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An analysis of the use of action learning on an MBA programme

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to enrich our understanding of action learning by listening to the voices of the students who have been participants in an action learning set on an academic programme. In this case, the final year of a part time the Master of Administration (MBA) programme. One university, responding to calls for innovation in postgraduate education, made the decision to use a differing approach to the teaching and learning on their part time Master of Business Administration (MBA) by introducing action learning into the final year research methodology and dissertation module. The paper reports the outcome of that decision, focusing on the student experience in learning sets. Data was captured by means of a semi-structured and the findings were thematically analysed. Insights are offered into aspects of learning set psychological dynamics such as psychological climate, the emergence of hierarchy in learning sets and the inevitable leadership struggles that follow, all of which have an impact on both student satisfaction and effectiveness of the learning set. The paper also offers insights into action learning as both a teaching and learning methodology in the area of post graduate study as experienced by the participants themselves.

KEYWORDS: Action learning, learning sets, student experiences, effective learning sets.

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to enrich our understanding of action learning by listening to the voices of the students who have been participants in an action learning set on an academic programme, whilst responded to the calls for innovation in the area of post graduate management development generally, and specifically MBA programmes (Mintzberg, 2004; Bennis & O'Toole, 2005; Simpson, 2006, and Roglio & Light,2009). The Master of Business Administrations (MBA) is an established programme within Universities. The programmes origins date back almost fifty years to the development of the UK's first two Business Schools. At first it was offered by a small number of exclusive graduate Business Schools to limited numbers of candidates. Most programmes were full-time. However, in recent history there has been a rapid expansion of part time postgraduate programmes in general and MBA programmes in particular. There is a growing concern about both the relevance and method of delivery of university teaching and its relevance to the world of work (Mintzberg,2004). Grey (2009:134) concluded that 'there is absolutely no evidence that taking a management course has any effect at all upon making people better managers' this encapsulates the findings of other writers on the subject (Antonocopoulou and Bento, 2006; Brocklehurst et al, 2007 and Clarke, 2008. Gold et al (2007:51) summarise the essence of these critics by saying that the MBA is 'too abstract, impractical and too orthodox'. Datar et al (2010) describe a move to new pedagogies, away from the typical MBA learning approach that was dominated by case studies, role plays and simulations and

structured lectures to more innovative approaches such as reflective practice, individual coaching and the use of both experiential and action learning approaches. Datar et al (2010) claim that MBA programs are beginning to innovate and experiment in order to change the MBA experience, and to assist business education in regaining its relevance and value.

The paper serves two primary purposes; first, to develop an understanding of how students experienced action learning and being a set member, therefore adding a richer dimension to the body of literature on action learning, simultaneously addressing the issue of under-representation of the learning set participants voices. Secondly, by analysing the data within a framework of the psychological processes that underpin action learning, we offer insights into the outcomes of innovation and experimentation that have utility for those engaged in the management of both teaching and learning in the field of management development.

ACTION LEARNING

Action learning has long been recognised as amongst the most effective means of delivering professional education and training (Zuber-Skerritt, 2002; Kramer, 2008). Smith (2001:36) cited in Johnson and Spicer (2006:42) wrote of the difficulties in learning from experience generally, explaining how action learning is an approach that addresses some of those difficulties. O'Hara et al (1996:16) described action learning as being 'less straightforward and more demanding than a traditional taught program' but spoke of the potential for it to achieve a

wide range of learning outcomes, a view that was supported by Johnson and Spicer (2006:40). As Weinstein (1995:32) states 'it means different things to different people' acknowledging the absence of universal understanding, giving rise to differing interpretations. Rimanoczy (2007:247) described the essence of the process as 'learning through experience, by asking questions of each other'. We, the authors, understand action learning to be, in its simplest form, an experience- based approach to learning that utilises Revan's premise that managers learn most effectively with and from other managers, whilst dealing with the real world complexity of organisational life. The process of action learning revolves around the group or 'set' of six to eight people working together to solve individual problems. Revans referred to these individuals as 'comrades in adversity' (1982).

