Reflections on ‘Creative’ Action Learning in Business Education: Some Issues in its Theory and Practice

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to consider some issues in the uses of what we have termed ‘creative’ action learning in a business education context, and to review some aspects of its practice. A review of the literature, including its use in higher education, is followed by a case illustration of its use in a UK business school with predominantly international students. Action learning is principally thought of as a human resource development practice and is widely used in a variety of public and private sector organisations. The focus here, however, is on the use of action learning in a business school setting and the application of specific creative thinking tools, in order to explore its potential for developing collaborative peer learning and support.

Key words: Action learning, business education, creative thinking techniques, theory and practice.

Introduction

Action learning is an approach to individual and organisational development and is widely used in a variety of public, private and third sector organisations (Brook, Pedler & Burgoyne, 2012). Its principal features are generally held to include identifying and working on difficult and complex problems, developing the application of ‘questioning insight’ to tackle these problems, taking action in the workplace and learning from the results of actions, and sharing problems, actions and reflections in small groups usually known as ‘sets’ (Pedler, Burgoyne and Brook, 2005).

Its stock has been rising again in higher education in recent times, especially with the development of academically vibrant variants such as, for example, critical action learning, a practice rooted in critical theory, and self-managed action learning, a practice which encourages set members to take control of the process for themselves, including its facilitation (Rigg & Trehan, 2004; Vince, 2008; Bournier, 2011). It is not the purpose of this paper to explore these variations in practice, but rather to consider aspects of the uses and practice of action learning in a more general sense in higher education in the UK, with a particular focus on the practice of what we have termed ‘creative’ action learning. This makes use of a variety of creative thinking tools to enhance the learning experience. To assist in this a case illustration from a business school is used to explore some of the issues.

Action learning has not always found favour within higher education. Indeed it has attracted controversy amongst development experts and academics partly because the ideas of practitioners are accorded greater prominence than those of experts (Pedler, Burgoyne and Brook, 2005; Harrison, 2009). Revans, regarded especially in the UK as the founding father of action learning, knew that it (and indeed he himself) would not always find ready acceptance for this reason. He resigned from his Chair at the University of Manchester in 1965 just as the new business school was being developed – appalled, as he saw it, at the triumph of the “book” culture of Owen’s College over the “tool” culture of the Manchester College of Technology, as it then was. He objected to the influence of the US business school

culture, pithily describing the recently imported MBA as ‘Moral Bankruptcy Assured’ (Pedler, Burgoyne & Brook, 2005). A few years later he wrote:

I am well aware that I do not share many of the present values of the academic world. My insistence that the first need of any science, namely that one should continuously observe its field of action at first hand – that we should involve the managers themselves in collecting and interpreting the data necessary for successful decision making – has been dismissed as unscientific, as poor research, and as unlikely to lead to any understanding of management...I shall cheerfully bear the reproach of conspiring to adulterate the standards of university scholarship (1971, xviii).

He was not, as is sometimes wrongly thought, against what he termed ‘programmed instruction’ or taught inputs but he did want to encourage action learners, using the skills involved in taking action, in questioning and in reflecting upon the effects of taking action, to learn from and with each other. Nonetheless, the use of action learning in higher education (at least in the way that Revans originally conceived it) is not without its difficulties, not least because he did not place much faith in facilitation or ‘expert inputs’.

This paper first considers the meaning of action learning (a term which has been subject to some dispute) and then explores some relevant literature, including a consideration of the uses of action learning in a higher education context. We then offer a case illustration drawn from our experience as facilitators of action learning sets, focusing upon our work in small sets with 36 international MSc business students. In our practice of action learning we have emphasised creative thinking tools and techniques (Amabile, 1996). We conclude with some observations on some of the implications of our approach for teaching practice. The case illustration offered here is predominantly considered from our perspective as action learning facilitators.

What do we mean by action learning?

