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ACTION LEARNING: ENGAGING THE BUDDING ENTREPRENEUR.

Key words: Action Learning, entrepreneurship, enterprise development.

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Abstract

Building on the discussion of what Action Learning is and who action learners are, this paper presents an analysis of learning on an undergraduate Enterprise Development Degree. Implicit in much of the literature is the expectation that action learners are practicing managers and so less attention has been given to exploring Action Learning in other learning communities. This paper discusses the interests and experiences of participants on a degree programme for developing entrepreneurs, which requires learning from action and for action. Cycles of Action Research are used to inform, what action learning might be in this context, who can engage and benefit from this approach, and the ongoing development of the programme.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Building on the discussion of what Action Learning is and who action learners are, this paper presents an analysis of learning on the BA Enterprise Development Programme at the University of Huddersfield. On this degree students must start and run a business in parallel with academic study. The paper uses the framework of Action Learning in order to explore and analyse the development of would-be entrepreneurs in their first year on this programme. The BA Enterprise Development effectively reframes and repositions action learning in a community bound by a desire to create new business; these would-be entrepreneurs are somewhat different to the notion of action learner as practising manager.

Cycles of Action Research are used to capture and make sense of participants' experiences on the first year of the BA Enterprise Development programme with a view to informing:

- what action learning is in this context;
- who can engage and benefit from this approach;
- the ongoing development of the programme and use of Action Learning.

Data was derived from biographical assessment and a questionnaire, with a view to gaining a deeper understanding of what participants are learning and how. Findings not only inform the learning agenda but they also confront what academic institutions need to do in order for Action Learning to embed and flourish.

2. ACTION LEARNING – SOME DEFINING FEATURES

A number of authors avoid abstracting Action Learning into a succinct and brief definition (Revans, 1998; Beaty et al, 1997). The danger of definition is that it can limit the development of both practice and theory to the detriment of the concept (Easterby-Smith, 1996, cited by Simpson and Bourner, 2006). We also believe that a lack of definition has been to the advantage of Action Learning – allowing practitioners to worry less about “what it is” and “what it should be” but focus more on use as the means by which the concept develops. Each new wave of application adds to the performance repertoire and the development of its performers.

... action learning must always re-invert itself – each application is a new accomplishment and a fresh performance.” (Pedler, 1997 cited by Simpson and Bourner, 2006, p175.)

There are, however, some common features to Action Learning programmes that effectively determine the learning approach and the nature of participation. According to Pedler (1992) Action Learning encompasses:

- Voluntary participation; those involved are able and willing to work, in collaboration, on significant matters (Pedler, 1996; McGill and Brockbank, 2004);
- Learning for and within a live issue or a real problem situation. Learning takes place within the context for action;

- The use of sets and self managed learning approaches (Cunningham, 1994) enabling participants do what they need to do in order to get movement on their live issues;
- The outcome and the means by which learning takes place is action. The quest is not to know management but to be management (Rimanoczy, 2007) and this is developed through action and reflection.

Together these features imply that the learner is sufficiently empowered and self aware, knowing what to learn and how. “Live issues” are defined by the participant and the learning requirement is surfaced through action learning sets and reflective practice. The collaborative learning environment uses questioning insight in order to help each participant direct and pace their learning needs. This self direction reflects a mature practitioner (Schmuck, 1997) and an environment in which the learner can undertake autonomous action (O’Hara et al. 1997).

Action Learning also reframes the traditional role of learners and teachers. Sets cast peers and tutors as comrades and facilitators, helping to enlighten but never dictate the learning of any one individual. It is the learning with others and from others that is emphasised in Revans’ work but there is some debate as to whether the action learning set should comprise of individuals with a shared purpose, in terms of learning, or shared work experiences. This long running issue reflects the idea that it is difficult to be definitive about the “what” and “who” of Action Learning. The real effectiveness of this approach is perhaps best explained by what Action Learning participants do outside of the classroom – take action on live issues...

“Action learning is at its most effective where the learning is allowed to influence future action such that the learning and the experience that fuel it are intimately connected.”
(O’Hara et al., 1997, p93)

Action Learning reflects Friere’s notion of learning as humanisation, emphasising the skills of listening, dialogue, respectful criticism and reflection, as the basis for personal transformation (Roberts, 2000). That is not to say that Action Learning is without theory or direction, rather it is the place of the learner to contribute and negotiate what programmed knowledge is required in response to their learning needs.

