

ACTION LEARNING IN EDUCATION

Wojciech Welskop

Abstract

This paper presents the idea of Action Learning as a learning by doing. This approach to the development of individuals does not focus on what people need to learn, but on solutions to real problems. The main objective method of action learning is that our everyday life is an endless source of possibilities and opportunities for learning. The fastest and most effective way of learning is to take some action which later could be used to draw conclusions. This approach to learning can be a starting point in an effective and efficient process-oriented quality education activities undertaken by the students of today and tomorrow.

Keywords: *action learning, learning by doing, education, experience, reflection*

1 THE PHILOSOPHY OF ACTION LEARNING

Action learning is an educational process where the participants study their own actions and experiences to improve performance. This is done in conjunction with others in small groups called *action learning sets*.

Action learning emerged in the second half of the 20th century and is based on the theories of learning by David Kolb from the 1980's. Kolb's theory of the learning cycle implies that we have to go through a four step learning cycle in order to learn: experience, reflection, abstract conceptualizing and active experimenting. For the learning process it is important to complete the whole cycle and it does not matter at which point we will start.

Reginald W. Revans, the originator of action learning, had invented and developed this method in the United Kingdom in the 1940s. He was involved with the British industry and health care - working in these institutions he came to the conclusion that conventional teaching methods were largely ineffective. People have to be aware of their deficit in knowledge and motivated to its completion by appropriately asked questions, and help others struggling with similar problems. New knowledge comes from asking questions and we can create new knowledge by looking at existing science and ask critical questions.

Action learning is based on the idea of growth and development of individuals and the organization, and effective operation of the group in order to find solutions to problems through experience sharing, reflection and inquiry. Action learning is based on the notion of relationship between action and reflection. That reflection is an important aspect of action learning, as reflection in future actions makes it more clear to learn from experience.

Action learning ‘(...) is based on the premise that there is no learning without action and no sober deliberate action without learning’.

1.1 Defining action learning

R.W. Revans is the creator of action learning. He was the first who developed action learning as an educational process figure on the identification of a problem, integration theory, action determination and outcome evaluation. The purpose of this method is to solve problems through a process of asking questions, clarifying the exact nature of the problem, identifying possible solutions and incorporating them in a possible strategy for action.

The term ‘action learning’ was created by R.W. Revans 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, in contrast to action research, focuses on the learning and the action does not require the extension of new knowledge in a theoretical sense. In action learning the participants select some issues, analyze them, take some action and reflect on that action.

In the process of reflection experience and theory are transformed into knowledge, which undoubtedly increases the effectiveness of learning. Action learning approach provides a combination of theory and experience, it creates positive change in motivating participants to actively participate in the learning process, and also acquires of more effective skills. Learning is not just about gaining knowledge from formal sources, but also from the actions and experiences.

Research indicates that individuals learn better from each other and also from the experience gained by working together in the group. Collaborative methods based on empirical and action-oriented strategies to make the newly created knowledge become the basis for new activities that is intended to bring change.

Action learning method is based on the experiences of the participants whose individual problems become the basis for constructive solutions in the future.

1.2 Variations in action learning practice

Describing the action learning it is difficult to speak of a clear approach to the method, because it means different things to different people.

R.W. Revans defined action learning as a process of intellectual development, emotional or physical, which requires participants to engage in the various relevant issues in order to achieve the desired change and improve the current situation.

Action learning by M. Pedler is an approach to the development of people in organizations which takes the task as 'the vehicle for learning'. It is based on the assumption that there is no learning without action, each action is appropriate. This method consists of three components: people, who are responsible for their actions, problems or tasks that people set themselves and a set of six or more people who support and seek to solve specific problems.

J. O'Neil, on the basis of a review of literature and empirical studies conducted in the USA, UK and Sweden, proposes four schools of approach to action learning method. These schools are identified as:

1. 'Scientific',
2. 'Experiential',
3. 'Critical Reflection',
4. 'Tacit'.

Action learning in terms of The Scientific School of Thought is conceptualized as a problem-solving technique based on three interactive systems: 'alpha', 'beta' and 'gamma'. *Alpha* system is the interplay of 'the learner's value system', 'the external system that affects the decision-making process', and 'the internal systems in which the learner works'. *Beta* system is based on five steps: 'survey', 'hypothesis', 'experiment', 'audit' and 'review'. In *Gamma* system personal development and interaction between the learner and the social environment are very important.

In practice, this form of action learning has much in common with action research, however, is definitely directed towards science.

The other school is The Experiential School of Thought. This approach helps learners to learn from their experiences, focus on personal development and monitor progress towards achieving learning goals. Some advocates of action learning see Kolb's experiential learning cycle as its theoretical base. Kolb's theory is the theoretical basis for the activities of The Experiential School of Action Learning supporters. In Kolb's experiential learning cycle

learning action, reflection, theory and practice are equally important. The action learning method is the foundation for learning action and enables learning in each stage of the experiential learning cycle.

The most effective learning is based on the need to solve problems. This allows you to acquire relevant knowledge, which gives discretion to further development.

According to The Critical Reflection School of Thought the kind of reflection that occurs in the Experiential School is a necessary, but not sufficient. 'Reflection is powerful, but critical reflection is more powerful'. Through critical reflection, we are able to identify the source of the problem and thus our beliefs, values, and we can make decisions about changes in our life and gain a greater understanding of surrounding world. The critical reflection by Jack Mezirow is 'assessment of the validity of the presuppositions of one's meaning perspectives, and examination of their sources and consequences'.

The fourth school of approach to action learning is the Tacit School of Thought, according to which the emphasis is put on the accidental and unplanned learning that takes place from any activity such as through observation, interaction or routine work. This approach may be useful for adult learning in educational contexts where problem solving can be achieved unexpectedly.

