

Adaptive action learning in an online community: facilitating a large cohort to deliver outstanding results.

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Abstract

This paper explores the literature around online and blended learning. The impetus came from a cohort of 60 students being led through their dissertation by an e-learning evangelist. Initially the pedagogy closely followed Salmon's Five Stage Model, Wenger's Community of Practice, and traditional Social Constructivism pedagogies. In hindsight, it has been realised that,

in practice, these pedagogies have been eclipsed by Action Learning – a far better fit to the emergent tutor and student experiences. It is suggested that where 'expert' students are working at the top of Bloom's taxonomy (criticality, creativity, evaluation, innovation), such as during the creation of a dissertation, action learning is a highly effective overarching pedagogy. Moreover, we propose a model of action learning that may work with massive participant numbers; like the MOOC, adding Massive to the existing acronym of action learning Sets: Massive Action Learning Set: MALS.

Keywords action learning, adaptive action learning, community, facilitator, online

Introduction

The clever man will tell you what he knows, he may even try to explain it to you. The wise man encourages you to discover it for yourself, even though he knows it inside out.

(Anon in Gautam and Batra 2011, 113)

From its embryonic beginnings in the 1940s action learning has become a widespread practice in staff development and mainstream education (Thornton and Yoong 2011). In the last 20 years, action learning has been adopted by business, the third sector and education to provide a space for colleagues to reflect and support each other as they develop approaches to the significant problems in their contexts (Sanyal 2018; Leonard and Lang 2010). The exponential increase in data and ways of accessing information means that learning to learn is a key skill and one that action learning may excel at – with a focus on questions, exploration and reflection rather than learning a skill or acquiring knowledge – moving away from an ‘expert’ or ‘teacher’ towards a facilitator, or as Revans calls, a ‘combiner’, who sets the stage with the aim of withdrawing from a learning set (Revans 2011, 19).

The purpose of this study is to explore the use of an action learning pedagogy for dissertation supervision with undergraduate and postgraduate students in the UK. We look at an online learning environment designed using the pedagogies of Salmon, Wenger, and Vygotsky – and facilitated by one of the authors who ‘stumbled’ into the action learning approach – an approach that evolved from the three seeding pedagogies. The role of the facilitator is key, and we explore the tension in that role – between facilitation, leading, and teaching – and find that once an action learning set is established the set can be extremely effective with minimal input by the facilitator; mitigating Revans’ original concerns of a facilitator becoming overly prescriptive (2011).

Motivated by what is absent in the literature, the study presented in this article has focused specifically on students’ experiences of a dissertation process and elucidates research questions about this. Given the relative paucity of literature about the role of the facilitator in action learning, we argue that an appropriate point of departure is to examine the experiences of and relationship between a large cohort and their facilitator. Gaining insight into the process through which students perceive action learning, as well as investigating how they manage their relationships, holds the prospect of better understanding the intricacies of implementing action learning with students in this context. The primary questions guiding the study were as follows:

- What are students’ experiences of action learning?
- How do a variety of online pedagogies fit a dissertation action learning set?
- What approach should the online supervisor (facilitator) take to get the best outcomes for the students?

Our study makes two contributions. First, it focuses on making effective use of action learning in an online environment; second, it contributes to scholarship around action learning to better fit the needs of twenty-first century students and educators through for instance, using much larger groups and making the experience scalable and asynchronous. Finally, it identifies gaps in the extant literature around facilitation and suggests avenues for future research.

The paper is structured as follows: after a discussion of the main action learning models and the tensions between them, we investigate the under explored role of the facilitator, the process of facilitation and learning potential, particularly community learning, online. Following the methodology, we use our discussion to expose the function of and part played by facilitation in stimulating and maintaining adaptive action learning, before concluding with ideas for further research and practical application of massive action learning.

Literature Review

In spite of a history of inclusion in learning debates spanning a half century, action learning has no settled definition that as well as leading it to be conflated with quite different pedagogies, has also lent it an adaptiveness that a firmer definition would not have allowed. Suffice to say action learning has various definitions, perhaps encouraged by Revans' reluctance to offer one; instead dedicating a chapter in 2011 to '...What Action Learning is Not' (2011, 62); not 'Sitting with Nellie' nor 'Operational Research'. Simpson and Bournier (2007:, 173) continued the tradition with seven pedagogies that action learning is not: '...self-directed teams, coaching, focus groups, action research, seminars, problem-based learning, and experiential learning'. Tensions that these different definitions evoke in the action learning community gave rise to the call for this paper.

