

On asking for clarification as to what she meant by the term ‘give credit’ she replied:

*“Well what I mean is, I’m not always very good at talking about me, you know I can talk about anything but me, indirectly I can talk about me more of a third person, you know when we went round the group you know that kind of stuff, you know I’ll be honest it wasn’t something I was comfortable with at the very beginning.”*

At this stage was she feeling uncomfortable with the idea of moving from quadrant three, the hidden area to quadrant one, the open quadrant? She elaborated with:

*“... even considering the job that I do which sounds daft in some ways because I can talk to people about a lot of personal issues you know people have disclosed that they have been sexually abused, you deal with abuse work and you talk about things that you’ve done in the past. People tell you about intimate relationships, I don’t mean sexual relationships but you know with their families, and that’s bread and butter to me, I have no qualms about doing it, talking about it, helping*

*people, counselling people you know what ever you want to talk about but it's not me doing it."*

When asked how she had dealt with the uncomfortable feeling that she was experiencing in refusing to disclose she replied:

*"I tend to deal with things by just closing down, as in outwardly I don't look like I'm closing down but to feel comfortable I have to close down inside like I switch off."*

Annie: *"And did you do that?"*

Jenny: *"Yeah I did, right at the beginning because I wasn't comfortable with some of the personal stuff."*

Reading through Jenny's account I was struck by the idea that she seemed to feel a degree of pressure placed upon her to disclose because other set members were starting to disclose, as seen in the following comment:

*"You realise everyone else was doing it and which is fine but everyone else doing it is not me doing it, and I'm quiet I suit myself, I make my own mind up and make my own decisions."*

McLeod (2003:449) draws upon the work of Lieberman et al (1973) which drew attention to some of the worrying aspects of group approaches, saying:

*"Situations can arise in groups where individual members are put under pressure to self-disclose or take part in an exercise despite their resistance or defences against doing so."*

I began to wonder if Jenny was experiencing 'cognitive dissonance' as seen in her acknowledgment of discomfort she was feeling in disclosing and about having to be "honest" in the learning set and speak about herself. This clearly made her feel



uncomfortable about being in a situation of being expected to do something that she didn't want to do or felt she shouldn't have to do, even if other members of the set were doing it. Rollinson et al (1998:130) describe cognitive dissonance as:

“The unpleasant mental feeling that arises when behaviour towards an object is not consistent with the attitude.”

Festinger (1957) quoted in Rollinson (1998:130) said:

“Cognitive dissonance assumes that consistency is sought between a consciously held attitude, and the behaviour towards an object. Festinger's basic propositions are:

1) Where in inconsistencies exist between an attitude and behaviour, an individual will develop a feeling of dissonance, i.e. that something is not quite correct.

2) The experience of dissonance is unpleasant and the person is strongly motivated to remove or avoid it, and the stronger the dissonance the greater the urge to do so.”

As a way of reducing that uncomfortable feeling, Jenny's defence to engage in dissonance reduction, in this instance by using dissimulation, i.e. maintaining the appearance that she was engaged but inwardly, closing down to protect herself.

Dissimulation as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary is “To conceal one's true feelings or intentions”. Weinstein (2005) wrote that not everyone is comfortable with disclosure and group members may actively engage in hiding the fact. Weinstein (2005:215) in discussing this in relation to one of her set members said:

“She hadn't been totally honest about herself and how her project was progressing. She had successfully presented herself as a capable, well organised woman who was very clear about what she wanted to achieve and how she was going to do it”.

With the set member admitting to her that she hadn't always been honest and she didn't think that they'd been honest with one another for fear of frightening or upsetting each other, which had resulted in an absence of challenge in the learning set.

Lastly, set members become more comfortable with disclosure as time moves on. In additional meta-analyses, Dindia (2002) confirmed that in social relationships personal disclosure is a reciprocal phenomenon. The results of her meta-analyses also provided support that self-disclosure processes are reciprocal both in the beginning stages of relationships between strangers, and in more advanced relational stages. Mary made the following comment:

*“I really don't know I think it was because people felt safe to do so that it would be understood and that it would be alright and no-one got any mixed messages after that.”*

In this particular case, she was referring to the idea of feeling safe in the learning set and that other set members understood the need for safety in the set. Edmondson (2002:3) refers to the concept of 'psychological safety' and defines it as “a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking” with “interpersonal risk taking” meaning “a sense of confidence that others will not embarrass, reject or punish someone for speaking up.” Mary expressed this notion as she explained:

*“then it became a very safe place, because you kind knew everyone and had a good idea of where they were coming from and their issues they were dealing with and you were able to be a bit more free and were able to disclose stuff that you ordinarily wouldn't have done at the beginning.”*

Adding to the idea of trust and the ability to speak freely in the set, Alice added:

*“People were making right noise and saying it's fine and I think that almost gave message your licensed to be like that and that's fine no-ones going to say it's not the right place to do it.”*

It appears that as set members become more comfortable with each other then a climate of trust apparently emerges and disclosure may become less problematic for some, but not others. The follow up questions are listed at the end of this chapter.

### What about the facilitator?

As briefly discussed in Chapter Two, each action learning set has specific roles within the set, one of the roles being that of the facilitator or set advisor. Pedler and Abbott (2008:187) point out:

“There are also many synonyms for the facilitator role, including coach, consultant, trainer, leader, animateur, moderator, counsellor and adviser.”

In using the term “facilitator”, McGill and Brockbank (2004:185) explain that this person is very different from a teacher or a trainer as those referred back to the traditional didactic approach that was outlined in Chapter Four. They wanted to be sure there was a clear distinction in the terms that are used when describing this particular role in the action learning, and went so far as to differentiate it from the term ‘set advisor’ which is also used (O’Neil, 1996) they argue that:

“The first use of the term ‘set advisor’ for the person who facilitates a set implies a particular model of learning where a group of individuals seek the ‘advice’ of a another individual who is perceived as ‘expert’ in some aspects of the sets activities.”

The Concise Oxford Dictionary defines the term ‘facilitation’ to mean “to make easier, promote and help forward.” Bens (2000:5) defines facilitation as:

"One who contributes structure and process to interactions so groups are able to function effectively and make high-quality

decisions. A helper and enabler whose goal is to support others as they achieve exceptional performance."

According to the literature, the learning set facilitator can play many differing roles (McGill and Beaty, 1992; O'Neil and Marsick, McGill and Brockbank, 2004) and includes that of a supporter, a challenger, a teacher, a reflector, and a questioner. Kaner (2007:32) elaborates on the theme of supporter by discussing the role of the facilitator as being:

"The facilitator's job is to support everyone to do their best thinking. To do this, the facilitator encourages full participation, promotes mutual understanding and cultivates shared responsibility. By supporting everyone to do their best thinking, a facilitator enables group members to search for inclusive solutions and build sustainable agreements."

Heron (1999) discussed facilitator's differing approaches to working with groups which included:

1. *The hierarchical mode.*

This is a mode in which the facilitator directs the learning process and exercises power over the group and does things for the group e.g. leads from the front by thinking and acting on behalf of the group. The facilitator decides on the group's objectives with regard to the learning process, the programme of activities, manages the group feelings and provides structure for learning.

2. *The co-operative mode.*

Here the facilitator is co-operative and shares power regarding the learning process and manages the different dimensions with the group; the facilitator enables and guides the group to become more self-directing in the various forms of learning by conferring with them. The facilitator prompts and helps group members to decide on the programme and gives meaning to their experiences. In this process, the facilitator may share his/her own opinion but is only one among

the group. Outcomes are always negotiated with the group as the facilitator is a collaborator with the other members of the group in devising the learning process.

### 3. *The autonomous mode.*

In this mode, the facilitator respects the total autonomy of the group and doesn't do things for them, or with them, but gives them total freedom to find their own way, exercising their own judgment without any intervention from the facilitator. The group has total responsibility for deciding on the format of the programme. The essence of learning is unprompted by the facilitator who simply creates space for it. However, this does not mean the abdication of responsibility, but simply the subtle art of creating the right conditions within which the group can exercise full self-determination in their learning. Weinstein (1999:135) saw the main task of the set advisor was to encourage the set, and the individuals within the set stating that the advisor should "look, listen, question, think, understand and learn" and that the advisor should be part of the set. According to Weinstein the advisor's tasks are:

- To help set members focus on appropriate projects or tasks that they bring, and to work with them with the help and encouragement of the other set members;
- To make set members consciously aware of everything they do, say, think and feel;
- To draw attention to the continuous learning opportunities that exist both within and outside the set;
- To maintain the very specific processes in the set, which enable all this work and learning to take place; and
- To model effective behaviour and language which results in constructive working and learning in the set, and to help set members understand and adopt both.

Revans (1982:15), however, saw a limited role for set advisers, stating that the role of the facilitator was:

“To launch the set quickly . . . there may be a need when it is first formed for some supernumerary. . . Such a combiner, brought in to speed the integration of the set must contrive that it achieves independence of them at the earliest possible moment. . .”

He continued on to say that he saw no on-going role for set facilitators, stating that:

“It is vital that action learning... escape yet another round of dependence upon ambiguous facilitators... it is particularly important that the interpretation of what is going on within the set is not unduly influenced by an uninvolved facilitator.”

In contrast, many of the leading writers on action learning (Pedler, 1996; Weinstein, 1995) have articulated the need for good facilitation in ensuring successful action learning sets. In his edited collection, ‘Action Learning in Practice’ Pedler (1991:291) summarised the position as such:

“There are three extant models of the set adviser role:

1. Revans’ own implied model of the initiator who withers away as the set begins to operate;
2. The role of the facilitator, who encourages giving and receiving between participants and who makes explicit the learning process; and;
3. The managerial role involved in steering the action learning group through the various stages of development from formation to mature action and learning.”

The literatures described above were all evident in the descriptions given by the interviewees. In relation to the managerial role, for example, Alice commented that the group had evolved and become self sufficient:

*“...but actually it was a learning set that had reached a particular point in its evolution in so there was less direction...” and basically I felt that you were there to sort of summarise and occasionally try and calm things down if it got a little bit overheated that in terms of coming up with conclusions, we were actually coming up with our own conclusions and so the learning sort of skills the learning type had progressed from directed learning to something we actually self-directed ourselves and worked through ourselves, so it was that sort of evolution of the set...”*

The position of the facilitator, as described here, is seen by Kirk and Broussine (2000:13) as desirable:

“The aim of facilitation is, we believe, to establish and hold an environment within which learning is created. The task of facilitation is to enable the group to create learning and to be aware of the processes of doing so experientially through the dynamics of the group.”

When first presented with the idea of facilitating an action learning set it may appear daunting. I was fortunate over the years been of being able to learn some skills, primarily by trial and error, and then latterly by working with Richard Graham, which gave me the opportunity to consider and reflect upon his style, and to some extent imitate his style (Bandura, 1977). McGill and Beaty (1992:107) advocated learning about facilitation by being a member of an action learning set for a period in time, roughly one year, and then those set members “who are willing and who are confident of initiating a set, move onto new sets” which is, in some respects, what I did. In contrast to this approach O’Hara et al (2004:33) said that they would find little evidence that this approach actually works stating that “observing a skilled facilitator in action provided for insufficient development of the skills of facilitation for set members to have the confidence to initiate new sets as facilities themselves. They felt that the skills needed for effective facilitation should be developed prior to the commencing of facilitation of a set.

There appear to be two schools of thought with opposing views. Having been initiated into the art of facilitating by watching and reflecting, it seems appropriate to theorise about it and consider what writers do say are the useful skills required for effective facilitation of action learning sets.

### *Skills for facilitation*

Before considering what skills are required in this context, I think that the broad nature of facilitation should be remembered. An action learning set is a unique group in its own right, and is not the same as other groups, such as work groups that may require additional skills such as role play, conflict resolution techniques. O'Hara et al (2001:32) provide a useful list as a starting point for the skills required for successful action learning set facilitation, which include:

- Questioning
- Active listening
- Giving and receiving feedback
- Understanding group processes
- Creative problem solving
- Personal confidence

Beaty et al (1993) identified a range of skills that added to and further developed the work of O'Hara et al (1996), these included:

- Questioning skills to help people to find their own solutions to their problems.
- Active listening skills to communicate to people that they were being understood; to help them work out their own solutions but not give solutions; to help them clarify their situation, the facts, their thoughts, and their feelings; to hear without judging or evaluating.
- The ability to give and receive feedback to help people learn and develop; to increase their self-esteem and to make them feel valued.
- An understanding of group process to appreciate the difference between task and process and between helpful and sabotaging behaviours.



- Creative problem solving skills to provide a range of tools to help the set when they were ‘stuck’.
- The skill of reflection to plan for future action and to help derive the learning from action.
- Understanding the process of learning to enable people to appreciate the variety of ways in which people can learn.

When asked about the role of the facilitator Jenny was very specific about her thoughts. She described ‘challenging’ and ‘frustrating’ as being important elements of facilitation:

*“I found it challenging, I found it frustrating... Well challenging actually means in that you were very good at pulling things out of people when I might not always have been comfortable with things being pulled out of me but you always left it open for a choice, you know either yes or no but not the end of that, but it was done in such a way that it was sort of subtle but it was good because it did pull things out in a structured way.”*

At this point I asked Jenny to explain her comment about the term ‘frustrating’, she reported:

*“Frustrating because you didn’t always let things drop, do you...Frustrating in that it was never a yes or no answer from you it was a what do you think about that, what do you feel about that, it was open ended response when someone said something it wasn’t well is that what you think and then shut it down it wasn’t yes or no it was left in such a way that, not hanging because that’s unfair, but you had to say more than yes or no, more of a how is that for you what was that like, you know those kind of things and that’s something that I find frustrating... You’re not given an easy option to just say it and*

*be done with it or finish it at the end of that sentence its about the learning, were all reading things outside of it..."*

From Jenny's responses, I decided I needed to follow up on set members expectations of the facilitator's role and what skills the facilitator demonstrated. The questions for the second round of formal interviews are outlined at the end of this chapter.

### What about personal confidence?

Personal confidence or self confidence, as it is often referred to, was an issue that was raised by interviewees in Chapter Six, but this was only raised by Geraldine. As a result I thought it would be useful to delve further into this area.

Lindenfield (1995:29) argues that self confidence is made up of 'learned social skills' and 'personality attributes', which are divided into outer and inner confidence. He states:

"The outer set of components gives us the kind of confidence which most people would instantly recognise. When we possess them, we visibly demonstrate our self-assurance and self-control through our appearance and behaviour. We have well-developed social skills in four areas:

- Communication;
- Self-presentation;
- Assertiveness; and
- Emotional control.

Inner confidence is, on the other hand, much less obvious to the outside world because it is essentially a more privately felt experience of inner peace and psychological strength. Its main components are:

- Self-love;
- Self-knowledge;

- Clear personal goals; and
- Positive thinking.”

When asked about the experience of being a member of an action learning set and whether or not it had had an impact on their personal confidence, responses included the following. From Mary:

*“Oh god not half! Yeah it’s gone up bucket loads, bucket loads!”*

Alice explained:

*“I think the turning point for me was the taking stock assignment looking back going back where I’d been what I’d done and where I wanted to go it was that self awareness really looking into me as a person, a leader and a manager, it really did me to put things into perspective and it started to shift my perception of me which had a knock on effect in terms of how I did things and I felt a bit more confident about how I approached things and I got a lot of good.”*

Jenny considered that ‘feedback’ had been important in boosting her confidence:

*“...feedback as well and that’s always a thing for me if someone tells me I’m doing things right that boosts my confidence...”*

All of the interviewees were of the opinion that being a member of an action learning set had had a positive impact on their personal and professional lives. However, action learning in terms of an individual’s actual learning and development does have its critics. As Wallace (1990) cited in Harrison (1996:27) argues:

“The approach has rarely been examined for the coherence of its principles, rigorously evaluated, or compared with evidence from elsewhere about how professionals learn to improve their job performance.”

Taking on board Wallace’s (1990) point, the question of whether an individual’s work performance had improved, and if so, how, was to be addressed in the second round of formal interviews. The question for the next interviews is identified at the end of this chapter.

### **Reflecting back on the first round of interviews**

At first I thought that data collection would be relatively easy. I set out with the intention of asking an open question accompanied by a set of questions that were to act as prompts. Those prompts in my mind did not have any overlap in terms of subject matter, therefore, with only five questions the coding would be a relatively easy process, or so I thought.

#### *Interviewing*

During the interviews I found that respondents didn’t answer the questions in the order I’d set the questions. As the conversation flowed some of the points I wanted to consider later in the interview came up. However I thought that to interrupt proceedings may have altered the flow, so I encouraged the respondents talk through their various stories of their experiences, interrupting if there was a natural pause to seek clarification or to elaborate on a point to aid understanding. In doing this I felt that I was able to add to the richness of the data captured.

#### *Coding*

To some extent I felt that I was starting to subconsciously code during the course of the actual interviews i.e. in the field. This was something that I was conscious of and I did make real effort not to do that, as I describe in the introduction. The key to the

work here is that it was the thoughts of the interviewees and not mine that were important. I was very quickly able to get a feel for the issues that arose in the transcripts and how they formed part of the first phase of interviews and was surprised at the richness of the data that I gathered from this process. Initially I had been concerned about the number of people I was able to interview, concerned that it may not be enough. However as the various stories started to unfold and the coding took place I began to appreciate that it wasn't the number of interviews that was the issue, but the quality that had been captured. I considered that I had very rich interviews and had captured some important data.

### *Interpretation*

When commencing the analysis and interpretation of the data, I hadn't envisaged the complexity of the data itself and the interconnectivity of the themes that were to emerge. It was challenging to discern what was linked, because in a sense they are all interlinked. The metaphor of a bowl of spaghetti resonated strongly in my mind throughout this task. At first I was little overwhelmed with the task of analysis. However, speaking to others who had been in a similar position to myself, the advice given was to persevere and some form or order would emerge, albeit a messy one, given the nature of what was being researched.

Once settled into the task, the concept cards that I had elected to use proved to be invaluable in order to extract the emerging themes, as data that was similar in nature could be placed together to compare and contrast and slowly a picture began to emerge. The picture was one of lots of loose ends, for example, the idea that individuals may dissimulate on initial encounter in the action learning set, possibly because of the presence of cognitive dissonance. In addition, the importance of language in the action learning set was highlighted, particularly in relation to the title, facilitator or set advisor and the learning approach that underpins the differing terms.

### *Was I meeting the initial aims of the thesis?*

Part way through the analysis phase I reflected on the interviews that I had carried out, coded and then analysed and a thought occurred to me. One of the primary aims

of this thesis is to give a voice to a group of people; learning set members who have previously been unheard, and I felt that I had started to do that. However I began to feel that there was more I could do.

In following the coding principles that I had, I felt that by ignoring the individual interviewee's names, in essence, I had chosen to ignore a richness that needed to be embedded into the research, I felt that I should use names and not numbers in order to give the thesis a greater sense of what I see is a human touch. I accepted that I had quite rightly assured anonymity to the respondents. I, of course, respected that, but I also owed something to the research. As a result I replaced all the occasions I had used the term interviewee with an individual pseudonym that would assure anonymity for the interviewees. These remained consistent throughout the thesis so readers could establish a recognition of the voice and a better understanding of them as individuals. Appendix Three illustrates the revised Prasad (1994) concept card.

### **Reflecting forward to the next round of interviews**

With the comments about the order of questions in mind, I endeavoured not to be overly concerned with managing the interviews and be a little more relaxed about the order of questions. I felt that if I managed the process more tightly I would only get back exactly what I had asked for. As I said in the opening statement about rapport, I had to be in a position to relinquish some of the control and be prepared to be influenced by what the interviewee was saying and the direction they wanted to go in as I knew that I could always return to any issue that I wanted to drill a little deeper into. Additionally, the order of interviewee responses was of no real concern because this would be dealt with when I was reading through the transcripts and coding them.

### **Chapter summary**

This chapter has analysed the first round of formal interviews, drawing out five themes that have a direct bearing on the research focus. The chapter then considered reflections on the research process, what I learned from carrying out the first stage of the interviews, with opportunities for me to reflect forward on how I would apply the learning in the next round of interviews.

The next chapter considers the second formal interviews focussing on five specific themes identified in this chapter. Each theme will be explored using the respective questions listed below:

*a) Status and hierarchy in action learning sets:*

- Was there a hierarchy of set members in your learning set?
- Did you feel equal to all members of the learning set?
- Were any members in your action learning set in a more senior organisational position to you?
- Did you find yourself acting differently with them?

