

Action Learning in Management Education: A State of the Field Review in Higher Education.

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a ‘state of the field’ review of the practice of action learning in Higher Education. It explores the opportunities and challenges faced by academics when introducing and maintaining action learning approaches in the university. Based on interviews with 18 academics from around the world, the findings indicate new and distinct ways of working with action learning and underscore the portability and malleability of the practice. The study indicates a mixed picture for the utilisation and spread of action learning: whilst it is flourishing in some universities, especially in post-graduate and post-experience work, and more specifically in management education, in other places there has been a cessation or displacement of previous activity. We consider some explanations for the current situation, and discuss how the challenges and opportunities inherent in the practice of action learning in HE might be better understood and managed.

Key Words: action learning; inquiry-based approaches; higher education; management education; challenges; institutional receptivity.

Introduction

This study examines the opportunities and challenges faced by academics using action learning in Higher Education. It is timely amid debates about the future direction of the UK’s Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) the climate in which HE now operates and the space open to university teachers for pedagogic innovation (Gunn, 2018).

Why does action learning matter in the HE context? Governments in the UK and elsewhere have called upon universities to develop management and leadership skill sets and especially to educate *for* practice, not just *about* practice. The need for such an approach remains pressing. McMillan and Overall (2016) have pointed out the arguments that suggest business schools remain insufficiently focused on practical, actionable knowledge and problem-solving. Engagement with the here-and-now problems of management and leadership require a re-focusing on alternative and innovative pedagogies, but this in itself presents challenges especially in the present climate. This paper offers a contribution to debates on inquiry based learning and management education and provides a baseline for further research on action based inquiry methods.

After briefly outlining the research context, this paper then reviews the extant literature to outline the challenges met in using action learning in HE. Following a note on the methodology, the main part of the paper considers the findings from the interviews and concludes with observations about the idiosyncrasies of action learning practices, the existence of an action learning ‘tribe’ and the strategies most likely to advance inquiry based learning in the often problematic context of HE today.

Study Context

Action learning is an approach to personal and organisational development in which participants work in sets to tackle important organisational problems and learn from their attempts to make changes in their practice (Pedler, 2008). Any account of action learning in HE begins with its adversarial origins. As developed by Revans (1978; 1980; 1982) as an approach to management education, action learning appears in direct opposition to the didactic traditions of the university. Revans disputed the value of case-based teaching methods imported from the USA and argued that management education should operate on

action learning lines to help managers learn how to tackle their own problems. It is interesting to note that such criticisms of the case based method persist. Dutta (2018) for example points to the key criticism that that classroom discussions cannot compensate for ‘real world’ experiential learning and that management cases may ‘convey a distorted sense of reality which may jeopardise learning and problem-solving abilities’ (2018, 493).

In 2005 research was conducted on the "extent, growth and variety of UK action learning" with an aim of establishing a benchmark for future research (Pedler, Burgoyne & Brook 2005, 50). A key strand of that research, funded by the Foundation for Management Education (FME), examined practice in UK Higher Education where pockets of committed practitioners were found amidst an apparently limited use of action learning. The FME was concerned with how business schools could best prepare and educate their students for the complex here-and-now challenges of business, and especially for management and leadership *practice*. Could action learning make a particular contribution in this respect? The question they posed then is just as applicable now. Aside from that study, research on action learning in HE has been dominated by notable single cases (for example Lizzio & Wilson, 2004; Yeadon-Lee & Worsdale, 2012) with wider studies drawing upon the experiences of academics in different institutions much less common and those that exist dated (Frank, 1996; Bourner & Frost, 1996). This paper aims to make a contribution in this respect. The HE context is now a significant one for action learning; an analysis of 127 papers found this to be the second most popular locus for action learning after the business sector (Park et al, 2013).

Research Questions

We pose the following research questions.

