

Self-managed action learning and assessors of newly qualified social workers in multiple organisations in England: a facilitator's perspective

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to explore a self-managed action learning (SMAL) initiative undertaken by social work assessors in England, which led to insights into the practice of SMAL.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper draws upon the experience of the authors in relation to an actual SMAL intervention in a social care context in England.

Findings – The paper suggests that, in contrast to extant literature, it is not the absence of an “expert” facilitator, which has proved to be most challenging but rather dealing with the practicalities of managing inter-organisational sets online. Specific individual and inter-organisational learning came about as a result of the SMAL initiative, including the implementation of inter-organisational networking to support isolated assessors.

Research limitations/implications – The ideas and perspectives discussed in this paper will be explored through further empirical research.

Practical implications – The paper illustrates how SMAL can be implemented and suggests how it can facilitate organisational and individual learning.

Social implications – The paper discusses an initiative with the aim of better supporting assessors of newly qualified social workers; a task of enormous importance to the future of social work practice in England.

Originality/value – The paper contributes to a limited literature on the practice of SMAL. The uniqueness comes from both the multi-organisational aspect of the programme, that it is self-managed and delivered virtually.

Keywords Action learning, Self-managed action learning, Organisational learning, Social workers

Paper type Viewpoint

Introduction

Action learning combines personal and organisational learning and features action for change; it may be seen as one of a number of context-sensitive and context-specific action-



inquiry technologies (Raelin, 2009; Pedler *et al.*, 2005; Pedler and Burgoyne, 2008). Participants set out to tackle important organisational problems, which may carry some kind of penalty for failure and learn from their attempts to change things in the here-and-now world of practice (Pedler, 2008; Brook and Pedler, 2020). The principles of action learning are generally agreed to include action as a basis for learning, working with problems (not puzzles, which may be said to have ready answers), aiming at personal and organisational development, working in a group or set of peers and leading with “fresh questions” (Revans, 2011; Pedler *et al.*, 2005). In the context of this article, our particular focus is on the use of self-managed action learning (SMAL) to assist social workers (based in a wide range of different types of organisations) to assess newly qualified social workers more effectively in their first year of employment.

In a content analysis of 127 papers, Park *et al.* (2013) seven purposes of action learning were discerned: leadership development, organisation development, professional development, personal development, learning methods, team development and community development. In the UK, the approach was found to be predominantly used in business and the health sector, although it has also found its place in higher education as part of some post-experience and post-graduate programmes, yet not without challenges (Brook and Pedler, 2020). In the USA, Marquardt (2011) has reported on a significant adoption and spread of action learning, especially though not exclusively as an approach to leadership development.

In their attempt to map the extent, growth and variety of action learning in the UK, Pedler *et al.* (2005) discussed six varieties of practice in use, which included critical action learning, auto action learning, action mentoring, online action learning, business-driven action learning and SMAL. Boshyk's (2016) suggestion of at least 27 varieties worldwide, an estimate Boshyk has since revised significantly upwards.

In a context in which, according to the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) in their latest employers' survey of learning and skills at work, 31% reported that their use of external suppliers and consultants has fallen, 31% reported that their learning and development (L&D) budget has decreased in the past 12 months and 32% reported that their L&D headcount has declined, it may be timely to consider the use of SMAL in the workplace (Crowley and Overton, 2021). Some caution is advised, however, as the CIPD's survey was conducted in the midst of the pandemic. When asked what their top “people” priorities were for their organisation in the next 12 months, the two top results were addressing the opportunities and challenges posed by Covid-19 and improving workforce flexibility and agility. This paper draws on an initiative, which is, in large measure, concerned with building capacity within the social care sector such that groups of social workers are equipped to manage action learning sets for themselves without the need for a permanent external facilitator (Abbott *et al.*, 2013).

The specific objective of this article is to explore the distinctive practice of SMAL through a consideration of some of the extant literature and by drawing on the authors' experience in relation to a current initiative in the UK social services. We consider some of the benefits and challenges of the practice. We also explore how individual and organisational learning gains arise from SMAL in this social care context. We begin by discussing the theoretical basis for action learning before discussing the particular practice of SMAL and how it may be differentiated from other forms of action learning.