To illustrate with two significant descriptions of action learning: first, Marquardt and Waddill (2004) outline six aspects: a problem; a small group from diverse backgrounds; an emphasis on questions and reflection rather than knowledge; members have agency to implement strategies; commitment from all stakeholders from the participants to their organisation; and a 'coach'.

Second, Pedler, Burgoyne, and Brook (2005) distil the '...consistencies in a reading of [Revans'] considerable writings over more than 50 years...' into their RCPs, – Revans' Classical Principles. Paraphrasing their RCPs:

- Action as the basis for learning;
- The potential for profound personal development;
- A 'wicked' problem – with no 'right' answer;
- Problems should be both organisational and personal;
- A set of peers who are able and willing to support and challenge each other;
- A focus on seeking novel questions – rather than others' knowledge.

While both descriptions are widely recognised, they omit risk; a key aspect from Revans' original writings:

Those who are not obliged to assess the risk to themselves of pursuing, or of trying to pursue, such-and-such lines of action cannot, by their indifference to the outcome, explore their own value systems nor identify any trustworthy pattern of their own beliefs. (Revans 2011, 17)

Facilitation

A consistent tension across many models has centred on the role of the facilitator, occupying a central place in some approaches such as Thornton and Yoong's 'facilitator' (2011) and Marquardt and Waddill's 'Coach' (2004). Pedler, Burgoyne and Brook's present us with an interesting example of this tension: whilst their RCPs (2005, 58) don't mention facilitation, in the same paper they mention facilitation many times (2005, 52, 54, 55, 56, etc.), and make the point that 'Chief amongst these [adaptations] are the use of permanent facilitators' (2005, 57) when action learning is used as a pedagogy.

Marquardt and Waddill's 'coach' focuses on group performance rather than group leading, perhaps having Revans' original concerns of a 'coach' or 'combiner' in mind:

...(s)uch a combiner, brought in to speed the integration of the set must contrive that it achieves independence of them at the earliest possible moment

(Revans 2011, 20)

Revans' concern is that the facilitator could unduly influence the group's thinking and thus undermine key aspects of action learning. For example, facilitators are unlikely to be connected to any context and thus have no risk of failure, and no means to take action. Other facilitators may behave like an expert rather than be 'wise' (Anon in Gautam and Batra 2011, 113), focussing on knowledge rather than questions, risking diverting attention away from the problem to a hurried solution. Authors writing about critical action learning (e.g. Rigg and Trehan 2004; Trehan and Pedler 2009) infer that the facilitator is an essential and multifaceted role: drawing the set together, giving direction, and 'provoking disruption' (Rigg and Trehan 2004, 165).

In the online environment, the facilitator is also seen as essential to ensure participation (Salmon 2011; Tarmizi, de Vreede, and Zigurs 2007; Thornton and Yoong 2011), with mixed results. Over the past decade there has been little research into the role of the facilitator in action learning, evidenced by a citation search using Thornton and Yoong as the seed (2011), echoed by Brook and Abbot:

...research work on the role of the action learning facilitator...appears to be limited...

(2020, 211)

Online

Online learning, using ICT to facilitate student learning, is one of a long line of innovations heralded as a step-change in the field of education, as significant as predecessors such as film, and audio recordings, writing, and language itself (Bonk 2009).

In the 1990s, an early proponent of online education, Gilly Salmon, experimented with embryonic discussion forums using dial up, analogue and text-based technologies. From her experiences, Salmon's key pedagogies and development processes such as the 'Five Stage Model' (2011) and 'Carpe Diem' process (Salmon and Wright 2014) emerged (Figure 1).

Salmon's Five Stage Model recommends that tutors act as moderators of online discussion, involved substantially in the early stages to welcome and encourage participants to engage with the system and their peers. The model suggests moderators taper off their engagement as the course progresses, allowing space for peer support that encourages a cohort to develop into a community. There are clear parallels between Salmon's model and Bloom's Taxonomy of Learning (1956), where moderators should be guiding students in the fourth or fifth stage of the Salmon Model to be at the top of Bloom's Taxonomy – looking for innovative aspects supported by conjecture and creativity.

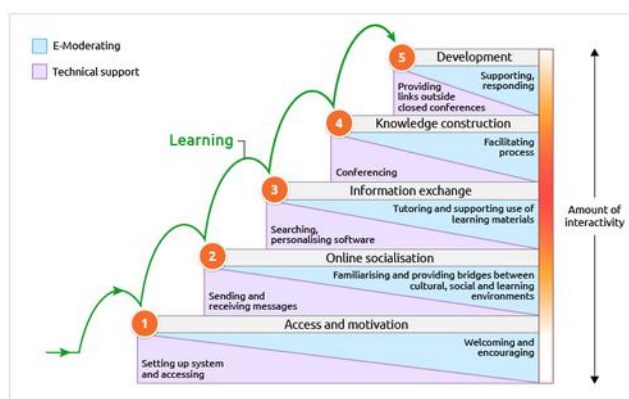


Figure 1. Salmon's Five Stage Model (2011).

