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## Action Learning and Multiculturalism in Higher Education: Implications and Future Challenges – A Discussion

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### Abstract

The aim of this research paper is to present a cross-sectional analysis of action learning and its implementation in multicultural cohorts of higher educational institutes. The author presents a theoretical discourse that focuses on the use of action learning technique within sets of culturally-diverse students in higher educational institutes. In particular, this argument aims at drawing the attention of academics towards the underlying challenges of running action learning sets with multicultural cohorts. The methodology used to identify significant issues in action learning in cross-cultural set compositions is through a theoretical discourse. The discourse revolves around three key areas: (i) to establish an understanding of the philosophical foundations of action learning; (ii) to convey the significance of cultural variations in action learning sets; and (iii) to identify challenges for higher educational institutions willing to incorporate action learning in their learning process. The discussion results in an eye-opener which focuses on future challenges which academics might face while implementing action learning. The researcher proposes that researchers must consider cultural aspects of a classroom when using experiential learning methods.

**Keywords:** Action Learning, Multiculturalism, Higher Education, Discourse.

### Introduction

De Vita (2001) argues that academics may consistently find it difficult to engage students in experiential learning activities when the group composition is multicultural. The term 'learning' may have different meanings to different people in different contexts (Yorks & Sauquet, 2003). Furthermore, learning not only comprises of the 'knowledge' gained from informational sources but also from actions and experiences (Mumford, 1997). Moreover, Marquardt (1999) asserts that an individual's actions may closely be knitted with his/her cultural-context. Therefore, prior knowledge on cultural variations in action learning sets may help educators avoid any consequent affect on the quality of the learning outcome.

### **Action Learning in the Midst of Action-Inquiry Technologies**

Research indicates that individuals learn better from each other and also from the experience gained through collaborative group work (Reynolds, 1994). Kasl & Yorks (2002: p.4) relate collaborative methods to experiential-based and action-oriented strategies where “newly created knowledge becomes the basis of new action that is intended to bring change”. Over the years action-oriented strategies have diversified under different names and varying profiles such as ‘action-learning’, ‘action-research’, ‘action-science’, ‘action-inquiry’ etc. (Kasl & Yorks, 2002) and have been collectively categorized as ‘action-inquiry technologies’ (Brooks & Watkins, 1994). Among all, action learning has surfaced as a method which incorporates action and learning through reflection on action using participant experiences in group settings (O’Neil, 1997). Action learning builds upon the experiences of participants and demands that individuals inquire each other in a constructive way to get problems solved. In the recent past, researchers have valued from this technology and have labeled action learning as one of the most promising innovations in management learning<sup>1</sup>.

### **Philosophical Foundations of Action Learning**

The roots of action learning can be traced back to the concept of ‘action research’ proposed by a German psychologist, Kurt Lewin in the mid 1940’s, whereas; the term action learning was coined in and given shape by Reginald Revans (Dilworth, 1998). Collectively grouped under the action-inquiry technologies, action learning is different from action research (Brooks & Watkins, 1994). It is based on the idea of growth and development of individuals and the organization, and on a concurrent group effort towards finding solutions to problems through experience sharing, reflection and inquiry (Inglis, 1994). However, Revans (1983: p.4) quotes action learning as, “a means of development, intellectual, emotional or physical, that requires its subjects, through responsible involvement in some real, complex and stressful problems, to achieve intended change sufficient to improve his observable behavior henceforth in the problem field”.

Action learning is a way of life aimed at improving performance (Margerison, 2005; Revans, 1998). It is not bound within pre-defined procedures and control measures rather it is a self-evolving practice which should construct itself around experiences and challenges of group participants. McGill & Beaty (2001) suggest that action learning is based on the notion of relationship between action and reflection. Furthermore, they emphasize that reflection is an important aspect of action learning, as reflection on past actions makes links more clear to learn from experience. Pedlar (1997: p.33) quotes Revans (1998) that action learning, “is based on the premise that there is no learning without action and no sober deliberate action without learning”. Actions are closely knitted with an individual’s background and action learning requires participants to share experiences (actions) and inquire on a frequency understood by all the participants.

