

Action Learning

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What is Action Learning?

Action learning is a way to solve problems and puzzles that you may be encountering in your practice. The technique is used frequently in organisations, often during periods of change, where a lot of 'learning' is going on that is both experiential in nature (rather than able to be gained from reading) and unique to the context and the time.

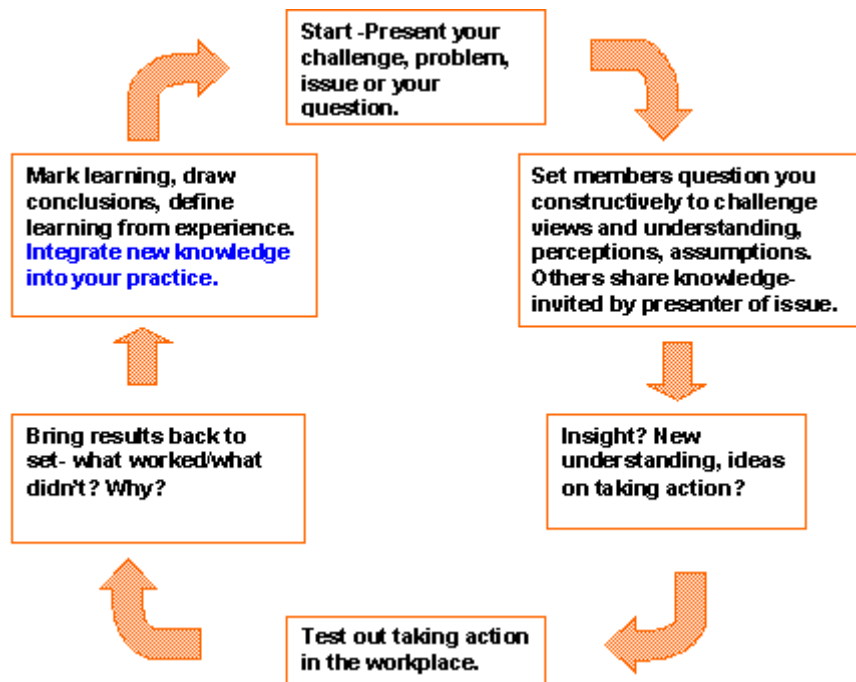
Action learning can be a useful model for teachers to use in their reflective practice. Teaching-in-practice involves the application of ideas and beliefs to actual situations and what we gain from these situations is experiential. Action learning techniques can help in understanding the experience, consolidating it and integrating it into new practice, something that is essential in a pragmatic activity like teaching.

An Action Learning Set (or Group) might be formed with colleagues who are working with the same students and courses. By sharing experiences, they build up a richer picture of what is going on, and a broader repertoire of how puzzles can be solved. Alternatively, members of an Action Learning Set may all be working with different groups or subjects, so that the value of the collaborative enterprise comes from the detachment of the others and their ability to bring their perspective to your experience.

The following sections explain what an Action Learning Set is, what the various roles are, and how it works in practice. Interspersed between the sections are some questions that you might like to reflect on before you move to the next section, to allow you to think through the potential benefits of the method for you.

How Set members learn from experience

Figure 1: The cycle of learning from experience in a Set



Source: NHS Modernisation Agency
(www.natpact.nhs.uk/cms/316.php) accessed 10 October 2006

What do Action Learning Sets Provide?

An Action Learning Set provides:

- an environment in which it is safe to admit weakness/ignorance/mistakes and ask for help
- the bringing together of participants' experience for mutual advantage
- an antidote to isolation for practitioners
- broadening horizons, through the shared situations presented by others
- an opportunity to express feelings as well as facts about the total working situation
- the opportunity to hear and be heard. This mutual attention and support releases and reinforces self-confidence
- an opportunity for Set members to expand their self-awareness, and confidence (to talk about themselves and to ask for feedback), together with some insight into their own inner resources.

How do Action Learning Sets Work?

Action Learning Sets create the conditions and use processes that stimulate learning through action. These actions take place outside the Set meeting, often away from the other Set members. Members of the Set seek to help each other solve real work problems and, at the same time, to develop as individuals.

An Action Learning Set consists of:

- between 4 and 8 members, who are peers working in the same or similar areas
- a presenter, who is one of the group members
- Set members, the rest of the group
- a facilitator. This could be someone from outside brought in for the purpose, or it could be one of the group. Groups sometimes start by requesting an outside facilitator, but draw on themselves for the role as they gain in confidence and understanding of the process.