Action learning theory

Action learning has sometimes been accused of being atheoretical, but it is rooted in a philosophy of action (praxis). Pedler and Burgoyne (2008) argue that Revans' praxeology rests on three philosophical stances: critical realism, pragmatism and the risk imperative. The critical realist approach is based on the idea that the world may be viewed as “an open system

with emergent properties” critical of strong positivism and extreme constructionism “on pragmatic grounds: neither works” (2008, p. 325).

Pragmatism is the basis for experiential learning, and Revans has acknowledged a debt to one of its best-known proponents – John Dewey. [Pedler and Burgoyne \(2008\)](#) suggest that action learning is steeped in the pragmatic tradition. As [Coghlan and Coughlan \(2010\)](#) point out, this philosophy argues that ideas should be judged on the basis of their utility and what results from these ideas – truth is, in effect, what works. Revans invites action learners to see their mission in terms of the following pragmatic questions: what are we really trying to do? What is stopping us from doing it? What can we do about it ([Revans, 2011](#), p. 29).

The risk imperative can be summed up as the need to work on challenges and problems that carry “significant risk of penalty for failure” (2011, p. 6). For Revans, action learning works best when the learners use it to deal with urgent problems (not puzzles) that matter for the individual and the organisation.

As [Coghlan and Coughlan \(2010\)](#) suggest, the methodology of action learning rests on the cyclical systems Revans termed alpha, beta and gamma. Alpha focuses on the identification and analysis of real organisational problems. Beta comprises a thorough examination of the problem through cycles of action and reflection. Gamma focuses attention upon the learning itself. Of gamma, [Coghlan and Coughlan \(2010\)](#) write that a way of thinking about it is in terms of “upstream learning” – inquiring into assumptions and intentions, for example and “downstream learning” – such as inquiring into behaviours and ways of acting in the world (2010, p. 198).

Distinguishing self-managed action learning

[Pedler et al.’s \(2005\)](#) research suggested that there had been a permanent shift in practice towards the use of what might be termed “expert” facilitators, and that the use of such a facilitator or coach had effectively become the norm. As [Brook et al. \(2012\)](#) noted, some forms of action learning, such as critical action learning, place considerable emphasis upon the need for and the role of the facilitator. SMAL requires set members to take responsibility for the management of the set for themselves, and this may include responsibility for identifying and working on key challenges. [O’Hara et al. \(2004\)](#) developed the practice based on some key core values, which included empowerment, learning and facilitative management. To this, they added some core beliefs, which included the idea that self-facilitated action learning sets have more often failed due to inadequate set (group) management than due to something lacking in their facilitation.

Following Revans’ expressed stance against externally imposed facilitation, [O’Hara et al.](#) in developing the idea and the practice of SMAL de-emphasised the role of the facilitator, they suggested “set manager” as a more appropriate and arguably less threatening term. The adoption of the term, they argued, would empower managers enabling them to bring their managerial skills to the task, and thus, it “de-mystified the process” (2004, p. 38). Unlike other forms, which can be seen to dilute Revans’ classical principles in some way, SMAL may be said to strengthen a key classical principle in challenging an often taken-for-granted aspect of current action learning practice (i.e. that of expert, arguably long-term facilitation).

Revans, the originator of action learning, saw no reason to have a permanent externally designated facilitative presence in sets as he made clear on a number of occasions. [Willis \(2004\)](#) in setting out a case for returning to what she termed the “Revans gold standard” makes important points about aims and practice. Moreover, securing wider organisational impact is of central importance. She writes:

One touchstone may be: Is this effort change-systemic at both individual and organizational levels? (2004, p 12).

In terms of practice, Willis makes a strong case for action learning to be largely self-organising:

This form of action learning, closest to what Revans envisioned in his theory and practice, means fundamentally that the action learning set will quickly learn that it has to bend all of its efforts toward becoming a democratizing, self-changing, organization-responsive force for the common good, or no work will get done (2004, p. 16).