RQ1: *What are the challenges and opportunities faced by academics when introducing and maintaining action learning approaches in the university?*

RQ2: *How might these challenges and opportunities be best understood and managed?*

Challenges and Opportunities of Action Learning in Higher Education

From its initial introduction, Revans' philosophy which challenges the expert and expository assumptions of traditional pedagogy, has continued to produce resistance to the adoption of action learning in HE, yet it offers learning and research opportunities not afforded by more didactic approaches. A review of a growing literature reveals some of these challenges:

Definitional. Revans never provided a tight definition, referring variously to action learning as a set of values, as constituting "ancient wisdom" and as taking various forms (Revans, 2011). It has been argued that action learning is not one practice but many, and the term has been applied to a variety of approaches 'betraying either distinctive philosophical traditions' (Brook, Pedler & Burgoyne, 2012; Revans 1998; Pedler 1996) or sometimes 'the slippery use of the concept to describe almost any form of group activity' (Trehan & Pedler 2009, 35). Cho & Bong note Boshyk's (2016) suggestion of at least 27 varieties worldwide, commenting that researchers and practitioners continue to find difficulties in distinguishing action learning from non-action learning programmes (2017, 161).

Alongside the variety of practices there remains considerable agreement on core principles. Willis (2004) proposes 23 indicators of a 'Revans' Gold Standard', whilst Pedler et al (2005, 58) list 8 'Revans' classical principles' (RCP) as agreed by at least 75% of their respondents (2005, 54). These include the requirements for: action as the source of learning; learning from reflection upon action and addressing problems which resist simple solution. The combination of agreed principles with a variety of practices is confusing, especially for new

practitioners. The problem is exacerbated in HE because teaching and learning methods are under constant review (Trehan & Rigg, 2015).

Critical Action Learning (CAL). To these definitional conundrums has been added a critical alternative to 'conventional' action learning (McLaughlin & Thorpe 1993; Willmott 1994). CAL can be seen as part of a turn to critical management education which challenges an unquestioning and "managerialist" slant (Trehan & Pedler, 2009; Trehan & Rigg, 2015). CAL aims to move action learning from being seen simply as a means to help resolve organisational problems to a way of understanding the task as enmeshed in emotional and power dynamics which shape the possibilities for learning (Vince 1996; 2004; 2008). Whilst in principle the set promotes equality and models "heterarchy and democratisation" (Willis 2004, 18) CAL is said to surface 'power' problems conventional action learning fails to address.

Atheoretical? Revans' emphasis on the primacy of questioning over the value of existing knowledge (2011, 5-8), has led to action learning being criticised for being atheoretical. The development of CAL provides an opportunity for theorising by drawing upon critical social theories including Marxism, post-structuralism, feminism and post-colonialism. CAL utilises public reflection (Raelin, 2001) and a critically reflective approach (Reynolds 1998, 90) which imposes demands on facilitators to deal openly with emotions, anxieties, beliefs and political questions, which cause 'ripples through those relationships, affecting power, how people see themselves and how they relate to each other' (Warwick et al 2018, 107).

Risk. Revans' "Risk Imperative" which holds that actions on difficult problems "must carry significant risk of penalty for failure" (2011, 6) poses a significant challenge for HE

practitioners of action learning. Any action may produce unintended consequences and ‘people should not enter into (action learning) lightly...(and) ... can experience it as powerful, even frightening’ (Marsick & O’Neil 1999 in Warwick et al 2018, 107). CAL may amplify risks by adding critical analysis of emotional and power dynamics. However, risk can enable significant learning (Revans 2011, 6-7) bridging the gap between classroom and ‘real world’ pressures so that ‘confusion, anger, fear and excitement were often apparent, openly discussed and a core part of the learning about managing and organizing’ (Pedler & Trehan 2009, 43).

Experiential Learning. Attitudes to action learning also form part of wider debates about experiential learning in management education (Kayes, 2002; Tosey & Marshall 2017). Inquiry-driven approaches are recognised as appropriate to addressing difficult and wicked problems. However, experiential learning has also been criticised for decontextualizing the learning process and for emphasising individual experience ‘at the expense of psychodynamic, social, and institutional aspects of learning’ (Kayes, 2002, 141). In accounting for the decline in postgraduate programmes based on experiential learning, Tosey & Marshall suggest that contributing factors include their being seen as ‘radical and contentious’ and as consisting of closed cohorts with ‘select staff (that) could appear elitist’ (2017, 397). In the present climate, experiential learning may be seen as ‘too demanding, too costly, too risky, too different and...not willing to fit in’ (Tosey & Marshall 2017, 377).

Cultural challenges. Proponents of action learning also encounter cultural challenges, particularly in contexts where asymmetric power relations have become embodied within the habitus of participants. In strongly teacher-led classrooms, where teachers are accorded the

equivalence of parents, the delegation of power to set participants is especially difficult to achieve (Mughal et al 2018, 78).