*b) Trust in action learning sets:*

- Was your action learning set a safe place to be?
- Did it remain a safe place to be?
- Do you feel that members were honest and open?
- Who did you think created a trusting climate in your action learning set?
- Did you establish norms in the set?
- How were they established?
- Did set members adhere to them throughout the life of the set?

*c) Disclosure of personal information:*

- Did you feel comfortable with disclosure of personal information at the first learning set meeting?
- At the start of the learning set meetings did you feel under pressure to disclose personal information?
- Were you honest with yourself and the group at the start of the action learning set meetings?

- At what stage did you feel comfortable with disclosure of personal information?
- What had changed in the learning set to make you feel more comfortable?

*d) Facilitation:*

- What role did you expect the facilitator to play?
- In playing the facilitator's role, what skills did he/she demonstrate?

*e) The impact on the individual's job performance:*

- What has been the impact of being in an action learning set on your job performance?



## **Chapter Eight – Analysis of Second Phase of Interviews**

### **Introduction**

This chapter is concerned with the analysis of the second round of interviews in the field. Five interviews were carried out over a one week period in March 2009. Of the interviewees, one was male, Phil, and the remaining four were female; Jenny, Lisa, Michelle and Carol. They all worked in the public sector either in either health or education, with the exception of one who worked in private healthcare. Three of the interviewees discussed their experiences of being in an academic action learning set; one set facilitated by myself and the other two by another colleague, two interviewees referred only to experiences in an organisational setting.

The sample chosen used a combination of convenience, purposive sampling and critical case techniques. Purposive sampling, as discussed in Chapter Four, selects a sample for a specific purpose, in the case of this thesis; firstly, by asking Phil to be interviewed I ensured that the sample interviewed wasn't exclusively female, which may have incurred a gender bias. Critical case sampling was used in the case of Jenny. I asked Jenny if she would consent to be interviewed again as she had raised some interesting points on dissimulation in the first interview. I wanted to revisit these points in order to obtain a deeper understanding of what we had previously discussed and felt that she had a unique perspective on this issue. The remaining interviewees were selected purely as a convenience sample.

The interviews were in-depth with questions that acted as prompts. They lasted between thirty minutes to forty five minutes, and in all five instances were carried out at Huddersfield University in a pre-booked private room. All interviews were arranged either by telephone or email.

The interviews commenced with the usual pleasantries such as journey and parking etc. I then explained the nature of the research and the rationale behind it, to all of the interviewees with the exception of Jenny who had been previously interviewed. When I phoned Jenny to ask her if she would come back into the University, I briefly

restated that she had said something during the course of her interview that I wanted to explore a little further with her, so I briefly reaffirmed that to her. Permission to tape the interview was requested, this request was accompanied by an explanation that what was said was confidential and individual's names, if quoted, would be erased by the person transcribing the interview and their anonymity would be respected. I must add that at this stage I did fully intend to do this; however as discussed, I changed my position on that, not wanting to miss an opportunity to once again give a voice to individuals. Each interviewee remained totally anonymous because each they were given a different name, and if they referred to another person in the interviewee that persons name would be replaced with xxxx, similarly, if any of the interviewees mentioned another person's work organisation that would be replaced with xxx. In my opinion, this ensures that the only person who would be aware of the true identity of individuals concerned would be myself.

The questions devised in Chapter Seven followed the format as set out in Appendix One and were designed to elicit in-depth responses in five areas of interest I believed to be important in determining the interviewees' views of the effectiveness of action learning sets. As a result of the analysis of the first formal interviews, these areas were determined to be:

- a) Status, equality and hierarchy in action learning sets;
- b) Trust in action learning sets;
- c) Disclosure of personal information;
- d) Facilitation; and
- e) The impact on the individual's job performance.

The following is the subsequent analysis of the five interviews and discussion will take each of these in turn.

#### Status, equality and hierarchy within action learning sets

Chapter Four gave a brief introduction to both hierarchy and status and Chapter Seven discussed these issues in more depth and culminated with a series of questions for the next interviews. These were:

- Was there a hierarchy of set members in your learning set?
- Did you feel equal to all members of the learning set?
- Were any members in your action learning set in a more senior organisational position to you?
- Did you find yourself acting differently with them?

The interviews discussed in this chapter used the above questions as discussion points, supported with appropriate literature, to drill down further into the following themes:

### *Social hierarchy*

Interestingly enough, when I opened the first discussion with; “Was there a hierarchy in your learning set?” Carol said “*I think there was potential for hierarchy, I don’t think there was one, but there would be potential for it*”. An insight into this is offered by Hogg and Tindale (2007) who suggested the notion of a social hierarchy, comprised of social characteristics in which gender, age, occupation and ethnicity play an important role in relation to status and hierarchy within groups, particularly with regard to issues of respect, influence and deference that emerge in group member interactions. This affects how the group actually operates. Examples include; who in the group speaks with confidence, who gets noticed the most, who gets listened to, and as a result, who is more influential in the group. Lisa gave a brief insight into this when she talked about the differing levels of experience that set members had and her perception of them, she is quoted as saying:

*“You also know that some of the group have more kudos than others because they have more experience.”*

Carol, highlights the issue of the difference in action learning sets, as she comments on her own age, she stated that in one set she was “*definitely the oldest!*” and when I asked her if she was conscious of her age, she replied:

*“No not really, sometimes I am because I’ve been around quite a long time, but sometimes in other parts of life people treat you differently.”*

In summary Carol’s experience of feeling different is worthy of comment, but it could be argued that no real analysis of that has been carried out in this research, however, together with Lisa’s comment it does suggest that this paradigm may exist in society and groups as suggested previously by Hogg and Tindale (2008) and may exist within the learning set.

#### *Academic hierarchy*

When I asked Jenny if she felt there was a hierarchy within her action learning set, she said:

*“I think my biggest fear was at the beginning, particularly because I hadn’t got my degree and everyone else had one I always had it in the back of my mind ‘would I be out of my depth?’, ‘would I be able to achieve things?’”*

Jenny saw academic qualifications as a factor that differentiated set members, which in her case seemed to create a sense of self-doubt in her own ability, prompting her to ask the question ‘Would I be out of my depth?’. This was echoed by Carol who said:

*“Yes and coming into it without a degree was one of the worries that I had because you think they are used to academic writing and I’m not. So in a way I came in I suppose, to me, as less experienced than them because in a university situation they had already been through that process.”*

Both Jenny’s and Carol’s concerns about their absence of academic qualifications suggested that they felt some form of subordination, and that there was a hierarchy based upon academic achievement. Allied to the absence of academic achievement appears to be the issue of ‘going through the process’ i.e. having studied before and

therefore there is an understanding of what is actually involved. The 'how to do' is seen as an advantage and having prior knowledge that creates an advantage over other set members by being familiar with such issues as how to work as a group, understanding how to write essays, knowing how the system works etc. Carol added:

*“...I was at a disadvantage to them so it never occurred to me that there might be a hierarchical structure and if there was it would be those that had been through the process and those that hadn't.”*

At this point I should say that I think that Carol's understanding of an academic hierarchy in this context relates directly to the levels of academic and professional qualifications held by the individual members in the learning set. This is particularly important to note if the action learning set is one that forms the basis of an academic programme where the set members are pursuing academic advancement and ultimately a qualification, in the case here an MSc in Professional Leadership by Action Learning and Inquiry. If that wasn't the case and the set was one that was situated in an organisational setting then this may not be seen as an issue. However, in this instance, as with any group in both society and organisations generally, members will evaluate themselves against one another.

Whether or not set members hold a university degree or some other professional qualification will be an important differentiating factor for some set members. It would also indicate that a set member has had experience of working within the academic environment which may be seen as an advantage. I found an interesting article on the internet entitled 'Pecking Order' at [www.jackthelass.website.com](http://www.jackthelass.website.com), a website for mature students that discusses individuals' experience of studying in higher education. The article resonated with some of the individuals that I interviewed. The author said:

*“It also got me thinking about even among PhD students there is a hierarchy. My first couple of years I felt clueless and like I would never reach the heady heights that my more experienced colleagues had reached. That changed when I did my fieldwork*

- having my own data that I could discuss, rather than just talk about other people's work, marked a definite move up the ladder. I've noticed that the PhD students in my department who have only started in the last academic year or two treat me differently to how they treat each other - I have reached the dizzy heights of post-fieldwork PhD student."

Tuckman's (1965) theory of group development as discussed in Chapter Four, Page 71 commences with a discussion of stage one, the idea of the group forming. This is a situation where the set members gather information and impressions about each other. At this stage set members seek to establish two issues. Firstly, who has academic qualifications and as a consequence, have had experience of this process before. This establishes an academic hierarchy. Secondly, set members seek to establish what other set member's seniority is within their organisation. Shutz's (1966) model of group development focused on the needs of the group member and the power and authority issues that exist in the group. A lack of an academic degree in the case of some set members and a clear positional hierarchy may render a feeling of subordination by some set members in relation to other set members.

In summary, possession of academic qualifications can create a hierarchy within the learning set. An absence of qualifications held by other set members leads to some members doubting their ability to cope in the learning set.

#### *Seniority hierarchy*

Other responses to the question of whether there was hierarchy in their learning set included that of Jenny who introduced the idea of the seniority hierarchy, she stated:

*"I think it goes back to that hierarchy stuff that you were talking about, that I was very aware right at the very beginning that we had General Managers in there, and again as I always do, I always assume that they have more knowledge than I have so then I'm thinking they all have degrees as well, am I going to be able to do this?"*

Jenny is referring to seniority regarding their respective positions within the organisation's hierarchy, and she assumes that because of their position they have a degree as well. At this stage she questions her own ability to cope in the learning set. Bourner and Weinstein (1996:57) discuss the issues in placing people of very differing employment status in the same action learning sets. They discussed the problems of this, which included the possibility that people who held dissimilar positions would have a limited understanding of each others roles and responsibilities, and therefore questioning insights may be limited. They also discussed the possibility that the person in the subordinate role may feel a little intimidated by the person more senior to them, which could therefore inhibit them and reduce their contribution to the set. Lastly, they also discussed the possibility that the person occupying the more senior position may be dismissive of the subordinate's opinion.

In summary, organisational seniority can create a hierarchy within the learning set, this may cause some members to doubt their ability to cope in that situation.

#### *Experience hierarchy*

An experience hierarchy in this instance refers to the set member who has the most knowledge of the presenter's live issue and is able to offer either a degree of both sympathy and empathy by their unique insight into the nature of the presenter's live issue. Lisa illustrated this point by saying:

*"I think there is one thing that stands out in an action learning set, certainly for me, it's that some people have greater experience than others, some people have greater length of time in the role rather than seniority, it's about experience."*

Jenny previously mentioned this when she talked about the presence of general managers in her set:

*"We had General Managers in there, and again as I always do, I always assume that they have more knowledge than I have."*

Lisa added:

*“You sense it and sometimes they’ll say “you know about this, you’ve got more experience in this”. You also know that some of the group have more kudos than others because they have more experience.”*

Carol’s following comments could be seen to demonstrate an example of a set member who was singled out and seen as different, perhaps being seen to have an element of kudos?

*“Towards the end of the course a few people used to say to me you’ve got lots of experience, you’re a much high flyer than us, which was really weird because I didn’t feel any different to them, in fact at our graduation I was introduced to somebody’s wife as “this is XXXX and she’s going to be a high flyer”, and I was with my partner and he was going “Hey!?” so that was quite weird!”*

The essence of the positional hierarchy is the amount of experience a set member has of the presenter’s live issue and how they can use that to enhance the discussions in the set. The opposite view of this could be that a supporter has limited experience of the presenter’s live issue. Through a process of clarifying the presenter’s live issue, the supporter is compelled to ask what are commonly known as naive questions or asking the ‘unaskable’ questions, which may inadvertently add to the richness of the discussion.

### *Positional hierarchy*

The essence of a positional hierarchy in the context of this research is the case of the set member who receives a promotion in the context of their organisation. As a result of a combination of both experience and political hierarchies, that individual may occupy a different position within the set, and as such, create a form of positional hierarchy. This promotion may impact upon set members from the same organisation



who now find themselves in a subordinate position, albeit, not necessarily subordinate in terms of line but in terms of organisational grade, Phil said:

*“Yes she achieved a very senior position in nursing and I think at that point the dynamics of the group possibly changed a little bit in terms of her nursing colleagues. I think she sort of became more of a mentor for some of her nursing colleagues because I think she could guide them into contacts and the way to solve problems, so I think the hierarchy came into its own a little bit then...”*

Phil now perceives the newly promoted set member to have access to information that was previously denied because of the position they occupied. He uses the term *“could potentially influence for me or tell me the right person to influence”*, asking questions such as: How can I influence that change? Who is the person to ask? He is acknowledging the change in the other set members’ positions in the learning set. Understanding that the member who was working at an elevated position, and could be useful, hence the use of the word ‘tool’. At this stage could the question be asked of the set members’ performance in the action learning set, for example, will all members contribute in the spirit of comradeship or will a degree of political lobbying take place, albeit couched in supportive rhetoric, or would personal interest play a part in the dialogue? Phil continued to say:

*“She would have known the right person to talk to, and possibly would have access to information which would potentially be a blocker for them.”*

He went on to say:

*“...I just got the impression that the dynamics of the group had changed because people would come to xxxx and almost seek support within the group, whereas previously that hadn’t been there because she had been working at a similar level interaction, I guess its almost you use the word hierarchy and*

*it's almost as if there's a different type of respect because someone is seen as having an elevated position which they previously didn't have..."*

In summary, the status of members can change within the set; the example cited here was a change in organisational position. If this occurs, then it may impact on the dynamics of the set.

### *Political hierarchy*

Greenberg and Baron (1997) cited in Curtiss (2003:293) define organisational politics as "those actions not officially approved by an organisation taken to influence others to meet one's personal goals". These are seen to be a somewhat inevitable in organisational life, with some individuals and groups taking advantage of circumstances at work that will benefit them personally. McLaughlin and Thorpe (1993: 25) comment:

*"At the level of their own expertise, managers undertaking action learning programmes can come to know themselves and their organisation much better. In particular, they can become aware of the primacy of politics, both macro and micro, and the influence of power on decision making, not to mention the mobilisation of bias."*

Lisa gave an insight into the impact of politics on personal disclosure illustrated with the following comment:

*"Well at first you have to be very wary because, certainly within the xxx I suppose it's everywhere you go, because certainly if certain things got out they could be very career limiting to say the least."*

In the following extract from Bourner and Frost (1996:13) the experiences of one of

their set members is discussed in relation to research they undertook concerning issues of disclosure in action learning, specifically experiences of the first action learning set meeting:

“My feelings before the first set were mixed; part of me was excited about the new possible learning but part of me felt very scared. Did I really want my fellow managers knowing I had weak spots? Was this from “Big Brother” above needing to find out how we rated as managers? Did I really want or need the stress? We had been asked to bring a task to work on, my way out could be to produce a task that did not reveal any weak spots. This would allow me to sail through without revealing anything about myself.”

Phil’s comments specifically highlight the idea of politics within the set and how a change in a set member’s organisational position change the way set members behave with one another, he said:

*“... I just think they possibly saw xxxx as a slightly different ‘tool’, for want of a better phrase, in terms of here’s someone who could potentially influence for me or tell me the right people to influence, it’s all about the level at which you work,, and what I’m saying is I think that xxxx had got herself in a position where she was possibly working at a much more senior level than some of the other managers in the group and because of that they would ask questions like “who’s the person that I should contact about that”, “how can I influence that change?”*

Both Lisa’s and Phil’s comments indicate there are two forms of politics occurring here. Firstly, the idea of organisational politics, and secondly, politics within the action learning set. In relation to the impact of an individual’s learning on their organisational political landscape, in that very often individuals leave experiences like this with a much more questioning approach to their world. This is due to having

undergone a form of transformation, (Mezirow, 1995) as described in Chapter Four, page 56. McGill and Brockbank (2003:116) recognise this, acknowledging that there is a political dimension to any action learning set. Much like any other group in organisational life, individuals may feel either powerless or powerful in relation to other members in the set and, as such, a situation where a set member sees an opportunity or feels that another set member has an advantage over them personally may occur. Vince and Martin (1993:213) argue that:

“The political nature of action learning is expressed through the strategic choice available to learning groups to move in a direction that promotes learning, or a direction that discourages learning. In other words, movement towards either risk or denial/avoidance is often political, as well as emotional, act on behalf of the individual.”

Another related issue on the subject of politics is the potential mismatch over the goals of the individual and the goals of the organisation and how there is the potential for an imbalance there. The idea of personal development will have inevitably a political dimension to it. The set member may now have a political dimension for change that is problematic for the organisation. Quite often personal development is pursued and to some extent is decontextualised. What may seem to be perfectly feasible in the context of an action learning set is not so readily acceptable in an organisational context. Reynolds (1998:198) wrote that:

“The aim of management education should not be to fit people into institutions as they currently exist, but to encourage them in questioning and confronting the social and political forces which provide the context of their work, and in questioning claims of common sense or the way things should be done.”

By its very nature, action learning calls for set members to be open to change, both in the way that they think and the way that they operationalise their new and emerging thinking, which may have political consequences. Rigg and Trehan (2004:41) advise that:

“Caution that there could be adverse consequences for a manager who begins to challenge inappropriately and perhaps naively; they warn that sponsoring employers do not want disillusioned, unsettled or demanding managers.”

Lisa, one of the interviewees said:

*“Sometimes when someone come into the xxx they bring fresh eyes and that’s quite helpful but in another way some of the ideas they have cannot come into fruition because of the culture of the xxx, so sometimes he’ll come up with a great idea and you’ll think “that will never work in the xxx”, but you have to explore before you can say that.”*

In summary, politics, both within the organisation and within the learning set play an important role in an action learning set. Politics impacts on what members are prepared to disclose to one another, and how they relate to one another.

#### *Manager/subordinate hierarchy*

This particular hierarchy is concerned with the learning set that comprises two members from the same organisation who are in a line relationship i.e. one is subordinate to the other. Jenny who was the manager of another member in the same set said:

*“I work with xxxx (subordinate set member) everyday and some of the people I might be talking about might be her colleagues, you know people she works with.”*

Jenny’s comment raises the issue of what can and cannot be said in the learning set. This may be for a series of reasons. Possibly the issue of politics, in that Jenny is unable to say things that may have political undertones, as discussed in the section on politics, within the learning set. It may also be that there is an issue of feeling safe to disclose. As discussed in Chapter Seven, Page 163, Edmondson (2002:3) refers to the

concept of 'psychological safety' and defined it as "a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking" with "interpersonal risk taking" meaning "a sense of confidence that others will not embarrass, reject or punish someone for speaking up". This may be applicable to Jenny and limit what she feels able to say. As such, psychological safety goes beyond interpersonal trust to include, (1) respect for each other's competence, (2) caring about each other as people and (3) trust in each other's intentions. The trust here for Jenny's subordinate member in the learning set is that what is disclosed will not be held against that individual manager at some future date or perhaps change or colour a currently held perception of that individual. Edmondson (2002:3) added:

"Most people feel a need to manage this risk to minimise harm to their image, especially in the workplace and especially in the presence of those who formally evaluate them. This is both instrumental (promotions and other valued rewards may be dependent on impressions held by bosses and others) and socio-emotional (we prefer others' approval than disapproval). One solution to minimising risk to one's image is simply to avoid engaging in interpersonal behaviors for which outcomes are uncertain. The problem with this solution is that it precludes learning."

In the case of the Jenny's subordinate, there is a possibility that psychological safety may be an issue. Alternately, the set member who is the manager may be in a position of having to screen or filter what they say because of the presence of the subordinate.

In summary, a manager/subordinate relationship that exists within the set may limit what both members feel able to say. This may be because of a political dimension that restricts discussions. Alternatively, they may both have a need to feel psychologically safe, which may mean they filter their contributions or do not contribute at all.

### *Dominance hierarchy*

Dominance hierarchies are often observed in society in general and have important implications for the way organisations, groups and families are understood in terms of politics and power in normal and abnormal social situations. Important factors include age, gender and assertiveness of individuals in these situations, which would include action learning sets. Assertive individuals with greater hierarchical and social status tend to displace those ranked lower than themselves. These hierarchies are not fixed and are dependent upon any number of changing variables. Hogg and Tindale (2007:352) argue that:

“Several decades of research into psychology and sociology have demonstrated that widely held status beliefs about actors’ distinguishing social characteristics play a powerful role in organising the patterns of influence, respect, and deference that develop among actors as they interact. They shape who speaks up with confidence, who gets noticed and listened to, whose ideas ‘sound better’, and who becomes influential in the group.”