Before going any further, it may be helpful to deal with the question of what is meant by action learning. The question has been considered elsewhere (Willis, 2004; Brook, Pedler & Burgoyne, 2012) and remains open to interpretation and debate. Revans did leave a legacy of writings which made the fundamental precepts apparent (Revans, 1998). Varying practices and approaches have developed in different locations, contexts and communities, and many now do agree on the basic principles, such as working on problems not puzzles, but this does allow for a variety of practice to have developed. Revans eschewed the idea of a once-and-for-all definition, but he did provide a description in addition to numerous statements of principle (see Table 1 below). Table 1 gives some definitions from notable practitioners and theorists of action learning, beginning with Revans himself.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

These definitions give some idea of the differences in emphasis even between experienced practitioners and/or academics schooled in Revans’ literature and the discipline of action learning. Willmott’s (1997) definition illustrates the marked difference between critical action learning and what might be termed ‘conventional’ action learning by his emphasis upon the centrality of critical social theory to its practice, and O’Neil and Marsick (2007) emphasise the role of the action learning ‘coach’ in the US model. There are yet others who would define action learning as no more than “learning by doing”, and those who would argue that we are probably better off leaving definitions to one side and taking some account of, “what action learning is not” as Revans himself originally did. Revans himself wrote:

Action learning takes so long to describe, so much longer to find interesting, and so much longer still to get started because it is so simple (1991, 3)

Revans particularly emphasised the fact that action learning is a “social process whereby those who try it learn with and from each other” but he also stressed that action learning has a “multiplying effect throughout the group or community of learners” (1991, 5). Although the set is regarded as being “at the cutting edge of every action learning programme” Revans was exercised by the idea of action learning spreading outwards from the small group or “set” to a wider learning community (1998, 10). For those in higher education, however, Revans’ placing a primacy on ‘Q’ – exploratory insight – is one of the features that marks action learning out as distinctive and challenging. There is also the issue of how to encourage and develop this central idea of ‘questioning insight’ (1998, 6).

The use of action learning in higher education

As Coghlan and Pedler (2006) have observed, we have seen an increasing use of action learning in postgraduate and post experience management education programmes. Post-graduate business education programmes invariably invite participants, many of whom are working in business contexts already, to engage in primary research in real organisations. This kind of work often requires people to take various kind of action – finding literature, doing field work, collecting data in various ways - in order to complete the task. Many students had identified as a problem – a real source of concern - the production of a dissertation based on primary research in an organisation. It also met one of Revans criteria for an action learning problem in that it had ‘a significant risk of a penalty for failure’ (1998, 8).

The increase in numbers taking up higher education opportunities in recent years presents an interesting challenge to those wishing to pursue action learning in universities. A more diverse student population is a positive development for the practise of action learning – as McGill and Beaty have observed, such diversity in terms of factors like age, experience, ethnicity, maturity and mode of study, presents an opportunity as “action learning is an approach which acknowledges and works with this diversity” (2002, 223). Yet the “massification” of higher education (even acknowledging current complex funding issues which may put off would-be students) might be seen as inimical to action learning, which is regarded as a productive but highly labour intensive intervention. Action learning sets are usually made up of no more than six participants (excluding the facilitator) and it may not prove possible to offer the approach to very large cohorts of students.

One answer to this has been the development of self managed action learning which was pioneered by the University of Brighton. Bournier (2011) writes about the use of this approach at Brighton as a way of coping with the ‘large numbers’ issue by replacing the need for continuous facilitation by an academic with a programme which trained set members in set participation, facilitation and management. The idea is very close to Revans original conception which, as we have seen, saw a limited role for a facilitator. Harley Frank (1996) undertook a survey of the use of action learning in British higher education and was able, at that time, to identify 12 different universities providing validated courses leading to a qualification – all of these were post-graduate courses of management education and appeared to be courses of part-time study. Bournier, Cooper and France (2000) built on Frank’s work by exploring what they described as the “singular receptivity of the university

(of Brighton) to action learning” and by reflecting on the conditions which encouraged its widespread use, given its adoption on 27 courses across all six faculties of that university (2000, 2). The conditions included the prevalence of courses which placed a high value on “action outcomes” from the learning process, the impact of the concept of the “reflective practitioner” especially in courses strongly related to professional practice, and the presence of “process champions” actively promoting action learning within the university (2000, 7-8).