Thornton and Yoong outline a similar model with their five stages (2011) (Figure 2):

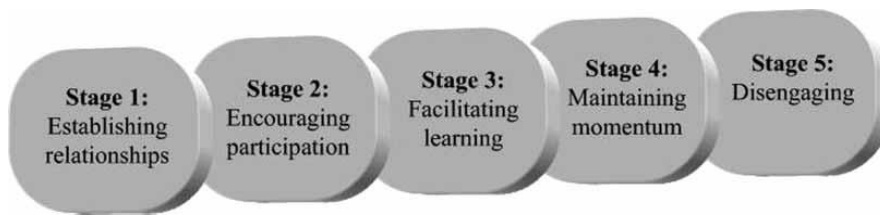


Figure 2. Thornton and Yoong's Stages of blended action learning facilitation (2011).

Unlike Salmon, Thornton and Yoong make action learning central to their approach, focussing on the link between encouragement and challenging learners yet with the end goal of disengaging still in mind; perhaps harking back to Revans' concern about facilitation.

Where the aim of the interactions is to encourage student-student interactions, the instructor should stand back to encourage others to participate.

(Thornton and Yoong 2011, 131)

Whilst Salmon's model does not link explicitly with action learning, nonetheless there are clear parallels with action learning and action learning sets; the role of the facilitator for Salmon is central, and the withdrawal route is clear, although not as disconnected as Thornton and Yoong, or as Revans may have wanted.

Communities

There are two notions around 'Communities' that are often cited. First is Garrison's Community of Inquiry (2007) which introduces three aspects of presence: cognitive, social, and teaching presence that can guide the design, construction, and delivery of online courses. Second, Wenger's Communities of Practice (1999) that focuses on practitioners as experts who come together to work on a common problem. Aligning with many RCPs, and requiring little facilitation, a departure from action learning is that the Communities of Practice and Inquiry work on the same or similar problems.

Social Constructivism

The third pedagogy that underpins our online design is Social Constructivism, whereby knowledge is created by individuals working in groups. In education, the seminal social constructivist ideas can be traced back to Vygotsky, who suggested that knowledge is first constructed socially and then internalised (Vygotsky 1962). These ideas have encouraged educators to see students as partners in the creation of their knowledge and underpin the action learning model since knowledge is constructed in a social space.

Working definition of action learning

Here we offer a working definition of action learning distilled from the literature and our experience:

1. Six or fewer participants (Brook and Abbott 2020); able and willing to meet regularly to offer and accept critical discussion of each other's problems;
2. The problems should be broadly similar, and difficult / 'wicked' problems (Edmonstone, Lawless, and Pedler 2019, 37), with no 'right' answers;
3. Yet disparate enough; so that it is difficult for delegates to 'advise' or be the expert;

4. Drivers to succeed – with a high personal cost of failure;
5. Similar framework; so that they can understand others' situations;
6. Disparate outcomes; that fit each delegate's position and context precisely.

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to explore the effectiveness of online pedagogies implemented by an online learning practitioner with a cohort of undergraduate students being led through their final dissertations. The complexity of this system meant that a qualitative case study approach was the best fit as it enables the best understanding of the situation (Silverman 2016).

The first meeting of the cohort took place in January 2012 and their hand in date was in May 2012. From an initial 30 students, another cohort was merged, resulting in a super cohort of 60. It was realised that supervising this number was impossible for a single tutor using a traditional model of eight hours per student of individual supervision, hence technology was used to leverage supervisory impact, comprising mainly discussion boards and webinars. Salmon's Five Stage Model was followed, ensuring lots of support and facilitation during the first few weeks tailing off as engagement grew, moving from 'a guide on the side' (King 1993) to a 'ghost in the wings' (Mazzolini and Maddison 2007).

In the first instance, two discussion boards were created, Coffee Room and Introduction, and the students were encouraged to post a draft of their Introduction chapter to the second board. Twice a month over the next four months a new discussion board was created following a traditional dissertation structure: Literature Review, Methodology, Findings, Discussion, Conclusions and Recommendations.