The process

- a Whoever is the presenter on the occasion outlines his or her issue(s) to the group.
- b Set members listen and formulate questions.
- c Set members present questions following an agreed procedure.
- d Presenter decides which questions to address and addresses them in front of Set members.
- e Set members probe with appropriate questions.
- f Presenter concludes with 'action points' to take forward.
- g Presenter reports on actions taken and results at start of next meeting.

You may also find the following websites useful on Action Learning and its practice in different organisations:

www.actionlearningassociates.co.uk/index.html

www.natpact.nhs.uk/cms/316.php

www.lboro.ac.uk/service/pd/action_learning.htm

The following website looks at Action Learning specifically for women in higher education:

www.junewhetherly.co.uk/women_universities.htm

Questions to reflect on at this stage

- a What do you see as the value of learning in this way as opposed to other learning methods (eg reading a book or article on the topic, watching someone else do what you are trying to do, being told what to do by other[s])?
- b Is it important that the other Set members are one's peers, and working in the same or similar areas? If so, why? If not, why not?
- c Why is a facilitator needed? What do you think their role should be?
- d What kind of questions or comments do you think it would be (i) appropriate and (ii) inappropriate for Set members to ask? Why?

How an Action Learning Set Works – Roles

The role of the presenter

The presenter brings their issue, problem, or project to the rest of the group. He or she:

- describes the issues of concern through a narrative account
- describes how it really is in the here and now
- receives questions from others in the group
- takes and addresses *only* those questions with which he or she is comfortable at this time
- decides on action points to take forward and commit to, and shares this with the Set
- reports on ensuing events at a subsequent meeting of the group.

The role of the Set members

Set members who are not presenting:

- listen actively and attentively
- watch for non-verbal cues, eg body language, hesitations etc
- receive questions from others in the group
- are attentive to the feelings as well as the words of the presenter
- do not intervene (unless permitted by the version of the process)
- formulate questions that encourage the presenter to understand the problem for him- or herself more clearly
- are prepared to probe and challenge the presenter's personal interpretations
- are always supportive, encouraging and empathetic

- give feedback appropriately, honestly and with discretion
- observe all the agreed ground rules for conduct of Set members.

Set members who are not presenting:

- *Never* diagnose, recommend, interpose their own agenda or give personal solutions
- *Never* judge or impose their own values.

The role of the facilitator

His or her main task is to enable Set members to work on their real issues.

The facilitator:

- creates conditions for the presenter to concentrate fully on their issue and get the most from the other Set members
- helps the Set members to give appropriate assistance, ie, not diagnose, analyse, recommend, give their own perspective, but instead ask open questions, help the presenter reach the path forward that is right for them
- intervenes when appropriate, eg to ask Set members to rephrase a question in an 'open' way, ensure that tone and atmosphere are appropriate, maintain other ground rules
- models the actions of a 'good' Set member
- gives feedback to the group on how they are working as Set members and as a Set
- never brings his or her own issues to the Set.

Questions to reflect on at this stage

Consider the following questions about the roles of the Set members.

The presenter

- a What prior guidance and/or rules do you think a presenter needs to carry out the task of presenting appropriately?
- b What might be the difficulties for an individual faced with the task of presenting an issue? Are there ways in which these difficulties could be addressed and overcome?
- c The presenter 'takes and addresses only those questions with which he or she is comfortable at this time'. Why is this an important caveat to the questioning?

The Set members

- a Why do you think Set members are instructed: never diagnose, recommend, interpose own agenda or give personal solution; never judge or impose own values?

- b Do you think Set members should be able to ask questions during the presentations, or should they wait till the end? Give your reasoning here.
- c What do you see as the problems in being a 'good' Set member? You are invited to share the particular problems that you personally might have if you wish.
- d What prior guidance and/or rules could Set members be given to help them carry out the tasks of listening, questioning and feeding back, appropriately?

The facilitator

- a An important part of the facilitator's task is to 'help the Set members to give appropriate assistance, ie, not diagnose, analyse, recommend, give their own perspective, but instead ask open questions, help the presenter reach the path forward that is right for them' . Why is it important that the facilitator does this?
- b Can you add anything to the list of tasks for the facilitator?
- c What do you think might be the difficulties for the facilitator in carrying out the role? What training might be appropriate for facilitators?