THE MODULE CONTEXT

The MBA programme is modular in design and culminates in a 3,000 word dissertation proposal and a 16,000 word dissertation. Students on the part time mode are introduced to this element of the programme by means of a four day research methods residential. Prior to attending the residential, students are given two important documents. The first is an outline of what action learning is and how it operates. The second document asked them to identify a research topic that forms the basis of their dissertation. In the introductory session attended by all staff and students, students were introduced to the basic rudiments of methodology, research methods and action learning. The nature of

the tasks were described, then whole cohort of students divided into their self – facilitated action learning sets of approximately six to eight students. The composition of each set reflects either their mode or location of attendance at the University, so in some cases there was a degree of familiarity within the sets; other sets comprise students who were relative strangers to one another.

The module comprised two tasks. Firstly an individual task - the completion of a one page form that gives the outline of the student's dissertation proposal. The task required set members to work collaboratively with the aim of critically evaluating each member's dissertation topic. Simultaneously students were engaged in research activity as described below in the expectation that learning from those tasks would inform the students' own understanding of the research process, whereby influencing each individual's approach to his or her own work.

The second task required the selection of a research topic from a predetermined list. The sets were tasked with operationalising that particular topic i.e. generating aims and objectives, methodology and method; these were then carried out over the period of the residential. The results of this experience then fed into the remaining group task, which was a peer reviewed presentation that considers both the sets' and individuals' learning and the influence that has on each individual's research proposal.

METHODOLOGY

'Interpretivist' philosophy underpins the research framework adopted in this research project. Interpretivism has more utility as a research approach as it offers rich insights into the nature of the individual's experiences of an action learning set. In order to gather data for this paper, an anonymous semi structured questionnaire was distributed at the end of the residential to all students. Approximately two thirds of the cohort filled in this questionnaire. Forty two responses were received. We were interested in how the students had experienced their time in the action learning set, so the questions revolved around different aspects of that experience. Questions asked were; what it had been like in the set, how useful they found the experience and what did they find difficult about the approach. The data was coded using an open coding approach. The process involved reading and re-reading the data, from that exercise we generated a series of themes which enabled us to organize those themes into categories. Here it is useful to refer to grounded theory, in particular the thoughts of Strauss and Corbin (1998) on researcher prior experiences. In reality to bracket our experience as academics would be problematic, our accumulated knowledge would inevitably inform the research, so this knowledge of action learning and the psychological processes within were used both prospectively in the way the initial semi structured questionnaire was designed, and retrospectively in the way the questionnaire was coded and analysed. Watson (1994:79) informs by stating that management researchers select and shape their findings, but do not invent what interviewees say. The following

analysis reflects our interpretation of student's experiences of using Action Learning.

FINDINGS

Set psychological processes

People coming together and interacting with each other immediately highlights difference. These differences form the basis for the establishment of group structure. As differentiation occurs, people naturally form various relations that change and modify over time, and would be the case in the context of the action learning sets we have chosen to consider. The primary aim within the action learning set was to consider each other's dissertation proposals through a process of challenge and support. This required set members to work as project teams. Analysis of data suggested that this had occurred. One student reporting on this process said that: *'It was very beneficial to get an objective perspective and pin down my research idea'* supported by another who stated: *'It was interesting to listen and embrace other opinions on an issue and the clarity they provided was great'*. These students intimate that synergy emerged within their sets that gave rise to a collective efficacy (Hogg and Tindale 2007:15) and reciprocity within the sets' activities (Maister et al, 2000) which gives an indication that the process was a positive one, thereby demonstrating the characteristics of an effective set. Part of the process within action learning is the concept of frames of reference. The students also alluded to the concept of reframing the focus of the individual dissertation topics, and a willingness to