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<sup>1</sup> Report entitled, ‘Continuous Learning’, by Canadian Center for Management Development – Published 1994

### **Where is the Missing Link?**

Higher educational institutions are now incorporating learning methodologies which are shifting from traditional to more experiential methods in nature. Action learning as an experiential group-based technique has been beneficial to academics and students in programmes which are based on notion of 'openness to experience' (Lawless, 2008). But before using this technique in higher educational institutions, the academics and professionals must understand the barriers in learning and be able to link action learning with '*cultural interpretations*' and '*higher education*'.

In a theoretical discourse on the literature of action learning, the author has observed a varied difference between action learning theory and practice which may be due to the simplistic nature of the concept of action learning (Pedlar, 1997). Hence the author considers that the discussion on action learning must expand from generic conceptualizations in theory to specific factors in practice such as 'cultural variations' complimented by its use in a specific environment such as 'academic institutions'.

### **Action Learning and Multiculturalism**

Action learning has emerged as a highly acclaimed tool for incorporating learning and change for both individuals and organizations, which has subsequently contributed towards its growth within education and management development courses (Lawless, 2008). Having the capability of being a powerful tool, academics and researchers must apply it predictably and effectively (Hicks, 2000). Conger & Toegel (2003) emphasize that most of the research has focused on the use of action learning for management development programmes. However, there have been very little studies on examining action learning with multicultural groups in higher educational institutions (Marquardt, 1998).

In an effort to categorize the literature on action learning, Mumford (1994) reviewed several articles and books and identified four distinctive categories of action learning: 'collections', 'action learning in fundamentals', 'action learning practice' and 'action learning focus'. Unfortunately, no evidence of literature on action learning with multiculturalism was documented in academic institutions. In a latter review of literature by Smith & O'Neil (2003), 'action learning practice' was found to be the most active category among which the researchers had thoroughly contributed. Despite its popularity in Europe and North America, there is very little empirical evidence regarding the implementation of action learning in different cultures such as South Asia, Middle East or Africa (O'Neil & Dilworth, 1999).

### **What are the Implications for Higher Educational Institutes?**

Learners from developing countries of the world are aiming for more developed countries in their quest for high quality higher education in the wake of changing economic shift from industrial to an information-based economy. These economic shifts have triggered 'globalization' and 'multiculturalization' which have caused an exponential growth in the service sector especially in higher education services (Muzychenko, 2007). It has been estimated that the total population

of international students will increase from 1.8 million in 2000 to 7.2 million in 2025<sup>2</sup>. The United Kingdom (UK) stands second as a host to international students accommodating 16% of the overall population among which Asian countries (including: China, Japan, India, Pakistan etc.) constitute of the highest international student population at 47%, while Middle-East and North Africa account for 10% and so on<sup>3</sup>.

Educators must understand that there are cultural differences between the host educational institutes and international students (Muzychenko, 2007). Furthermore, the educational institutes are also deeply-linked within a country's cultural context (Powell & Anderson, 1995), hence higher educational institutes are subject to 'cross-cultural' challenges. Imparting learning methodologies may be challenging for a culturally diverse group as students may have practiced different approaches to learning (Cadman, 2000). In order to ascertain the rightful methodology between culture and learning, this phenomenon has attracted many sociologist, anthropologists and educationists to understand the cultural variations while learning (Muzychenko, 2007). However, it must be borne in mind that the educational trends have changed from traditional to experiential methods (Meister, 1998). As seen by Pedlar (1997: p.191), education is " ... shifting from subject-centered to student-centered, from content-driven to context and process-driven, from talking to listening, from expert to exemplar and from power position to personal authority".

### Conclusion

Action learning is being used extensively by educators who have applied this technique in university setups with the aim of employing critical perspectives, self-development, self-evaluation and reflection on actions of students (Hicks, 2000). Mumford (1997) suggests that after the Belgian experience of Revans where he headed up the inter-university project for industrial productivity, action learning extended itself to various other cultures but unfortunately very little contribution has been made to the literature regarding cultural experiences in action learning in universities. He further suggests that there is a need for genuine exposure of the impact that the multicultural phenomena may have on action learning and an urgency to identify the cultural characteristics which might inhibit the successful implementation of action learning. Therefore this creates a wonderful opportunity to study action learning because there is a wide gap of literature between action learning and multicultural groups (Marquardt, 1998).

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<sup>2</sup> Global Student Mobility Report 2025, IDP Education Australia – September 2002

<sup>3</sup> Larsen et al.(2002). 'Trends in Educational Services', in OECD Annual Report – Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development

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