In his *ABC of Action Learning*, Revans made the following point:

It is vital that action learning . . . escape yet another round of dependence upon ambiguous facilitators. It may well be that, in the near future, any help to get fresh sets underway can be adequately provided by managers now participating in action learning sets as substantive members (Revans, 2011, pp. 9–10).

Many thought leaders in the field have put distance between themselves and the idea of wholly self-managed sets. For example, with the development of practices such as critical action learning comes a requirement for facilitators with processual and subject area knowledge – something Rigg has termed “bilingualism” (Rigg, 2008; Vince, 2008). Vince (2008) argues that in critical action learning, action learning sets are “environments within which the emotions, politics and social power relations that are integral to organizing can be viewed, discussed and (potentially) transformed” (2008, p. 97). Such work requires skilled external facilitation. Even O’Hara *et al.* (2004) acknowledged that:

In practice it has proved desirable or necessary for sets to be facilitated by set advisers as the record of self-facilitated sets seems to have been, at best, mixed (2004, p. 32).

External expert facilitation may prove a costly business, especially for public sector organisations such as that which is the subject of this paper and the idea of developing one’s own cohort of managers with facilitative skills may be seen as both attractive and necessary. Indeed, Abbott *et al.* (2013) found that in their evaluation of the building of internal capacity for action learning facilitation (also set in a social work context), participants used the skills and techniques derived from the programme, and indeed integrated them into everyday practice beyond the work of the sets. Examples of this given by participants included changing the way they facilitated and chaired work meetings. Others described how the programme had enabled them to improve their work relationships, especially with those they supervised, through the application of more constructive feedback methods and improved reflective practice.

The key ingredient O’Hara *et al.* (2004) brought to the development of SMAL was a clearly articulated overview of the skills needed for effective set membership (such as questioning skills, the ability to give and receive feedback and the need to understand the process of learning). They also outlined a potential structure of a SMAL set meeting, offering a kind of template, which could be adopted by those seeking to implement the approach. They were also admirably open about the kinds of difficulties SMAL throws up, especially in relation to the question of achieving quality control.

Whereas O’Hara *et al.* (2004) offered self-management with a high degree of structure and proffered written guidance and workshops on requisite knowledge and skills, Levy and Knowles (2020) developed a looser form of self-management in an informal café setting:

The core idea of “drop-in action learning” idea is to bring groups of small/micro business leaders and owners together, on a monthly basis to act as free consultants, advisers and guides to each other (2020, p. 159).

This “drop in” self-managed form evolved over time with levels of facilitator engagement fluctuating: “sometimes it was higher in terms of expert knowledge input, in others we left a

group entirely to themselves and sat together at a different table” (2020, p. 161). Context matters, and this entrepreneurial “drop-in” form illustrates the protean, flexible nature of the action learning approach.

Another significant aspect of the practice discussed below is its virtual character. Long before the pandemic gave rise to an explosion in digital learning, the idea and practice of virtual action learning (VAL) had emerged, creating opportunities to bring together geographically dispersed individuals and organisations. [Pedler *et al.* \(2014\)](#) discuss some of the challenges of the practice but also make recommendations based on their experience. They assert that VAL facilitators should support the development of self-organising and self-facilitating skills, but that this requires a solid understanding of action learning processes.

Background to and overview of the self-managed action learning initiative

This paper documents our reflections on a SMAL project in social care, which began in January 2020 and is ongoing. The data for this paper were drawn from extended recorded semi-structured interviews between the two authors, which were subsequently transcribed and analysed thematically ([Braun and Clarke, 2006](#)). Topics discussed included previous experiences of SMAL, reasons why SMAL was thought appropriate for this initiative and the challenges and opportunities raised by using the approach. The first author has significant experience of implementing action learning over 20 years, especially in higher education and the National Health Service. The second author initiated and delivered the SMAL project, has over 12 years’ experience in building internal organisational capacity by training social workers and others to become SMAL facilitators, and created materials to support the SMAL project. The project involved a variety of different social care organisations – 108 in total – each nominating one member of staff. University ethical approval was sought and secured as was approval from the project sponsoring organisation, Skills for Care. Skills for Care is an organisation based in the UK, dedicated to ensuring that England’s adult and children’s social care workforce has the skilled workforce to deliver quality social care.