Bourner et al (2000) noted some possible reasons for suspicions in the academy about the more widespread adoption of action learning, together with some lessons which they felt might increase its chances of success. Action learning is threatening to many academics in HE; it challenges the received knowledge of people who have made heavy investments in the received knowledge of subject disciplines. It can raise difficulties in getting courses validated in areas of HE where the learning outcomes are focused on, and limited to, conveying critical understanding of a subject discipline. It looks resource intensive in a period when the unit of resource continues to decline. Bourner suggested at the time of writing that it had made only limited inroads into management education in universities, its field of origin (2000, 8) but in more recent times this picture has shown evidence of change. Rae (2009) for example, was able to report on an innovative use of action learning to help students develop new business ventures as self-started work experience, and critical action learning, as observed earlier, is now a practice in a number of HE institutions (Rigg and Trehan, 2004; Lawless, 2008; Vince, 2008). A comparatively recent addition to action learning practice in HE, this form of action learning is rooted in critical theory and probably originated in the work of academics such as McLaughlin and Thorpe (1993) who had recognised the (possibly untapped) capacity for managers and others engaged in action learning to address:

...the primacy of politics, both macro and micro, and the influence of power on decision making and non decision-making not to mention the “mobilization of bias” (1993, 25).

A good illustration of its practice is in the work of Rigg and Trehan (2004) which offers examples in case study form of critical action learning being used to address complex questions of (for example) bias and discrimination. All this notwithstanding, as enthusiasts for action learning, Bourner et al make clear that they see great scope for the use of action learning in universities across the range of subjects, at different levels and via different modes of study (2000, op cit).

Method

The approach taken was to conduct a small-scale qualitative exploratory study. We invited students to reflect on their experiences in the set within actual set meetings and also individually in semi-structured interviews with the authors. We also reflected on our own experience in employing action learning, and in particular upon our role as facilitators. The following case illustration is based on these observations. A limitation of this study is that it is based on a small sample and the fact that we did not have the resources to run more than six sets. Action learning can be labour intensive and we felt it important that this project was undertaken on a voluntary basis (on the part of both students and researchers). We contend that action learning cannot be ‘forced’ upon participants.

Case Illustration: Practising ‘Creative’ Action Learning in a Business School Context

We used action learning with the aim of developing independent research skills, collaborative learning and peer support amongst business and management postgraduate students. For this programme, a business and management postgraduate course, we ran action learning sets comprising 36 students over a period of 7 months, with sets meeting every two weeks. This course is international in complexion with 74% of students coming from outside of Britain (16 different countries in all). 92% of students volunteering to take part in the sets were international students, thus the sets were made up of participants from China, Ghana, Nigeria, Cameroon, Bulgaria, Greece, Poland, Romania, Britain and Russia. It is important to note that student participation was wholly voluntary. With the agreement of the course leader, the entire cohort of 106 had been provided with information about action learning early on in the course and given the option whether or not to take part.

Our experience agrees with what appears to be a standard approach used by most practitioners of action learning that set meetings work best when they have no more than six members (Pedler, Burgoyne and Brook, 2005). Sets were more productive when members attended regularly, and this indeed was one of the essential ‘ground-rules’ to which sets committed themselves at the outset of the programme. Other generally agreed ground-rules included giving each other equal air time, respecting each others’ views, active listening, and giving respect and attention to those for whom English is not their first language. We found that set meetings varied in length with some lasting up to three hours.

One of the reasons we felt action learning might have a positive impact in this particular context was because of the kinds of difficulties historically encountered by some of the students on the programme which principally centred around completing the dissertation. We found that students had varying expectations of the supervisory role, some thinking it to be more about teaching and instructing than guiding and supporting. This, coupled with students’ self-reported difficulties in communicating in English, both verbally and in writing, and the problems involved in engaging in primary research, often for the first time, made this area a complex and difficult one for both student and academic. Strauss (2011) has made the point that despite an increasing recognition that (dissertation) supervision would be enhanced were it to more of a shared responsibility, this ‘sharing’ does not routinely occur.

