

Breaking the Ground on Action Learning Action Research at Strathmore University

Author: Wilson Magolo

Abstract

Action learning has revolutionized learning in many organizations and sectors worldwide. The role of action learning in the classroom has attracted attention from educators and researchers alike. Even though the power and elegance of action learning in education has been celebrated, challenges in implementation still abound. This action research paper explores the potential for action learning to provide variety to group work and group assignments at Strathmore University, shows how the learner is empowered through action learning and demonstrates the powerful responses by learners as pointing to possibilities for further exploration and implementation; in this way, a few areas requiring further research within the University are identified.

Keywords

action learning, action research, active learning, group work

Background

Action learning has been defined as “a process of reflecting on one's work and beliefs in the supportive/confrontational environment of one's peers for the purpose of gaining new insights and resolving real business and community problems in real time.” (Dilworth & Willis, 2003). While the usefulness of action learning has been celebrated in many sectors, with hundreds of research and testimonial articles available (Mumford, 1994), structured research is still needed to continue to explore its application in higher education in the developing world (Cho & Egan, 2009). To facilitate continuous improvement and improve the learning curve, a systematic approach to implementation of active learning in the classroom has been encouraged (Auster & Wylie, 2006). A combination of action learning and action research was found to be favorable to the development of a robust research culture in action learning in management education (Raelin & Coghlan, 2006).

Opportunities for feedback and practice in learning are a valuable resource in the transfer of knowledge from the classroom to actual practice (Hess, 2007). Action learning provides one avenue for such knowledge transfer.

Methodology and Findings

The research was conducted at Strathmore University in 2011 and involved a questionnaire-based exploratory study of 2 undergraduate degree classes. One class in the School of Management and Commerce consisted of 5 students (1 action learning set) and the other class in the Faculty of Information Technology comprised 11 students (2 action learning sets). The students were grouped into the action learning sets on the basis of the class register using simple sequential ordering. The subjects taught in both faculties were relatively non-technical in nature – the subject in the School of Management and Commerce was Global Contexts in Health Care whereas the subject in the Faculty of Information Technology was Information Resource Management.

The research was based on the hypothesis that action learning can be adopted, adapted and applied to improve activities and participation in class and group discussions. The small class sizes with few action learning sets facilitated monitoring of group work.

The approach used involved role-playing similar to what would be found in a class-room practicum approach (Hess, 2007). Since this was an exploratory study, such an approach enabled students to experience the key steps of the action learning process without having to select real-life work scenarios on their own.

The key steps of the action learning process involve the formation of a group of between 5 and 7 students (called an action learning set) working to solve real-life problems through insightful and challenging questions, the key point being that the action learning set member who poses the problem at the start is the same one who must come up with a solution. The role of the other set

members is to pose insightful and challenging questions that encourage the set member who presented the problem to come up with a solution which the same set member can go out and test before returning with feedback concerning the result of the action and whether the problem got solved. Each meeting of the set members must have a facilitator, who could be one of the set members chosen on a fixed or rotating basis. The role of the facilitator is to ensure that everything done in the action learning set is done only in response to questions, that the questions asked are legitimate and not merely a camouflage of solutions, and to point out learning opportunities during the set meetings.

A simulation of the action learning process through role-playing was done during the term whenever opportunity arose and at the end of the term, a brief evaluation of action learning was done using a questionnaire consisting of two aspects: Did you find being engaged in an Action Learning Set to be a positive learning experience? Provide all the reasons why you answered “Yes” or why you answered “No.”

Findings

There was an overwhelming positive response to the question “Did you find being engaged in an Action Learning Set to be a positive learning experience?” and all students responded with a resounding “yes.” The students' reasons for this response are given in the Appendix.