The next section will take a closer look at the identities and competencies of the action learner – and considers who may prefer and benefit from this approach.

3. ACTION LEARNERS – IDENTITIES AND INTERESTS

Just as Action Learning continues to defy definition, so who is right for Action Learning remains a “live issue”. Implicit in the literature is an assumption that it is practising managers who are in possession of live issues and perhaps better able to act on their learning needs. Revan’s call for Action Learning was born of a concern that while managers attending professional development courses might address real world problems, they were not taking action on them and were therefore restricting their development (Mintzberg, 2004).

Action learners appreciate the limitations of simply acquiring more knowledge; understanding that real world problems require more than knowing, they require informed action. There is a realisation that competency, and the ability to do, are the

means by which learning takes place. This is encapsulated by Revans' in the idea that Action Learning is...

... "concerned with encouraging real persons to tackle real problems, in real time." (Revans, 1983, p62)

Who might these real people be? The issue is less a matter of age or formal position in the business, but more an expression of learning maturity, someone able and willing to learn from and through experience. But if learning is a competence developed through autonomous action then this approach may not suit all managers. The autonomy to take action on real problems may be challenged at many levels – even senior management (O'Hara et al., 1997) alternatively, the barriers to learning may be internal, and result in an inability to question assumptions and actions (Argyris, 1991). The question of who can make use of Action Learning is still open, but this debate also needs to go beyond the confines of the management community, as (O'Hara et al. 1997) notes,

It may be that in saying action learning is most appropriate for mature adults, we are simply blind to the possibilities of using it with others. p94

Are Business Schools open to Action Learning? To fully incorporate this approach would involve reframing the roles of learner and tutor as well as the place of theory. Traditionally theory is dispensed by tutors according to a predetermined teaching plan. In business schools the synthesis between theory and practice is encouraged, but the implicit relationship is that theory (first) helps to inform future practice. In Action Learning, it is the learner who determines the role and place of programmed knowledge in relation to action (Graham, 1998). The relationship is therefore far less structured and more dependent on the context and preferences of the learner.

Theory is sometimes "preparatory action"; it is getting ready to do something. But many people in order to do something, need to be confronted with the situation in which they have to do it (Revans, 1998, p6).

The depth of learning is also crucial to the success of Action Learning. Reflective practice must uncover assumptions that drive actions, so that learners may transform how they see things and change what they do. The quest for personal development in conjunction with business transformation is desirous and yet challenging for both learner and institution. It is the ability to conjoin action, reflection and theorising that drives action learning but we are reliant on the action learner to explain the real outcomes of this process.

Reflecting on these ideas the Action Learner is:

- Purposeful in their intent to manage and act competently in relation to real business needs;
- Able and willing to learn for and from autonomous action. Reflection is the vital component through which sense making occurs.
- Disciplined and supported to engage with a live issue – which may be complex, messy, elusive and challenging in definition alone.
- Through reflection and action have the ability to find, apply and make use of theory. "Knowing what" and "knowing how" are of equal importance and intimately combined.

- Collaborative, able to learn from others who might be “just like me”.

Action Learning is not, however, for everyone (Weinstein, 1998). Internal and external pressures can conspire against Action Learning. The lack of a predetermined syllabus and the scrutiny of self in relation to problems may be disorientating and potentially threatening. Participants can take some time to uncover, and get “traction” on, live issues. Blockages may exist in the workplace (O’Hara et al., 1997) and a lack of autonomy can create a sense of inertia. The right time to do Action Learning depends on the motivation and situation of learner.

The full time undergraduate student is rarely defined as an Action Learner. We may not think they have live issues because business courses are about organisations in which the learner is not active. There is also limited autonomy in the learning environment. Class sizes and the specification of learning outcomes (prior to candidates entering programmes) leaves little scope for an Action Learning approach. A number of business programmes do emphasise personal and professional development, as well as providing business simulation opportunities. Undergraduates are exposed to the ideas of self managed learning, experiential learning and reflective practice, but much of this is done to help them complete their course. The intent is to make them better students as opposed to effective in business.

In contrast to the professional business learning environment is the entrepreneurial learning culture; thought to be more informal and existing outside of the traditional education system. Here learning is derived from taking real actions and experiencing associated risks (Mintzberg, 2004).