We thought very carefully about the facilitation role, and this led us to conclude that Revans’ original conception of a ‘light touch’ approach was appropriate so that students could see that we were not dissertation supervisors by another name. Moreover, as recent changes had occurred leading to a shorter degree programme (reduced from 18 to 12 months) we wanted to offer opportunities for a more reflective space, albeit on a voluntary basis, so that a greater amount of time could be given to developing collaborative working, reflection and action on the students’ chosen area of concern.

We started by emphasising, as Revans did, the difference between a ‘problem’ and a ‘puzzle’, the latter being something to which an answer could easily be found, the former something to which answers are not definitive, or readily to be found. All the participants confirmed that producing the dissertation was the big central issue they wanted to tackle.

We emphasised at the outset that the ‘curriculum’ in action learning sets is dictated by the students themselves and that the work of the set is not subject to any kind of formal

assessment. We encouraged regular re-visiting of ground-rules set by the participants themselves.

We employed a wide range of creative approaches in our practice of action learning including storytelling, metaphoric thinking, rich pictures, six thinking hats, Ketso and variants on brainstorming to help the students to deal for themselves with various aspects of the problem (Morgan & Dennehy, 1997; Tanner, 1992; Cortazzi & Roote, 1975 de Bono, 1995; Tippett, 2010; Osborn, 1963). Storytelling approaches, for example, allowed the students to share examples of culturally and educationally diverse experiences, which might explain, at least in some cases, a certain reticence in asking questions. As postgraduates many students also had work experiences to draw upon as well. To encourage productive storytelling we adopted a framework proposed by Morgan and Dennehy (1997) which included setting, build up, crisis, learning from the experience and new awareness as a consequence (1997, 498).

Action learning privileges the asking of ‘insightful questions’ which has proved to be a novel approach for some students. One student spoke about her experience, and her developing interest in the questioning approach:

At home I was made to stand up in front of the whole class by the teacher and tell everyone my mistakes in my work. In China we do not disagree with the teacher... At home we don't question so much. I like to ask questions and so it's been good to adapt to a changed style. It was difficult to adapt at first but I found the change a good one because I like to ask questions. In China my experience is we don't question the teacher so much. We are having more group working in China now. But we don't have so many arguments and discussions, and this is something I like more now.

The idea of brainwriting and brainstorming was introduced into set work early on. In the case of brainstorming, we followed Osborn's (1963) ‘classic’ four rules, believing that early a criticism of ideas, especially in front of peers, can adversely affect confidence. The rules we follow are (1) deferment of judgment, (2) quantity (of ideas) breeds quality, (3) combination of ideas and building on ideas is encouraged and, (4) to encourage the generation of ‘wild’ ideas. Byron (2012) has pointed to the mis-use of brainstorming in many contexts and its consequent limited success in terms of productivity. To counter this, Byron suggests a number of improvements, including brainwriting which involves writing ideas down on an individual basis whilst participating in a group brainstorming session, and the involvement of an experienced facilitator (Byron, 2012, 209 -211)

The approach we took was that each student would present a problem or some aspect of it and each student in the set would be asked to write down a question on a ‘post-it’, so that the student presenting their work or idea could go away with a set of questions to reflect upon later. Questions generated this way are often deceptively simple in appearance but can give students pause for thought in relation to their chosen research project and the understanding and meaning they attach to their use of particular terms. Some examples from one of the sets included the following:

Why have you chosen this topic? Is the topic going to sustain your interest for months? Will this be of real interest to a future employer? What do you mean by ‘organisational effectiveness’? How will you gain access to collect data? What kind of data do you want to collect? How do you define ‘performance’ in the workplace? What is your reason for choosing this subject? What do you want to find out? What's stopping you from progressing (on this issue)?

This approach proved particularly helpful in the early stages of trying to generate ideas for the dissertation proposal, as one student commented:

Through the action learning set questions came up about my area of interest that on my own I would never have thought of, which made me understand my topic more, and also the fact that I am working with my mates makes me 'sit up' and keep pace.