The criteria for each section were established and posted as a starter post. Students were invited to post drafts of their chapters to the boards, read each other's work as well as the facilitator's comments, and post any other useful information, comments and feedback about the work itself and the learning journey/experience, thus the method of data capture was a bottom up approach (House, Stiffman, and Brown 2006). Sunday evening webinars added a 'social presence' (Garrison 2007) between tutor and students. Whereas top-down survey research delivers insights into group processes

(Haslam, Powell, and Turner 2000; Gallova et al. 2018), bottom-up qualitative research (Miskovic 2007) captures unique subjective elements. As qualitative research is better suited to exploring lived experiences and individually constructed meanings (Golafshani 2003; Fusch and Ness 2015), we agreed that it would be a better tool for delving into the under-researched role of the facilitator.

Using participants' experiences from our case organisation allowed us to look into the unique and subtle experiences up-close, and in more detail than a focus group (concerned more with recurrent themes within a group) would have permitted (Baškarada 2014). We selected the particular extracts based on our collective agreement of their illuminative value, insightfulness and authenticity. The work of Lincoln (Lincoln 2005, 2010) – with her intent to understand the lived experience of participants – guided the analysis process. Participants notes and words, blog postings and recollections, diary entries made at the time were analysed through a flexible approach of moving backwards and forwards (Mason 2002), the aim being not only to explore connections but to ensure that key themes were generated directly from participants, that is, using a thematic approach to tease out 'naturally' occurring insights within a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2013).

The participants

Out of 60 in the whole group, those described below have been chosen for the differences they present, purposive sampling in keeping with our qualitative approach. The data is from our contemporary notes, blog posts, recollections of interactions with the students on the discussion boards, via email, or during phone tutorials, and collected and used with the consent of both the participants and the ethics committee. All except Lisa are pseudonyms.

First, Adele, who quickly established herself as an exemplary leader, both in engagement and contributions to the cohort. Her driver for excelling was financial, perhaps like many, because if she graduated with a first, she would get an additional £6,000 in her bursary. An inspirational student, she often posted insightful comments outside of a 9–5 routine. After a couple of weeks her contributions were so effective it made the facilitator's posts seem rather lack-lustre.

Second, Lisa, a student who created a blog post about her experiences at my invitation (Corcoran 2015) – so cannot remain anonymous. Lisa was a stalwart of the cohort – never missing a Sunday evening webinar, and often contributing in a timely and useful manner to colleagues' posts. Her blog post is an excellent source of data for this paper (ibid).

Clare is a construct of a handful of participants that were key contributors. Clare was initially a reluctant participant who I encouraged to contribute to the discussion board, yet she was reluctant due to lack of confidence with the technology, but more so lack of confidence in her contribution. We worked on an initial post together and as she pressed the Submit button she said '...I'm quaking in my boots'...she became a key contributor to the cohort – yet remained reluctant to join the webinar sessions.

Adele, Lisa and the Clares all got Firsts in their dissertations.

Denise, another construct, was difficult to engage, due to having difficult home circumstances and again a lack of confidence. After a few telephone tutorials her initial reluctance was overcome and she began to read and occasionally reply to others on the discussion boards. She attended a couple of webinars, and although contributed little, she acknowledged that the experience was valuable to see others in the cohort, and that she made great use of postings of the facilitator and peers.

Then Elsie, the Education Faculties student of the year getting 95% in her Dissertation. Elsie logged in at the beginning of the course and then did not log in again until the end. It is clear that she regarded the discussion boards as little use to her, and she attended only one webinar. It might be the case that Elsie was typical of many students at the time – not engaging, downloading the materials, working at her own pace in her own time, not seeing the benefit of engaging with others on the course. However, she was not typical of my cohort – as over half were posting and nearly all those that did not engage were witness learners (Fritsch 1997) as evidenced from my telephone tutorials, logging in and observing rather than engaging.

Elsie was difficult to reach, contributed little to the discussion, and didn't engage with any tutorials. It would be useful to know if her lack of engagement was due to lack of willingness or opportunity; whatever the reason, 'Elsie' shows that action learning is not for everyone. Perhaps for Elsie, engagement would have resulted in a net detriment, for herself and for the group, since if Elsie's contributions were at the same standard as her submission, her presence may have disengaged others, undermined the action learning experience, and been detrimental to the entire cohort. Further, some HEIs mandate the use of action learning, something Revans may have balked at; HEIs need to be mindful of the implications of forcing all to engage.