As [Manthorpe *et al.* \(2014\)](#) have pointed out, there has been a plethora of material published on the experiences of newly qualified social workers, but more limited material is available on the experiences and perspectives of those responsible for those assessing and supporting newly qualified social workers (NQSWs). This initiative was designed for assessors of NQSWs both in children’s and families’ and adult settings who are engaged in supporting these staff as they work through their mandatory Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) in statutory settings. The aim of the ASYE is to support and assess the newly qualified social workers as they start out on what the British Association of Social Workers termed “their complex and demanding profession” and to help maximise their effectiveness, provide them with ongoing good quality supervision and ultimately assess their competence to practice. The NQSWs may themselves also be engaging in action learning sets as part of their progression during this year ([Baines, 2020](#)). The assessors are primarily engaged in assessing newly qualified social workers’ practice and supporting them in building their portfolio of evidence to be submitted at the end of their year.

The aim of the SMAL initiative was to encourage members of sets to work on particular challenges raised by the assessor role, but also to share good practice. Examples of challenges raised included how to engage NQSWs and managers in the process, how to better support staff in undertaking critical reflection, how to deal with systemic issues in managing complex cases and how to assess effectively remotely in the particular context of the pandemic. In terms of the problem of managing an NQSW remotely, this was typically expressed in the form of a question:

I've never met this person I'm supposed to be assessing, they've never been inside the organisation, they got a computer delivered at home, they got a desk delivered at home, their induction was held online, this new person has never met the team, never met anybody in the organisation face-to-face, is expected to go out and work with vulnerable families, so how on Earth do I support somebody remotely who's newly qualified, how do I assess them when I've never met them, and I'm never likely to meet them in their ASYE year?

Another example of a challenge that an assessor faced, and that resonated with other assessors, lay in dealing with the case of a knowledgeable, competent NQSW who found themselves putting in place a package of services for one client, which went well, and yet in following a similar line with another client, the result was not only unsuccessful for the client but also led to an angry response on the part of a number of those involved. An analysis of the problem in a set meeting led to insights about the probable causes of the problem, which were agreed to be systemic in character and not to do with the capability NQSW. Actions were agreed, which could then be taken to support the NQSW.

The assessor could be a line manager, an individual who is taking on an assessor role as part of their development to become a team leader or a practice educator. It is these assessors who formed the membership of the 18 SMAL sets across England, which began in January 2020. Each set consisted of six assessors, and each of these was drawn from different social care organisations, including local authorities, fostering agencies and charities. They operated in different settings and communities, including inner cities and isolated rural communities. This particular construction of each set helped to better facilitate the sharing of learning across the different organisations.

An important feature of the initiative was the preparation that was put in place by the second author to support SMAL. This consisted of a two-day introduction to the process and the fundamental principles that underpin action learning. They are also introduced to some useful techniques such as focusing on high impact questions in which, briefly, a participant presents a problem and their colleagues ask questions, which the problem presenter then writes down. The presenter is then invited to pick out the three or four questions, which had the most impact on them and to say something about why it impacted them.

The overall approach is modelled for them, and they are given a pack of resources comprising a set of cards with different action learning processes and exemplar questions, and a handbook including set preparation sheets, observer and reflective logs. The set members are invited to take on different roles such as, for example, a time-keeping role or a process caretaker role; these are rotated round the group. The main roles are as follows: timekeeper – the person who monitors the time allocated for each step and the whole problem-cycle and supports the set to keep to time. Process caretaker – the person who helps the group remember what is to happen at each stage of the action learning method. Presenter – the person who is presenting the challenge to the group. Observer – the person allocated to observe and give feedback to the group what they observe in terms of group behaviour. Finally, the host – the person who confirms the next meeting date, arranges the venue or sets up the virtual meeting space. This last role proved to be the most challenging.