Students also agreed to share particular pieces of work (for example an early draft of a literature review) which could then be critiqued by other members of the set. The students themselves encouraged a sharing of useful resources (such as journal articles and other relevant texts). They might elect to share examples of very specific and particular problems they were encountering (for example, in managing their time, or even managing their stress levels in relation to the project). With the advances in cloud computing, one group used 'drop-box' as a way of sharing such content and information; this was soon extended to other sets indicating that students were taking ownership of the action learning sets, and even sharing ideas across sets.

We also introduced students to the idea of doing a personal reflective log – something which would not be marked, but was wholly for their own use. The format of this included familiar action learning questions such as: *what did you learn about your issue from attending today's action learning set meeting? what did you learn about yourself? What strengths and areas for development have you identified? What have you shared? How have you contributed to other members' progress in today's action learning set?* We also invited participants to take particular actions (of their own devising) before the next meeting (Pedler, 1996). The students reported that these logs were used as a “dissertation development tracker”.

Whilst some creative approaches were approached with caution by some students (some of whom expressed a marked preference for being 'taught' over group-based approaches even though they had volunteered) over the duration of the seven months this lessened as the students became more familiar with the action learning approach and the different creative techniques we employed. The creative exercises allowed even the most reticent to contribute and to come up with new ideas and ways of working. It must be said that our previous experience teaching the students on other parts of the course is likely to have helped the students adapt to this different way of working.

Metaphoric thinking, which as the name suggests uses a metaphor to explore a problem, and in doing so generate new ideas by connecting the current problem to something that occurs in a totally unrelated system was also applied as part of the action learning approach (Morgan, 1991; Tanner 1992). In practice it often begins with the challenge of viewing a problem through drawing, for example a vehicle or an animal. Set members went on to draw a range of things; a number drew pictures which showed them taking a journey and not knowing the way, or showed them being faced with multiple (and conflicting) paths or signposts, or driving a car that seemed to have run out of fuel! This brought humour to the action learning space, and a shared understanding that students were not alone in their confused state regarding the dissertation. It also enabled us to discuss some of the anxieties involved in learning new things, such as, in this case, research skills. An allied technique, illuminative incident analysis has been closely linked with action learning (Cortazzi and Roote, 1975).

Having built up a set of ideas, and given the participants time to consider and reflect upon these, KETSO (Tippett, 2010) was employed. This method originated in South Africa and focuses around building participative creativity in an attempt to collectively highlight key

challenges and build feasible solutions. This highly participative technique seemed to work well with all students, especially those who sometimes found voicing their opinions in the set difficult for a range of reasons, including a lack of confidence in expressing themselves in English. In order to be most effective, it is essential that this method, which involves individual and collective working and the building up ideas and clustering them, mirrors, in part, the mind mapping idea, is run by an experienced facilitator; it is a highly active and participative method that allows everyone in a diverse group to contribute and shares their ideas and opinions.

Reflecting on the role of the facilitators

Action learning facilitation is a demanding task, and because Revans did not define the role there is considerable freedom in how the role is interpreted in practice (Pedler & Abbott, 2008). Revans considered that the main role of facilitators was to 'speed the integration of the set' and then make themselves dispensable as soon as practically possible (1998, 12). In higher education it is unlikely but not improbable that action learning would work without facilitation and taught inputs. In an empirical review of action learning practice, Pedler, Burgoyne and Brook (2005) found that chief among their survey findings was the use of permanent facilitators or action learning coaches, and that this practice was as much present in the use of action learning as HRD practice as in its wholly expected use in higher education. Having said this, Bourner (2011) has shown that self managed action learning can work effectively provided participants are given the tools to manage the process.

In our view in order for our approach to action learning to work most effectively, the creative tools and activities we have drawn upon need to be used to support the students in making their own decisions and taking their own agreed actions. Ideally the process should be student- owned, otherwise it can easily turn into just another series of seminars or workshops. We keep the problems students are working on central to the process, and we continually emphasise that action is the servant of learning by encouraging students to record their learning about themselves and about their problem at the end of each meeting (Pedler, 1996).