Finally, Frankie, who had to intercalate. Frankie was enrolled into the 2013 course, but the facilitator manually enrolled her into the previous year where her original cohort had graduated. During a tutorial he led her to the course and the discussion boards – where the 2,573 postings were, and

heard a very panicky and fearful voice say 'I can't read all those...'. It was fortuitous that the facilitator introduced her to the course via telephone, so could hear her panic, and at that moment was gifted the notion of getting her to search for her problem, her context, her topic – and she did, and she progressed, to exceed her predicted grade.

Gaining participant engagement

At the initial and only face to face session it was clear there was a reluctance to use technologies such as discussion boards and webinars. However, a couple of days after the f2f session, the facilitator recorded and sent a video to the students asking them to log in to the VLE and subscribe to the Coffee Room and Introduction discussion boards. During the initial days the VLEs automated systems were used to nudge those that had not logged into the VLE to log in, and also used the same to send a welcome message to those that had – perhaps following Salmon's Stage One: Access and Motivation (2011). After a rather reluctant start at the face to face session some students started posting to the discussions, including their Introduction chapter drafts.

The facilitator posted the same type of feedback to the discussion boards as he would give during tutorials, but perhaps a little more polished and generalised. The focus was always on improving, correcting, and/or steering students' work towards higher criteria in the marking grid. The design was to comment on the students' work and post this back to the public forum so that all students benefited from the tutor's comments, leveraging the facilitator's voice. Early in the course the facilitator, via discussion board descriptions and early webinars, suggested the type of feedback students should be giving to each other; to find a few positive things to comment on and a fewer negative areas that could be improved. This instruction was heavily reinforced by the facilitator replying quickly to students posting with the kind of posts he was looking for from peers; using his feedback to exemplify what he wanted to see. The idea of getting students to assess each others' work was informed by Nicol, Thomson, and Breslin (2014, 103) who surmised 'the production and the receipt of feedback reviews can enhance students' learning'. As the weeks progressed the facilitator posted less urgently, standing back to let peers comment on postings; following Salmon's Five Stage Model approach (Salmon 2011).

During the first couple of weeks, the facilitator responded quickly to posts, with either supportive comments and answering questions, or posting a full commentary on a student's chapter, following Salmon's Model (2011) of being highly supportive during the early phases of an online course: stages Two (Online Socialisation) and Three (Information Exchange).

Over the first eight weeks, the facilitator slowly disengaged from the cohort, from responding almost immediately to any posts, to rarely responding the same day, and then only if a peer had already posted. Sometimes he would nudge others in the cohort to respond, to be facilitative, not autocratic, moving to the upper stages of Salmon's model; through 'Guide on the Side' (King 1993), nudging students with the lightest whisper, echoing the sentiment of Mazzolini and Maddison's notion of a 'Ghost in the Wings' (2007).

The facilitator also posted general links to University regulations, links to useful websites like Ofsted, as well as many, many posts thanking students for offering their work for critique, and for their critique of others' work. A final 'optional' discussion board was offered to host students' reflections on the dissertation process; this helped some to improve their implications for practice and recommendations sections.

The methodology is subject to several drawbacks. The relatively small sample size means that findings are not generalisable, reliance on tutorials implies that students' reported conversations rather than observed actions and behaviours were privileged. Further, the students were (mostly) mature females studying on the same course at the same university. Indeed, most participants were

also from the same region. The main challenge in an exploratory study such as this one was to balance description with comparison in order to enable analytical generalisation.

Findings and analysis

Thematic Analysis (TA), seeking 'naturally' occurring data in our arsenal of blogs, discussion board contributions, comments, feedback and conversation, enabled us to pick up the interactional contribution that moved our understanding forward on the basis of that analysis. For example, participants talking about their own experience stirred up memories of similar barriers and opportunities, in turn enabling connections to be made by individuals and between group members, themselves producing data from the ground up. We read the entries and picked out themes together and individually, meeting after a couple of weeks to discuss the most repeatable and recurrent themes that we felt had been generated. We were also attracted to TA by its flexibility that enabled us to use a range of sources of participant-generated material and 'test' different learning pedagogies related to our research questions without diminishing the data or our engagement with it. This flexibility supported active engagement with the data, in turn gave voice to answering our questions.

This research focused on students' shared experience of the dissertation process (with other students) and offered meaningful opportunities to engage with students engaged in different research with some difference between cultural backgrounds. There was a gap between students' aspiration about what working alongside others could be like and their actual experience. The main themes that emerged are grouped under the two broad headings of community and facilitator, with participants' words in quotes, derived from telephone support, tutorials and the discussion board.