3.1 Entrepreneurs as action learners

Entrepreneurs are strong candidates for Action Learning (Clarke et al., 2006); being wholly concerned with transformation – in converting opportunities into business entities. Moreover, questioning convention is a fundamental part of opportunity seeking and new business creation. The development of a business is, in essence, an enduring live issue and not without personal and economic risk. Crucially, new business creation is a compelling live issue for entrepreneurs; using terminology from Vogler (1996) it is their “call to adventure” at the start of a “heroic journey”.

New business creation is dependent on a strong action orientation (Pittway and Cope, 2007); stories of discoveries and mistakes are re-told by entrepreneurs, often shared within networks of practice, (Taylor and Thorpe, 2004) and this can fulfil the vital reflection component to learning.

The problem is that the need for reflection may not be recognised and managed consciously. While social networks are a key feature of the entrepreneurial learning culture (Taylor and Thorpe, 2004), collaborative reflection may be informal, ad hoc and ephemeral. In this context, Action Learning can “plug the gap” and help entrepreneurs derive learning from their experiences. The challenge for the providers of entrepreneurship programmes is creating the environment where issues are live, actions real and the associated risks “felt” (Pittway and Cope, 2007).

The role of tuition is to help enrich the reflection phase, importantly encouraging theoretical reflection for future action. The use of programmed knowledge is therefore targeted to specific needs, but may also be generated by participants.

Action learning recognises the possibility for learners to generate knowledge rather than merely absorb passively the results of the research produced by specialists...(Zuber-Skerritt, 2002, p115)

With the BA Enterprise Development, we believe that if we can frame participants as would-be entrepreneurs from the moment they enter formal education, then their capacity for, and interest in, Action Learning is raised. It is this belief that has driven the approach for programme design, which is explained below.

4. BA ENTERPRISE DEVELOPMENT – ENTREPRENEURSHIP BY ACTION LEARNING

This innovative three year full-time degree was launched in 2009. It is very much a niche product attracting modest numbers – which has the advantage of enabling a cohesive and mutually-supportive cohort. As part of their interview the students are screened to ensure they are committed to starting a business as well as successfully completing the degree. The business that the student sets up, even the business plan, does not earn credits directly. However, many assignments are related to the business and achieving movement on this “live issue”. In the final year credits are given for a satisfactory reflective portfolio of learning – both learning by doing and learning from doing in the context of the business.

The staff involved believe that even first year undergraduates can become reflective learners with the right support– which is not a typical perspective taken with undergraduate students – and there is a genuine commitment to develop this capability. The autonomy for personal development effectively mirrors the use of right brain thinking for new business opportunities. All the foundation modules have an action element, which engages the students, and also a focus on their personal capabilities and development. In addition, the use of external mentors to support the teaching team allows for the role of teacher to be reframed to performance coach, trainer and facilitator.

Teaching ‘business’ in the way that is common on a typical business studies type degree is held back until the second and third years. The requirement for left-brain thinking¹ increases, but the intent is that right brain thinking² is always present. In addition to specific assignments there are additional core deliverables: a business (proposition) pitch at the end of Year One, a persuasive business plan at the end of Year Two, an existing business at the end of the course.

Figure 1. maps BA Enterprise Development using an original conceptual framework developed for examining the thrust of any similar business programme. On the vertical axis there is a separation of the central topics: Small Business Management and Entrepreneurship. They are related but they are different – one is largely about processes and functions, the other is more closely related to the relevant people. Also

¹ Left brain thinking is characterised by logical reasoning and is concerned with judging and evaluating business ideas (Bragg and Bragg, 2005)

² Right brain thinking is characterised by intuition and feelings, manifesting in dreams and visions. It is important in opportunity seeking. (ibid)