As Research. ‘Action learning research’ (Coghlan & Coughlan 2010) is a significant development since earlier research and of particular relevance to HE. Action learning sets can generate ‘actionable knowledge’ (Argyris 1996), and be of value to third parties by disseminating data and knowledge co-created by the members. As with other ‘action modalities’ (Raelin 2009), action learning can contribute to methodologies and ‘situated knowledges’ (Harraway 1988) in hard-to-research situations such as working with rape victims with learning difficulties (Olsen & Carter 2016). It can be used to test conceptual ideas such as ‘unlearning; (Brook et al 2016) and can be blended or used in concert with other research approaches to produce innovations in practice and knowledge sharing (Wood et al 2017).

Assessment. Action learning, social learning and experiential learning can all create difficulties for assessment, a central concern in HE institutions (Coghlan & Pedler, 2006; Mendonça et al, 2015). Whilst well-integrated methods of self- and peer assessment can stimulate ‘deep thinking and learning, critical reflection and structuring of the learning process’ (Segers & Dochy (2001, 340), assessments based on the ‘personal learning journey’ are often not adequate: ‘(T)here must be a social effect and thus a social aspect to any account of action learning’ (Coghlan & Pedler 2006, 136). Accounts of the social or organisational effects also create opportunities to produce evidence of impact, an important factor in HE research funding (see for example the following which reports on leadership development through action learning:

<https://impact.ref.ac.uk/casestudies/CaseStudy.aspx?Id=15163>).

Methodology

The 18 respondents in the present study were engaged at depth via conversations guided by focusing questions sent in advance. We determined that a more qualitative and interpretive approach to exploring academics' practices of action learning would better illuminate how they made sense of their various experiences. As Sandberg (2005) has observed, the primary research objective within interpretive research tradition is to explore individuals' and groups' lived experiences; we were therefore concerned to offer as accurate an accounting of the meanings interviewees ascribed to interviewees' experiences and perceptions as possible.

Interviewees came from the USA, Hungary, Denmark, Ireland, South Korea, Australia and China as well as in the UK. They were purposively selected because of their high levels of engagement with experiential and action learning practices; many were research active and extensively published. Most held tenured positions, a majority at professorial level. The interviews, which took place in 2018, were undertaken with participants' permission in line with the university's ethical guidelines (Willig, 2008), were conducted by telephone or internet and lasted for up to 60 minutes. They were recorded and transcribed largely verbatim (minus pauses and verbal inflections). Transcripts were then sent back to respondents to check for accuracy and to allow for further comment or amendment (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

[Insert Table 1 Sample Profile HERE]

The qualitative approach and small sample size necessarily limits the potential for generalisation but provides rich insights into the perceptions and practices of individual academics. We applied Braun & Clarke's ideas of thematic analysis and thematic mapping (2006, 90). We read and re-read the transcripts and noted initial ideas using the interview

questions as headings: receptivity, facilitation, variety of practice, etc. A final thematic map was produced on the basis of the four themes under which the findings were grouped. We used the map as a way of exploring relationships and connections between the codes and the themes and subthemes (Braun & Clarke, 2013, 232). Alphanumeric identifiers were applied to our interviewees (ranging from 010 to 029).

[Insert Table 2 Key Interview Questions & Sources in the Literature HERE]

Findings

Respondents' experiences on the challenges and opportunities of using action learning approach in HE are discussed below grouped under four themes.

[Insert Fig 1 Data Analysis HERE]

Institutional Receptiveness

Respondents reported widely differing experiences in their institutions, ranging from wholehearted support to deep-rooted resistance, and sometimes both in different places. Some informants argued that action learning was now well accepted: "(it) has been practised inside most universities for all sorts of activities and no-one raises an eyebrow anymore" (013). Another noted:

"we've got the external validation person saying that (action learning) is the best element in the programme" (017), adding: "My head of school is very receptive (and)...a head of department became involved...and went on to become a facilitator, so she's seen it in action, (it has) made them quite receptive to it" (017).

Whilst some of our respondents were in supportive programme teams, departments or even universities, half had experienced pressures stemming from the clash of values between action learning and their institutions. Several had experienced resistance especially in areas associated with expository teaching. One said: "here, we have very traditional teachers... so the teacher speaks the truth and the student listens." (026).