reconsider the initial focus, demonstrated by the student who said: *'the questions/suggestions from members of the group about every proposal made me think about my proposal in more depth and question some of the assumptions I had made* . Schon and Rein (1994) refer to a world view or 'frame' as the way an individual views their particular issue, the slant an individual will put on an issue. Very often an individual students topic is a reflection of how they see the world they live in, which is often a window to the organisations' culture that the student forms a part of and becomes familiar with, consequently, it can be difficult to see alternative views on a particular issue or in this case; a research project. Speaking very candidly on this subject, one student commented saying that the process was: *'very useful as it showed me that my opinion was narrow and I was blinkered'* supported by another student who was keen to: *'reduce the risk of personal bias'*. Through challenge within the set (Mumford and Gold, 2004:148) individuals are encouraged to use Revans' (1984) concept of re-framing as it often generates new meanings and a new focus for the dissertation. One student concluded that this process had: *'helped to refine ideas and process and reassure me about the feasibility of the intended project which was valuable'*. Challenge, as said before, is a feature of the action learning process, and with due consideration for all concerned, usually yields positive results, one participant reporting that: *'the group already had a variety of academic experience so this was positive in giving valuable support whilst heated debate occurred; it was, in the main, constructive*. Lee's (2006:93) article describing her experiences of having been an action learning set member recalls

the importance of challenge in action learning sets stating that challenge as a concept can have aggressive or competitive connotations, however it was a healthy and necessary activity and if consensus dominated the set here would have been nothing to learn and develop from each other.

In relation to the task itself, positive responses from the data included the idea of differing opinions, one student reported that: *'it was good to get the opinions of all the group members and help in defining the dissertation project'* and that these opinions were welcomed, another added that it was a: *'very worthwhile exercise. The input from the other members of the set proved valuable in the formation (sic) of the dissertation proposal.* Reframing and the concept of challenge proved to be essential to the creation of an effective action learning set, succinctly concluded by the student who remarked that: *'the power of five minds bouncing ideas and challenging views and opinions was great'.*

Psychological climate

It can be inferred from the narrative above that a positive psychological climate was a feature of some of the learning sets, which proved to be an environment for useful learning to take place. This also illustrates the characteristics of a humanistic approach to action learning (Rogers, 1983; McGill and Brockbank, 2006), where such values as support, trust and safety are essential aspects that ensure that individuals will work together in a meaningful way. This is a feature of the psychological climate that exists in any successful group (Koys and Decotis, 1991; Jones and James, (1979). The humanistic approach focuses on the human element of learning and is concerned with the subjective nature of each individual

and their unique view of the world. McLeod (2003:447) describes the central aim of a humanist approach as 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. This is clearly evidenced by one student who felt working in the set was a: *'positive experience, at times we strayed outside the rules and made suggestions and observations'* with another student adding that the process was *'insightful, un-inhibiting, beneficial and comfortable'*. The creation of an effective cultural island depends on differing factors, one being the presence of psychological safety. Positive responses included one participant felt that, although the experience had been challenging: *'everyone in the group worked really well together and demonstrated advanced emotional intelligence evidenced by mutual respect, negotiation and a real willingness to manage differences of opinion in a way that ensured that there was no animosity in the group'*. Another student commented on his set, stating that he felt that the: *'the group worked well together, lots of useful debates and discussions'* another added that: *'it is really beneficial if you are the person putting your issues out for discussion'*. Overall it was felt that the sets were: *'supportive, chance to explore ideas, fun, participative, a learning experience'*. These comments also resonate with a high degree of psychological safety experienced by some set members.

Psychological Safety

An important feature of a positive psychological climate is psychological safety (Dindia, 2002) which is about caring about each other as people and trusting in

another's intentions. Thereby an individual feels safe from physical, psychological or emotional harm. West and Cheouke (2003: 216) maintained that there must be mutual support, trust, empathy and challenge in the learning set, a place where people can generate creative ideas that can be tested and debated. One student acknowledged this by saying that: *'the support mechanism from learning within the group gives the feeling of safety'*. If the other members of the set felt the same, then the likelihood was the set had better prospects with respect to task completion. This is illustrated by the student who initially felt intimidated by the set, reporting that: *'working in a group of six men I felt a little intimidated until I got to know everyone. At the end of the weekend my confidence in taking part in the discussions grew'* another added that: *'initially I was reserved about their ability to understand my issue but was delighted at their concern and support'*. Bourner et al (1996:13) wrote that action learning sets should be "a safe place to explore self and project" with Smith (2001:35) added that the action learning process permitted risk taking within a psychologically safe environment. The above examples demonstrate the importance of feeling safe and supported within the set