Procedural Arrangements and Affective Elements – the Ground Rules

Timing, tone and topics for an Action Learning Set

Timing

- The optimal life-span for an Action Learning Set is between 6 and 12 months (after which the members may have learned as much as they can from each other and may need to re-form with new members if they are to access new knowledge and ways of thinking).
- The optimal time lapse between Set meetings is between 4 and 6 weeks, though there should not be more than 2 weeks between the first and second meetings, in order that the impetus and enthusiasm derived from the first meeting may be sustained and reinforced quite quickly.
- In any Action Learning Set session, there should be a maximum of 35 minutes per presenter and 15 minutes at the end for closure. Given that all Set members should be active throughout, the Set should take care not to try to cram too many presentations into a single session.

Tone

- Everyone is active, engaged and alert throughout.
- A relaxed environment with comfortable seating is advisable.
- Refreshments should be available, either at set times or throughout the session.

Topics

- There can be immense variety.
- The criterion is a broad one: 'anything that a member wants to work on in order to generate action points'.
- The aim is that the presenter gets personal learning out of the session and the aim of the discussion is to encourage his or her learning.

Getting started, keeping going, achieving closure

Getting started

- An Action Learning Set meeting for the first time can start by working together to generate ideas for that opening session and (possibly) for subsequent sessions. Everyone needs to come up with a suggestion and a reason why this is a substantive problem (though they don't have to commit to it for the future). This activity should take about 15 minutes, and at the end an issue should be taken for the first 'dry run'.
- Once things are under way, there can either have been agreement about the issue to be presented and who will present, or a bidding as to who has issues they want or need to present. Of course everyone should present fairly regularly but there should also be the possibility to accommodate any urgently-arising issue for a Set member.

Keeping going

- The presenter is given time to work through the issue in his or her own words
- The presenter should be 'trusted' to find his or her own way through the dilemma to planned actions that he or she personally formulates and with which he or she feels comfortable.
- The facilitator should act when appropriate to prevent digression, to ensure that questions are formulated in an 'open' way, and to keep things to time.
- Everyone must agree and act in such a way that it is clear that it is the presenter's issue, not anyone else's.
- Set members can get in-session feedback from the presenter through such questions as: 'Is what I'm saying helpful?'
- Action Learning Sets are elongated learning experiences in their own right and the Set gets better as it goes forward and gains more experience.

Achieving closure

- Leave time at the end for the members to reflect on the session and summarise their view of what has happened.
- About 15 minute should be left for this.
- It is coordinated by the facilitator.
- Things that went well should be noted and celebrated.
- Ideas about ways to improve the process next time should be voiced and noted.

Description of an Action Learning Set

Here is some information regarding the philosophy and process involved in action learning.

- a A Set should comprise between 4 and 8 people, who meet with a Set facilitator.
- b When a Set meets for the first time, there needs to be an introductory or warm-up session. When a Set has already met, it will begin with action report updates from the previous meeting.
- c The facilitator invites members to bid for space in the session and an 'presenter' emerges (or things work by strict rotation around the group).
- d The presenter describes a problem, situation or opportunity, possibly using a flip chart to draw or describe the structures or salient points.
- e What follows is in no sense a general discussion, but nearer to group counselling. Members of the Set, by giving close attention, and especially by asking open questions, enable the presenter to get a deeper understanding of her or his problem. Experience has shown that the best way to work is to offer questions slowly, one at a time, and always to the presenter.
- f In this way the Set helps the presenter towards clarification of her or his situation.
- g The presenter is thus helped to see various options and to choose one of them for him- or herself.
- h The presenter may be challenged by the Set to fix for him- or herself an intermediate goal and outline to the Set his or her next step, or may be permitted to self-select goals for the next session.
- i The facilitator leads a brief process review of the session. This may happen at the end and/or throughout the work of the Set.

Three basic conventions

Only One at a Time (OOAAT)

Only one person at a time in the Set presents an issue: the others give attention and help, entirely for her or his sake. The space belongs to the presenter. Any personal material belonging to other Set members is rigorously excluded from that space. For example, Set members do not tell anecdotes, say 'how it is in my organisation', or give advice.

In fact, other Set members talk *very little*, and learn the difficult discipline of not drawing attention to their own personal agenda, in the presenter's space. The presenter alone is in focus.

Counselling style (COST)

Even if Set members can see a solution with great clarity, they will refrain from giving advice or taking over the problem. Instead they will continue listening, quite often allowing silence, and ask questions to clarify, not their own understanding, but only that of the presenter.

Safe to Admit Need (STAN)

Only in a group where it is safe to disclose ignorance, admit weakness and ask for help is it possible for the presenter to learn at sufficient depth for him or her to develop as an individual. A primary objective of the facilitator is therefore to create an atmosphere where it is STAN.