Another recalled that the "feedback I got (about using action learning and action research) was disappointing, because the key decision makers had varying degrees of understanding about the processes of learning and couldn't see what we were doing" (028). Another reported: "Re-validation is always a struggle unless you can do the politics of having people who are inside the system and who are supportive of it and get it" (027). Resistance may stem from views of what constitutes learning or research:

"The key people.... are all dyed-in-the-wool positivist researchers reflect(ing) both the culture of a health faculty but also a university that regards itself to be ancient" (028). This resistance may be overcome through persistence: "On one level I think they have come to see the potential ... [and following a research bid] ... " I had interest from senior colleagues, and some of them very senior, (who) were really excited at what I was suggesting, which was using the action learning process" (028).

It is common to find action learning only in particular disciplines or departments. Whilst mainly found on post experience and post-graduate programmes, there were a few examples of undergraduate use. In the UK, an employers' training levy has created a market for degree apprenticeships which may use action learning to support work-based learning projects. Use

of action learning is not usually widespread in institutions and more likely to be found in pockets or "oases". One respondent said: "Basically action learning is present in this kind of HR, HRD and OD field, and I know some other fields in different universities like environmental sciences, teacher education, social sciences, where they use it" (017). Other areas cited as using action learning included health and social care, social policy, educational leadership, physical therapy, human development, engineering management, medical education, leadership and management, SME and entrepreneur programmes and business schools.

Where suspicion of action learning persists, this may result from unfamiliarity. One person describing the overall culture of their university as supportive, but said: " it is treated by people who are not involved ... as something that's a bit mysterious" (020). This same person noted that the methodology of action learning, and especially the closed and confidential environment of the set, led to those not involved feeling excluded. Another noted: "I don't think it always did itself any favours politically in universities because of the perceived arrogance, a kind of superiority about the pedagogy" (027).

Those of our respondents who experienced resistance or hostility had resorted to different kinds of survival strategy, including operating under cover. A covert or even subversive thread is found in a number of responses. One practitioner always used action learning but did not name it as such either to students or the university:

"It's embedded in my course design but I rarely call it action learning, and why is that? I think it's kind of like hiding the pill in the food, because I feel it's such a powerful tool but I'm not sure they (the institution) embrace the agenda" (024).

Another said that often:

"I don't tell them I'm doing action learning but what I'm saying is let's generate the issues, let's look at the questions and see how we think about them, and then we can generate the actions from that to move forward" (013).

Another operated in full sight but more or less independently:

"I'd been in universities for long enough to know that would crush my initiative ... (so I set up) an independent board (where) we'd have full control of the finances, I would raise the money for the institute as we called it, and so we controlled that" (029).

A question arising in these cases of personal survival is whether the practice of action learning can survive within the institution without the practitioner. There must be considerable doubts about this given these idiosyncratic ways of working. The respondent quoted immediately above has recently retired and is not being replaced, so that the independent programme looks likely to close.

A further strategy amongst some people who were independent practitioners as well as academics, was migration to places where action learning is welcomed or accepted. Three respondents had moved between universities to take advantage of currently favourable conditions. One described themselves as a member of a "tribe" committed to the practice of action learning in a new university which was "developing a centre of excellence...a home for that kind of pedagogic offer, and this is going to be my next tribal home" (027). The idea of "academic tribes" (Becher & Trowler, 2001) carries the notion that the knowledge structure of a discipline conditions the behaviour and values of its teachers. Thus for example, Revans' original discipline of physics is characterised as "hard, pure, convergent and urban" and we have argued that he initially interpreted action learning from an applied

science or operational research orientation. Over time his position shifted to one in which individual learning and personal development become central to his conception of action learning (Pedler et al 2005, 63).

Finally, there is a more mundane explanation for institutional resistance, which is much more apparent now than when earlier research was conducted. Action learning and other experiential approaches are often seen as resource intensive methodologies at a time when there is a trend in parts of HE towards larger programmes and digital web-based programmes.

Philosophical Differences

Wider approval for action learning in HE is not helped by the perception that it is atheoretical, a charge originating in Revans' championing of questioning over inputs of knowledge in the context of intractable problems (2011: 4-8). Most of the academics in our sample expressed preferences for non-didactic and learner-centred approaches where students determine the curricula in whole or in part. This philosophy is often at odds with that of the wider academy:

"We've had loads of scepticism from colleagues what happens now is that if people aren't into (action learning) they're not given the supervisions...but there's plenty of people who want to do it now. We're not going to make people do it if it doesn't align with their way of seeing the world" (018).