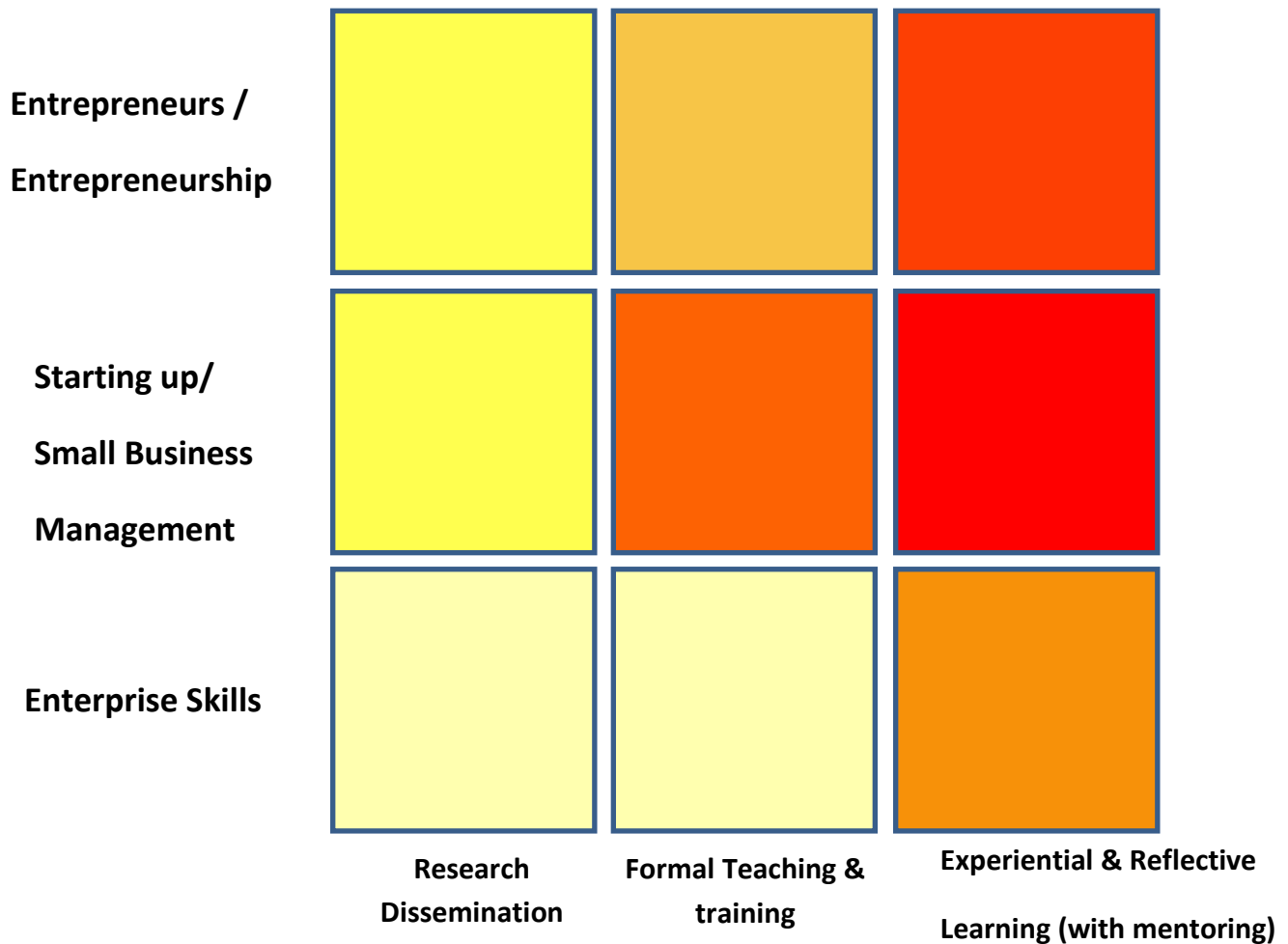
included are the all-important generic enterprise skills which arguably have relevance for most undergraduates, regardless of their chosen discipline. On the horizontal axis is the teaching/learning perspective. On the left is research dissemination, the latest emergent thinking in the subject. This leads to teaching the core material in the centre column, and then, to the right, is experiential and reflective learning.

Depending on the University, the level of the degree in question and the preferred style of the relevant Business School one might envisage a strong focus towards the left and the middle columns. In Figure 1. the deepest colours are used to emphasise that the BA Enterprise Development has, instead, a strong bias towards the right hand column and, perhaps inevitably, uses teaching and learning that has a pronounced leaning towards the right rather than the left brain. There is no mapping of any alternative programmes in this paper but anyone with relevant insight and data for a particular course can do this.

In short, then, the key themes of this particular degree are:

- Action Orientation
- Reflective practice around critical incidents – in Year 1 the nature of critical incidents and associated learning are directed by the participants. A wide range of experiences and challenges are undertaken such that the skill of reflection can be practiced and developed.
- Where possible assessment relates to getting movement on the live issue addressing ideas for new business development, personal development and learning to learn.
- A collaborative learning environment – in which students learn from each other and from working with (external) experts in addition to ‘conventional’ tutors.