Discussion

While it was often not easy to apply action learning (in its strict definition) to the classroom, useful adaptations of the concept could be found and usefully implemented. Customization for theoretical classroom and the subject provided room for the high level outcome of creativity. Hence, even though what took place in the classroom in the label of action learning might not have been in the strict definition of action learning, the effort towards the action learning process seemed to invite exactly the kind of creativity and experimentation that generalizes in useful ways towards accomplishing higher level outcomes.

Indeed, many times the challenge was forwarded to students to find ways of employing action learning sets in their assignment/group discussions, once they had been given adequate introduction to the action learning concept.

The main focus for the Action Learning Sets was to cultivate and develop the ability to ask good questions that invited good answers, thus using the criterion of usefulness to determine the quality of questions asked in the action learning set. The experience tended to improve engagement of the students and facilitated the inclusion of activities that involved forms of role-playing.

It is likely that the fit between one's teaching philosophy and the role of questioning insight *does* determine the level of enthusiasm with which one approaches the action learning concept and therefore the level of enthusiasm generated in the students; thus, there appears to be a place for enthusiasm for the concept in the success of the action learning process.

Conclusion

Based on feedback from participating students, Action Learning has a role in higher education. The feedback from the questionnaires supports the conclusion that there is indeed a role for action learning in higher education. Further research could modify the questionnaire to investigate the specific role of action learning in the learning activities.

Nevertheless, action learning truly has an inspiring message and that is that as we ask ourselves improved questions and act on them, life responds with improvements. Boring moments can simply be crowded out of action learning sessions as learner engagement is enhanced. The question of where, when and how to work action learning in higher education is key to continuing adoption. Action learning may not be for every kind of group work...but then, it does not try to be. Whenever it is desirable for students to work in groups, action learning can even provide a way of

supplementing and complementing rather than replacing the traditional group work.

Recommendations for Further Study

Some areas identified for further research within the university include:

Triangulation of findings

Working with actual practice in the real world

Large group action learning set application

Follow-up case studies, using quantitative and/or qualitative data

Follow-up for application to environments beyond the university

Business school application

Adapting action learning to technical subjects

Self-selected groups versus instructor-selected groups

Freshman classes versus graduating classes

Assignment selection and adaptation for industry application

Observer effect and control studies

Effect of integration of different learning styles within the action learning sets

Effect of facilitation (rotating facilitator versus constant facilitator)

Approach to award of marks based on level and quality of participation

Integration with other forms of activities and group work

Virtual action learning

APPENDIX

Student Responses to Question: Did you find being engaged in an Action Learning Set to be a positive learning experience? All respondents answered “Yes” to this question.

Provide all the reasons why you answered “Yes” or why you answered “No”

To the “Yes” response, students gave the following reasons:

“Gave the opportunity to understand what questions to ask in order”

“Feel better and willing to be part of a team”

“More productive as a member”

“Gave opportunity to interact with others”

“Not feeling intimidated by those who know more and instead feel helped”

“Can deliver more and better work”

“Learners do not deviate from the main point or topic”

“There is shared learning – one learns more from the others on the same issue”

“Involved intense discussions where each person's opinion mattered in an attempt to come up with the best possible solution to the problem”

“Helped to see things from others' perspective”

“Helped to think from a broader perspective”

“Taught a lot on how to handle other people and their issues”

“Interacting with fellow class members makes it easier to get a feel of how the other members view the same topic”

“Breaks the ice between class members and creates a better atmosphere for learning”

“Wider coverage of areas which are being reviewed”

“Different perspectives broaden one's view on a particular subject”

“Interaction with classmates is enhanced”

“Proper understanding of subject matter due to reinforcement of lecture material with set members' understanding”

“Positive learning experience helping to delineate problem and find solutions that fit the scenario”

“Criticism of the answers gave a new perspective on the issues at hand”

“Provided benefit of working together”

“Helps to explore all possible options”

“Sharpens the critical skills of a person”

“Elicits critical thinking from within”

“Solutions are seen to be with the problem”

“Involves every stakeholder”

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