Prior working experience may increase a person's willingness to adopt the approach: "there's very few straight in (to teaching) from their own studies ... you tend to find that the people involved are those with substantial private sector experience" (018). McMillan and Overall

(2016) have highlighted the issue of deans hiring faculty with limited professional experience unable, arguably, to help students address the problems they will encounter in their managerial careers. Faculty in this position are much less likely to adopt action based inquiry approaches.

Participants may share these philosophical differences, including those for whom it conflicts with their culturally inherited attitudes to learning (Mughal et al 2018). Where action learning is seen to fail it may be attributed to resistant students who "haven't bought into the methodology" (017) or who "all seemed to see the world in the same way, and the actual learning just didn't seem to work really, other than a support network to confirm how dreadful the world was to them" (020). This sense of alienation amongst participants was noted by another interviewee: "I don't have a sense of it failing but more that it's not really picked up (because of) a kind of perplexity around the real world, getting too immersed in it, I don't quite know why that is" (025).

Methodological Variety

This ideographic study uncovers almost as many varieties as there are practitioners, prompting the thought that each action learning practice is unique, reflecting the particular person, their personalities, backgrounds, previous disciplines and interests. At the same time however these interviews also reveal an equally striking consistency with the fundamentals, or what we earlier called the "ethos": rather than the method of action learning (2005, 57).

Variations in practices included "reflective action learning and coaching" (0.10), and a move within this university toward more critical form of reflection, which contrasts with another who adopts a deliberately 'minimalist' approach 'with no intention to develop (action learning) beyond what it is' (011). Other respondents noted that action learning blends well

with, and often exists alongside, other ideas and technologies including action research (019, 013), soft systems methodologies and appreciative inquiry (013). One said that they combined elements of the business driven and critical action learning varieties: 'I think a blend of the two is quite powerful' (015). Another noted that whatever the other methods used, action learning always features as the "delivery mechanism" (013). One person uses ideas from mindfulness to help participants focus their attentions and energies (017). Action learning also lends itself easily to virtualisation both on synchronous, speech and group based platforms (010, 027) or on asynchronous, written forums or one-to-one's (024). Two respondents (interviewed together) had developed a "network action learning approach" for inter-organisational settings, which often feature in Revans' original work (021).

A question which often preoccupied practitioners' minds was: when is it not action learning? (Revans 2011, 77-93). One respondent felt uncomfortable about practices in which facilitators keep control via techniques such as writing questions on post-it notes, or problem holders being temporarily excluded from the set whilst other members freely "gossiped" about them and their challenge, although they then observed that "this action learning set still meets, so whilst they might not be doing action learning the way I would like it done, it has proved helpful" (011).

The malleability and polymorphic nature of action learning is the counterpoint to its definitional challenges. In eschewing precise definition in favour of principles and values, Revans has frustrated but yet endowed his idea with possibilities for reinvention and renewal. As both method and ethos (Pedler et al 2005, 62) action learning can be adapted to many educational situations. Taken in detail our interviews demonstrate how the tenets have been crafted to fit respondents' particular circumstances, and at the same time illustrate the extent

of a shared way of working that indicates a distinctive tribe. To illustrate this phenomena the example below features a practice honed by the respondent over many years. At first sight, it might not even be recognisable as action learning, but the author's narrative reveals a deep understanding of the ethos:

Case Example: Action learning as a personal and professional practice (024)

This person had developed their approach to "action e-learning" over 14 years as a practitioner. This form is an asynchronous version of virtual action learning (VAL) (Dickenson et al 2010). They wrote their own software programme, "a kind of go-to-meeting Webex" in which the participants, mainly on post-experience programmes, input their challenges or problems on-line using Blackboard. The practitioner takes an active role modelling questioning as a way of progressing issues via threaded discussions. They also intervene on a one-to-one basis via people's learning logs, or collectively via a blog. An intervention might take the form of a reflective question to a person about the effect of their input on the discussion, as, for example, when they feel the person is being too dominant or not listening. The practitioner also takes a lead in asking people to take action on their challenges: " I request that they take action, and usually they do. But I can't hold them to it...and I do actually become part of the set asking questions because I am modelling what they are to do."