Bales (1950, 1970) carried out a seminal study with white, American undergraduates who were socially similar. He found that the amount of air time an individual had in a group influenced their standing in the group, in that their ideas were given greatest consideration, they were invited to contribute more often and ultimately had more influence on the group and were more likely to emerge as the group leader. As a consequence, Bales (1970) concluded that, in these groups of undergraduates, stable hierarchies emerged in the areas of participation initiated; opportunities given to participate; evaluations received and influence over others. This process was highlighted by Carol who commented:

*“It depends on personalities doesn’t it, if you’re someone that’s quite assertive, I think there is potential for someone to try and take over and I think at that point then people might see them as a higher being type thing.”*

In contrast to Carol, when I asked Michelle the question “Did you feel equal to other set members?” she said:

*“Yeah because we were all equally bewildered as each other....  
I think because you don’t really know what you’re going to get  
to do and you don’t really know where other people are in  
relation to that, you could have someone that knows everything  
about action learning and so in a way that’s quite good  
because then you all learn together and that allows you to ask  
more questions because if nobody knows anything it’s safe isn’t  
it?”*

Carol in responding to the same question added:

*“Yes and coming into it without a degree was one of the  
worries that I had because you think they are used to academic  
writing and I’m not. So in a way I came in I suppose, to me, as  
less experienced than them because in a university situation  
they had already been through that process?”*

In some respects I felt that these were very simple but insightful responses that revealed and contributed a lot to the view of effectiveness of an action learning set. Was a state of equal group bewilderment an ideal state in that it allows individuals to ask the naive questions that, because of political pressures, we are not expected to ask because it reveals our lack of knowledge and leaves an individual in a vulnerable position?

In summary, aspects of an individual set member’s personality, in this case assertiveness, can create a form of hierarchy, in that the more assertive set member may dominate, in that they receive more air time than the others, they dominate the discussions and ultimately their opinions are seen as more valid.

To summarise it appears that there were a number of hierarchies operating in the sets at various times in their existence. Theoretical perspectives suggest that set members,



as members of society, in general will naturally compare themselves with one another on first meetings. The interviewee's experiences discussed here show that this does happen. Also as a result, differing forms of status are accorded to members in the set as differing hierarchies emerge both immediately and over time and have differing life spans. Analysis of the transcripts has shown that the following hierarchies are likely to emerge:

- Social hierarchy - based upon society's tendency to discriminate on the basis of gender and age.
- Academic hierarchy – differing levels of academic and professional qualifications held by set members. Whilst demonstrating an academic level and prior experience of Higher Education it also indicates differing levels of knowledge held by members in the learning set.
- Seniority hierarchy – differing levels of organisational seniority within the action learning set.
- Experience hierarchy – differing levels of contribution according to contextual knowledge and experience of other set member's issues.
- Positional hierarchy - the introduction of shifting power bases may occur as a result of some members of the action learning being promoted within their organisations structure resulting in other members responding differently to them.
- Political hierarchy – differing positions in the same organisation resulting in the possibility of organisational politics occurring in the learning set.
- Manager/subordinate hierarchy – managerial subordinate relationship in the same action learning set. The existence of a line relationship in the set and how that impacts upon the relationship that they have in the learning set and its impact on the other set members.

- Dominance hierarchy - the differing levels of 'presence' within the set and the impact that may have on the learning set.

The impact on the individual's, of perceived presence of these hierarchies, was seen in different ways in the learning sets, these behaviours included:

- A possibility of being treated differently because of age.
- Concerns about whether or not a set member would be out of their depth.
- Assumptions that others set members have more ability.
- Needing reassurance from the facilitator.
- Engaging in political behaviour in the group because of perceived work status differences.
- Engaging in political behaviour because set members work in the same organisation.
- Selective contribution and reporting because of manager subordinate behaviour.

### Trust in action learning sets

The following section will discuss the issue of trust in action learning sets. The concept of trust was first introduced in Chapter Seven, Page 146. Here issues of trust and associated themes, including honesty, openness, confidentiality, reciprocity and vulnerability, were introduced. The chapter then moved into the area of the creation of trust and safety within action learning sets. This section will discuss further research questions, these are:

- Was your action learning set a safe place to be?
- Did it remain a safe place to be?
- Do you feel that members were honest and open?
- Who did you think created a trusting climate in your action learning set?

- Did you establish ground rules in the set?
- How were they established?
- Did set members adhere to them throughout the life of the set?

The discussion will address the specific issues that arose from these questions, namely, psychological safety, honesty and openness and ground rules.

### *Psychological safety*

When opening the discussion with the question; was your action learning set a safe place to be? Both Carol and Michelle reported for them, the learning set had been a safe and non threatening environment. Carol said:

*“Yes it was. It was safe. The first couple of times it was like what are the boundaries? What are the limits?”*

Michelle added:

*“It was somewhere where you don’t feel threatened, you don’t feel like you’re going to be ridiculed or judged, made to feel a fool.”*

Carol’s comment refers to the state of being ‘safe’ or feeling safe in that an individual is safe from physical, psychological or emotional harm (Dindia,2002). The feeling of safety referred to by Carol appeared to emanate from the idea of ground rules as Lisa described:

*“Absolutely, because we lay ground rules down before, with the action learning set with the training leads we have very similar agendas and I’ve known those people for quite a long time and there is complete trust there certainly from my point of view.”*

Psychological safety was briefly introduced in Chapter Seven, Page 163, in that the interviewees felt safe after the set had established a clear set of ground-rules that declared where the boundaries were, what behaviour was acceptable and what wasn't. This resonates with Tuckman's (1965) first stage of group development where there is a focus on understanding the rules of the group. Tuckman (1965:385) described the nature of the group's task as being "a personal and interpersonal one in that the group exists to help the individuals deal with themselves and others" and the first stage is concerned with 'orientation to the task' and how the group will achieve that task, essentially discovering its ground rules. The following extract from Phil illustrates this as he refers to how acceptable standards of behaviour were recognised:

*"People like I said valued each other's contributions, and their experiences, and we weren't a judgemental group we were generally supportive of each other and I think were from a background where we respect peoples right to confidentiality and I think it does seem, obviously it was all laid out at the beginning you know "this is how we are going to operate" but I think we all just generally came from that background anyway, what was said within those four walls stayed within those four walls."*

Acceptable standards of behaviour in terms of honesty and openness, confidentiality and reciprocity, as discussed in Chapter Seven, were therefore established before the set could start to be effective and achieve its task of helping individual set members deal with themselves. This enabled the action learning set be a safe place to be. The next extract comes from Lisa, who directly discussed the first phase of the sets development:

*"Yes, I mean I felt very comfortable about the whole approach the whole set-up I thought you could discuss things openly and honestly without any concerns about information being shared in a public arena. I think we all understood the concept that it was about development and in order to achieve that development you needed to be open and honest."*

Accepting that boundaries have been established and that ground rules have been laid down, there is an understanding and that for action learning to be effective, set members need to be honest and open. I asked Lisa if she felt that as a result it became a trusting climate, she replied:

*“Yeah it did, and I think it’s also about finding out what you’re actually there for and understanding it and thinking that this could be of value with an element of scepticism when people come in with things like that.”*

When invited to expand upon this she added:

*“I didn’t know what to expect I was expecting it to be more of an academic environment and that was a relief because it was quite relaxed and you could actually discuss things and find out where you were going.”*

Lisa had declared that what had occurred in her first action learning set on a Masters programme at the University had not met with her initial expectations, so it was a ‘relief’ because she had entered this environment that was proving to be relaxed enough for her to discuss things and find out where she was going. This resonates with discussions in Chapter Four of the relative differences between andragogy and pedagogy. In this instance Lisa’s need to experience psychological safety in the learning environment had been met by her feeling psychologically safe in the action learning set, and in this instance allaying her scepticism of this type of learning environment.

Jenny responded to the question of whether or not the action learning set was a safe place to be by stating:

*“I’m absolutely sure it was a safe place because I got to choose how much I disclosed, I’m talking personal stuff.”*

Here Jenny refers to the issue of psychological safety by referring to the choice of whether to engage in personal disclosure or not, feeling that she had control over what she disclosed. In that respect the psychological safety she experienced was created internally to her as opposed to externally via the group and/or facilitator. She continued:

*“And you can also leave as well... I tend to think for myself, I mean I’m quite happy to follow a pack and go with the flow but if I really don’t like something I’ll bring myself out of it.”*

When I asked Michelle if her action learning set was a safe place to be she replied:

*“Yes, I knew three people in that learning set, I knew XXX, XXX and I didn’t know that XXX was going, but I knew her, so there were people there that I knew and I probably felt more comfortable that there were people there that I knew than if it had been a group of strangers.”*

Knowledge of other members in the learning set is an interesting point, in that it can either be a positive or negative force that impacts on the comfort of the set members or adds to their anxiety. Carol’s view on this, for example was almost the opposite of Michelle’s:

*“I think that can be difficult, so in a set if everyone is equal and they don’t know you its alright to say whatever because it’s almost like it’s a new reflection its somebody can get a feel of what you’re like and feed that back to you with no knowledge at all so its purely off the bit they see, there’s no engrained knowledge of you they have no prior concept of what you’re like and that is refreshing because if you want to work in a leadership role which is why most of us do this, how you are seen as a leader, you only get one shot, so it’s how you are so if someone thought you were really abrasive you would have got*

*that back from the group after a while they'd have come back to you and said "actually this is how you present yourself" and that would have been accepted not again and again no axe to grind and I felt that would have been pure, what they were saying to you was unsoiled by previous experience."*

McCallister, (1995:26) discussed the idea of 'social similarity' which resonates with Michelle's experiences of stating that similarity between individuals can influence trust, initially citing the examples of race, age, gender. Roy and Dugal (1998:566) used the term 'like-minded individuals' and added experience to McCallisters'(1995) list of individual characteristics. In this instance I would cite occupation, particularly in some occupations where the underpinning values of the individuals are similar i.e. in the caring professions.

Carol concluded by saying:

*"So for me it's been a group with nobody that knew me or anything about me and that meant that you can go one of two ways you can either put on a face about how you want people to think you are or you can decide to be how you are and see, but one of my objectives from this was to be seen how others see me, so you have to be open and honest then because otherwise you're just play acting."*

#### *Honesty and openness*

When asked whether they felt that set members were open and honest, in relation to honesty, Lisa reported:

*"You can't do it from day one, because you have to trust people and you can't trust people from day one, so you might introduce it as a concept and if the people are on the course because that's what they want to do and therefore they are developing they will respect that won't they."*

Michelle stated:

*“Possibly not and again I think that comes down to whether or not people had an experience or enough experience that they were able to share.”*

Michelle continued on to discuss her experience of another member in the learning set who she felt had limited experience which therefore may have restricted her ability to contribute to learning set:

*“I don’t know whether it was about openness and honesty or whether she just genuinely didn’t feel that she had that much to share, I’m not saying that she was dishonest at all, I just think there was sometimes a lack of things that she was able to contribute with.”*

The issue here is whether there is a reluctance to contribute because of a desire not to be honest, or whether a lack of contribution is due to the set member feeling they haven’t enough experience to offer anything meaningful to contribute. In this instance Michelle is using attribution theory to make sense of her fellow set member as a way of understanding the situation of apparent non disclosure and therefore reluctance to be honest and open. Attribution theory is defined by Cort et al (2007:11) as a situation where:

“Individuals, groups and organisations possess an inherent need to understand “why” events, or situations, occur. To order their world, individuals attempt to uncover the causality of events. Causal attributions are made by people to aid them in dealing with, and reacting to, events occurring in their environment through gaining a better understanding of the causal factors leading to an event, individuals are able to modify their behaviors and control the likelihood of the future occurrence of the event. Individuals assess the outcomes of past behaviors



and adapt strategies to increase the probability of success in future endeavours, thus minimising the risk of failure. As such, current behavior is based upon the causal attributions of past events (i.e. the application of new knowledge).”

In response to the same question, Michelle reported:

*“I think sometimes they were too honest and open.”*

She continued to say:

*“...but I think that xxxx came a lot, maybe some of the time for her own needs, which is fine but that didn’t always give other people, I’m not saying 20 minutes and that’s your time up for the day, I’m not saying that but it did switch people off... I’m talking about length, not appropriate, because it was appropriate within the context of the action learning set, because it was about work, what you were doing, what you were learning and how you were trying to change things for yourself and at work but it was appropriate but sometimes it was the length, not knowing when to stop, like personally not knowing when to stop.”*

There are a range of responses here; including the issue that some members were too honest and that Michelle was embarrassed (Dindira, 2002). When asked about the creation of a trusting climate and who they thought created that climate Phil stated:

*“The group created it, feeling comfortable, feeling safe, and feeling at ease with one another.”*

Jenny, similarly felt that it was a collective responsibility:

*“It was everybody’s because we are all adults and we are all there to learn, or another way of looking at it is that it may be your role to lead that in terms of expectations and this is how we do business in relation the ground rules and the norms but we are all adults in that group we are all there for something, and if you want to be cold and brutal about it, it’s a Masters in Leadership at the end of the day, so if you want to be at the side of it, but you’re leading, you’re teaching us but we needed to come on that journey with you.”*

Lisa, on the other hand, highlighted the role of the facilitator:

*“Well I think the facilitator had a lot to do with it, because it all starts from there, it’s a good starting point, your ground rules are laid out from the start, people share things and were encouraged to talk about it, say how it feels.”*

The above responses are interesting in that there is no consensus of opinion as to who they think created a trusting climate in the learning set. Certainly it seemed to be accepted that a trusting climate existed. As part of the discussions on this both Carol and Jenny started to explore a little deeper the idea of a trusting climate. Carol started to describe how she had experienced the emergence of trust in her action learning set:

*“Well you start to know things about people, personal things about people, so you know you might go and have a coffee or have some lunch, we’d go in the morning before we had class and go for a coffee or something you never knew who it was going to be but you always had a conversation with somebody so you built up a relationship within that group.”*

Jenny introduced the idea of group cohesion through the sympathetic stance the set took to one of its members, she explained:

*“it was quite a support network because xxxx had a lot of problems I mean she had a pretty horrendous time and actually she was quite open about it and I think people were very supportive of her and she felt that in that environment she could, I mean there wasn’t anyone in that group who didn’t have an issue or some kind of problem.”*

In summary, honesty and openness are major facets of an action learning sets. There are differing opinions on the extent to which set members are prepared to be open, however, with time, most set members will become more honest in the set.

### *Ground rules*

Chapter Four introduced the concept of ground rules. These are usually set at the start of the learning set’s life and over a period of time become ‘norms’. They refer to how the set will operate. When asked about the rules in the group and how they were established, Jenny was clear that her set had been governed by a set of rules established by the facilitator, she stated:

*“We are all adults and we are all there to learn, or another way of looking at it is that it may be your role to lead that in terms of expectations and this is how we do business in relation the ground rules and the norms but we are all adults in that group we are all there for something.”*

Phil gave an example of one of the ground rules in his set and introduced the concept of confidentiality, neither referring to it as being either a rule or a norm, but he felt it was clear and was needed within the set, he said:

*“I’m fairly sure that in the early days the facilitator would have said that we needed a bit of confidentiality and we could say what we needed to within the group and it’s not going to get back to your manager or public forum.”*

He then gave a clear example of confidentiality by saying:

*“Yes, I don’t think that there were any doubts whatsoever that the group knew that you could feel comfortable about talking about your manager, issues in your workplace, sensitive and personal issues without feeling that there was any chance that that would get outside the group.”*

Michelle suggested that confidentiality was perhaps more a tacit dimension in her learning set:

*“I don’t know whether we formally established them but I’m sure that somewhere right at the beginning we just talked about the nature of action learning sets, what it is about and how the set would sort of function and within that you know, whether it was actually spoken out loud I don’t know, it was just an understanding I had of it.”*

Michelle wasn’t clear about the process of establishing ground rules in the context of her learning set. However, she was clear that she knew there were ground rules that would operate in this arena based on her experience of similar settings. She continued:

*“Well my background is group work anyway, that’s what I do with clients so to me its almost like doing with staff what we do with patients and those sort of norms and rules just sort of are how we function so for me it was fairly easy to transfer into that setting.”*

When asked about what the ground rules were, Lisa uses the term ‘normal stuff’ alluding to a form of tacit knowledge in the way set members understand the ground rules, she made the following comment:

*“Well there’d be the normal stuff around being on time, being respectful, listening, not monopolising, not too much criticising, and it being private and staying within the room, usual stuff.”*

Jenny elaborated with examples of the ground rules:

*“the rules were whatever we say doesn’t go outside the room, that we’d let other people speak, that we wouldn’t be angry, that we’d value other peoples’ opinions that was it wasn’t it, and be open about things, and I think that’s what we signed up for, it’s a bit like the truth the whole truth and nothing but the truth.”*

Carol took a rather unusual but interesting slant on the idea of the ground rules and said:

*“It was yes, and it was also about we weren’t, whatever anybody said, we weren’t going to take offence it wasn’t going to be a judgment it was going to be a suggestion and we weren’t going to take offence.”*

She confirmed that ground rules had been established in her learning set. However, her set had also somehow reversed the idea of a rule. Instead of agreeing to the actions as a set, i.e. we are going to do something, she maintained her set were agreeing on what they would not do in the set, which is the same action but presented in a different form. This topic was then concluded with the question regarding adherence to the ground rules, Michelle explained:

*“Yes I think they did, I think they did, I don’t recall any major upheaval I think we had discussions but I don’t think it ever got particularly heated, I don’t think it did.”*

Phil also remarked:

*“Yes I think most people stuck to it, those norms doing this type of work are pretty standard most people can reel them off, whereas as a group when we became more established I didn’t think about norms because everything was ok, it was safe, it was alright.”*

Phil’s comments can be seen to suggest that the original ground rules, which served as a guide to the set’s behaviour in the early days had now become the norm and as such had become part of the culture of the set. Carol, for example, concludes:

*“Umm, yes I think they evolve, I think the group evolves but I think you have some basic things that people sign up to whether they are said or you just know that they are there and you kind of know what is ok to do and what’s ok to say and what’s not.”*

This brings the discussion back round to the ideas that ground rules are introduced to the set and over time become norms and exist at a subliminal level within the sets. As discussed in Chapter Four, unlike ground rules, which tend to be stated, norms are unsaid and become part of the set’s normal behaviour.

In summary, for the people I interviewed, action learning was seen to be a psychologically safe environment with a climate that is relaxed and therefore facilitates individual set members to discuss issues that are relevant to them. Psychological safety emerged as a facet of an effective group and that can be created and controlled in one of two ways. Firstly, at an individual level and, secondly, at a set level which includes the facilitator.

### Disclosure of personal information

Chapter Seven introduced the concept of personal disclosure as part of the presenter’s role and concluded with the notion that as set members become more comfortable with each other then a climate of trust emerges and disclosure may become less problematic for some, but not others. The chapter then suggested that this area should be further explored by probing a little deeper into the individual aspects of disclosure, seeking to discover the individuals’ perspectives, as opposed to the widely discussed

group perspective that general literature in the this field has tended to focus on. This facilitated the creation of a series of suggested questions for the second formal interviews. The questions for the second formal interviews probe a little deeper into the individual aspects of disclosure seeking to discover the individual perspective as opposed to the widely recognised group perspective that the general literature in the field has largely tended to focus on. These questions were:

- Did you feel comfortable with disclosure of personal information at the first learning set meeting?
- At the start of the learning set meetings did you feel under pressure to disclose personal information?
- Were you honest with yourself and the group at the start of the action learning set meetings?
- At what stage did you feel comfortable with disclosure of personal information?
- What had changed in the learning set to make you feel more comfortable?