All members of the set present a challenge or problem for everyone to work on as the set progresses. The participants are taken through the importance of questioning and different approaches to questioning such as “thinking, feeling, willing” question types. As part of the preparation, a set member would be specifically tasked with observing, writing down and then feeding back the observations of the group. In the first workshop, clear roles were set out, which would be undertaken in rotation. On the second day, the set becomes self-managed, and the workshop facilitator is there to support them if they get stuck with any aspect of the process. Due to the geographic distribution of set members, the process is wholly virtual in character.

Aside from individual learning gains in relation to some of the issues alluded to above, there were also wider organisational gains that emerged. The sets not only encompassed those assessing NQSWs in adult care but also in children's care, which meant that organisations were taking part who were very varied in terms of their size, scope and status. Sets were, thus, composed of these varied organisations bringing very different challenges, which were in some cases to do with being "micro" in scope. For example, some organisations only had one or two assessors, and as such, these assessors could find themselves operating in isolation. This finding led to the development of a specific network for micro organisations.

A binding factor in terms of identity was a shared understanding of and commitment to professional social work values. Not all members of the sets were practising social workers; some had been social workers in the past but were now working in L&D roles within their organisations and acting as assessors in that capacity. There was no hint of professional tension in the set meetings if, for example, a member of a set did not have a current caseload. The "binding" in the sets was a shared commitment to supporting NQSWs and to shared professional values that are also enshrined in separate professional framework standards for adults and children's services. The adult services professional capability framework makes specific mention of the idea that the term "social worker" is "an international profession with a global definition that supports professional identity and practice with diverse communities in England" (Professional Capabilities Framework). As Moorhead *et al.* (2016) assert, a focus on a coherent values-driven identity remains valuable in the face of a challenging workplace.

Challenges and benefits of self-managed action learning

Interestingly, it is not what might be called the core work of the set – dealing with the challenges and problems presented by set members – that presented the biggest area of challenge in this SMAL initiative. One of the principal challenges reported by participating groups is managing the practicalities, especially in a virtual environment with multiple organisations in which the "who, where, when and how" aspects of set meetings were, in consequence, made more complex. Set members struggled with logistical issues, such as who was going to act as online host for a series of meetings, and the when and how often such meetings should take place. Participants were working with very different virtual platforms (e.g. at any one time, MS Teams, Zoom, Blue Jeans, Google Meet and Cisco), which meant that if they wanted to schedule meetings during the working day, they had to contact their IT department to enable access to other platforms. This potentially could have been resolved by using personal technology; however, all participating organisations forbade this for security reasons. This logistical issue was not a challenge that O'Hara *et al.* (2004, p. 34) faced in their experience of SMAL in a face-to-face environment. They write about such decisions as agreeing dates and deciding how to structure the meetings as being "usually uncontentious".

O'Hara *et al.* (2004) suggest that the nature of the facilitation required for action learning seemed to them to be closer to Bentley's (1994) empowerment model in which people take responsibility for their own actions and achievements than, for example, some of the descriptions set out by Heron (2004). Although having said this Heron does, in his conception of three modes of facilitation, articulate an "autonomous mode", which constitutes "the subtle art of creating conditions within which people can exercise full self-determination in their learning" (2004, p 8).

The idea of SMAL also meets Willis's (2004) conception of a Revans' gold standard, which suggests that action learning sets that are self-managing and self-organising are "more like" Revans' original articulation of the practice. O'Hara *et al.* (2004, p. 35) replace the set facilitator role with a set manager role. In doing so, they recognised the necessity for a role to "keep the set on the road" and to make improvements in how the set operated and speculated that "failures in the history of self-facilitated sets were due to the absence of this role more than the

absence of an external facilitator” (2004, p. 35). In their training of set members, they therefore emphasised the skills needed for effective set membership and offered a template for effective set meetings. The structure they proposed aimed to avoid two principal pitfalls; firstly, that sets become too “task-focused”, and secondly, that sets become a “talking shop”, which eschews effective action.