Community

While most participants expressed ambivalence about being a part of a group, many were more positive about participating in a learning community, the group associated with 'producing something solid' whereas the community was about 'ongoing learning'. Some of the earlier concerns such as not posting to the discussion board due to fear: fear of their work being critiqued by peers, fear of not being good enough, fear of being judged were lessened by the sense of community that had been engendered in the early weeks, enabling 'us all to become friends, my on line gang!'. Some admitted to a 'fear of having my work stolen' but this fear reduced with the momentum built by the community. It was this community, built over time and nurtured by the facilitator, that enabled students to overcome their reluctance to comment on others' work, to 'judge and be judged' in the discussion board, and to share knowledge with those who were seen as more knowledgeable.

Facilitator

Almost all the students read all the posts and feedback from students and facilitator, and reported that this was mostly because they followed the facilitator's behaviour in the first few weeks, 'just wanting to follow the facilitator', 'it was kind of exciting following others online', 'reassured that we were doing the right thing with the discussion board because the facilitator was'. Initially only a handful of students regularly posted; this level of engagement led to most students taking (and perhaps learning) from each other's and the facilitator's posts and webinar discussions.

Some students complained about the quality of the feedback from their peers, such as it being 'rather pointless' as it was very short such as 'I like this' and 'this is a good chapter' with little detail

on why so that students could build on what was good and improve what wasn't. The facilitator probed the discussions in order to encourage more detailed responses, himself giving feedforward and critical commentary that might be built on to improve work. It was interesting to discover that none of the students had met before the face to face session but had developed a sense of familiarity and group solidarity purely through participation on the discussion boards and in the webinars.

Addressing student concerns

Students who feared posting the most were offered an email route for review and comments; many posted to the forums after some private feedback, words of encouragement and mostly, 'watching how it worked, how supportive it was'. Those who were reluctant to comment on others' work were directed to look at the facilitator's critique and try to model a few of those comments. For those who did not like getting comments from their peers, encouragement to regard all opinions as valid and worthwhile worked well with some. In a few instances, students posted weak critiques or were slightly heavy handed in their feedback, the facilitator emailed and encouraged them to find and comment on two positive aspects of someone's draft chapter, and one area to work on. The role of the facilitator, on hand and ready, was key in the early setting of community norms.

The biggest and most consistent concern was students' fear that their work would be 'stolen' by their peers. This was countered with the notion of 'post first'; putting an idea into a public space with your own name giving you ownership of your ideas, suggesting to students that giving an idea away will make room for two better ones to come along. Further, as confidence in the discussion and the facilitator presence grew psychologically in participants, most fear over stolen work was allayed.

After three months there were over 1000 posts to the discussion boards, and the facilitator had become an almost silent partner in the students' enterprise. At the end of the course there were 2573 posts, with over two thirds of participants actively posting to the discussion boards. Moreover, 57% of the cohort achieved a First in their dissertation.

Discussion

Starting with the pedagogies that informed the design of the online learning environment, we interweave responses to our three questions throughout the discussion below. Pedagogies were Social Constructivism, the Five Stage Model, and Communities of Practice (Vygotsky 1962; Salmon 2011; Wenger 1999). We suggest the design of the course with time-released discussion boards and weekly webinars, supported with the private email communications, all informed by the initial pedagogies, resulted in significant engagement from and thus learning by the students.

Facilitator's role

Students reported that facilitation was key to their engagement, from the auto-generated and personal emails, to the follow-up telephone nudges and tutorials. They were unaccustomed to this level of interaction from a tutor. Further, they reported that the level of familiarity students had with each other was generated by the facilitator. Denise (participant construct - see above) summarises: 'It was you, David, who created all these postings, created our 'community''

The tension that action learning has with facilitation is around the tendency for facilitators to lead; to be an 'expert'; to step into 'teacher' mode. In many dissertation contexts there is less risk of this

happening because the supervisor cannot be an expert in each student's field. Hence the facilitator's actions tended to focus on questions (Marquardt and Waddill 2004) and naturally fell into the 'lite' model that Revans espoused:

Such a combiner, brought in to speed the integration of the set must contrive that it achieves independence of them at the earliest possible moment.

(Revans 2011, 20)

Which pedagogy was it?

The initial three pedagogies were of immense benefit to the creation of the environment and the huge engagement of the students. However, on reflection, it seems that action learning is a better fit to the tutor and students' experience because it addresses all aspects of interaction, from the initial problem, to the community, to facilitation. We distil some of the key aspects of our approach into six attributes, and provide a narrative around some similarities and differences to action learning and RCPs, and due to those differences, becoming Adaptive action learning:

(1) Group of around six

We assert that the approach was action learning, yet our group size is ten times a typical ALS. So how can we continue to assert 'action learning'? We suggest that the rationale for a group of six is to facilitate deep interactions, to formulate and present problems and explore solutions, to have extended time with each other to enable deep reflection for every participant, and allow answers to emerge from within. In a larger group, a skilled facilitator with an insightful 'core' group of six (or 8 or 10) may be able to garner examples of deep reflection and expose that to the entire group via discussion posts or recorded webinars. Regardless of the size, we witnessed the set at the cutting edge of the action learning process.