All the interviewees were asked “Did you feel comfortable with the disclosure of personal information at the first learning set meeting?” Phil comments:

*“I didn’t personally have a problem with it.”*

This was echoed by Michelle who said:

*“it depends what you’re disclosing about yourself, I mean yes I don’t tend to bother particularly and speak as I find, and tend to say what I think and feel so that wasn’t a problem.”*

However Carol and Jenny expressed some reservation, Carol stated:

*“I was probably alright, but that’s difficult as well because in a way it was a bit of a safe harbour because if you manage a*

*department then you keep a lot to yourself so you don't, it's very difficult to disclose an awful lot about you."*

Jenny said:

*"You're talking personal, it's not something that I'm always comfortable with unless I know somebody, and some of that knowing would have to be around trust, I'd have to have known them for a while... No not so much sometime but I have to get a feeling that I like them, that they're ok, I'm just not used to talking about me with people I don't know... Yes I did, well saying more than I normally would have said, like when I was talking about xxxx, that's not something that I would normally do with people that I don't know."*

Lisa also expressed reservations but for political reasons, she explained:

*"Well at first you have to be very wary because, certainly within the xxx I suppose it's everywhere you go, because certainly if certain things got out they could be very career limiting to say the least."*

Overall, there was no consensus opinion regarding a feeling of comfort with the act of disclosing, suggesting that perhaps this is a personal choice. This could be based on both the experience of disclosing and whether or not the individual has been exposed to the action learning set situation or something similar or, secondly, a personality trait that describes individuals having a private disposition when it comes to disclosure. Jenny, in referring to the two year action learning programme she had been a member of, explained that:

*"I contributed more in the second year than the first, because I got used to it probably towards the latter end of the first year, to be fair."*



She continued:

*“I suppose I think I consciously decide what I’m comfortable with doing... me letting bits of me go in stages... personal stuff it’s in stages and getting to know people but when I decide... sometimes taking a bit of a risk.”*

Issues of interest here are that Jenny describes disclosure as a conscious decision, based upon what she feels comfortable with, and discloses incrementally as she begins to get to know others in the learning set. This is an example of what Bandura (1977) describes as ‘social learning’. Jenny describes this as a risk, I would say in this instance a psychological risk and in the case of Lisa, a political risk. The point to note is that the process of getting to know other set members is an important one. Lisa in relation to disclosure discusses the political dimension and stated:

*“Yes... Because of some of the scenarios that we speak about, and it’s funny, because before we say anything we always say “obviously we are aware that this is a completely confidential environment and we can say, and be completely open and transparent””*

She clearly acknowledges the part that organisational politics can and does play in the action learning set. She uses the norm that must have been established at the start of the set’s life and reminds her fellow set members that they have an obligation to adhere to those norms, clearly confidentiality in this instance. She uses the word ‘obviously’ as a way of telling other set members that this is something that they know and should do.

When asked the question; “At the start of the learning set meetings did you feel under pressure to disclose personal information?” the following replies were given:

Carol, possibly referring to social norms, said:

*“No it was just that people held back because they didn’t want to be seen as “oh she’s going to be a mouthy one””*

Carol may also be highlighting other issues, how to disclose and what is appropriate to the set, not wanting to get it wrong as in some form of saving face, avoiding embarrassment. Lisa refers to holding back:

*“Well it was interesting but certainly not pressure, but it was interesting because we all had to come with a live issue and it was interesting to see who would go first, because nobody wanted to go first and I think for God’s sake we’re all senior people here and I think it was strange but nobody wanted to be that first person.”*

When I asked her how she could see this was happening, she stated:

*“Oh you could just tell, it was the way people were looking at each other and you just knew, but you also knew that once the first scenario had been discussed that would be fine but it was just somebody... I just knew, it was just instinct, you could tell it was quite uncomfortable and a little bit awkward at first, nobody actually said it but you could tell by body language, by glances around, things like that... You know like, a bit like I’m doing (closed position).... Yes \*laughs\* and the way people were looking at each other, you just knew, very bristly and quite insular.”*

When discussing who should go first in the learning set, Michelle stated:

*“No I think that’s the thing that just evolved, I mean obviously you were there to share your experience of your live issue, and update, and we knew that was part and parcel right from day one, but in terms of disclosing things about yourself and your*

*situation and how its affecting you I think that was just natural progression of the group.”*

Possible explanations for the reluctance to go first could include, as said earlier, the embarrassment of getting it wrong, i.e. disclosing too much so as to make the other members of the learning set feel uncomfortable. It could be the type of disclosure, perhaps expectations of the other set members would be the set would be concerned with work related issues, and the presenter commences with something that is personal. This may not meet the expectations of the other set members who have joined the set to discuss work related issues, and are reluctant to be involved in what they may perceive to be a self help group. It may simply be some set members are inexperienced at disclosing. Maybe disclosure has been something that they have engaged in previously that has not being a positive experience, perhaps the culture that the set was not one that could handle disclosure, perhaps there was a political dimension which was problematic for the individual.

Phil introduced the personality of the facilitator and commented on the effect that had on him in terms of feeling at ease with the set, he stated:

*“No not at all, like I said there was something about the facilitator’s abilities as a lecturer, teacher, coach, mentor, call it what you want, that put you at ease you just felt that it was the right thing to do and I mean it was a lovely group of people and that’s the best way to describe it and whether that’s a dynamic you get in a every group I don’t know.”*

Phil describes how the composition of the group, from his perspective, was one in which he felt comfortable, so it was therefore appropriate for him to disclose. He also cited the skills of the facilitator as being a factor that added to his comfort, stating that irrespective of the facilitator’s role, it was something about the facilitator that put him at ease.

When I asked the question; “Were you honest with yourself and the group at the start of the action learning set meetings? Carol, in responding to this question, gave an all

embracing account of how she felt about the issue of being honest, she explained:

*“so in a set if everyone is equal and they don’t know you it’s alright to say whatever because it’s almost like it’s a new reflection its somebody can get a feel of what your like and feed that back to you with no knowledge at all so its purely off the bit they see, there’s no engrained knowledge of you they have no prior concept of what you’re like and that’s refreshing because if you want to work in a leadership role which is why most of us do this, how you are seen as a leader, you only get one shot, so its how you are so if someone thought you were really abrasive you would have got that back from the group after a while they’d have come back to you and said “actually this is how you present yourself” and that would have been accepted not angst and again no axe to grind and I felt that would have been pure, what they were saying to you was unsoiled by previous experience.”*

The caveat here is that everyone is equal and hasn’t met before, so in that respect set members can be honest with each other and can give honest feedback because of the perceived lack of political dimension in the set. From Carol’s perspective the absence of knowledge of the individual therefore creates the opportunities for unbiased feedback. This is in contrast to Jenny who said:

*“Honest with myself yes, with the group no because I didn’t know what to expect.”*

She qualified her statement by adding:

*“Well as long as you don’t lie and you’re not untrustworthy, and that what you say is honest... You don’t lie, you don’t mislead people, and you don’t give false promises or raise expectations. I don’t see that as not being honest, it’s me choosing not to say something.”*

In contrast, Lisa reported:

*“Yes because to me that’s the only way it’s going to work and I’ve been in action learning sets before so I knew from before that if it was going to work you had to be completely open and honest.”*

At this juncture, it is quite clear to see that there are different interpretations of the term ‘honesty’ as discussed in previous chapters. Essentially honesty can be placed on a continuum with some set members saying that they are completely honest and open and others choosing to say that they are honest with themselves but not the set. In relation to being honest, Michelle acknowledged that she couldn’t always be honest in her work capacity but found it liberating to be honest in the context of the learning set, she explained:

*“It’s quite liberating really, because we’re not always open and honest with other people and we always have this face at work and we always sometimes have to do and say things that we don’t personally believe, it’s not our values and it’s quite difficult but obviously the more senior you get the more you have to do it and detach yourself so it’s quite, I know I said it’s liberating and it is once you’ve done it but actually before that it’s quite challenging within yourself to think “Can I do this? Can I actually say what I want to say, what I feel?” but then once you realise you can it’s very quite liberating.”*

Carol said:

*“I think we were honest in terms of this is the live issue and this is what I’m dealing with and then I think we were being as honest and as open as we could be given what our understanding of this process and journey.”*

Lisa said:

*“Because you can only share with others what you know at that time and your knowledge is such when you start the process that this is what you can tell people, this is what you can share, its only as you get a bit further down and you become more aware that you become more insightful to your own experiences, how you learn, how you don’t learn, what your barriers are, what your challenges are, and it’s only once you start going down that journey that you start to be really honest because you can put wool over your own eyes, which I did... Well you don’t realise that you’re not being honest, that’s my point .... Because you only know what you know at the time and you don’t know what you don’t know at this stage.”*

Again, no real consensus of opinion here, in fact in some respects a polarity of views. Jenny who maintains that she is honest with herself, but not the set, which is something that Jenny had acknowledged before, to Carol who maintains that she was being as honest as she could in her discussions of her live issue.

When I asked the question; “At what stage did you feel comfortable with disclosure of personal information?” all of the interviewees described the significance of group cohesion:

*“I think when you’ve had a few coffees in the morning and you’re all in the same “I’m not quite sure about this assignment what do you think” when you start to discuss things.” (Carol)*

*“We didn’t come across it to the extent of when it came to Christmas time instead of going out for a Christmas meal we ordered food in, it’s just a stupid little thing but actually we were just so comfortable in our own little world that it was easier for us to be catered for than to go out on our own... I mean we always went for coffee together, we always went for*

*lunch together, we spent the day together, that was how it was. It was never a case of “Oh I need to nip to the bank, I’ll see you back here this afternoon”, the social sessions were just as important as the working sessions.” (Phil)*

*“To the extent that, this was very obvious, in that you went up to the dining room in the Harold Wilson building and we pulled three or four tables together just so that we remained together as a group, we never had three of four disparate groups we always had one, that was just the way it was and it was never, it was never felt that we needed to ask that question it was just we need another space, let’s make another space, everybody was included, the group was all inclusive there’s no two ways about that.” (Lisa)*

As the set matures and set members become more comfortable with one another, Bourner and Weinstein (1996) suggested in their analysis that other hierarchies would emerge. At this juncture it is useful to return to Tuckman’s (1965) theory of group development and consider the second and third phases; storming and norming. Tuckman (1965) wrote that every group or in this instance, set, will then enter the storming stage in which individual’s have different ideas that compete for consideration. The set addresses issues such as what problems they are really supposed to solve, how they will function independently and together, and in the case of a group (other than a learning set which was discussed as being different from a group) what leadership model they will accept.

Set members open up to each other and acknowledge each other's ideas and perspectives, or as Michelle, one of my interviewees phrased it “*getting to know them*”. In some cases storming can be resolved quickly, in others; the group never leaves this stage. Tuckman (1965) argued that the storming stage is necessary for the set to start to work or as Phil, another of my interviewees said “*gel*”. At this stage in the set’s development tolerance of each set member and their differences needs to be considered and at some point the set will enter the norming stage.

In the norming stage set members adjust their behaviour to each other as they develop learning habits that make working together seem more natural and fluid. During this phase set members begin to trust each other and motivation increases as the set becomes more acquainted with processes involved in action learning. In the course of the interviews, some of the interviewees gave insight into how they became more comfortable with disclosure. Phil made a link between disclosure and the group gelling; he then introduced the idea of the facilitator's tacit knowledge, he said:

*“I don't think that XXXX (facilitator) would have let us go to the next stage of the learning set unless he felt that the set had gelled in a way.”*

Michelle introduced the idea of getting to know the other set members:

*“By getting to know them, it could be work, it could be personal, and when I say personal I don't mean a relationship, basically listening to people, how they talk about things, and just generally how they come across as a person and then that makes me feel comfortable in myself, at ease, and that makes me more honest about the emotional side, I don't think it's dishonest not saying stuff.”*

She later added:

*“I think it's me feeling comfortable and safe to do that. I contributed more in the second year than the first, because I got used to it probably towards the latter end of the first year, to be fair...”*

In summary no consensus of opinion was evident on the issue of feeling comfortable with personal disclosure. Much of this was based on individual's personality and previous experience of disclosing in open forums such as a learning set where issues of a personal and professional nature are the focus of attention. It was acknowledged that there can be a political dimension to an action learning set, which will have



implications for whether or not set members choose to disclose, and if they do, how much, particularly if the sets are organisationally based.

The social aspects of a set will start to encourage the set to bond. It appears that by ensuring that the set have time to become acquainted with one another, examples in the interviews included coffee before the set starts its business, at lunch breaks encouraging eating together as a set as opposed to individually in different locations. This seemed to encourage set members to chat about other aspects of their lives, the more intimate knowledge disclosed to one another appeared to have a bonding effect on the set.

### Facilitation

Chapter Seven considered the semantics of the term facilitation and described what skills an effective set advisor should have. From that analysis, I devised a series of questions that would be asked at the second round of formal interviews, these were:

- What role did you expect the facilitator to play?
- In playing the facilitator's role, what skills did he/she demonstrate?

#### *Set member expectations*

When asked; "What role did you expect the facilitator to play?" Michelle initially reported:

*"I didn't have any expectations about what the facilitator would be like because I had no idea."*

Carol, on the other hand, stated:

*"I think I expected them to be the catalyst, so I think that the facilitator did what I expected them to do which was just to push it along. You're given little snippets but you're not given a lot, so that depending on your perspective that's a good thing or a bad thing, you find something to hang your hat on, which*

*is really what you were giving us, like a quote or have you thought about this or that but not to be given and actually have to go away to do the work, so it's not like learning by rote and its quite loose, it's not really like the power of suggestion like Derren Brown type of thing, but actually it is a catalyst and you choose, there's a lot of choice in action learning you either choose to go with it or you don't and if you didn't the only person that's not going to benefit is yourself."*

Lisa, similarly stated:

*"To be honest, I expected them, because I'd read up on action learning sets, I expected them to be a gate keeper of the group... just making sure we were on track not being directional, you know just not exactly part of the group because you wouldn't expect them to be part of the group because you expect them to sit back and just make sure everything was happening and when it needed the little nudge or a some more flow just to intercept or interact then."*

Jenny and Phil both remarked that they initially expected the facilitator to take a more traditional teaching approach, Jenny said:

*"My initial, I expected it to be more taught, more directional... Well yes, as I got my head round the whole concept of action learning that I realised that you were there just to guide the whole process and you did actually give direction it was just never in the way that I envisaged."*

With Phil stating:

*"Probably more of a traditional lecturer, I didn't really understand what an action learning set was."*

Initially Michelle held similar views as stated earlier, but then she began to reframe the experience, which in her case had begun to open up a differing perspective on the experience which had been previously unknown to her, she reported:

*“Well because I thought that you would send, like I said more of a teacher mode, send me down a path to look at certain things in a very certain way, but you didn’t, you’d talk people through situations and in advertently lead me down a path that I didn’t always know was there”.*

Carol echoed the above by giving an example of ‘reframing’ (Revans, 1984) when she mentioned “*making people think in different ways*”, she stated:

*“So in a way that’s like a blank canvass, you’re just there to push ideas in and make people think in a different way, but it’s not forceful it’s not you have to take that but something about it makes you want to take it, which is different...”*

As the above shows, there was a variety of differing responses to this question. Each particular interviewee had some form of expectation about the role that the facilitator would play, with only one person saying they had no expectations. This indicates that, from the outset, it is difficult to meet all set members’ expectations, therefore the facilitator has to be skilled at responding as such. Jenny highlights:

*“Yes and we probably all had very different expectations so from that point of view when you’re teaching you have a set of learning outcomes and when you’re presenting information people you know what you are going to present in a certain way and hopefully at the end they will all go out with a similar kind of perception of the subject matter, this is very different it’s very fluid and loose, so in terms of supporting eight different people from different backgrounds with completely different perceptions of what action learning might be and getting us all to an end point where we have learnt, we’ve*

*grown, we've developed, I think is really... well I can't imagine I can only expect that it's a really difficult thing to do..."*

Phil, when speaking of his facilitator commented:

*"I think that it was an awful lot to do with xxxx, I mean he was the catalyst that made things happen."*

Lisa, in discussing her expectations, introduced the role of the gate keeper into the discussions, who is essentially an intermediary in the group. The facilitator in starting the process is also demonstrating to the rest of the set a way of working that supports the presenter and isn't simply giving advice to them. Bourner and Weinstein (1996:60) stated that:

*"In the early days of a set, the set adviser models "helpful" behaviour: not pressing advice, but asking questions, reflecting back, challenging and supporting where appropriate. He or she sometimes holds up a mirror to the set to let them see how they are working and what are processes that help or hinder."*

Jenny, in discussing helpful behaviours, initially saw the language used in the learning sets as being problematic:

*" I found it a rather strange concept for the first few months until I got into that whole sense of, and being constantly told by you every time we asked you a question you just gave us another question "Well what do you think you'd say?" and I used to think "Why does she keep asking me what I think? I wouldn't have asked the question if I knew" but that's what you did and that was very different but I think that's because we'd been used to being taught and it's a completely different concept..."*

Here Jenny acknowledges that at first in action learning it can be difficult to understand how the set works. Specifically, in her experience, she questions why the facilitator did not give specific answers when asked, in accordance with her experience of school and the role of the school teacher. In action learning programmes held in a university, and, which lead to a qualification, there are situations in the early stages of the set's life where the facilitator, usually a lecturer may have to give direction. This is particularly the case, in the context of programmed knowledge (P) as outlined in Chapter Four, where the facilitator may have to change the approach given. Bourner and Weinstein (1996:60) advised that:

“Shifting out of this role to give “taught inputs” is possible but needs to be handled carefully otherwise confusion may arise about where to draw the boundaries of expecting “expert” help. This is a particular problem now that action learning has gained entry to the universities and other institutions of higher education. The set adviser is likely to be a course tutor. As such he or she is likely to be seen (and be) a source of expertise about course regulations and policies. It can be very difficult to disentangle this role as conduit of information about the course from that of set adviser.”

Pedler and Abbott (2008:185) stated that “facilitation has to be flexible, mobile in direction, purposeful, supportive but not mollicoddling”. There was no real consensus of opinion here, interviewees' expectations ranged from the traditional lecturer who would play a predominantly taught didactic role, the catalyst within the set, i.e. a person who starts the process by offering thoughts, different ways of looking at the issue with a view to offering the set member presenting and the ‘gate keeper’ whose primary concern is the process.

This next section considers responses to the question “In playing the facilitator's role, what skills did he/she demonstrate? In listening to the various interviewees' responses I have also expanded this to consider personal qualities as well as skills. When asked the question Carol, although not speaking about skills directly, made both an interesting and profound comment, she said:

*“I mean I could come up with a list of people that I think could never, ever do an action learning set so if you can come up with a list of people that couldn’t do it you must be able to come up with a list of people that could or what characteristics is that make you able to do it.”*

Pedler (2008:192), in discussing the importance of facilitation carried out a review of a development programme of a health service he had worked with. He interviewed people who had been in action learning sets on this programme. One of his interviewees echoed Carol’s point and said:

“I have been in an action learning set before where we had six months of facilitation but which fell apart when the facilitator left – facilitation is the glue that holds the set together. I’m not sure if it should be like this, I know that set members should take responsibility and so on, but for me facilitation is crucial and central. Facilitation skills are key.”

From the above quotation and Carol’s comment it is apparent that the facilitator plays a crucial role within the action learning process. This prompts the question of a facilitator’s personal qualities and skills they would require. From Carol’s comment I was able to code the other interviewees’ responses according to what themes emerged and consider what interviewees felt were the essential personal qualities and skills of an action learning facilitator.

### *Personal qualities*

Rogers (1983:157) wrote that “the personal qualities and attitudes of the facilitator are more important than any method he or she employs”. He explained that differing methods and strategies will be ineffective unless the facilitator demonstrates a genuine desire to create a climate in which there is freedom to learn. Ringer (2002:62) advocates freeing the facilitator in saying:

“The illusion that leaders are in control of the group. We see our interactions with the group in a new light; as influence rather than control.”

The set then benefits by the facilitator’s presence as opposed to control by the facilitator. The facilitator role is influenced by psychodynamics as Ringer (2002:18) outlines, “maintaining yourself fully present in the group and providing appropriate support for the group to achieve its goals”. Following on from this, Weinstein (1999:138) argues that a set advisor’s qualities should include:

- The ability to be non-judgemental, accepting and allowing others to be themselves;
- A genuine belief in the potential of everyone, respecting them and trying to understand them;
- A commitment to helping people learn and develop, and offering them the power to do so and take responsibility for themselves;
- The ability to allow people to do and learn things in their own time and at their own speed;
- An enquiring, inquisitive mind that seeks to understand; and
- Personal, intellectual and emotional integrity, openness and honesty.

The above list offers an insight onto the meaning behind Carol’s comments on ‘who could’ and ‘who could not’ facilitate an action learning set. Weinstein’s (1999) list offers an insight into the characteristics that enable someone to facilitate an action learning set and perhaps underpin her thoughts.