As all participants were qualified social workers and most still practising with a few exceptions, their sense of a professional identity bound participants together as (in Revans’ phrase) “comrades in adversity”. Their shared values and goals enabled trust to be established quickly. Moreover, a key requirement placed on the profession is to engage in critical reflection and to support NQSWs in undertaking critical reflection in their turn. SMAL provided a vehicle through which the problems of engaging in critical reflection could be surfaced and treated, and indeed, reflection is itself a necessary component of the practice. As Helyer (2015) noted, reflection is much more than “looking back”; it is also the opportunity to reflect in action on what is happening in the present. As set members are working on their problems and issues in real time, this opportunity to reflect and “feed forward” is available to them through action learning.

This notwithstanding, organisational differences became apparent early on in the life of the sets in terms of systemic differences in how L&D was operationalised. There were differences in approach in terms of empowering participants to manage their own L&D and in relating to the quality assurance aspect of the programme. Set members came from different kinds of organisations (albeit with similar purpose). Some had large L&D functions; others smaller or non-existent dedicated L&D structures. SMAL means there is no L&D specialist overseeing or managing the set meetings, or receiving feedback on those meetings. This raises the question of how SMAL is perceived by sponsoring organisations in terms of its impact and effect.

Another question raised in relation to SMAL is that of how to assure quality control. O’Hara *et al.*’s (2004) answer to this question was to develop the role they called Set Process Adviser (PA) whose main task was to “embed the process of self-management” (2004, p. 39). These process advisers would join the set for the last 30 min and would assist in reviewing personal learning and the self-management of the set. However, the addition of this role was far from uncomplicated. In their discussion, O’Hara *et al.* (2004) noted that “the presence of the PA became incongruent with the idea of self-management and became a symbol of our lack of trust in the process” (2004, p. 41). This PA role was not adopted in this SMAL initiative, and partly reflects a concern with the whole notion of quality assurance in this context, a concern that we reflect upon in the next section.

An early challenge faced by participants was undertaking the SMAL approach online. Participants knew how to operate whilst physically in a room, but they did not feel comfortable operating in a virtual room together, especially as the sets were constructed of people from different organisations who did not previously know each other. The problem was managed by ensuring participants had a structured template to follow at the beginning, which they could then dispense with as they grew more confident with the process.

Reflecting on the self-managed action learning initiative

This was the first time many of these experienced professionals had encountered action learning. Interestingly, their reaction to the idea of a permanent facilitator role was, at best, ambivalent; having experienced the rotating roles concept and managing the process for themselves many of them did not see the need for such a role. However, as indicated above, the practicalities involved in organising the process remained an issue for them, partly because each set involved participants from six different organisations and partly because many of them found the attendant IT issues difficult. Inter-organisational relationships were

formed and best practice was shared, e.g. set members shared resources such as handbook material for NQSWs.

This notwithstanding, it should be emphasised that a lot of support and guidance was given at the onset. Revans spoke about the necessity for an *accoucheur* role (literally male midwife) whose job it is to help create the conditions for action learning and support the integration and induction of the set. We would argue that the success of SMAL depends upon this work; it was the only role to gain specific approval from Revans.

The first four months of the project were spent explaining and discussing the objectives and ideas of action learning with the commissioner and stakeholders. It was crucial to build relationships with senior managers and leaders and those who sponsored the initiative. Part of getting commitment from the top was collecting data on the key challenges. This resulted in the focus being supporting and assessment of NQSWs. For the success of the programme, it was important that every participant should want to improve the situation they find themselves in, and they had to be volunteers. Action learning needs willing participants with issues that they wish to tackle. After the first introductory session in the small groups, participants were invited to stay with the group or leave without question. Interestingly, from the 108 organisations who started the programme, only six dropped out.