Figure 1. BA Enterprise Development – Content and Learning Context



On reflection the association with Action Learning is through the use of self managed learning, in order to facilitate learning through action and reflection. But fundamentally, we believe that the design of the programme, specifically the goal of developing a functioning business, effectively reframes a learner’s notion of self, their tutors and the institution in to an Action Learning context. Participants represent a learning community bound by a desire to be in business and are empowered to manage the associated learning.

5. ACTION RESEARCH, METHODS USED AND SOME INITIAL FINDINGS

Now in its second year of operation, there is a need to assess the extent to which Action Learning is utilised by BA Enterprise Development participants for the purpose of personal and new business development. Does the approach provide the means by which the learner can discover what they need to learn and how? The aim of this preliminary research is not to test for Action Learning but rather look at how

participants are making use of and engaging in Action Learning. (In time, more cycles of Action Research will better inform individual learning journeys and how programme interventions can affect experiences.)

The ongoing development of this programme represents a live issue, requiring active engagement from participants in order to ensure meaningful development – in this sense Action Research provides the basis for programme management (Schmuck, 1997). The rationale for Action Research is twofold, in that:

- there is an opportunity to take stock and reflect on actions and outcomes date with a view to informing programme management;
- any changes and development to programme should be informed by participants through a process of constructive collaboration.

This exploratory research is the first structured attempt to ask what BA Enterprise Development participants are learning and how they are doing this. Data has been derived from three discrete cycles of reflection (two applications of a questionnaire and content analysis of assignments) initially undertaken for the purpose of seeing “how things are going”. These data are now brought together, under the auspices of Action Research, for the purpose of better understanding the role of Action Learning.

Findings and analytical discussion are combined for the purpose of this paper. As Rowley (2003) notes there is no predetermined recipe for the discussion of Action Research findings. Simply put, the data from this research informs “how things are going” by directly drawing on the views of participants. It is from their experiences that proposals for action will be informed.

Assignment and questionnaire data has been derived from the current Year 1 cohort. There are now 11 students, with 2 having decided after one term that higher education is ‘not for them’. Neither commented that they believed the course was inappropriate. For the T-Shirt questionnaire described below there were 12 respondents from the original 13 entrants. Assignments were received from the eleven who returned for the second term and these have been used for the analysis described.

In the T-Shirt questionnaire a number of statements were written and offered as choices, respondents were asked “*What’s on my T-Shirt today?*” The idea to do this was taken from a presentation by Mortiboys (2010) who was using a similar approach to investigate emotional intelligence amongst a group of people. The students were first asked to choose their favourite statement during Freshers’ Week, before they had any direct exposure to what was coming once formal classes started. The same choices – using the same presentation - were offered again some five to six weeks into the course. The first and second choices of each student are documented in Table 1.

The statements that had no takers are as interesting as the one to which the largest number migrated.

Table 1. What’s on my T-shirt today? (adapted from Mortiboys, 2010)

<i>T-SHIRT CHOICES</i>	<i>STUDENT RESPONDENTS</i>														<i>Total first time</i>	<i>Total second time</i>	<i>TOTAL</i>
	<i>A</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>G</i>	<i>H</i>	<i>I</i>	<i>J</i>	<i>K</i>	<i>L</i>					
I'm here looking for the best ideas					1									1	0	1	
I want to know the secret of success									1		2			1	1	2	
I want sound practical advice					2			1						1	1	2	
All that matters to me is being in business	2					1						1		2	1	3	
I'm hoping I'll get ideas from others		1,2												1	1	2	
I want time to think my ideas through								2		1				1	1	2	
I want to avoid the pitfalls														0	0	0	
This is my chance to do something different				1,2		2			2	2	1	2		2	5	7	
I'll like it if it is new and different							2							0	1	1	
I'll do the studying if it helps me get on														0	0	0	
There is so much to business I'm going to need help	1		1,2				1							3	1	4	

The authors infer the following findings from the data presented above.

- Firstly, that the non response to “*I want to avoid the pitfalls*” suggests that participants appreciate the entrepreneurship is about opportunities and their associated risks. Ignoring this T-shirt statement suggests that avoiding mistakes is a low priority and perhaps an acknowledgement that risk is a part of they do.
- The statement “*there is so much to business I’m going to need help*” was the most selected statement in Freshers’ Week, however, results from November show it is a less popular option. We might now hypothesise that once they realise help is available, from tutors and peers, then the significance of this concern falls away (Thompson, 2006).
- The overall impression is one of statements concerning business ideas give way to the expressed desire to “*do something different*”. There is an emerging emphasis on action.