Some students attend thinking that the experience will be a transfer of knowledge from facilitator to participant; our experience suggests that this is one of the most difficult aspects of facilitating action learning in this setting. To counter this we laid some careful groundwork explaining action learning in some detail initially, revisiting ground rules at the start of every set meeting and encouraging participation at every opportunity. This type of learning is often a very new experience for students, especially when they face searching questions, those which Revans termed 'insightful questions', which may be, at the very least uncomfortable and even anxiety generating (1998, 13). The reality is that the facilitator must allow the participants to find the answer or path for themselves and students must take responsibility for their own learning.

Conclusions

It is sometimes difficult for academics, used to being in a position of authority, to resile from that position. Action learning demands a different approach. Facilitators must allow action learning sets to work independently, issue their own challenges and find their own solutions to key problems. Yet independent and self-directed learning is very much part of the postgraduate student learning experience. It is thus sometimes quite difficult for the facilitator to work out just how much they should intervene or even participate in set meetings. We have

tried to offer a balanced approach – including creative thinking tools so that students can develop their skills and their capacities in terms of analysing problems, generating ideas and questioning and challenging themselves and each other. We have also tried to follow many of the basic tenets of action learning as derived from Revans' writings. In particular, a focus on action and reflection, and on the personal development of the student, and an emphasis upon working with problems identified by participants themselves together with the generation of fresh questions.

Whilst the sets were diverse in nationality, prior educational and work experience, skill set and language, trust and session effectiveness grew steadily through the careful facilitation of the action learning groups. Although some students involved were at first sceptical of some of the creative centred exercises, with time and experience resistance declined and readiness to commit and contribute increased. Many of the students involved suggested to us that the sets were the "driving force" behind the successful completion of the dissertation; on average achieving a mark 13% above their course mean. "The opportunity to generate and discuss ideas", "greater confidence in critical and reflective writing", "ability to conduct primary research", "understanding of the necessary structure of the dissertation, "opportunity to discuss, question and reflect upon each other's work", are comments from students that show the impact that the creative actions learning sets had in meeting the students' needs.

In addition, students also report other positive results. "A deeper understanding and appreciation of those of other nationalities", "helped me build confidence in myself, in my ability to communicate in English, and comfort in sharing my thoughts and opinions with others", in fact the majority suggested that they would have liked "the action learning sets to be a part of the MSc programme", suggesting that they would have "been of academic and personal benefit from the very beginning, the UK culture, and education system is very difficult, and many find the transition very challenging".

In summary, we believe action learning, with a creative twist, does have a place as one tool in the development of students, especially those engaged in undertaking major projects, such as research dissertations. It also reclaims action learning as an approach in the development of those who are or soon will be working in the business environment. Revans intended it to be used to develop managers and help to solve business and managerial problems, and so it seems appropriate that business schools make proper use of the approach to develop business and management students.

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Table 1: Action Learning Definitions

Definition	Practitioner/Theorist
Action learning is a means of development, intellectual, emotional or physical, that requires its subjects, through responsible involvement in some real, complex and stressful problem, to achieve intended change (1982: 626-7).	R W Revans
Action learning is a method for individual and organisational development. Working in small groups, people tackle important organisational issues or problems and learn from their attempts to change things (1996:13)	M Pedler
Critical action learning (consists of) learning guided by critical social theory and reflection upon experiences derived from its practical application. Learners...can be facilitated by the concerns of other groups, in addition to individual tutors, when identifying and addressing problems. (1997:172)	H Willmott
An approach to working with and developing people that uses work on an actual project or problem as the way to learn. Participants work in small groups to take action to solve their problem and learn how to learn from that action. Often a learning coach works with the group in order to help the members learn how to balance their work with the learning from that work (2007:6)	J O'Neil and V Marsick

Table 1: Definitions using a framework adapted from O'Neil and Marsick (2007, 7)