As discussed above, an issue that has been raised in relation to SMAL is that of how to assure quality control (O'Hara *et al.*, 2004). Questions that immediately suggest themselves are what do we mean by "quality" and who is to decide what is "quality" in an action learning context. Is it for a facilitator to determine, or an organisational sponsor or the members of the set? Consider this reflection on the SMAL programme:

... when I've been facilitating I've experienced situations in which somebody presents a problem and you go through it, and you think 'oh I'm not entirely sure this has been very helpful, the questions weren't rich enough, there could have been things that we didn't ask that we should have asked.' Then the person comes back and they talk about it as though it was a really important part of their professional development, or it was really impactful, and yet at the time I was thinking I'm not entirely sure this has been great. I think we've got to be really careful as people who do facilitate that we don't get too arrogant about how we're controlling things, or how important our role is in terms of quality assurance.

One danger with having a permanent external facilitator is that of over-reliance, something Revans had noted and was keen to avoid. The role is best seen, in SMAL, in terms of giving people the tools they need and to help create the environment in which they can then move forward.

In terms of organisational benefits, there are of course obvious financial gains in developing people to manage the action learning process for themselves without recourse to external facilitation. In an environment in which public money is involved, the benefit is more than merely financial. Moreover, there were some very specific learning gains that were fed back into the system in terms of learning for the whole system. This is quite complex because it consists of all the local authorities in England and all private fostering agencies. There are a huge variety of organisations, and over-layering these is the lead body that must support these organisations, particularly with ASYE and assessing NQSWs. It became apparent through sets working together that there was no consistency across agencies in terms of the use of the materials that were there to support ASYEs. The lead body went on to revise its paperwork in line with suggestions that came out of the sets' recommendations.

Discussion

The questions posed at the outset of this paper ask what the challenges posed and benefits gained from implementing the distinctive practice of SMAL in this context and what are the specific organisational and individual learning gains. The literature review undertaken for

this paper demonstrates the paucity of literature on SMAL in contrast to a significant body of literature on facilitated action learning.

Rigg (2006) has suggested that if building organisational capacity and learning is a goal, then not having an expert facilitator may lead to lost organisational development opportunities. The “bilingual facilitator” is advocated as someone who can shift the balance between process and expert facilitation, and can, especially in the context of the public services, speak both the language of public policy and L&D (2006, p. 199). Rigg (2008) also suggests that there is a danger of individuals pulling the agenda back to themselves rather than focusing on the need to secure organisational/systemic outcomes. However, if professionals are effectively trained to manage the work of the set, and already possess the language of public and social policy as is the case with this initiative, then SMAL has the potential to lead to organisational and even inter-organisational development gains.

Participants in this initiative having experienced role rotation queried the idea of a semi-permanent facilitator, and some suggested that this might lead to the possibility of such a role, leading to the imposition of a particular agenda or way of working. SMAL is not necessarily workable in all contexts but in some contexts, such as the one outlined here, it can find its place.

Questions remain about how self-managed sets manage and understand what they share, especially when that sharing is not limited to one organisation, but many. Much action learning literature *per se* is concerned with single case studies of single organisations; this paper has dealt with the slightly more unusual situation of sets comprised of members from multiple organisations – albeit with common purpose. This raises the question of the influence of the sponsoring organisations on the success of the SMAL model. This is answered at least in part by the imperative for SMAL to work – the need for the problems and issues raised relating to effective supervision and support of NQSWs to be treated, and those involved in this work being effectively supported in their task.

It may be asserted that whilst SMAL may not suit all types of work-based learner, for those with a shared professional and social identity, which is values-driven, such as social workers, this type of action learning appears to be especially suitable. The profession requires critical reflection as a core practice, and the shared objective of supporting and assessing newly qualified colleagues albeit in very different organisational contexts binds the members of the sets together.

Conclusion

The paper suggests that it is not the absence of an “expert” facilitator that has proved to be challenging but rather dealing with the practicalities of managing inter-organisational sets online. More research is needed, however, to examine this conclusion and consider set members’ perspectives. We note that specific individual and inter-organisational learning came about as a result of the initiative, including setting up an inter-organisational network to support isolated assessors. The paper suggests that a reason SMAL may have proved successful in this context is due in part to participant type – professionals for whom reflection is an occupational requirement. Success also depends on the quality of the preparation, induction and support work put in place, especially prior to launch and in the early stages of the initiative.

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