Findings from the T-shirt questionnaire are re-reviewed in relation to issues raised in the biographical assignment for the “Research and Study Skills” module, completed in Semester 1 of the first year of study. This assignment is designed to raise the “learning to learn” agenda by getting participants thinking about: why they are here; what they want to achieve, and how they can manage the learning requirement. Different sections of the assignment have been used to inform the defining features of Action Learning (as cited earlier in this study). The content from assessments has been used thus:

- Voluntary participation – is informed by responses to *Task 1*: “(Begin the story) Why are you on the BA Enterprise Development? How is this course an opportunity for you?”
- Live issues – what they are and how participants engage with them has been inferred from two learning contracts (*Task 5*).
- Learning from action and for action – is informed by responses to *Task 4*, incorporating the questions: “What have learned about yourself?”; “What have you learned about learning?”

The commentary uses content analysis to draw out key insights and from doing so sub-categories emerge.

6. FURTHER FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The following comments and ideas have been informed by written assessments; the majority of this cohort were aged 19 either when they joined us or shortly afterwards. The cohort comprises 10 males and 1 female student.

6.1 Voluntary participation

An important theme in Action Learning is the idea that the participant drives the learning agenda. They volunteer for Action Learning in order to engage in change – both personally and in an organisational sense. Content analysis of the assessment sheds some light on what influenced participants to choose the BA Enterprise Development programme.

Influences have been further divided into the sub-categories of internal drivers and external influences.

6.1.1 Internal drivers

Most assessments stressed the importance of internal influences arising from personal insight in identifying their developmental and learning needs. There was an emerging sense of finding a learning experience that “suited me”.

Some felt their preferred learning style was conducive to the action orientation of the BA Enterprise Development. Expressed preferences included: work based learning; a practical degree; kinaesthetic and activist approaches. Knowing their preferred learning style helped to make sense of past experiences and inform the search for a more meaningful fit between what to learn and how.

I have always been reasonably good at academic studies achieving my potential...yet found the work tedious, structured and boring. I was unable to get enthusiastic over the work I was set and found it increasingly difficult to stay focused...This may be because I see myself as an activist. (Student 1)

Learning aspirations reflected widespread interest in “know how”, and as opposed to knowing more. The participant goes on to note...

On this course I aspire to develop two things, one being my personal development as a hopeful developing entrepreneur. I want to work on the skills I don't have, enhance the ones I do have and find (developing) (sic) ones I did not know I had. (Student 1)

A commitment to action can come from frustration with a more theoretical approach to learning; knowing more may not help the participant develop a business. Indeed learners may already be adept at acquiring knowledge for themselves, without the aid of teaching.

I could have done a computer science related degree at a university. Then, I could have set up a business in the computing industry...But there are some problems with that idea. I could waste my time learning things I already know or things that I don't need. Especially as I can learn some of these things myself very easily. (Student 2)

In common with the entrepreneurial learning context, a desire to be with the right people is expressed.

I hoped that there would be people like me on the course; driven, leadership and a risk taker are all personal qualities that in my opinion I possess...(Student 3)

The classroom can be the place for informed collaboration, between tutors, students and experts in the field, providing the appropriate roles can be assumed. Both support and challenge are important here.

I feel this style of learning will help me to better my understanding of the job at hand...it will also allow me to encounter problems with less risk of failure due to the support of the staff and the mentors on the course...(Student 4)

Interestingly, self awareness and enacting personal development strategies may have begun prior to the degree, for one participant redefining what they learned and how, started in school.

Reflecting on my studies, I now realise my teacher was like a business coach to me. ..She altered her teaching approach to my activist learning approach; giving me constructive criticism, which enabled me to problem solve. (Student 5)

Together these comments reflect the participants' interest in how entrepreneurship is learned; the need to take action and to have meaningful interaction with others is key. Comments reflect the idea of the "adult transition phase" (Lessem, 1991) whereby individuals change the configuration who are they are dependent on and what they are independent from.

There is also the emergence of personal visioning as a way of articulating learning goals. The participant here stresses that learning needs to result in business success.

All I wanted to gain through my study was to develop myself to be stronger individual, thus helping me in my future aspirations to be a great business woman. (Student 6)

A key theme in this paper is the unique nature of the programme, and it seems this is important in attracting and retaining interest (as reflected in the T-shirt questionnaire).