### *Honesty and warmth*

In relation to personality traits, Phil described the need to for the facilitator to be honest and warm:

*“I think I talked about personality and if you look at personality traits xxxx had, he was very warm, he was very*

*open and honest, he was very focused, he knew exactly where he wanted us to get and I always got the impression that he got a lot of delight when we got to where he wanted us to get without actually having to guide us there, a lot of the time you could come out of the session and actually see that xxxx had enjoyed the session as much as anyone and a lot of the time he didn't really participate he just sat back and let it flow, it was an ability to step back which was probably his strongest asset..."*

For Phil, honesty and warmth were crucial elements in being a good facilitator. He saw his facilitator's honesty as part of the set's general approach to the action learning process, which, coupled with the facilitator's warmth, overcame the difference between the facilitator and the set, in many ways the facilitator was becoming a part of the set, Phil stated:

*"He was very open and honest as we all were, I think he lived by his own rules and the rules he expected of others and I think he didn't differentiate himself from the rest of the group, I mean you knew he was the lecturer but you never really saw him as such, if you know what I mean."*

Phil felt that his facilitator was passionate about what he did. He continued:

*"I mean I'm a great believer that life revolves around passionate individuals. I mean passionate about what you want to do and what you want to deliver, I mean you need the basic skills but without the passion you'd never achieve that."*

### *Intuition*

Phil also raised the subject of intuition:



*I mean he had a fantastic intuition, and I'm sure that he'd been trained and I'm sure that he was well read, I'm sure he would know what to look for, I mean I can't tell you his thought processes but I'm fairly confident that he knew what he was doing."*

This resonates with the work of Weinstein (1999:138) who argued that that:

"The role of the set advisor is to judge, or perhaps 'sense' is a better word, how best to help participants to learn. For instance will they learn best when pushed or cradled? Will harsh confrontation bring more results, or is a gentler, more supportive approach more likely to encourage development and change? Each individual reacts to different goals: a set advisor has to make sensitive assessments."

As well as intuition, Phil also described how his learning set facilitator 'had talent':

*"He had a talent that is very, very difficult to describe and I've never come across it in any... I mean I've studied for many years and I've never come across it in any of the lecturers that I've ever dealt with and I mean it was part of his personality but it wasn't even just his personality, it was almost like a gift he had, he was so well suited to what he was doing and he made it look very easy but I'm sure it was hard work."*

Is the "gift" the intuition that Phil referred to? Had his facilitator sensed what the appropriate response was at that moment in time, perhaps sensing when to challenge or support by having a feel for what was happening in the set. In Phil's description there is a suggestion of the idea of a facilitator's 'tacit' knowledge of group processes. Knowledge has a number of differing facets to it which include: explicit knowledge, implicit knowledge, and tacit knowledge. Tacit knowledge seems to suggest that we actually know more than we perhaps know or can tell others about. In research studies from a variety of disciplines, tacit knowledge has been characterised as follows:

personal, difficult to articulate fully, experience based, contextualised, job specific, held within, both known and unknown to the holder, transferred through conversation and narrative, and capable of becoming explicit knowledge and vice versa (Gourlay, 2004). This highly personal, subjective form of knowledge is usually informal and can be inferred from the statements of others (Sternberg et al, 1999). Tacit knowledge consists often of habits and culture that individuals are usually unaware of. In the field of knowledge management, the concept of tacit knowledge refers to a knowledge which is only known by an individual and that is difficult to communicate to the organisation they work for.

Wagner and Sternberg (1985:3) use the term to describe “knowledge that is not openly expressed or taught.” McAdam et al (2007:46) describe it as:

“Knowledge-in-practice developed from direct experience and action; highly pragmatic and situation specific; subconsciously understood and applied; difficult to articulate; usually shared through interactive conversation and shared experience.”

McAdam et al (2007:45) identify two issues associated with tacit knowledge. The first is whether tacit knowledge is an individual trait or a trait that can be shared by both individuals and groups, and the second is whether tacit knowledge can be made explicit.

#### *Intonation in the facilitator's voice*

An issue raised by one interviewee, Carol, was the facilitator's voice, particularly the intonation. This suggested that a person's voice could also hold differing properties:

*“It's the voice as well, that's the other thing that I think I've learnt.*

*How you say things, it's not judgemental just calm and suggesting.*

*To make you think about things, have you thought about when you say that what do you actually mean... Yes, and very neutral and non-judgemental. Yes, a lot in terms of voice, I think intonation and non-judgemental just sort of encouraging.”*

In the first part of the above quotation Carol is referring to ‘paralinguistics’. Townsend (1988:36) defined paralinguistics as “*how we say things as opposed to what we say*” and divided the subject into seven categories:

- Timing/length of utterances.
- Emotional tone/inflection.
- Speech errors.
- National or regional accent.
- Choice of words/sentence structure.
- Verbal "tics".
- Tonic accent or stressed words.

In her comments regarding her facilitator’s voice, Carol was referring to the emotional tone or inflection, intonation as she referred to it, and her feeling that it had the properties of being calm, neutral, encouraging and non-judgmental. The impact on Carol was that it encouraged her to think. Townsend (1988:37) discusses the use of emotion in voice and states:

“As we can see, pitch and speed are important paralinguistic elements of our speech which let other people know how we feel. They are also important when we want to create moods and emotions in other people. Think of the different voices used in TV advertising. A soft, fruity slow-speaking voice-over is used to create a mood of contentment for advertising chocolates or expensive perfume. When the advert is for a carpet sale we are exposed to loud and strident exhortations to rush and hurry to the shop and beat all the other bargain hunters.”

## *Nurturing*

A particular personal quality raised by one of the interviewees, Jenny, was nurturing, she reported that:

*“I think there is a lot of nurturing and gentle leading people down paths and then letting people explore it for them and bring it back a bit and then send people off on the next bit of the journey.”*

Phil similarly stated:

*“Well I think because it was an alien concept to all of us I think we had to start right from the basics and I think what you were very good at was getting us to understand the process of action learning but still be able to get on with our live issue, and develop and learn and almost see ourselves in a different light, a bit like a parenting role in that sort of sense, bearing in mind we were all very different people coming from different backgrounds, with different experiences, and you’re not teaching as such, your not teaching a subject, I think that was a skill.”*

Jenny added:

*“I think it was about empowerment and nurturing, you were both very good at that.”*

The above points resonate with Weinstein’s (1999) comments on the genuine belief that everyone has potential and the set advisor should be patient and support the individual as he/she grows and develops as a set member.

### *Skills of the facilitator*

The interviewees raised a number of 'skills' when discussing their learning set facilitators, namely:

- Listening
- Memory
- Concentration and assimilation
- Questioning
- Dealing with emotion

In Chapter Seven I discussed the work of Beaty et al (1993) and O'Hara (2001) and cited their respective lists of skills that they felt an effective facilitator should have. Both the lists covered the expected skills and listening was cited by both. However, Weinstein (1999:138) qualifies listening further:

“Listening, and hearing what is being said and how, and noticing what is not said or expressed.”

Listening was the most popular skill mentioned in discussions, interviewees giving different illustrations of this overarching theme. In relation to listening skills, Jenny states:

*“Well you were very good listeners and you were very astute at picking up on key themes, very, you seemed to pluck things out of nowhere sometimes and then you were very good at really drilling down into what the problem or issue is from, just random words and phrases.”*

Jenny's definition is a good example of 'active listening' or 'complete listening' as it is sometimes known as. In contrast to that of 'passive listening', where people are often not listening attentively to one another, they may be distracted, thinking about other things, or in particular thinking about what they are going to say next. Active

listening is a structured way of listening and responding to others. It focuses attention on the speaker. Suspending one's own frame of reference and suspending judgment are important in order to fully attend to the speaker. Egan (1990) cited in McGill and Brockbank (2004:169) suggest that the following components are included in active or complete listening:

1. Observing and reading the speaker's non-verbal behaviour; posture, facial expressions, movement, tone of voice, and the like;
2. Listening to the whole person in the context of the social groupings of life;
3. Tough minded listening;
4. Listening to and understanding the speakers verbal messages

Carol added:

*“It's hard (facilitating action learning sets), you make it look easy but it's hard because you have to listen so hard and pick up on the right thing and know what to say without giving a solution, by asking leading questions.”*

Listening can sometimes be a difficult thing to do, because the facilitator is actually listening to what is being said, and also what is not being said. Carol describes “*picking up on the right thing*” which highlights how the facilitator has understood the essence of what the presenter's story is. McGill and Brockbank (2004:170) advocate ‘tough minded listening’ saying that:

*“This requires that our listener places himself in the frame of the presenter so that he really understands where she is coming from.”*

Jenny introduced the concept of memory and added:

*“Say there were times when you were talking to xxxx and xxxx might chip in and say something supportive if you like, or encouraging, you know to be helpful and when it came round to*

*xxxx turn you picked up on, you did it a number of times, you kind of picked up on some of the things that xxx has said, but it might have been 20 minutes ago.”*

A key skill is remembering who said what at various stages in the set and hold that person's comment and returning to it, where necessary paraphrasing what has been said in order to check that the set have an understanding of the correct. Lisa outlines what she felt were positive qualities:

*“Yes, one of them was very good the first one, they listened they coaxed to a certain degree, certainly not the word directional, they weren't dictatorial or hierarchical so it was very good and they didn't keep interrupting and speaking over other people they let the conversation and it was only when they knew that the conversation was completely exhausted that they'd interject.”*

Lisa, in an animated fashion, referred to another set facilitator she had worked with, she went on to describe an aspect of listening that had been a problem to her:

*“He's a bloody pain in the arse, sorry! He speaks over people when we're talking about a certain subject he seems to think he knows more than anybody else and he interjects all the time with his opinions and he talks far too much, he shouldn't be the one that's talking he cuts the conversation down when you know that there is still more to explore, and he'll say 'right we're moving on' and we'll say hold on a minute we're not moving on we don't want to move on we want to explore this further.”*

In terms of listening to the presenter, here is an example of what not to do. When I asked her the outcome of this scenario, she said that the set had folded, which in some respects is not surprising.

Michelle introduced the concept of concentration and assimilation, she reported:

*“You listened, you obviously paid attention to what was being said in the group because if you don’t pay attention, you don’t listen and you’re not going to be able to cope with something or encourage something and I think you were very quick to grasp that, even though we all came from different backgrounds we all had very similar problems from a work point of view, which could be around the xxx as it is at the moment and concentrating as well, concentrating on what is going on around you.”*

Action learning sets, as discussed in Chapter Three, usually take up either a half day or, in the case of the MSc programme here at the university, a full day. The sets usually comprise of at least six set members with a maximum of eight set members. As discussed in Chapter Two, each person has their own live issue, so discussions focus on those live issues for the majority of the day, other than for hospitality breaks. This requires the whole set to concentrate for long periods of time. It is essential to do so to ensure that nothing vital is missed. For the facilitator, he or she must also listen and, whilst listening, pay attention to what is happening in the set in terms of the group dynamics. Allied to that, as Michelle pointed out, is the issue that the set members come from differing backgrounds so there is a need for flexibility in terms of understanding the differing issues, whilst being able to quickly assimilate the information that is been provided by the presenter.

### *Questioning*

Two interviewees discussed the significance of the style of questioning used by the facilitator. As Carol stated:

*“It’s hard (facilitating action learning sets), you make it look easy but it’s hard because you have to listen so hard and pick up on the right thing and know what to say without giving a solution, by asking the right questions.”*



Carol draws particular attention to the type of questions used, using the term ‘right questions’. Jenny expanded this idea in her description of facilitator questioning:

*“Sometimes you’d say things like “that’s an interesting word you’ve just used there” or “I’m interested to know why you used that phrase” or “why did you say that in that context then?” and “what were you meaning?”, you’d say things like that which then made you think a little bit more and think well why did I actually say that and what do I mean by it and you’d drill further and further down until we actually got to the crux of what it was and often it wasn’t where we started.”*

Jenny introduced examples of the differing types of question that could be asked. There are three aspects to this; why questions are asked; what questions are asked; and how the questions are asked.

Firstly, questions are asked in the learning set to help the presenter articulate their perspective on the live issue they are considering. This is the essence of action learning and the concept of ‘insightful questioning’ (Revans, 1988) as discussed in Chapter Three, Page 26. The primary aim of asking questions isn’t to elicit an answer, but to encourage the presenter to learn how to ask questions of themselves by thinking and reflecting as a way of responding to questions posed. Questions may sometimes engender a defensive response from the presenter, this is usually addressed by the set by asking the presenter why he/she is feeling defensive, or creating a sense that they are feeling defensive. Often this is a way of opening up an underlying issue. Alternatively, it may be that the questioner is been a little over zealous. If that is the case, then they are likely to receive some feedback from the group on that, creating a learning opportunity for that individual.

Secondly, enabling questions help the presenter to struggle with their live issue. It also allows the presenter’s dominant paradigm to be challenged in a supportive environment by encouraging the presenter to reframe their issue and entertain other possibilities without providing a ready made solution. Jenny previously gave

examples of enabling questions when she discussed the use of the right question. This style of questioning resonates with Socratic questioning described by McGill and Brockbank (2006:180) and Revans (1982) described in Chapter One, which begin with one of the following: What, how, why, when where and who. Phil talked about his facilitator's style of questioning, he said:

*“He would introduce some themes and once that he'd introduced those themes we'd explore and talk around those themes, and I mean quite often it was “what does this mean to you and your workplace, do you have any problems in your workplace around this, is there anything we can discuss” and for a lot of people it was almost like seeking help”.*

This type of questioning invites the presenter to engage in dialogue as opposed to closed questions that encourage a word one answer; yes or no. Michelle gave an example of this approach:

*“I think it was nice how you did it, you kind of picked on one or two little things, which was very good and that can kind of draw somebody out and they can start talking more and you've got your knowledge, you knew about the subject matter, and it was helpful when people were stuck about ‘where do I need to go to get the answers’, ‘what sort of things do I need to be reading’, it wasn't a case of there it is get on with.”*

I found Socratic questioning useful in other aspects of teaching and certainly in working with Masters Students embarking upon the writing of a final dissertation, it encourages individuals to both explore and expand in either a verbal or written format.

Finally, how questions are asked. The questions need to be phrased in such a way as to encourage the presenter to explore different aspects or hidden meanings behind what has been said, but not in a way that creates an atmosphere that becomes oppressive, almost like an interrogation as opposed to creating dialogue. Carol

thought this could be achieved by giving the presenter the confidence to speak and articulate their own opinion:

*“I think it’s about allowing people and giving people the confidence to speak and allowing them to have an opinion which in normal education that I’ve been through you weren’t allowed to have an opinion.”*

To have that confidence requires that the facilitator asks enabling questions (McGill and Brockbank, 2004). The main purpose of an enabling question is for the presenter to be able to learn from the question as a form of reflective dialogue in which the presenter, with the help of the facilitator and the set, will reflect on their actions, consider new actions and then decide upon a new course of action. In other words the questioning process is not an interrogation but a process that encourages the presenter to action change in some way, which is the essence of action learning. Through skilful questioning they learn about their own actions and ultimately change. Donaghue (1992:20) discusses the idea of effective learning set facilitation in terms of change and change in the individual set members. He discusses the fundamental issues that underpin effective facilitation:

*“First, learning is about change. Therefore if an action learning set is to be effective, the individuals in the set must change in some way as a result of the process. Second, the set exists to achieve outputs in the form of successful projects and so to be effective these require completion. This balance between the nature of task achievement and the nature of developing people forms the fulcrum of effective set advising that is why the set is there and it is therefore why the set adviser is there.”*

### *Dealing with emotion*

For Carol the concept of emotion and the management of emotion in the set were particularly important, she states:

*“I get the impression that it wouldn’t have mattered if someone had absolutely flipped and shouted, neither you nor xxxx would have reacted to that.”*

Here Carol is referring to the idea that any member of the learning set may engage in various expressions of emotion and how the facilitators used emotional intelligence to deal with this situation. Carol uses the term ‘flipped’; a term commonly associated with an individual losing control and stepping outside the bounds of our culturally accepted behaviour. This particular quotation brings in various points worthy of consideration. This includes the role of emotion in the set in that the purpose of the action learning is about change in the individual. This can, and often is a painful process, and inevitably a range of emotions are expressed, and not every set member can deal with emotion. Weinstein (1999:74) wrote of her experiences of facilitating a learning set in which one of the set members could not deal with expressions of emotion, she wrote:

“In one set I worked with, a man decided to leave during the section meeting. What prompted his exit was another member recalling in tears, an upsetting moment at work. Her tears and speaking were controlled and fluent. However the man felt that the show of emotion was inappropriate. On being questioned by the set, he admitted that he could not cope with others’ emotions. If there was a chance that such might surface again in the set, he preferred to leave right there and then. And he did. The others in the set were sad at this because they felt he might have learned something about his discomfort if he had chosen to stay and work on this.”

It is useful to look at the background to the concept of emotion, and the complexity of emotion in both the set and, in the set member’s own organisation (which is discussed in the next section).

Salovey et al (2004) introduced one of the first comprehensive theories of emotional intelligence. They combined the theoretical concepts of both emotion and intelligence.

They defined emotion (2004:189) as “an organised response system that coordinates experiences of moods and feelings, such as happiness, anger, sadness and surprise” and intelligence (2004:232) as “a primary emphasis on abstract reasoning and may, secondarily, refer to adaptation.” They suggested that intellect and emotional intelligence are different and in fact use different parts of the brain. Goleman (1998) adapted the Mayer and Salovey model, focusing on emotional intelligence as a series of competencies grouped around the management of an individual’s feelings and relationships with others. Emotional intelligence is defined as:

“The capacity for understanding our own feelings and those of others, for motivating others and ourselves whilst using leadership, empathy and integrity.” (1998:82)

His model focused on emotional intelligence as a wide array of competencies and skills that underpin leadership performance. The model outlined four main emotional intelligence constructs:

1. Self-awareness — the ability to read one's emotions and recognise their impact while using gut feelings to guide decisions.
2. Self-management — involves controlling one's emotions and impulses and adapting to changing circumstances.
3. Social awareness — the ability to sense, understand, and react to others' emotions while comprehending social networks.
4. Relationship management — the ability to inspire, influence, and develop others while managing conflict.

Goleman (2001:28) included a set of emotional competencies within each construct of emotional intelligence and believed that emotional competencies are not innate talents, but rather learned capabilities that must be worked on and developed to achieve outstanding performance. These competencies are usually depicted as a list; however I have chosen to tabulate them. The competencies are:

<b>Self or personal competencies</b>	<b>Social competencies</b>
Emotional self-awareness	Social awareness
Accurate self-assessment	Empathy

Self-confidence	Service orientation
Self-management	Organisational awareness
Emotional self-control	Relationship management
Trustworthiness	Developing others
Conscientiousness	Influence
Adaptability	Communication
Achievement drive	Conflict management
Initiative	Visionary leadership
	Catalysing change
	Teamwork and collaboration
	Building Bonds

Goleman (2001) posits that individuals are born with a general emotional intelligence that determines their potential for learning emotional competencies.

Emotional intelligence can be demonstrated through the concepts of both tact and diplomacy. Carmeli and Tishler (2006:11) define tact and diplomacy as:

“Exhibiting consideration and sensitivity in dealing with others and avoiding giving offence.”

To summarise this section has looked at the concept of facilitation and asked interviewees to consider two aspects of facilitation. Firstly, to consider their own expectations of their facilitator’s role, and secondly, the role they actually played and what personal qualities and skills they demonstrated.

In asking; “What role did you expect the facilitator to play?” I found that there were a variety of differing expectations held by the interviewees. These ranged from the individual who expected the role to be more didactic and in keeping with a typical pedagogic approach on one hand, to the contrary perspective of the dominant role of the facilitator as gate keeper; not a member of the set but responsible for the processes that occur within the set and the set facilitator knows and understands the set members’ expectations.

The second part of this section was concerned with the role actually played by the facilitator and the interviewee's views on what skills he/she demonstrated. The discussions were divided into two parts; personal qualities and skills, each seen as different issues.

Personal qualities, or characteristics, of the individual included:

- Honesty and warmth shown by the facilitator;
- Intuition that he/she has when working with a set;
- Intonation in their voice; and
- Nurturing individuals within the set.