This person describes how they began their practice by converting Marquardt's (1999) form of face-to-face action learning and how it has developed since reading Revans: "I think my approach ... has been better with the Revans model ... I would say that the role of the facilitator became less preeminent". During this interview, this person's views repeatedly resonated with Revans' philosophy and values. In an extended discussion about power and the facilitator role, an important aspect of action e-learning became clear:

"So the cultural and organisational differences are not only mitigated but they're almost invisible, and so it's fascinating what happens there. I've made the mistake of not realising that someone was a man when in fact I was thinking that the person was a woman based on the same data ... it's so weird. And I think honestly that's a good thing in a way because you get to know each other just for how you think, only how you think".

This age, gender and race-blind aspect of this particular practice supports the aim in critical action learning of being disruptive of social and cultural hierarchies, as in this reference to a female student located in a Middle Eastern country: "I got a note from a student who said she had never been able to ask questions like that before; the online the practice of action e-learning is disruptive and in a good way".

As this interview made plain, this person's practice reflects personal as well as professional values: "It is fun, and the highlight of my professional life." (024)

Facilitation

Without exception, respondents saw the facilitation role as necessary and important in the HE context. Most were aware of Revans' reservations (2011, 12) and his warnings about 'the hankering of the teacher to be the centre of attention' (010), but as one noted, a key responsibility of the HE facilitators of action learning is to 'ensure learning possibilities for everyone' (017). Several pointed out the importance of facilitating the core purpose of student autonomy: "It (action learning) needs the enquiry, it needs to be student-led"; facilitation should be "structured to begin with but becomes autonomous at the end" (010). One respondent spoke about "distributing the power" so that participants ultimately became 'owners of the brand' (029), and another said: 'I think groups can and do get to a point where

they don't need a facilitator...but they have to be quite savvy when it comes to issues of support, challenge and power' (020).

A consistent theme amongst respondents was the aim to build a collaborative focus in which participants developed their capacity to reflect upon action. How this was done varied widely on a structuring/directiveness scale, where the preference for less rather than more of these is closer to "Revans' gold standard" (Willis 2004). One spoke of 'modelling the behaviours that you're hoping other people will then adopt' (019), and another played an active part in managing learning processes asserting that the facilitator should be: 'confident about interpersonal issues – dealing with anger and people being upset...Some facilitators won't intervene at all and that can be a very uncomfortable approach. I think it is necessary to intervene, challenge, ask questions and so on' (021). At the less structured end a respondent said: 'basically...I'm closer to the end of being not too active, just part of the process, keeping the frame' (017). Others stressed their "caretaker" and "architect" roles in setting up the appropriate processes (021), and another argued that the facilitator must uphold certain "care ethics" by acting as a minder maintaining "a duty of care" towards participants by 'setting things up and watching out for the group' (011).

An important and particular aspect of learning in the HE context is that of relating theory to practice. One respondent suggested that the HE facilitator needs to be a 'judicial contributor of knowledge' (021). Another proposed that the role combines an academic knowledge of models and theories, an understanding of the organisational context, a know-how and experience from working with people in organisations, together with building relationships and helping people to move forward in relation to their own practice. (018). The need to be agile in these respects was a recurring theme. A respondent described this desirable flexibility

in some detail: 'dipping into relevant theory' one minute, 'just talking about the work' the next, then 'saying nothing and letting the set work things out for themselves" but then directly managing "raw emotion and conflict' (018).

Another critical aspect of action learning facilitation in HE is that it often comes coupled with an assessment role. For most of our respondents working with post-graduate or post-experience settings, what was assessed was the participants' learning from the problem they addressed, usually in the form of assignments. Although one respondent had used a before-and-after test to assess changes in problem solving abilities and flexibility of mind-set, most practitioners cited written self-reflections and learning journals as fitting best with their learner-centred philosophies. Several set out to encourage peer and self-assessment by using tools for critical reflection such as reflective logs. Whilst this form of assessment is known to stimulate deep thinking and critical reflection (Segers & Dochy, 2001), it can fall foul of what one respondent described as the "nightmare" of institutional politics. Where institutions are unconvinced of these approaches: 'what happens with self and peer assessment models is that they become quite bureaucratic...(with) .. a need for audit trails...(and) ... you end up having to fill in a lot of forms around the various elements of the programme...' (027).