Action and reflection are firmly in the foreground (O'Hara et al., 1997) of the first year. Although new to the programme, participants show a preference for doing something different, both in terms of what they learn and how.

My main aspirations for the course...was that I hoped it to be more than just a normal business degree, that does exactly what (I)(sic) says on the tin, Just a boring business degree that uses boring old style scenarios. (Student 3)

There is an expressed need for practical skills and a desire to co-determine the learning agenda.

What really excited me was the uniqueness and practicality of the course, how it enables me, as a student to grasp the knowledge and theory needed in enterprising and practically apply it...Even though the course has to be partially structured for the academic degree, i still have the freedom and experience to express my creativity with developing ideas of my choice. (Student 1)

Making mistakes is seen as part of the entrepreneurial process. Some learners have already had this experience and are looking for the programme help them contend with the need to identify and work through potential problems.

I have failed numerous times in trying to get into business over the last couple of years...Having been unsuccessful several times I wanted to do the more intelligent thing and actually acquire business knowledge in a more controlled way... (Student 7)

There is an expressed need for help and support, but as noted with the T-shirt exercise, this concern may subside as support mechanisms emerge and the participants' capacity for learning develops.

6.1.2 External influences

Choosing the BA Enterprise Development was also influenced by tutors, teachers, parents and business people. What is interesting is that participants referred to how these people were supportive towards their business aspirations, there is only limited reference to others being "role models". Referring to a significant teacher, one participant stated:

She suggested that I would become the most successful student she has ever taught. This was a key moment for me as it shows that she believed in me and my ambitions. (Student 5)

Young Enterprise was also cited as being influential, perhaps because it introduces young people to learning about business by being in business.

6.2 Learning Contracts and live issues

Live issues are difficult to frame and comprehend and so Action Learning sets are typically used to help the learner to determine their live issues and develop ideas for action, however, sets are only an intermittent feature of the BA Enterprise Development. Alternatively, the programme utilises self managed learning in the form of Learning Contracts to help the learner engage with and take action on live issues. Contracts are used to emphasise the importance of reflecting for action and from action and are not intended as legally binding commitments to which participants must adhere (Weinstein, 1998). The intent is to agree and operationalise a plan of action. Contracts position the participant as co-director of their development, requiring them to find the opportunities for learning (Mumford, 1995), (Knowles, 1990) and to take responsibility for implementing their plans.

It may happen that contracts are not fully enacted as intended, requiring that both learner and tutor understand that things change; this in itself is an area for reflection and

learning. In addition, goal setting and negotiation skills are learned as part of the contracting process. The contracts developed by participants on the BA Enterprise Development have been reviewed in terms of the learners' interests and here a distinction is made between "learning for knowledge and understanding" and "learning for skills and attitudes" (after Knowles, 1990).

6.2.1 Contracts for knowledge and understanding

A few learning contracts specified the need to gain more knowledge. Learners were interested in knowing more about areas such as: neuro linguistic programming (as a means to better communication); the challenges of taking new products to market; industry specific knowledge (alcoholic beverages and sports industries), and the experiences of other entrepreneurs. Two contracts simply specified to need to know more about business and noted that reading would provide the most appropriate means.

The desire for knowledge, in most cases was linked to a specific business opportunity as opposed to academic learning goals. The interest in knowledge was about informing the issue of new business development and the need to understand business (theoretically and practically) beyond the realm of personal experience.

6.2.2 Contracts for skills, attitudes and values

Most of the learning contracts were concerned with the development of skills and attitudes. Three contracts expressed the need for greater reflection, one linked the need for reflection to the development of a business plan, and another was concerned with the need for a better understanding of self, but once again skills and attitudes were expressed with business opportunities in mind...

Goal: *To be more reserved as a person and the reflect upon different decisions in terms of the business idea. (Student 3, Learning Contract 2)*

Skills agendas also reflect the challenges of the first year. Formative assessment is frequent and demanding, involving real work on real business problems, often incorporating assessment by "real" business people. These challenges demand both personal organisation and the ability to communicate ideas effectively.

Time management and presentation skills were the two key areas for transferable skills development. Active listening; being more confident in groups, and the practice of delegation in groups were also identified.

6.2.3 Contracts for both

The most effective Learning Contracts bring the idea of know what and know how together – combining skills and knowledge in the learning agenda. The following aim and objective expresses the idea that relevant knowledge can be acquired through action.