Not all students liked working in action learning sets

It's an accepted part of life that on many occasions we work in groups, however, not everyone likes or enjoys been part of a group. In this particular context, the action learning sets were pre-determined by the module delivery team, so both inevitably and unfortunately, there were some students who were asked to work in sets with students they were unfamiliar with. This decision inevitably created a

variety of differing issues when considering group dynamics involved in the learning set process. Some individuals preferred to work alone, this may have occurred for a variety of differing reasons that possibly include personality type (Eysenck, 1947) such as the introvert who tends to be quiet and reserved. Alternatively, it may be the individual's preferred learning style (Honey and Mumford, 1984) such as that of the reflector, who usually stands back and observes, preferring to take a back seat as seen by one student who felt that they had been: *'prone to being dominated; too much too often; didn't always feel it supported my learning styles'*. One student was quite emphatic about this and said that the: *'reality for me is I dislike team-working and sharing ideas'*, this student probably remained on the periphery of the set, and it was unlikely that there will be any form of psychological engagement in the set. This may have impacted on the effectiveness of the set, be unsettling for other members of the set and certainly didn't provide any satisfaction for the member concerned, overall there was little collective identity within the set. Another added: *'too much contact in too short a time for me to fully embrace and feel comfortable with the concept'*. So action learning as a collaborative process does not suit everyone. Another reason for some students experiencing dissatisfaction with action learning revolved around student's expectation of the learning process itself, particularly the use of un-facilitated learning sets in this context. Revans (1982:15) saw a limited role for set advisers, stating that the role of the facilitator was 'to launch the set quickly' after that he saw the facilitator as been supernumerary, continuing on to say that he saw no on-going role for set

facilitators. Analysis of some of the data concurs with Revans (1982) suggested that self-facilitated sets were not overly problematic for the students, one student stated that they found working in the set: *'useful, supportive, very dependent on the learners within the group with very little input from tutors.* Another added that the environment was *'as one might expect; much like a classroom environment but without a lecturer. There was good spirit and mutual respect however'*. In contrast, various writers (Weinstein, 1999; Pedler, 1996) would advocate that sets have facilitators, and as such have identified specific roles and purposes for them. Supported by the student who said it: *'it felt like the group was working in isolation at times. Think greater interaction/joint activity would have aided the learning process. Lack of input from 'nominated' learning set advisor'*, with another concurring by saying: *'I think we were expecting guided activities. I found it tiring just to be closed off in a room to debate'* adding that he/she: *'wasn't expecting 'tuition' but expected input from nominated academic contact to refine/guide the process'*. One particular explanation of the expectation of the presence of a tutor may involve around the concept of roles and role expectations. When the students originally joined the programme they were taught using typical MBA approaches identified earlier in this paper. There may be an expectation that this continues to the end.

Group dynamics

A change in the composition of previous groups that had worked together, now had been reconfigured for the purposes of the residential, this did have an adverse effect on some individuals. One student reported that: *'half the group*

had worked together previously and therefore had already 'formed' and there was an obvious 'divide'. Group size may also be a factor 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. This was demonstrated by the student who said: *'there are seven people in our set and I would have found it more useful if there had only been four.* Another student added: *'there are four of us that took a year out between the first and second years and we get on and support each other quite well'* this was echoed by the student who said: *'it has felt a little like we have had the other three inflicted upon us. It was difficult to get people to engage with the process and support others rather than talk about themselves.* Communication presented itself as a problem to the set, as there were signs of tension and possible antagonism (Bales, 1950), thus risking compromising the effectiveness of the set. In this instance, both sets had had previously worked together and clearly had psychologically engaged with one another in the past (Schein, 1980) demonstrating that they had already moved through Tuckman's (1965) various stages of development, reaching the performing stage. Introducing new and possibly diverse members had the effect of disturbing the existing groups sociometry possibly risking creating division with one element of the set becoming neglected referred to as neglectees (Moreno, 1953). At this stage there is also a strong likelihood that the set may revert to the forming stage, with a failure to secure commitment from all the set members, with task failure being a