Many in similar cohorts will be Denises, committed enough to engage with the posts, yet reluctant to post or expose themselves to a webinar. Denise will see insightful posts and be able to map to her own situation, generalising into her context, to develop further skills of reflection, and explore routes she can take to help with her problem. One example from our cohort was ethics, noting that all ethical statements were generally good, with no 'fails'; rather unusual for an undergraduate education cohort.

(2) Similar problem

Action learning asks participants to bring different problems, though these need to be relatable for all delegates, so more similar than different. The 'problem' of creating a dissertation, to produce an extended report including primary research in their setting following the University's Level 6 grading criteria, is 'similar' enough.

(3) Disparate enough problem

Yet the problem needs to be disparate enough to require participants to generalise other participants' approaches to their problems and see if it works in their context. Many of our students were looking at a phenomenological methodology, using interview, observation, and document analysis as their primary research tools, yet no student could take another's questionnaire and use it in their setting. Moreover, our students had two problems – the creation of a traditional academic 'dissertation' and a focus on a problem in their work context – perhaps this is close to Revans' notion of an organisational vs 'own job' problem (Pedler, Burgoyne, and Brook 2005).

(4) Significant internal drivers to succeed – to 'break through'

The students not only risked failing their degree if they were not able to produce a passable dissertation but would risk losing potential large amounts of money if they couldn't achieve a high

grade. As already mentioned, those achieving a first in their course typically got an additional £6000 bursary.

(5) Similar framework

Although the action learning models suggest participants from disparate groups, being a peer set alludes to them understanding each other's contexts. In our design, the framework was the production of a dissertation using the University's submission framework and grading criteria.

(6) Disparate outcomes

Yet each outcome was different enough to address each student's situation.

Using the experience above, let us try to adapt action learning – to see where we can push boundaries yet avoid falling into Problem Based Learning (Wood 2003) or similar.

Challenging group size

We posit it may be possible, in the context of dissertation supervision or similar, to have massive groups. Taking the experience outlined above, having five to ten key contributors that the facilitator used to convey his message to the tens of other students 'observing', we suggest there could be 600 or 6000 students with most as 'witness learners', ensuring continued engagement in the learning due to adherence to the other action learning principles.

Participants will have the opportunity of posting to the whole group, but many will not, out of convention, lack of confidence, or fear of being 'shown up' (Clare: 'Shaking in my boots'). This self-regulation worked well for everyone in our cohort, and we suggest this will help regulate at scale. One risk is there will be a larger number of overconfident (and perhaps less able or 'useful') participants overly keen to engage. Hence in massive groups the role of the facilitator increases in significance; to take on tasks such as quieting the over enthusiastic while encouraging participation from those who may be simply overawed by the size of the group.

With a massive group, technologies such as learner analytics (Arnold and Pistilli 2012) should be used to identify those at risk of disengagement. Many of the remediations that these tools suggest can be automated, and for those that cannot be automated, systems can nudge the facilitator, giving them a wealth of information about the participant that the skilled facilitator can use to create a remediation.

Three examples from our experience suggest scaling may be possible. First, Denise, who may represent the majority of a massive cohort, reluctant to post or otherwise publicly engage, yet able to take from others postings (as a 'witness learner') enough information to interpret into her own context. Then Elsie, who downloaded, left and submitted; then got the highest mark across the whole School. Finally, Frankie, who came, intercalated, then engaged with great success. These three are likely to represent a significant proportion of the students; more representative in a typical online course where staff lament the general lack of engagement on discussion boards (Stott 2016).

To help understand this layering of others' experiences over one's own, consider the term 'social learning by proxy'; finding similarities with one's own position and then transferring the information expressed by their colleagues online to create knowledge in their situation. For example, Frankie, who used the VLEs search tools to hone in on posts relevant to her situation.

Technology could help with the lack of interaction with peers by requiring students to create blog posts about their problem, their interaction with the course, and solutions they are exploring. This virtual panopticon (Bentham 1791), where participants know that their own words can be seen by others, addresses in part the need for peer interaction. It is the possibility of being noticed that drives the student to create a good reflection. We suggest an acronym for this approach that

challenges group size, adopting Massive from MOOC (Cormier et al. 2010), to give Massive Action Learning Sets: MALS.