Learning Aim: *To gain greater understanding of the clothing manufacturing process and business operations in setting up a fashion clothing label...*

Objective (1 of 3): *to create and manufacture at least one sample product from my initial design concepts and have it created as a learning experience of the manufacturing process.(Student 1)*

This contract is ambitious and perhaps not fully attainable within the academic year, but as an expression of learning intent, it presents the rationale for learning from action.

6.3 Learning from action and for action

To conclude their assignments, participants are asked to reflect on what they have learned so far in terms of: self, study and research skills, and the learning process. In the spirit of action learning we encourage participants to see the links between personal and business transformation and the importance of learning to both.

There were a limited number of “subject related” learning statements, in contrast there were significant insights into self; both in terms of emerging self awareness and the agenda for personal development.

My development I feel is more intrinsic: I have progressed tremendously with regards to feelings, I am more relaxed and comfortable than I have ever been in situations I have previously struggled on. (Student 5)

The role of reflection and re-reflection, in continuing the process of self discovery, is also evident as is the idea of seeking support and challenge from peers.

I realised if I want to progress I couldn't always be this “bulldozer” (the typical activist), I needed to approach this differently and reflect to get myself back on track. I judged myself very critically and asked my peers to as well. (Student 5)

The impact of frequent formative assessment, on real business problems, has perhaps speeded up and strengthened these insights.

I am actually a far stronger person than I originally thought, and tasks such as the Holmfirth Pitch have shown me how well I can work under pressure and how successful I can be at delivering what is asked of me. (Student 6)

In terms of “learning to learn”, some participants are theorising about learning from their actions.

Learning doesn't have to be taught it can be learned by doing and learned from being around business minded people (Student 7)

This statement below suggests a desire to engage in Action Learning...

I now feel one of the most important things of all is feedback, reflection and questioning the status quo. Much insight can be gained from viewing the results of actions and also asking for other people's perspectives. It is important to improve things that need improving and this requires an open mind to change. (Student 2)

7. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The question at this stage of the programme is whether Action Learning is being used effectively. The programme has been designed to develop practicing entrepreneurs, by initially focusing on both right brain thinking and the ability to engage in learning through action and reflection. Initial findings suggest that the BA Enterprise Development provides the context for Action Learning, attracting learners seeking autonomy and self directed learning opportunities.

With specific reference to the participants' experiences:

- Action and reflection are providing the means for learning. While there is general preference for the activist learning style (as expressed by participants), there is a growing awareness of the importance of reflection.
- Those who choose this approach want to “do something different”. The agenda for personal development and achieving business goals are openly expressed, whereas a desire for academic attainment receives little reference in both assignments and questionnaire data.
- The role of collaboration in learning is evident in year 1 and tutors are only one such resource. Importantly, support, challenges and developmental feedback are coming from peers, tutors and business/professional contacts.
- The focus of learning attention at this time is personal development, but this agenda is in turn influenced more by what participants want to achieve in business, even at these early stages.

We foresee interesting challenges in developing entrepreneurs through our Action Learning approach. It is not for everyone, however. Why this is the case may not be the same as with practicing managers. With less emphasis on sets, we avoid defensive behaviours associated with fear of open criticism, however, there are issues around innate complacency (Stark, 2006). While some participants express a preference of learning through action, their behaviours reflect a more passive approach. We also have to ask if we have a part to play in this response; are there limits to reframing for tutors and learners alike (Palmer and Dunford, 1996)?

The worlds of education and training have had difficulty in accepting action learning as a legitimate process and why teaching is still equated with instruction and acquiring knowledge...(Beaty et al. 1997, p 184)

Alternatively, for some the course is still not active enough – this might not be expressed but rather demonstrated by being too busy to attend sessions. It is already evident that a business opportunity “out there” is sometimes taken at the expense of attending classes “in here”.

There are issues on maintaining a constructive relationship between reflecting, doing and theorising. Theoretical reflection may not happen without the presence of formal assessment. The challenge of the second year is that the emphasis of the teaching and learning approach shifts to left brain thinking and this may create an initial shock for participants. We intend for them to retain a right brain approach and continue self managed learning. Our research is now shifting to the year 2 experience as perhaps this is the domain for learning sets.

Just as we acknowledge that it is difficult for individual learners to be precise about what they have learned from Action Learning, it is difficult to be precise about the nature and significance of our learning in terms of programme management – at this time. By using Action Research we are learning from our actions, for future action, initially independently and now more collaboratively for the purpose of engaging in a very compelling live issue – developing entrepreneurs.

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