Another noted an endemic conflict between learner-centred approaches and assessment:

" the difference between what we do in HE and what you might do outside is that there are also the examiners, so there is kind of a conflict, well I think there's a conflict there anyway if I'm quite honest" (010).

What emerges strongly from these interviews is the sense that whilst the action learning idea can be interpreted in many ways, it can be practiced by only by those who understand and

embrace its values as consistent with their own. It cannot easily be created by those who do not know, share or understand these values.

Conclusion

The findings from this study contribute to a better understanding of the challenges and opportunities of practising action learning in Higher Education in several respects. First, the idiosyncratic nature of action learning practices together with a shared recognition of membership of a distinctive tribe; and second, the significance of institutional receptiveness and the effects of the changes and pressures over the past two decades together with respondents' differing responses. These vary from deliberate isolation and entrepreneurial separation to careful assimilation and exploitation of the opportunities offered by the philosophy and methodologies of action learning.

A notable aspect of this study was that new and distinct ways of working with action learning were still emerging in our final interviews. Whilst in our earlier study we had attempted to classify distinct practices it is clear from this more qualitative approach that even Boshyk's (2016) 27 varieties is likely to be an underestimate. The conclusion that there are as many practices as there are practitioners reflects a more ideographic methodology, but these findings nevertheless provide empirical support for Pedler & Abbott's (2008) assertion that there is no "one right way" to undertake action learning. They also confirm an earlier observation about action learning as ethos as distinct from method (Pedler et al 2005). This ethos is illustrated here by the shared principles evident across the transcripts, as interviewees distinguished what they do from that which "is not action learning" (Revans 2011, 7-93).

This leads to the further conclusion that we can no more fully map the territory of action learning now than we could in 2005. Variety in practice comes about through different personal and professional points of origin - a practitioner with a mental health background is likely to operate differently from one who has been a human resources manager. Individual practices are developed on the basis of such experiences and a myriad of other personal characteristics, histories and preferences. Because action learning is only well defined at the level of values and principles, it allows for almost infinite methodological interpretation. What is striking, in all but one or two of our interviewees' accounts, is how well considered, consistent and authentic are their individual practices. Such thought-through practices are always personal and are never replicated precisely, yet they are also recognisable as belonging to a distinctive professional tribe.

Beliefs about the nature of knowledge affect notions of how best to approach the teaching and learning process, so that, for example, holding a "learner-centred" philosophy will lead a teacher to focus on encouraging students to construct their own knowledge and understandings (Lindblom-Ylänne et al 2006: 286). The impression gained from these interviewees is that facilitation practices are both very personal and honed over long practice, and yet are based on a commitment to shared values which in several respects run counter-cultural in this context. This is so both conceptually - questioning is held to be more important than that received knowledge; peer advice preferable to that of experts etc.- and in practice, as in the light touch facilitation of learning rather than exposition or instruction.

In seeking insights into the practices of action learning in HE, this study contributes to a wider literature on the use of inquiry-based approaches to teaching and learning in universities. Tosey & Marshall (2017) have suggested that pedagogical approaches

characterized by inquiry-based, action-oriented experiential learning have largely disappeared from universities together with an accompanying loss of facilitative skills. Tosey & Marshall argue that, over the last two decades, various factors have contributed to this demise, including economic pressures affecting student numbers and employer funding together with less secure employment for mid-career participants moves towards the "commodification" and "massification" of programmes. As far as staff are concerned, increased demands via work intensification, monitoring and pressure to write for 3* or 4 * journals unwelcoming of practice accounts, have reinforced traditional pedagogies and reduced space for more experimental programmes (2017, 5). In this context, experiential approaches focused on learning can be seen as too risky, too self-absorbed and promoting unnecessary critical self-reflection. Having said this, some of our respondents made the point that action learning can, and indeed has, made a contribution to impact cases which contribute to the UK's research excellence framework.

Is Tosey and Marshall's (2017) thesis too bleak as far as action learning is concerned? The evidence from this research is mixed: action learning is flourishing in some parts and in some universities, especially in post-graduate and post-experience work, but elsewhere it does seem to have disappeared or been displaced. One interviewee remarks that they now spend more time in front of a camera than working face-to-face, whilst other members of the action learning tribe have left their old institutions in search of more fertile grounds. On the other hand, respondents report new inquiry-driven activity starting up where there is receptivity and sponsorship from senior academics. Other opportunities have come via initiatives such as the UK Government's Higher and degree apprenticeships (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/higher-and-degree-apprenticeships>), which, especially, though not exclusively at Master's level, often employ action and peer-group

based learning. A conclusion is that action learning, being more malleable and portable than the intensive programmes described by Tosey & Marshall, provides some practitioners with ways of surviving and even thriving amidst current pressures.