strong possibility, illustrated by the student who said that 'it was first difficult to work in a diverse group of people with different perceptions of the understanding of dissertation. The second part of the quotation relates to the norms that had been previously created in the original group, where there is a sense that the norm may have focused on collegiality, with the new group have a more singular view of participant, which affronts the previously established norm. At this stage the group was finding itself in a situation of risking becoming unsuccessful.

The issue of who will leadership within some sets was seen as a problem for some students. Often what happens is that dominant members assume the responsibility of leadership as part of the establishment of both hierarchy and roles within the set (Hogg and Tindale, 2007). 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' or 'not usual' social situations. This module, arguably, would accord with that view; a situation where in some cases, relative strangers are brought together and tasked with functioning as a set. Here important factors such as age, gender and assertiveness of individuals in these situations are brought to the fore. Assertive individuals with perceived greater hierarchical and social status tend to displace those ranked lower than themselves, as illustrated by the student who reported that: '*one or two colleagues had a more leadership role and felt that they need to lead it*'. As Hogg and Tindale (2007:352) stated, these hierarchies are not fixed and are dependent upon any number of changing variables. In the previous example, the individuals by virtue of their position

within their own organisation appeared to assume control of the set based on an understanding of themselves as leaders, albeit leaders in their own organisational context. Other members, on this occasion took a subservient role with another student reporting: *'one or two were rather quiet and were good listeners but did not defend their own argument when challenged'* therefore being unwilling to defend their own position and to challenge the self-appointed dominant leader. One student reported that: *'certain members were very vocal and 'took over', causing some resentment'* this was supported by the student who added that: *'we had issues of one person tending to dominate proceedings, which became distracting. However, once this settled down the full benefit of working in a set was realised'* these examples illustrate that a dominant character in the set can create negative psychological climate if that situation remains unchallenged. Gender may also play a role in the operation of the set. One female student reported that: *'working in a group of six men I felt a little intimidated until I got to know everyone. At the end of the weekend my confidence in taking part in the discussions grew. As the woman's confidence emerges, the set becomes more balanced, thus creating a more positive experience for her. Unlike the male student who apparently had a negative experience in his set and reported that gender was an issue stating that: 'being in such a female dominated group was tough. At times I felt like a poodle! In a handbag! One can only assume that a sense of equality in the set did not emerge for him.*

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This paper we have attempted to develop a richer understanding how action learning was experienced by a cohort of part time MBA students in the context of a final year module. The research has revealed various issues in relation to the psychological processes that existed within the action learning sets and briefly considered their impact on set effectiveness and member satisfaction. The main findings were the importance of a positive psychological climate within the action learning sets and the necessity for a climate in which set members feel both emotionally and psychologically secure. If this is place then action learning has a very positive impact on the learning process as members in time will start to discuss the messier and more problematic aspects of their work, thus allowing the set to make a contribution. However, the decision to use action learning needs to be carefully considered as action learning can also be problematic as at a basic level, not all students work well in groups, preferring to work alone. Established groups see the introduction of new members as being problematic, so there is the question of when to introduce this philosophy, arguably it should be introduced at the start of a programme when groups have not yet formed. Un-facilitated sets can be problematic in terms of hierarchy and leadership as dominant members often start to dictate proceedings, which other members may find problematic, so the composition of each set would need consideration, however, social engineering of leaning sets may run counter to a democratic ethos the organisers are trying to engender.

For those educators and facilitators planning to use action learning as part of any management development initiative, this paper serves as an insight in to both the nature of interpersonal relationships that exist with in action learning sets and the subsequent impact they might have on the overall effectiveness of the set.

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Abstract 198

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