The skills included:

- Listening and hearing;
- Questioning in both a challenging and supportive way;
- Dealing with emotions that may be brought to the set;

#### Impact on the individual's job performance

Donaghue (1992:20) asks "What are the outputs which determine the effectiveness of the set advisor?" Simply stated, outputs could be (a) individuals who have changed in some way and (b) individuals who have improved their personal work performance. This following section considers the second part of that particular question, although not directly attributing individual effectiveness with the effectiveness of the set facilitator, it indirectly considers the impact that action learning has had on the individual set member's job performance.

When I asked the question; "What has been the impact of action learning on your job performance?" a whole host of interesting responses were given. What struck me the most was how this question was universally approached with such enthusiasm. Carol, for example, explained that:

*“I know I’m in a room full of consultants but I won’t let them talk over me which I would have done before, I’d have just let them get on with it but now if I need to take control, I’ll take control, not in a nasty way just in a reasoning way and whereas before I would have just let them get on with it I won’t now.”*

She carried onto say:

*“I think it’s just self-confidence it’s having confidence that actually I do know what I’m talking about most of the time and even if they react I’m not going to take it personally as if it’s “you don’t know what you’re doing therefore we can say what we like” so in that way I think the consultants are in a bit of a shock because in a meeting they’ll think nothing of just talking over you but now I make a point of carrying on and you can see them all just shut up, its amazing!”*

Carol’s statement *“if I need to take control, I’ll take control”* demonstrates her self efficacy, particularly, confident and assertive behaviour. Bandura (1997:2) defined self-efficacy as being the:

*“Beliefs in one’s capabilities to organise and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments.”*

Particular pertinent to Carol’s experiences is the point made by Wood and Bandura (1989:364) who advocate “exercising control over events”. Allied to self efficacy is the concept of self confidence. Lindenfield (1995:29) discusses the concept of self confidence and describes the idea of outer confidence; the confidence that can be seen in an individual’s behaviour. These include:

- Communication
- Assertiveness
- Emotional Control



- Emotional Resilience
- Reflection

### *Communication*

For Carol, communication was an issue which she highlighted in recounting the way in which more senior people in her organisation had historically spoken over her; she now feels that this is no longer the case.

### *Assertiveness*

Assertiveness is relevant in Carol's account, in terms of how she control of the situation, she says "*not in a nasty way*", here differentiating types of methods of taking control; the difference between being assertive as opposed to being aggressive.

Michelle, however, demonstrates a more assertive manner and said:

*"Umm, I'm more outspoken than ever before, but probably in a more constructive way, I tended to only be outspoken and have a point of view when I was rattled to the point where I'd got so frustrated that I ended up quite unconstructive by just blurting out what I was thinking and feeling whereas now I have the confidence to say what I'm thinking at the time in a more constructive matter, particularly at the early stages and in the planning stages where I've started to value my own opinion."*

Lisa also describes assertiveness and outer confidence:

*"I've put my views forward, and once upon a time I'd have been scared to death to do that because I always thought that other people knew more than me and knew better than me."*

Tennant (1982:3), in defining assertiveness, states that:

*"Assertiveness is defined as a self expression through which a person stands up for his/her own rights without violating the*

rights of others. Assertiveness theory assumes that everybody has certain human rights that these rights should be respected and that assertiveness skills can be improved. If a response is to be truly assertive it follows that it should be honest and appropriate both to the people involved and the situation. In any situation one can initiate a conversation or respond to others. Assertiveness theory emphasises the fact that both parties in all situations have resources and that effectiveness results if both sets of resources are used. Therefore the idea emerges of having the ability to shape a situation and also be shaped without losing sight of the definition of assertiveness.”

As a communication style and strategy, assertiveness is distinguished from aggression and passivity. How people deal with personal boundaries; their own and those of other people, helps to distinguish between these three concepts. Passive communicators do not defend their own personal boundaries and thus allow aggressive people to harm or otherwise unduly influence them. They are also typically not likely to risk trying to influence anyone else. An individual who communicates assertively by not being afraid to speak his mind or trying to influence others, but doing so in a way that respects the personal boundaries of others is assertive. Tennant (1982:3) gives reasons as to why individuals need to be assertive, these include:

- It is respectful of both oneself and others.
- It leads to better feelings between both parties.
- It gives a person more control of his or her behaviour.
- It provides independence and responsibility.
- It helps a person to communicate what one feels, thinks and wants.
- It provides more independence and responsibility.
- It has a high "success rate" albeit the objectives of being assertive are not to win.

### *Emotional Control*

Phil introduced the concept of emotional intelligence on the issue of emotion and skills of the facilitator, as discussed in the preceding topic. He discussed how he successfully transferred his learning on emotion from one context to another:

*“it certainly makes me very aware of other people’s thoughts and needs... it comes back to the action learning set, I mean you learn from those that have the experience at what ever level, so yes I’m sure it has impacted possibly sub-consciously.”*

### *Emotional Resilience*

Carol’s description resonates with Goleman’s (2001) personal competencies of emotional self-control and emotional self-awareness, she is aware of the emotional dimension to her professional life and demonstrates this through her description of a workplace event; *“even if they react, I’m not going to take it personally”*. This also resonates with the concept of ‘Emotional Resilience’, here she is acknowledging that even if the discussion gets a little over heated she now feels that she has the ability to keep calm and remain professional. Dulewicz and Higgs (2003:196) define emotional resilience as:

*“Being able to maintain one’s performance, especially when under great pressure or when being challenged or criticised.”*

Michelle discusses risk taking and describes how her attitude has changed. Within this she is demonstrating Goleman’s (2001) personal competency of adaptability and how she has changed, she states:

*“No, I’m not worried about things; I’d take a risk now that I wouldn’t have taken before...”*

## *Reflection*

Carol introduces the idea of a more reflective approach to decision making, she explains:

*“I think from a reflective point of view I will read around things, I do a lot of reading and I didn’t do that before because I always thought ‘well I haven’t got the time’ but actually if you put the effort in it helps so that’s the other thing, getting background information and not just working on the hoof, it’s a lot better you don’t get caught out as many times doing that.”*

She discusses how she feels her approach to decision making is now more considered, thus avoiding difficult situations in her workplace.

Lisa adds the dimension of reflection and taking time out in order to develop the idea of looking at something from a different perspective, she said:

*“Well the first thing is that it gives you time out, we never ever get time out, and we can actually discuss real life situations not like when you go into a training session and you get hypothetical scenarios that really aren’t relating to your work at all so it’s actually something that you really want some help with and you’ve got your peers who understand what the situation is and come up with different options to explore, and it’s funny because when you are in one of these issues, or one of these dilemmas, you know there’s that old saying “you can’t see the wood for the trees”, and actually you can’t sometimes so fresh eyes it’s really interesting.”*

She continued on to say:

*“I think it gives you fresh eyes when you go back in, it sort of recharges your batteries and gives you that satisfaction that you are doing a good job, well as well as you can under the circumstances and that other people are feeling the pressure or the issues as well as you so like I said it recharges your batteries and you think I’m not as bad as I thought I was...”*

Jenny introduced the concept of increased self awareness, stating that she now feels that she has a better understanding of herself, resonating with Goleman’s (1998) accurate self-assessment as evidenced by an affirmation of her knowledge and ability, she explains:

*“Well because you think you know yourself, well you do know yourself, but to then put it to the test in a whole different variety of ways and to have all the answers coming back to you telling you all the things you thought you knew already.”*

She further illustrates Goleman’s (1998) accurate self assessment competency as she contextualises that better understanding of self in her role as a leader, she said:

*“My leadership abilities, I’m more aware of my skills and my weaknesses. Yes, definitely, self-awareness is one of the biggest gains that I got, and insight into yourself, which I think is valuable when you’re leading and managing a team and change, you need to have that level of insight in a way and a lot of people don’t and don’t have the opportunity to find it either.”*

Similarly, Phil stated:

*“Yes absolutely in terms of what my strengths and what my weaknesses are, very much so there’s not many opportunities in*

*your life where you get to explore yourself in so much detail as painful as it was.”*

The nature of the leadership role and task achievement is also tied in with the nature of improvement in an individual's job performance. Mumford (1986:12) discussed the relationship between “effectiveness in management and the effectiveness in management development” and was concerned with the idea of the connection between inputs and outputs in the development process. He argues that “effectiveness is defined clearly by the results actually secured and not by the knowledge someone possesses”.

In summary, it is clear from the analysis of the above comments that the action learning process and being a set member had a positive effect on all the interviewees. Two clear themes emerged; (a) individual development and (b) the impact that has on the way they carry out their professional responsibilities. Each interviewee gave examples of how he or she had developed and they cited examples from their professional lives, these included:

- Self efficacy and self confidence;
- A move from passivity to assertiveness;
- A better understanding of self including leadership role;
- A further development of emotional intelligence; and
- The ability to reframe situations.

### **Conclusions to the analysis: Reflecting back on data collection and analysis**

At this point in the analysis process I think that it is useful to reconsider the concept of saturation that was discussed in Chapter Four. Strauss and Corbin (1998:212) cited in Bryman and Bell (2003: 330) wrote that saturation is a situation in the research process when:

“(a) no new or relevant data seem to be emerging regarding a category (b) the category is well developed in terms of its

properties and dimensions demonstrating variation, (c) the relationships among categories are well established and validated”

When I commenced the data collection process, starting with the pilot interviews, I started with an open question: ““What is it like being a member of an action learning set?” This allowed me the freedom to ask whatever questions I liked in response to the replies I was given by the interviewees. Within that particular process that I had begun to create quite a rich picture of their experiences and within that process I was able to build supplementary questions into the second pilot interview, based upon what I had been told in the first interview. These questions were not radical departures from the main theme being discussed but merely prompts that elicited richer data from the interviewee, almost as a way of coaxing a little bit more from them. From these interviews I was able to determine what areas resonated between the interviewees and what I would like to use as primary themes in the second subsequent interviews. This is the essence of grounded theory in that issues of interest were pursued and greater breadth was added to the research. This opened up more areas of to be discussed in the next round of interviews.

In the following interviews I opened with the same question as asked in the pilot interview; “What is it like to be a member of an action learning set?” I then added the following questions:

- What about the expectations of set members prior knowledge?
- What about the expectations of performance of set members in the action learning set?
- What about the disclosure of personal issues?
- What about the facilitator?
- What about personal confidence?

As discussed in my reflections throughout the data collection process, this is not a straight forward process and the interviewees did not always answer the questions in order. This was challenging to me at first but I very quickly realised that I would get a

greater richness if I encouraged the interviewees to just talk, and I could occasionally interject with a question, or alternatively, I could interject with a point of clarification that wasn't on the list of questions. It also allowed me to follow up on points that previous interviewees had raised, ensuring that I gained another angle or insight into that point. So to some extent the questions above represent the areas I wanted to discuss but also associated areas that I had not initially considered. At the end of this round of interviews I was left with a series of topics that I wanted to pursue. I knew that I was digging much deeper and gaining a very rich picture.

As part of my reflections in Chapter Seven, I was surprised with the richness of the data I had collected from the four interviews, which could be argued is a relatively small number of interviews. I had realised that quite a lot of insights could be gained from using a conversational approach and with knowledge that I had five more interviews to carry out I began to feel confident about the quality of the data I was capturing.

The third round of interviews started very much the same. I had, by now, quite an extensive list of prompts on which I intended to base the interviews (see Appendix One). As in the previous interviews, interviewees gave a very rich account of their experiences of being a learning set member. I used the questions and interjected where appropriate. Again, anything that was said that was slightly different I picked upon because at this stage I was becoming comfortable in the data collection method. I was beginning to use the skills that I use in an action learning set; listening and remembering different points so I could return to them at an appropriate moment. Again the data collected was rich, but the process was not quite the same; a lot of what was now feeling like old ground was being discussed, offering no new insights. Certainly there were examples of affirming points and reaffirming points; however, when I arrived at the end of the interviews I was not filled with a sense of needing to know more as I had experienced in the previous round of questions. I was also concerned that if I carried on collecting data then the richness would start to become diluted.

At this stage I had now made up my mind to cease the interviews and concentrate on the analysis as a whole. I felt it was useful to return to Strauss and Corbin's



(1998:212) definition of saturation as cited in Bryman and Bell (2003:330) and use that as guidance. They advised that saturation was a situation when:

“No new or relevant data seem to be emerging regarding a category; the category is well developed in terms of its properties and dimensions demonstrating variation; and the relationships among categories are well established and validated.”

As I said earlier, I was starting to feel that we were going over old ground and nothing new of any real interest was being introduced. Differing topics that had emerged had been looked at from a variety of differing perspectives. The categories had become quite complex and as they developed it became apparent that there was an inter-link between them which had been uncovered as interviewees discussed their experiences. As a result I was sure that each point had been fully developed and that all the topics had been fully saturated.

At this stage in the research process I was starting to feel a lot more confident with the analysis of the transcripts. I was able to use Prasad's (1993) template effectively and worked through each interview line by line allocating a code to it. A systematic approach to data analysis was now in place. This assisted me in dealing with the task of working through the transcripts. It was through coding that I began to see themes emerging. The literature provided a range of explanatory frameworks through which to conceptualise the issues associated with effective action learning sets.

### **Chapter summary**

This chapter has considered five specific themes areas of interest I believed to be important in determining interviewee's views on the effectiveness of action learning sets, these themes included:

- a) status and hierarchy in action learning sets;
- b) trust in action learning sets;
- c) disclosure of personal information;

- d) facilitation; and finally
- e) the impact on the individual's job performance.

In relation to each theme, conclusions have been drawn and questions of the data have been asked at various stages. The chapter has concluded by considering my reflections on the research process and what I had learned of the research process to date.

The following chapter considers the details of the findings and conclusions discussed in this chapter. The focus for this chapter was the drawing together of the data gathered from eleven interviews on the subject of former set member's experiences of being an action learning set member and their views on effective action learning sets. It progresses with a consideration of the main points of the analysis and the subsequent impact on the effectiveness of action learning sets. Through the development of these discussions I then draw out my contribution to knowledge within the fields of organisational behaviour, action learning and grounded methodology.

## **Chapter Nine - Discussion and Conclusions**

### **Introduction**

This chapter considers the primary purpose of this thesis: a consideration of what makes an effective action learning set from the perspective of action learning set participants. The chapter considers the findings and subsequent analysis from the data gathered from eleven interviews, in which interviewees were asked about their experiences of being an action learning set member. The chapter commences with a brief review of the literature explored in Chapter Four on the evaluation of action learning programmes in general. The chapter then summarises the main findings from all the interviews held and their subsequent impact on the effectiveness of action learning sets. It then considers the contribution to knowledge that this research makes; specifically in the areas of organisational behaviour, action learning and grounded theory. The chapter concludes with the limitations of this thesis.

### **Current thinking on evaluation of action learning programmes**

Chapter Four considered the differing perspectives on how the process of action learning is evaluated and cited the views of various academics, practitioners and researchers. Revans (1984), the founder of action learning, felt that an increase in an organisation's productivity was one indicator of the overall success of action learning. Weiss (1996) considered the achievement of both intended and unintended outcomes resulting from action learning. A university award is a good example of an intended outcome and unanticipated learning, such as social learning, would be an example of an unintended outcome. Owen and Rogers (1999) evaluated the success of action learning by the change in an individual's behaviour. Brockbank and McGill (2003), however, felt that too much emphasis was placed on positivistic methods of evaluation that largely ignore a range of stakeholder views.

The actual effectiveness of the learning sets themselves, however, remains under researched. The following findings from interviews, and the subsequent analysis,

whilst acknowledging existing literature, widens the debate on the effectiveness of action learning sets by adding the views of the participants.

### **Summary and discussion of research findings:**

#### Status, equality and hierarchy in action learning sets

In relation to the issue of status, equality and hierarchy within action learning sets, the analysis has shown that there are a number of hierarchies operating in the sets at various times in the life of the set. Theoretical perspectives suggest that set members, as members of society, in general, will naturally compare themselves to one another in the first action learning set meetings, but within a short period of time, alternative hierarchies begin to emerge and have differing life spans. Analysis of the interview transcripts has shown that interviewees experienced the following hierarchies in their action learning sets:

##### *Social Hierarchy*

A social hierarchy was shown to be applicable to both action learning sets run by Universities with the primary aim of achieving an academic qualification, and action learning sets held in organisations where there is no aim. This hierarchy is based upon society's general tendency to discriminate on the basis of gender and age (Hogg and Tindale, 2007; Strodbeck et al, 1957).

Social hierarchy is likely to impact upon the effectiveness of the action learning set in the following ways:

One individual set member commented that she experienced a feeling of being older than the other set members. The issue here revolves around her perception of her age and whether she will be treated differently or not. As outlined in Chapter Seven, Hogg and Tindale (2007) suggest that social characteristics such as gender, age, occupation and ethnicity play an important role in the issue of status and hierarchy within groups. The example cited here relates to older individuals, however, this is very likely to be the same for the younger people. In terms of effectiveness in the set, there is a danger that this may detract from the willingness of the older/younger members to fully

contribute or have their opinions dismissed for the same reasons, thus diminishing the set's overall effectiveness.

### *Academic Hierarchy*

An academic hierarchy was seen to be specific to action learning sets in an academic environment that has the specific aim of achieving a qualification at the end of the sets life. Set members interviewed have differing levels of academic and professional qualifications, and from their perspective, created inequalities in both knowledge and experience.

This hierarchy caused some concerns amongst set members who did not have an academic degree; raising concerns about their ability to contribute to the discussions in the set and their ability to complete the course. Analysis also showed concerns regarding the perception of the other set members, and whether or not they would value the contribution of the set member without the same formal qualifications.

### *Seniority Hierarchy*

This hierarchy was concerned with differing set members' levels of organisational seniority within the action learning set. This may apply equally to action learning sets in a university and an organisational based set. Although the literature discussed issues that set members had experienced with those subordinate to them, the main points here relate to those who were senior to them and revolved around the idea of knowledge attached to status, with set members doubting the validity of their contributions because of their absence of equivalent status. The analysis suggested that sets that are held in organisations and comprise of members of the same organisation are likely to have issues around seniority. Assumptions that set members have more status in the organisation, therefore more status in the set, will create a feeling that the set is unequal in terms of ability to contribute to the workings of the set. This can lead to a degree of over credibility given to the contribution from the more senior individual and the opposite for the more subordinate set member. This may impact upon the subordinate's willingness to contribute to the learning set and the remaining member's willingness to hear that individual's contribution.

### *Experience Hierarchy*

The analysis revealed that differing levels of support are given to the set presenter according to the contextual knowledge and experience of the set members as a whole. This has the effect of creating a hierarchy based upon a member's ability to contribute to the presenter's live issue. From this, a situation arises in which both too much and too little contextual knowledge can be problematic. The analysis has shown that too much contextual knowledge by set members, which can act as a barrier, is naive but inadvertently insightful questions are unlikely to be asked of the presenter. Encouragement to look at the live issue in question differently, because of over familiarity and what McGill and Brockbank (2004:122) describe as the 'taken-for-granted' (TFGs), only perpetuates a single loop learning approach. This denies the presenter the opportunity to reframe the issue (Revan, 1984) and work through personal assumptions (Mezirow, 1991) as a way of moving on from single loop learning to double loop learning.

A further problem revealed through the analysis is that too little contextual knowledge may result in set members abdicating from the discussion, believing that they have little to add yet. However, through the application of Revan's (1984) questions, it is this set member that is likely to make a significant contribution to discussions through naive questions. Experience hierarchy was shown as relating to differing levels of support and could be offered to the presenter according to contextual knowledge and experience of other set members. This creates a hierarchy in terms of differing set member's abilities to contribute to the discussion.

### *Positional Hierarchy*

This hierarchy was shown as relating to the case of the set member who received a promotion in their work organisation and was subsequently seen as occupying a more senior position in comparison with other set members who worked for the same organisation. This then created a form of positional hierarchy within the set. This essentially changes the perception of the newly promoted member's position in the learning set to some of the other set members. This revolved around individuals who were contemporaries previously having an equal power base within the set, but this equilibrium shifted due to the promotion of one of the members. The impact on the set was evident in the following ways:

- Change of attitude from some of the set members due to the other member's promotion;
- Increased overt political behaviour which may compromise some of the quality of the set discussions;
- Reluctance to challenge the newly promoted member for the reasons outlined in positional hierarchies; and
- Set members attempting to extend their personal networks via contacts from the newly appointed set member.

Ultimately changing power dynamics, that have the effect of both reducing and diminishing some members' contributions to set discussions and outcomes, often with increasing political behaviour, ultimately impact on the quality of the discussions.