Action learning offers some considerable advantages over more expository methods. It is notably engaging for participants, perhaps particularly in the context of part-time and post-experience programmes. It allows for the integration of teaching with application to current challenges or issues in the work place, especially where staff are able to be flexible and responsive in the inputs and resources they provide. Whilst we had expected at the outset that assessment might be a problem area for action learning in the academy, this does not seem to be so at least for these practitioners. Rather to the contrary, the inclusion of action learning in the pedagogical mix creates opportunities to gather evidence of social and organisational impact, which is an increasingly important consideration in the context of research funding.

By contrast with the more survivalist strategies exemplified here, other respondents illustrated how resistance can be overcome, and sceptics won over, via the demonstration of good results and the incitement of curiosity about what action learning can do. It seems probable that such strategies, where feasible, are more likely to bring about the wider use of action learning through the induction and development of other staff members. This prompts the thought that HE practitioners in difficult situations could apply their principles to themselves and establish learning sets with others similarly minded, to avoid isolation and increase the chances of a better reception.

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Table 1: Sample Profile

Gender	Location	Role	Faculty
Male	UK	Senior Lecturer	Business
Female	UK	Professor	Business
Male	UK	Senior Lecturer	Business
Male	UK	Professor	Business
Male	UK	Senior Lecturer	Business
Male	S Korea	Professor	Business
Female	UK	Senior lecturer	Business
Male	UK	Professor	Business
Female	USA	Professor	Business
Male	UK	Senior Lecturer	Business
Male	Ireland	Professor	Business
Male	Ireland	Professor	Business
Female	Ireland	Senior Lecturer	Business
Male	China / Canada	Adjunct Faculty	Business
Female	Denmark	Senior Lecturer	Business
Female	Hungary	Research Lead / Head of Department	Business
Male	UK	Director of Leadership Development	Leadership / Business
Male	Australia	Associate Professor	Business

Table 2: Some Key Interview Questions & Sources in the Literature

How receptive is the university to the practice of action learning?	Kayes, 2002; Pedler et al, 2005; Lindblom-Ylänne et al, 2006; Elliott & Reynolds, 2014. Tosey & Marshall, 2017.
What is your working definition of action learning? Do the Revans Classical Principles all still apply in your own practice? If they have changed, in what ways?	Marsick & O’Neil, 1999. Willis, 2004; Pedler et al, 2005; Brook, Pedler, Brook & Burgoyne, 2012; Cho & Bong, 2017.
How is action learning assessed? What difficulties (if any) have you encountered in assessment?	Coughlan & Pedler, 2006; Segers & Dochy, 2001. Mendonca et al, 2015.
Do you support or encourage the use of action learning as a research method? If so, how has it been practised?	Zuber-Skerritt, 2001. Coughlan & Coughlan, 2010. Rigg & Coughlan, 2016.
How do you view the facilitator role within the HE context?	Warwick et al, 2018; Sanyal, 2018. Vince, 2004; Rigg & Trehan, 2004. Milano et al, 2015. Tosey & Marshall, 2017.
Have you encountered, or developed, any new forms of action learning? If YES, what challenges (if any) have you met in using this form?	Boshyk, 2000; Reynolds & Vince, 2004. Pedler, et al, 2005; Vince, 2004; 2008; 2012; Rimanoczy & Brown, 2008.
Do you use CAL? How? What challenges have you encountered in its use? Benefits?	Vince, 1996; Rigg & Trehan, 2004; Vince, 2008; Trehan & Rigg, 2015; Warwick et al, 2018

Fig 1

Table 3 Data Analysis

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Oases of activity• Subversive practice• Suspicion of experiential methodologies• Resource intensity / cost	→ Institutional Receptivity
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Revans' classical principles• Embedding mindfulness• Blended business driven & critical action learning• On-line variants	→ Methodological Variety
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Structure• Directiveness• Duty of care• Proceeding through questioning	→ Facilitation differences
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Regarded as atheoretical• Learners determine the curriculum• Attitudes to learning• Pedagogical histories	→ Philosophical Differences