Now we wonder if we could remove another core principle. No matter what the group size, so far, we are still working with a cohort that studies together, at the same time, synchronously (or near synchronously if in different time zones). As a thought experiment, imagine that requirement being removed: all studying at different times? Our thought experiment now would be to remove synchronicity, to get a Frankie experience. Can we have an action learning group where the majority learn later than the initial group? If managed with time-released mechanisms, this simulated synchronicity may keep a pace to the original online learning experience, using time-release mechanisms to mirror the timely responses to interactions. When Frankie was exposed to the whole course it was overpowering. With a little facilitation, this was resolved by narrowing to her context and topic, and she thus did well.

Surmising – we suggest it may be possible to remove two key attributes of group size and synchronicity of an action learning environment and still have an action learning approach. One final thought: could an online course be constructed, tweaking the content of postings, and adjusting the timings of interactions with the aim of getting better outcomes for those students, our witness action learners? We would need to avoid falling into the trap of creating a ‘Problem Based Learning’ approach (Wood 2003) by ensuring we used the original problems the initial group brought; using these as an authentic source would avoid creating a ‘Puzzle’ (Revans 2011, 27).

What are the enduring aspects of action learning, and the tensions or paradoxes with the notion of adaptive action learning?

Flexible definition: Perhaps Revans wanted action learning to have an unsettled definition to encourage development, to let the practice evolve across different domains, to become as Brook, Pedler and Burgoyne say ‘... protean, flexible and context-sensitive’ (2012, 279) and ‘adaptive’.

We see our approach as both a return to and departure from some of Revans’ original approaches. For example, with group size we are reminded of Revans’ work with large groups, yet also see an evolution as we suggest the possibility of unlimited group sizes. Similarly with facilitation – having a facilitator engage with an initial group, but no direct interface with subsequent cohorts – somewhat addresses Revans’ concerns about a facilitator ‘teaching’ the set by overly engaging.

It would be fair to suggest our model as having significant departures from a working definition of action learning, and our suggestions of massive and asynchronous departs further. However, we suggest this is not a departure or a ‘dilution of’ (Pedler, Burgoyne, and Brook 2005, 59), but more an ‘evolution of’ action learning, an example of ‘adaptive’ action learning.

Our first tension is the role of the facilitator. ‘Revans expressed scepticism towards... The long-term action learning facilitator’ (Brook, Pedler, and Burgoyne 2012, 276) leads us to be cautious about how much we burden the facilitator in future ALSs. Moreover, given our suggestion of Massive, this places even more pressure on a facilitation role, both policing and encouraging, having a focus on questions rather than answers to avoid falling into the ‘teaching’ trap. Further, Massive is a major tension or departure from the significant RCP of small group size (Brook and Abbott 2020), although this RCP may be a misnomer, as Revans never explicitly stated set sizes, and in fact worked with some very large groups. Further, Revans also stated that the set was at the cutting edge of every action learning programme.

Removing RCPs, especially synchronicity, may result in MALS being outside action learning’s very broad church. We shall see.

Further research

Our next step in this research is to analyse the 2500 discussion board posts using electronic analysis tools, including contemporary systems that offer automated sentiment analysis (Ahmad et al. 2017). We suggest there is a lack of recent literature around the role of the facilitator (Brook and Abbott 2020; Sanyal 2018; Maltbia, Marsick, and Ghosh 2014), and would like to see other facilitators explore the pedagogies they have used with their cohorts, especially at this time of enforced remote working (April – July 2020, a traditional dissertation hotspot), and even more so if online facilitation is part of the 'new normal'.

We suggest that similar research (to this study) gathers student reflection on the process, perhaps via a reflection mechanism like our final discussion board or by contacting the students directly – and if the latter were conducted by a third party in confidence the reflections may be less guarded and richer.

Finally, we would like to explore the removal of Revans' core principles of group size and contemporaneity as outlined above, and maintain other aspects of an action learning set as an authentic starting point, but capturing the interactions and their timeliness, and adjusting both content and timing to see if that may generate a better outcome for a witness learning run of the same course. This could run just a few days behind the live course – thus getting a near perfect control and experimental group for comparison.

The clever man will tell you what he knows, he may even try to explain it to you. The wise man encourages you to discover it for yourself, even though he knows it inside out. But since he seems to give you nothing, we have no need to reward him. Thus, the wise have disappeared and left in a desolation of the clever.

(Anon in Gautam and Batra 2011, 113)

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