#### *Political Hierarchy*

Political hierarchy was seen to concern members operating in the same set occupying different positions, or working in different sections of the same organisation, resulting in the possibility of organisational politics occurring in the learning set. The effectiveness of the set may be compromised for the following reasons:

- Selective contribution and reporting because of the concern of what may be discussed outside the learning set in a political arena that is not safe or as safe;
- Facilitator neutrality: if the facilitator is an organisational member, they may have an additional agenda other than that of facilitating that set, e.g. introducing change. If the facilitator is external to the organisation, e.g. a self-employed business consultant, then the agenda may be the longevity of the set, thus ensuring a regular source of income;
- The perception from set members that the Chatham House rule may not be applied in reality; and
- Dissimulation on the part of set members because of concerns of political safety and impact on careers.

Again, all the above issues immediately impact upon the quality of the work carried out by the set, and the subsequent impact upon effectiveness.

#### *Manager/Subordinate Hierarchy*

This hierarchy was seen to emerge from the manager/subordinate relationship existing in the same action learning set, primarily the impact that relationship may have on the dynamics of those set members involved in it. The analysis shows that a manager/subordinate hierarchy is likely to limit the contributions that both the manager and subordinate make to the action learning set discussions for the following reasons:

- A possible political dimension that results in the censoring of each member's contributions to the set;
- Limited input from subordinate who may feel intimidated by the manager;
- The manager may feel that the subordinate colleague has little to offer because of the subordinate's position in the hierarchy; perhaps the subordinate individual is unaware of the issues at a more senior level.

#### *Dominance Hierarchy*

Dominance hierarchy was shown through the varying levels of 'presence' of the differing strengths of personality within the set and the effect on the dynamics in the set. It was revealed to concern a member's strength of 'personality' and 'presence' in the set and the subsequent impact on the effectiveness of the set. Examples include:

- Members who are seen by other set members as more dominant and therefore more powerful tend to shape the set's behaviour (Lieberman et al 1973). This often reflects their own values, which may not always benefit the set, leading to a less effective learning set.
- Members who hog airtime, dominating with their issue, will take away time from other set members, creating a rush at the end to ensure that all members receive airtime. This may impact in the sense that the set is not operating effectively as not everyone gets the chance to contribute and as such there becomes a focus on the equity of the process as opposed to the content of the



discussions. This may also create tensions for the facilitator who may begin to hurry set members.

In summary, the analysis revealed that there are a variety of differing hierarchical factors that impact on the action learning set's effectiveness. To some extent to present these hierarchies discretely detracts from the complexity of their presence in the actual learning sets. Inevitably these hierarchies are interlinked and will be present at differing times in the set, creating a more complicated richness of tensions which ultimately impact on the effectiveness of the set.

### Trust in action learning sets

The analysis suggested that trust is an important facet of an effective learning set. Interviewees placed emphasis on both psychological and political safety as important facets of trust in the set (Dindira, 2002). The analysis highlighted the need for a safe environment in which the psychological climate is relaxed. This had the effect of encouraging individual set members to discuss issues that could also make them vulnerable. There is a need to feel that the set is a safe place before they disclose sensitive or personal information about themselves or their organisations. If the set does not feel a safe place then members may be reluctant to discuss contentious issues and, as was seen in the analysis of interview transcripts, members will actively engage in dissimulation as a way of protecting themselves from psychological harm or reducing the effects of cognitive dissonance they may feel. In dissimulating, a set member may appear to be taking part in the set discussions; however, there was a degree of self protection with set members working at a superficial level and not really engaging honestly in issues relating to self, thus directly impacting on the effectiveness of the personal outcome for the individual concerned.

Trust also takes time to create and starts to emerge as part of the socialising process which engenders a greater degree of personal comfort and trust experienced in the set. Time for socialising, which may be seen as wasted time, often has the effect of building cohesion into the set, contributing to the creation of a positive psychological climate in which members may feel that they do not need to dissimulate, coupled with

other set members who have not experienced the same type of concern, will have a positive impact on the effectiveness of the set.

### Personal disclosure

Tuckman (1965) suggests that groups develop at a uniform rate and that all members progress through the various stages of development at the same time. From my analysis of the data for this research I would suggest that in the context of an action learning set there is an individual perspective that mirrors the work of Tuckman (1965) and focuses on the individual set member's progression with the set. The issue of progression is linked with the notion of personal disclosure, citing a situation of an effective learning set as being a parallel situation to that of Tuckman's (1965) performing stage in his model of group development.

The findings of this thesis support the above supposition in that the individual set member's experience of personal disclosure occurred at an individual rate. The set member's individual experience can be located on a continuum, ranging from being very comfortable with personal disclosure to being very uncomfortable with disclosure. This creates a situation where individuals progressed at different rates until a situation where the set was an effective one.

It is the norm that ground rules are usually agreed at the start of the learning set's active life, and on some occasions they include an expectation of personal disclosure from the individual set members. Analysis has shown that this experience presents itself as being problematic for some set members. On occasion this results in the individual resisting pressure from the group by concealing what they actually think and feel (McKenna, 1994:301) by engaging in dissimulation as a method of dealing with cognitive dissonance.

Building upon the above points in relation to trust, it was shown that if set members feel there is a political dimension to an action learning set it will have implications for whether or not set members will disclose, and if they do, how much, particularly if the sets are organisationally based. This clearly has implications for the effectiveness of the set in that contribution may be both limited and untruthful.

There were also differing opinions as to degrees of comfort and discomfort in personal disclosure. Some set members preferred not to have colleagues as set members so they could present themselves to the set as a blank canvas. Others felt more comfortable with set members they have known previously (McCallister, 1995). As was shown, an absence of comfort will impact on the amount that is disclosed and therefore the effectiveness of the set. Some set members felt more secure when they realised that they would not be pressurised to disclose (Lieberman et al, 1974). However, there was an expectation from some set members that disclosure was essential to the effectiveness of the set. The analysis revealed that from the outset this is therefore a problematic situation in which some members will dissimulate as a way of dealing with cognitive dissonance.

### Facilitation

I found a variety of differing expectations held by the interviewees, these ranged from the individual who expected the role to be more didactic, in keeping with a typical pedagogical approach on the one hand, to the opposite perspective, that of the gate keeper; someone who is not a member of the set but has responsibility for the processes that occur within the set. The remainder of the sample were placed at various locations on this emerging continuum. In terms of maximising the effectiveness of the set, the facilitator needs to be aware that set members will bring different expectations to the set and need to be both understood and addressed, if this is not carried out, a situation may occur in which set members are confused and feel there is a mismatch between the expectations and the reality of their experience. It is then very likely that some member's contributions will diminish in the early days of the life of the set, a situation that may not be resolved.

The second part of this section was concerned with the role actually played by the facilitator and the interviewee's views on what skills they demonstrated. This builds on existing work concerning facilitator skills which list various skills required to effectively manage an action learning set (O'Hara, 2001; Beaty et al, 1993). Interviewees cited the following as some of the personal qualities and skills their respective set facilitator had possessed:

*Personal qualities:*

Honesty- demonstrating personal trustworthiness in dealings with set members.

Warmth - showing a form of empathy, sympathy and compassion.

Intuition - understands the group dynamics present in the set.

Intonation in voice - has a quality in the voice that engenders a feeling of safety

Nurturing – helps individual set members to grow and develop.

*Skills:*

Listening - demonstrates a variety of differing forms of listening and hearing.

Questioning - is able to use questions in such a way the presenter is encouraged to fully explore their live issue.

Dealing with emotion - is able to manage the emotional dynamic of the set.

In terms of impact of the effectiveness of the set, action learning is a very specific way of facilitating, which requires a range of differing skills that encourage the set to work together on difficult live issues. If the facilitator does not have the appropriate facilitation skills to understand the group processes occurring, it may be that set members' contributions will be affected as the management of the set will be affected.

Impact on the set member's job performance

As discussed in Chapter Two and the start of this chapter, there are different ways to evaluate the success of an action learning programme. This research has built upon that literature in that it is clear from the analysis of the discussions above that the action learning process and being a set member have had a positive effect on all the interviewees involved in interviews. Two clear themes relating to personal effectiveness have emerged here; (a) individual development and (b) the impact that has on the way they carry out their professional responsibilities. Examples of this include:

- Self confidence leading to self efficacy. All interviewees reported an increase in personal self-confidence as a result of engaging in the action learning process.

- A move from passivity to assertiveness. Some interviewees were more assertive in their daily work encounters, whereas in the past, passivity was the most prevalent stance taken.
- A better understanding of self including the individual's leadership role and the impact of that greater understanding on those who are subordinate to them.
- The employment of emotional intelligence in order to engage with people more effectively by being aware of the needs of others.
- The ability to reframe situations creating a more developed understanding of the situation or issue.

It is clear from the analysis carried out in this thesis that the action learning process and being a set member have had a positive effect on all the interviewees. Two clear themes relating to personal effectiveness have emerged here: individual development and how they carry out their professional roles. The analysis suggests that change in the individual will have a direct bearing in how they conduct themselves within an action learning set. As they begin to change and develop so will the strength of their contribution to the discussions held in the set. As confidence grows within the individual so will their capacity to challenge in a supportive manner, perhaps seeing weaknesses in the arguments that are presented in the discussions which culminate in a much richer experience for set members and ultimately a more effective set.

### **Contribution to the field of Organisational Behaviour**

The following section discusses the formal contribution to knowledge that has emanated from the analysis carried out. This makes a direct contribution to the field of Organisational Behaviour. The thesis contributes directly to the study of group theory, adult learning, reflective practice and communication. Additionally, by including other disciplines such as psychology and counselling studies, I feel that I have added a richness and differing dimension to the study of Organisational Behaviour.

### Hierarchies in learning sets

The findings show that an action learning set contains a variety of differing hierarchies at any one time and that these hierarchies have a direct impact the effectiveness of the set. Hierarchies will impact on the set members and, as a consequence, affect the contribution they make to the operation of the set. Hierarchies create power differences amongst set members. These power differences lead to dominance of individual set members and suppression of others at differing times, impacting on the individual set members' contributions and, in turn, affecting the effectiveness of the set.

### Trust in action learning sets

Analyses highlighted the processes involved in the development of trust in the action learning set. Trust, has been shown to be vital to the effective working of the set. Set members need to feel both psychologically and politically safe before they are willing to discuss sensitive issues in the set and be honest about how they think and feel about those issues. The level of trust experienced in the set has a direct affect on the content and amount they are willing to disclose. Trust also takes time to create and starts to emerge as part of the socialising process which engenders a greater degree of personal comfort and trust experienced in the set.

### Personal disclosure in action learning sets

The analysis of the transcripts reveals disclosure to be on a continuum which ranges from being comfortable with personal disclosure in the learning set, to feeling uncomfortable with it. Within the analysis is also consideration of the notion that set members will actively engage in dissimulation when it comes to their turn to present their issue. One explanation for this is that set members dissimulate as a mechanism of reducing the impact of cognitive dissonance in themselves, so will use dissimulation as a dissonance reduction technique.

## **Contribution to Action Learning Practice**

This thesis offers a unique view on what makes effective action learning, thus enriching both the understanding and practice of action learning. As stated in Chapter

One, this area of research has been dominated by the thoughts of researchers, academics and consultants who have presented their views on what makes effective action learning set. The thesis adds practical knowledge, specifically addressing:

#### Location of action learning sets

The thesis explored issues surrounding the location of action learning sets, in that it has considered the issues involved in action learning sets, held in either universities or in differing organisational settings.

#### In-house action learning programmes

There are several issues here. A situation where two set members work together in a manager/subordinate role can be problematic as there is an automatic power imbalance which may impact on the nature of what is disclosed and the extent they can disclose personal issues and thoughts. There is also the possibility of politics being an issue within the set. For example, set members may pursue different agendas within the organisation and actively lobby in the set to progress those particular agendas. Added to this is the question of confidentiality or the 'Chatham House' rule. The uncertainty of whether what is actually said will 'stay in the room' is a concern for some set members. In summary, the questions to ask are:

- To what extent can work colleagues in action learning sets be truly 'comrades in adversity', given the politics and problems of in-house action learning programmes?; and
- Does the organisation and the political agendas of its employees get in the way?

From an organisational perspective, there is an issue involved in work place action learning and the extent to which action learning can work effectively in the organisational environment. Within the issue there is a consideration of the extent to which action learning fits with the corporate culture. Here I acknowledge the dichotomy of how the action learning process focuses on the creation of the double loop learner returning and his or her contextualisation of that acquired knowledge into

what may remain a single loop organisation, with consideration of the subsequent impact on the effectiveness of the organisation.

#### Facilitator's neutrality

If the facilitator is a member of the organisation and has another role in the organisation, there may be a conflict of loyalties here that could be a concern for some set members who may have an involvement in that other role. Again, the impact of this is seen in terms in terms of disclosure because of that political uncertainty.

#### Facilitator's skills

This thesis has added to the existing body of literature on the skills required of an action learning set facilitator (see inter alia O'Hara, 2001; Beaty et al, 1993) by discussing the learning from the differing experiences of the all the interviewees.

#### Naming the facilitator

It is useful to consider the influence that names of the roles have on the action learning process, in particular that of the individual leading the set. Whether the set is managed by a 'facilitator' or 'set advisor' may have an impact on the set member's perception of the role and the style employed by the individual leading the set. For example, the role of the 'facilitator' is to ensure the set works and that power is distributed equally in the group and there is no suggestion that the 'facilitator' is the expert. In contrast, 'set advisor' suggests an individual occupies the role of advisor to the set and therefore has expert power within the set.

#### Set member expectations

This analysis has shown that individual set members will have differing understandings and expectations of the action learning process at the start of the life of the set. These range from the traditional teacher to the gatekeeper whose concern is the processes of the set. These expectations have a marked effect on the success of the action learning process. It would be useful to examine how the set facilitator knows and understands the members' expectations, what knowledge of group processes they would need to have in order to both identify and understand them, whilst considering the subsequent impact of that on the effectiveness of the set.



## **Contribution to research approaches concerning action learning**

### Set members unique perspective

The contribution to knowledge here is the unique insight of action learning set members and how it informs the knowledge that we have of organisational behavioural processes in this particular context. In order to do this a method has to be used that puts the set members' views at the forefront of the research. One of the reasons I chose to use grounded theory was that this research approach does exactly that.

### Giving voice to an under researched group

One of the principal drivers of this research was to be able to give a voice to participants of action learning sets and place, on record, their views of what makes an effective action learning set. I think that the use of grounded theory as a research approach allowed me to do that, primarily in this instance, the research approach has placed the perspective of the interviewee, i.e. to tell their story from their point of view, choosing to include what they see as relevant, above the perspective of the interviewer, who has a prepared view of the important perspectives that need to be spoken about.

### Dual imperatives in the research approach

I have written this thesis in such a way that makes the research process a transparent process. The thesis shows how the research process unfolds, whilst demonstrating the evolving skill of the researcher. This is illustrated through personal reflections at each stage in the research, which have been written in the first person. This dual approach contributes to knowledge concerning general research processes by offering an insight into how grounded theory has been combined with an auto-biographical approach.

## **Limitations of the research**

As with any task that has been carried out for the first time there are always things that could have been done differently. I don't think for one minute that this is any

different. There are some aspects of this research that could be improved upon. These include:

#### Sample composition

The sample is predominantly female. Some may argue that this may impact upon the findings in that it could be considered that it is an over representation of a female view. The counter argument to this is that the thesis was constructed as a consideration of participants' views generally and that both the questions asked and the discussions were, as far as possible, gender neutral. The stance taken has left scope for further research centered around the issue of gender, if so desired.

#### Emphasis on the public sector

The vast majority of the people interviewed are from the public sector. There are parallels with the point above, in that it could be argued that there is an over representation of one sector of the workforce, i.e. the public sector. This is simply an issue of access and that more individuals from the public sector have elected to become involved in the action learning process. There are inevitably a number of reasons for this, cost possibly being an important prohibitor.

#### Researcher bias

I have to acknowledge the possibility of personal bias that needs to be considered. This is not to say that the work is in anyway biased, but simply an acknowledgement that there is always the possibility that an individual researcher has the potential to be biased. I acknowledge two aspects of my professional persona that could have been problematic had I not been conscious of them. Firstly, my background as a lecturer in Organisational Behaviour, and the influence that may have had on grounded theory as a research approach. Conscious that suspending prior knowledge is difficult and I have a knowledge of relevant topics that may have induced early coding, therefore could affect the findings of the thesis. However, I endeavoured not to let this be the case. Secondly, my passion for action learning may have induced me to seek out confirmatory data and viewed interviewee's responses in a more positive light.

It was useful to take a reflexive approach to the research exercise, as this did allow me to both experience and acknowledge the potential impact I may have on the research process, and respond accordingly.

### **Chapter summary**

This chapter considered the primary purpose of this thesis: a consideration of what makes an effective action learning set from the perspective of action learning set participants. The chapter commenced with a brief review of the literature explored in Chapter Four on the evaluation of action learning programmes in general. It then summarised the main findings from all the interviews, considering the impact on the effectiveness of action learning sets. I then outlined the contribution to knowledge that the thesis makes; specifically in the areas of organisational behaviour, action learning and the research approach taken. The chapter concluded with the limitations of this thesis.

The following chapter considers the secondary purpose of this research; an autobiographical account focusing on learning the craft of being a researcher. The chapter is divided into two parts; the first part addresses the issue of my learning from this experience and the second part, reflections on the journey.

## **Chapter Ten - Learning and Reflections**

### **Introduction**

This chapter considers the secondary purpose of this research: to learn the craft of being a researcher. The chapter is divided into two parts; the first part addresses the issue of my learning from this experience and the second part, reflects on the journey.

### **Learning**

After experiences in general, but in particular, an experience such as the writing of a large piece of work, it has become common to reflect upon the personal learning gained from that experience. The following discussion considers what I have learned from that experience. The section is divided into three elements: learning about the research context, learning about myself and lastly, learning to learn (Pedler, 1996). The reason I have used this particular model is that it is useful for capturing all round learning. It allows an individual to consider not only the knowledge gained from the experience, but also includes the 'self' in that experience, and how that individual 'learns to learn', moving the individual from being a 'learned' individual to a 'learning' individual.

### **Learning about the context**

#### Learning about Organisational Behaviour

When I started writing this thesis I had certain expectations that I would learn about the broad subject of Organisational Behaviour. I expected to increase my knowledge base by revisiting subjects that I have taught for many years at differing levels, in differing ways with differing audiences. As a fairly accomplished teacher, my overall expectation was that if I knew more, the result would be an even clearer picture of organisational behaviour and therefore I would be a much more confident lecturer. What I didn't expect to happen is that I would be left feeling that I had so many gaps in my knowledge and that there is so much more to learn. I didn't expect that I would

move from a situation of being, what I thought was, ‘consciously competent’ to ‘consciously incompetent’ in a manner of speaking. I had come to realise that I started to question my basic assumptions about my own knowledge (Mezirow, 1995) and how that might be a result of absence of skills as a researcher. I had imagined that text books alone would give me grounding in this area. Clearly they are a useful starting point, but there is a need to delve deeper in to literature, coupled with a need to identify development possibilities in literature that I can make a contribution to. Certainly in instances where the literature makes assumptions about individuals in groups, purposely or otherwise, ignoring the individuality of experience within those assumptions. There is a need to look for opportunities within the action learning literature to contribute.

#### Learning how to do research

I intuitively feel that grounded theory as a methodological approach is seldom used within the Business School and a more positivistic approach seems to be the dominant research paradigm. This is supported at grass roots level, in that as the leader for the dissertation module on the Business School’s MBA for the last five years, it is one of my roles to sign off the dissertation proposals. In doing so I was able to build up a picture of the type of research students were completing, which tended to be case studies with a blended methods approach. Very rarely would a dissertation use phenomenology or put a grounded theory approach forward for approval. Having experienced grounded theory I now feel that I am in a stronger position to encourage students to consider alternative approaches and therefore broaden out our research approach used on the MBA.

#### Developing research skills

In carrying out this research I have learned and developed certain skills:

- *Confidence and expertise in interviewing*

In terms of interviewing, I think there are two elements to this. Firstly, the issue of confidence and how that increased as I carried out more interviews and secondly how my expertise in this area grew.

- *Confidence*

I think that action learning is one of the most powerful learning and teaching mediums that I have encountered. It has the effect of inculcating a strong belief and confidence. In the course of the interviews, respondents have reported that their levels of confidence grew, and as a result of that I feel my commitment and confidence has also grown over the years I have practised it. When I started to get such feedback in the actual interviews I knew there was a great deal of belief in what we were discussing, that emanated from both parties, this was really important as I could both see and feel my confidence growing with each interview that I carried out.

I am committed to grounded theory and feel that it is vitally important to the immediate community that former set members have their voice heard. I felt that I was making that contribution and, as a result, I became more psychologically committed to my research.

I feel that I developed the confidence to trust the interviewee and suspend my own preconceived ideas of what should be discussed, again, essentially important to the process of rounded theory.

- *Expertise in interviewing*

Kvale's (1996) advice on how to carry out an interview was useful. Some of the advice he gave sounded quite simplistic but proved to be very difficult to do in reality, i.e. try not to talk too much. In the actual interviews it felt strange at first, very reminiscent of my early days of facilitating action learning sets in which I was consciously trying not to interrupt. As the interviews progressed I started to see the value of this advice as my silence encouraged the interviewee to talk, but not to stumble. I felt that if I created the right environment then we could both settle into the interview, and a sense that we were having a conversation about a common experience unfolded. As my expertise developed I felt that I was developing a sense of the appropriate moments to interject with a question and sensed when to be quiet so the interviewee could collect their thoughts or pause for breath. In a sense I developed the idea of timing, i.e. when to be quiet and

when to press on forward, a situation where I was able to reflect in action (Schön, 1983) and adapt to each interviewee, reflecting in the moment, considering where to go, holding points in my mind as I would return to them later to fully explore as I didn't want to interrupt the interviewees point, particularly if they were impassioned about a particular point or were in flow with an important anecdote.

- *Reading and writing skills*

Learning to read different journal articles proved to be both interesting and, on occasion, frustrating. I was able to start to discern differing styles and the differing intentions of the author. What I found was that learning to decipher academic language took practice and perseverance. Articles that were difficult to understand were read on several occasions over a period of time to become accessible. Through the process of reading and writing my knowledge was becoming sufficiently deep enough to make the majority of work I read understandable.

- *Assimilation skills*

Learning to read and understand more carefully is allied to the point of being more analytical. In the past there has always been a constant pressure and emphasis has usually been about speed of assimilation, but this assimilation has tended to stay at a fairly superficial level. In the process of completing this thesis, I have needed to work with some complex issues where superficiality has not enabled my understanding. In order to understand I have undergone a process of reading and reflection.

- *Listening Skills*

I listen to what is being said to me, both in the interviews and in tutorials with my supervisor. It has been invaluable in the course of the interviews to try and develop the ability to listen and hear what was said to me. When in interview situations I was conscious to listen for what was and what was not said as a way of judging whether to probe a point a little further. In the context of supervision, I consciously tried to listen and assimilate difficult concepts prior to asking questions.

## **Learning about self**

In learning about myself I was very influenced by the work of Habermas (1978). Habermas discussed both the physical and mental world that the individual created for themselves. He viewed human life as a quest for self-emancipation; a search for autonomy through self-formative processes. He identifies three kinds of learning; instrumental learning; communicative learning and emancipatory learning, from which a hierarchy is formed. I found it useful to consider instrumental and emancipatory elements of learning as a framework for my learning, as follows:

### Instrumental learning

This relates to how to manipulate the environment; the acquisition of skills and understanding needed to control the world the individual lives in. This resonated with me in the respect of wanting to have a degree of control in the environment I live and work in. As individuals, I believe when women, in particular, get older, the outside world views them in a different way, with the individual often feeling invisible (Hogg and Tindale, 2007). Society often ascribes attributes and attitudes to older people that do not fit with the individual's perception of themselves, in that the acquisition of knowledge and the status ascribed to that knowledge will contribute to addressing that dominant paradigm. In the first instance in an organisational sense, then secondly with respect to society as a whole.

This refers to developing self-understanding, and a transformation of cultural and personal presuppositions that are always with me and affect the way I think and act. In terms of emancipation, I feel that I am gaining a form of psychological freedom from the following:

Firstly, freedom from an incomplete early education that has tended to affect my level of confidence and reinforce the Imposter Syndrome (Brems,1994) that I feel and struggle with, like a lot of other professionals. Brems et al (1994:183) wrote that the imposter syndrome "refers to individuals' feelings of not being as capable or adequate as others perceive or evaluate them to be". This research experience has started the process of challenging that personal paradigm, largely by a realisation that my action



learning practice resonates with that of other writers in this field whose work I admire and respect, notably; Brockbank and McGill; and Bourner and Weinstein. I have had the same concerns that they have written about and experience similar things. In Chapter One I discussed Anne Brockbank's issue of having to justify to her colleagues the role that action played in the University. This was very similar to my early experience of action learning facilitation, in which I felt a sense of my work being undermined, at worst, and at best, just simply misunderstood. That situation was then transferred into the classroom where I encountered skeptics in the action learning set; students who had misunderstood the nature of action learning and felt early disappointments that I was not meeting their expectations. I still wrestle with these issues and will probably do so in the future, but I am confident that what I contribute is worthwhile and not a result of 'not quite being good enough'.

Secondly, there is also relation to the freedom from the constraints of linear thought and my need to work in both an orderly and prescribed manner. The use of grounded theory has facilitated the use of lateral thought (De Bono, 1970) in order to make connections between the interviewee's thoughts and academic literature that supports those views. I initially made the assumption that research was a fairly messy and uncomplicated affair. With this there should be some form of logical progression. However, working with an area that is largely under researched, i.e. participant's perspectives, has meant that there are no established patterns to follow or theories to test, allowing a freedom to think about the issue in a new way.

Finally there is the freedom to challenge the notion of a correct answer which builds upon the above point. I have come to see the value that an individual's perspective on an issue is just as powerful as an existing theory, in that it adds another dimension to the theory or seeks to create another way of viewing what ever it is that is being considered.

In a general sense, there have been other aspects that I have learned about myself that are of a general nature, these include:

### Emotional Resilience

I approached this issue from two perspectives; dealing with the ‘future situation’ and the ‘now’ situation. The future situation was linked to the idea of reflecting forward and envisioning a situation in which my professional life would change. I envisaged that change to include the opportunity to become more involved in research and scholarly pursuits in accordance with the vision of the Vice Chancellor which would not only enrich my future but make me a stakeholder in the change process that the University is undergoing and this would also secure my employability. This vision then needed to be translated into a ‘now’ situation, a strategy for moving forward with the work and being able to generate the will to be able to do that. I achieved that through a very simple mechanism. I set myself a target of writing a thousand words per week and at the end of each week I totalled my efforts and then listed on a schedule. This schedule was simply an A4 piece of lined paper divided into a series of columns devoted to a particular chapter of the thesis. As a result I was able to reflect on my progress and start to understand that I was capable of achieving my target. From this exercise a discipline emerged that was powerful enough to enable me to reflect forward and believe that this project was achievable and that I should see it as a marathon, not a sprint, and pace myself accordingly.

### Patience

The Myers Briggs Typology Indicator MBTI (1987:7) as discussed in Chapter Two, characterises me as an ENFP with one of the aspects of my personality being my ‘enthusiasm and high spirited nature’. However one of the down sides of being an ENFP is that I often rely on my ability to improvise instead of preparing in advance. The lesson I needed to learn was patience and understanding that this process was not a sprint but rather a marathon. I had spent many years intellectually preparing for this journey, so I would need to psychologically prepare. One aspect of that preparation would be the development of a degree of patience.

One of the main reasons why I’ve enjoyed this experience so much was the time spent planning in the early days of the research which prevented me from losing time at the latter stages of the thesis. This was primarily down to my supervisor managing me carefully and, as he would say, “keeping me on a short lead” until my research skills had developed sufficiently.

### Empathy with students

Transferring learning into other contexts, i.e. the process of learning the craft of researching, has proved invaluable in working with students on research dissertations. I have always been sympathetic to students, appreciating that it is difficult for part time students to study, work and actually live, however I now feel that I am in a better position to understand their intellectual needs and I am able to offer empathetic support because of this work. In the action learning sets themselves, individual action points are agreed. I was also part of that process in that I made a commitment to myself to complete work on this thesis and report back on my progress to the various sets I was facilitating. In that respect, I felt that I was demonstrating my commitment to the process whilst being a “comrade in adversity” (Revans, 1984) and this has worked well. Feedback from students has been positive as they have felt that empathy, recognising that the whole set was in a similar position had a motivating effect on them.

### **Learning to learn**

#### Development of least preferred learning style

My Honey and Mumford (1982) preferred learning style is activism, my least preferred is reflection. The following are brief descriptors of those preferred as discussed in Chapter Four, Page 58.

#### Activitists (Do)

- Immerse themselves fully in new experiences.
- Enjoy here and now.
- Open minded, enthusiastic, flexible.
- Act first, consider consequences later.
- Seek to centre activity around themselves.

#### Reflectors (Review)

- Stand back and observe.
- Cautious, take a back seat.

- Collect and analyse data about experience and events, slow to reach conclusions.
- Use information from past, present and immediate observations to maintain a big picture perspective.

As part of the learning experience I have made a conscious effort to try and capitalise on my preferred style whilst working on my least preferred style in an attempt to have a balance learning approach. I think that this was important to me as this task has taken learning skills that had not had the opportunity to become fully developed.

I have used some of the concepts identified in the activist element of the theory in that I have fully immersed myself in this new research experience. As I have no real research experience, I approached this with an open mind. I had an overall objective which was to give voice to an under researched group of people, but within that there was a high degree of flexibility of how that was achieved. True to form, I approached this task with an enormous degree of enthusiasm, which in some instances, prompted action first and regret second, certainly in respect to some of the more mundane tasks i.e. designing a system to locate page numbers when referring backwards and forward to differing chapters. Reflecting on that action, it would have being more sensible to use a red font for ease of location as opposed to having to read and locate all these instances.

With respect to my least preferred style of 'Reflection' the completion of this thesis has highlighted some of those missing attributes which have required my attention during the process. The profile of a reflector discusses the process of collecting and analysing data about experience and events, and being purposefully slow to reach conclusions. At the start of this journey I tended to reach conclusions rather rapidly, usually on face value. However, mindful of this trait, I have purposely tried to slow down that process, where possible, leaving the data interpretation open in order to return after a suitable period of time. Mindful that there is a need to reflect on initial thoughts and then return later.

In terms of considering the 'big picture', I can see what I consider to be the big picture but often that vision is based upon intuition. I purposely have tried to develop

a more considered approach to this and incorporate thought and reflection where possible.

### **Reflecting back on the journey**

Reflecting back on the journey I have been struck by a few things. Strangely enough, although this has been an extremely taxing experience, I can honestly say it has been fun. Although I didn't appreciate the size of the task and how much it would take over my life, but I have managed to fit all the work in during a very difficult time at work, a time where there have been new developments going on in the department in which I have been heavily involved. This has meant that I have had to draw on various aspects of my professional and personal make up, however, the result seems to have been a marked improvement in my time management and my ability to work in a team. Course leadership has now become a joint venture between me and my administrative colleagues. I have always wanted to do this, but it has now become essential and has been met with favourable reactions from my administrative colleagues who maintain that working as a team has brought them closer to students and achieved a greater sense of what the organisation is about; an unintended consequence and one which I wish I could claim all the credit for.

I thought it would be lonely, certainly that was the message I had heard and read about from others who had completed a PhD, however I found that I needed the solitude, being so busy at work. I found the thinking very therapeutic, so loneliness was never an issue.

I think that the journey has made me feel more confident in some respects, certainly I am more rounded as a learner and teacher and I am more confident in my action learning practice and the teaching of research methodology. However, having carried out such an extensive piece of work I have come to realise that there is so much to learn in this particular field, so wanting to learn more will always be a constant feature in my life.

## **Reflecting forward**

In reflecting forward, I think that it is useful to have short and medium term aims and tasks. My short term considerations comprise of two elements. Firstly, preparing for the next phase of PhD, the viva voce. As part of my preparation I need to prepare a list of questions I would ask if I were the examiner and construct responses accordingly. In doing so I will maintain a connection with the thesis until the day of the viva. Secondly, I need to keep my enthusiasm going, it would be useful to aim to publish something of this work, based on a topic identified in Chapter Nine, there are many articles to write and I would like to set myself a target of producing one over the next few months.

In terms of medium and longer term aims, I would say in the first instance, I would like to improve my action learning practice. A good start would be for me to remember to:

- Clarify set members' expectations at the outset of the first meeting. In terms of discussing what they expect from the role of the facilitator and how that ties in with the actuality of an action learning set.
- Discuss issues of trust and personal disclosure with set members prior to them commencing an action learning programme, pointing out that the essence of an effective action learning set is honesty. Primarily that the set member is honest with themselves, and then in turn, the set.
- Model desired behaviour in all the action learning sets. Examples of this include the type of questions asked of the presenter and paraphrasing the presenter's live issue to clarify understanding.

With respect to a longer term aim, I would initially like to consider the possibility of writing up the thesis in the form of a book based on the findings of this research that contributes to the field of action learning practice. Additionally, I would like to focus on a more research orientated approach to my role within the Department of Leadership and Management, certainly in the respect of making a contribution to the research output via the publication of journal articles as identified in the previous chapter.

## **Chapter summary**

This final chapter has considered the secondary purpose of this research, which was to reflect on the process of learning the craft of becoming a researcher. The chapter was divided into two parts; the first part addressed the issue of my learning from this experience, split into three elements: learning about context, learning about self and learning to learn. The second part considered my reflections on the journey, looking back at the whole experience. This was followed by a discussion of the highlights of my journey, whilst reflecting forward on how the experience has affected me and what I will do differently as a result of the experience.

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## **Appendix One**

### **Interview Questions**

#### **Interview Question for Pilot visit to the field**

**June 2008**

“What’s it like being a member of an action learning set”.

#### **Interview Questions for first visit to the field**

**October 2008**

What about the expectations of set members prior knowledge?

What about the expectations of performance of set members in the action learning set?

What about the disclosure of personal issues?

What about the facilitator?

What about personal confidence?

#### **Interview Questions for second visit to the field**

**March 2009-April 2009**

Category One –Hierarchy in action learning sets

- Was there a hierarchy of set members in your learning set?
- Did you feel equal to all members of the learning set?
- Were any members in your action learning set more senior organisational position to you?
- Did you find yourself acting differently with them?

Category Two- Trust in action learning sets

- Was your action learning set a safe place to be?



- Did it remain a safe place to be?
- Do you feel that members were honest and open?
- Who did you think created a trusting climate in your action learning set?
- Did you establish norms in the set?
- What were the norms?
- How were they established?
- Did set members adhere to them throughout the life of the set?

#### Category Three – Disclosure of Personal Information

- Did you feel comfortable with disclosure of personal information?
- At the start of the learning set meetings did you feel under pressure to disclose personal information?
- Were you honest with yourself and the group at the start of the action learning set meetings?
- At what stage did you feel comfortable with disclosure of personal information?.
- What had changed in the learning set to make you feel more comfortable?

#### Category Four- Facilitation

- What role did you expect the facilitator to play in the action learning set?
- What role did your facilitator actually play in the action learning set?
- What skills did he/she demonstrate?

#### Category Five – Impact on the individual

- What has been the impact of been in an action learning set on your job performance ?

## **Appendix 2**

### **Myers Briggs Typology Indicator (1980)**

#### **Characteristics Frequently Associated with Sensing Types**

##### **ISTJ**

Quiet, serious, earn success by thoroughness and dependability. Practical, matter-of-fact, realistic and responsible, Decide logically what should be done and work rewards it steadily, regardless of distractions, Take pleasure in making everything orderly and organised - their work, their home, their life. Value traditions and loyalty.

##### **ISFJ**

Quiet, friendly, responsible and conscientious. Committed and steady in meeting their obligations. Thorough, Painstaking and accurate. Loyal, considerate, notice and remember details about people who are important to them, concerned with how others feel. Strive to create an orderly and harmonious environment at work and at home.

##### **INFJ**

Seek meaning and connection in ideas, relationships and material possessions. Want to understand what motivates people and are insightful about others. Conscientious and committed to their firm values. Develop a clear vision about how best to serve the common good. Organised and decisive in implementing their vision.

##### **INFP**

Idealistic, loyal to their values and to people who are important to them. Want an external life that is congruent with their values. Curious, quick to see possibilities, can be catalysts for implementing ideas. Seek to understand people and to help them fulfil their potential, Adaptable, flexible and accepting unless a value is threatened.

##### **ENFP**

Warmly enthusiastic and imaginative, see life as full of possibilities. Make connections between events and information very quickly, and confidently proceed based on the patterns they see. Want a lot of affirmation from others, and readily give appreciation and support. Spontaneous and flexible, often rely on their ability to improvise and their verbal fluency'

##### **ENFJ**

Warm, empathetic, responsive and responsible. Highly attuned to the emotions, needs and motivations of others. Find potential in everyone want to help others fulfil their potential. May act as catalysts for individual and group growth. Loyal, responsive to

praise and criticism. Sociable, facilitate others in a group, and provide inspiring leadership.

#### INTJ

Have original minds and great drive for implementing their ideas and achieving their goals. Quickly see patterns in external events and develop long-range explanatory perspectives. When committed, organise a job and carry it through. Sceptical and independent, have high standards of competence and Performance - for themselves and others.

#### ENTJ

Idealistic, loyal to their values and to people who are important to them. Want an external life that is congruent with their values. Curious, quick to see possibilities, can be catalysts for implementing ideas. Seek to understand people and to help them fulfil their potential, Adaptable, flexible and accepting unless a value is threatened.

#### ISTP

Tolerant and flexible, quiet observers until a problem appears, then act quickly to find workable solutions. Analyse what makes things work and readily get through large amounts of data to isolate the core of practical problems. Interested in cause and effect, organise facts using logical principles, value efficiency.

#### ISFP

Quiet, friendly, sensitive and kind. Enjoy the here-and-now, what's going on around them. Like to have "their own space and to work within their own time frame" Loyal and committed to their values and to people who are important to them. Dislike disagreements and conflicts, do not force their opinions or values on others.

#### INTP

Seek to develop logical explanations for everything that interests them. Theoretical and abstract, interested more in ideas than in social interaction. Quiet, contained, flexible and adaptable. Have unusual ability to focus in depth to solve problems in their area of interest. Sceptical, sometimes critical, always analytical.

#### ENTP

Quick, ingenious, stimulating. Alert and outspoken. Resourceful in solving new and challenging problems. Adept at generating conceptual possibilities and then analysing them strategically. Good at reading other people. Bored by routine, will seldom do the same thing the same way, apt to turn to one new interest after another

## ESTP

Flexible and tolerant, they take a pragmatic approach focused on immediate results. Theories and conceptual explanations bore them - they want to act energetically to solve the problem. Focus on the here-and-now spontaneous, enjoy each moment that they can be active with others. Enjoy material comforts and style. Learn best through doing.

## ESFP

Outgoing, friendly and accepting. Exuberant lovers of life, people and material comforts. Enjoy working with others to make things happen. Bring common sense and a realistic approach to their work, and make work fun. Flexible and spontaneous,. Adapt readily to new people. and environments. Learn best by trying a new skill with other people.

## ESTJ

Practical, realistic, matter-of-fact. Decisive, quickly move to implement decisions. Organise projects and people to get things done, focus on getting results in the most efficient way Possible. Take care of routine details. Have a clear set of logical standards, systematically follow them and want others to also. Forceful in implementing their plans.

## ESFJ

Warm-hearted, conscientious and cooperative. Want harmony in their environment, work with determination to establish it. Like to work with others to complete tasks accurately and on time. Loyal, follow through even in small matters. Notice what others need in their day-to-day lives and try to Provide it. Want to be appreciated for who they are and for what they contribute.

## Appendix 3

### Prasad's (1993) Revised Concept Card

What about the expectations of set members prior knowledge?

Data Source	Quotation	Memos	Concept/theme
Michelle, pg 3	<i>"Oh I don't know, I didn't look at it from that point of view. I think I had my own expectations that people would have prior knowledge, and it weren't because of positions they held in organisations, but because they all had degrees already."</i>	Expectations based upon academic knowledge	Hierarchy
Jenny, pg 6	<i>"Yes, on the degree really I mean I did a diploma years and years ago at XXX but that was on addiction studies but it was the same process you start here and finish there and it's the same for a degree, you start here and finish there."</i>	Expectations based upon having a degree	Expectations of learners
Alice, pg 1	<i>"Umm, I don't recall that we had to have any to be honest."</i>	No expectations	None