1.3 The assumptions of action learning

The purpose of action learning is to help people in solving problems through a simple mechanism to ask questions. Learners should have the awareness of the gaps in their knowledge and motivation to its completion by properly asked questions and help other people with similar problems. R. Revans developed this idea and made it into the equation as:

$$L = P + Q$$

Where 'L' stands for 'learning', 'P' traditional ways of knowledge transfer – 'programmed knowledge' and 'Q' as a question to allow insight into a given situation (questioning to create insight). For the 'Q' sets out four 'major' questions: *where? who? when? what?* and three 'minor' questions: *why? how many? how much?* In this equation, 'Q' is the idea of action learning.

According to the International Foundation for Action Learning (IFAL) 'During action learning assumptions are challenged, results are confronted, feedback from others increases self-understanding'.

The action learning is an experiential learning method intended for personal and group development. Today this method is an effective tool for learning and development which also alters the actions and thoughts. Increasingly, literature confirms the widespread use of this method in different contexts in many organizations. Action learning has been the subject of different interpretations of the original concept created in 1940s by R.W. Revans because of the flexibility of terms used in it.

Assumptions and practice of action learning relate to ‘group-based learning’, therefore are not limited to the managers in the organization, but also to those individuals or groups who want to use this approach in order to support the present reflective learning based on dialogue, discussion and listening. Educators must extend their teaching methods from traditional to experiential methods such as action learning.

Action learning makes the following assumptions:

1. The paradigm of the learning process (logical structure) is adapted to the conscious (quasi-rational) decisions and both are assimilated to the scientific method.
2. Action learning can't be the academic curriculum consisting of transmission of knowledge or comments on its implementation. In learning anything to see the effect of the application of new knowledge is important. ‘(...) without authority to change one's ideas about the world one cannot change the world itself’. Do not distinguish between research, action and learning, because it is a wrong assumption.
3. Learning should be only of their own volition, not the will of the other person, unless that is the plan, and there is a reward or motivator.
4. The volition to learn usually is caused by the possibility of success or by the dread of calamity. These opportunities or problems, however, must be true, based on the value systems of individuals, offering real rewards and real penalties for failure. Learning that does not involve personal value systems may be apparent or inefficient in the future.
5. To solve problems effectively we should be aware of what we do. We must be able to describe our behavior in words or symbols, what they believe themselves to be doing may appear very differently to external observers. Sometimes we can already start the learning process before any visible trial action is taken.
6. In action learning external observers are different for action learners and for the action learning set.
7. The role of the professional teacher (moderator) in action learning is reduced, and at the same time limits to ensure an environment in which people can get together on

action learning sets. The learning is both a critique, guidance and support for all persons equal and from the outcome of the real-time action taken upon the real world of the problem or opportunity.

8. In action learning, there is no curriculum, no template session, there are also no experts. In this method, we use a variety of ideas since it seeks one goal only: 'Can we do what we set out to do, and by what evidence do we know whether we have done it?' In action learning our ideas act as a kind of scientific method.

2 USING ACTION LEARNING IN EDUCATION

S. O'Hara presents a model of implementing action learning in an academic context designed on the model of education. In this model three parts have been distinguished: *Learning to Learn Orientation, The Higher Education Framework and Outcomes.*

The part called *Learning to Learn Orientation* is focused on ensuring the secure sections of action learning and supportive working environment based on trust and mutual support towards the aim of learning. The group meeting of action learning is the opportunity for individuals to share their experiences and problems in order to find effective solutions of them. In this sets the participants share a common purpose, intellectual and emotional energy.

The Higher Educational Framework includes traditional practices associated with the programmed knowledge. The role of action learning is to add the element of questioning and reflection of the problem. Such actions oriented to the problem may be an alternative for students and adults to learn through the exchange of experiences with other people.

In the third part called *Outcomes*, the aim is to ensure that learners gain new experiences and insights of the topic and the development of new skills and the ability to cope with new situations, both at work and in your personal life. The development and implementation of changes by individuals also help solve problems for all members of the group.

The first part constitutes the action learning practices and different approaches affecting the shape of an action learning project. The second part consists of the individual and group influences relevant to the process of effective learning. The third part contains the framework for implementing action learning in an academic context. The fourth part presents the designed individual elements of an action learning project.

Looking at the general definition of action learning it can be seen that this method is both a concept and a form of action which aims to strengthen the ability of people in everyday situations. Everyone can change the unfavorable situation for themselves with minimal outside help. With an action learning people become more critical and aware of their values, objectives, activities, and can act more rationally in the surrounding reality.

Knowledge that already exists which students can learn in school by reading books, learning different theories or concepts (programmed knowledge called 'P') is an essential component of learning, but it is insufficient. Hence the idea to develop this knowledge and make it even more effective (Questioning Insight 'Q').

Both the concept and theory are important in the learning process, but the action learning focuses primarily on the application. Hence the emphasis on 'Q', that is, the questions that should be asked and experience which can be purchased through the answers. At the heart of action learning there is the ability to ask the right questions at the right time and take action.

In action learning it is more important what you do not know rather than what you do know, so the most important thing is to focus on the right questions, not the right answers and the most important issues are problems.

On the one hand, there are questions that are described in the literature as a perplexing questions to which the answer has already been formulated, the solution of the problem already exists, but we do not have found yet. On the other hand, there are questions and problems for which there is no correct answer. Different people will have different ideas and suggestions in order to answer the question and fix the problem. There will be no right answer but you may get many satisfactory solutions.

The purpose of action learning is to provide a proper answer. This method is a process of first asking questions to clarify the exact nature of the problem, then identifying possible solutions and finally taking action. In action learning it is important to analyze the situation to find effective solutions to problems. The measures taken are open to people and people decide which ones to accept and put into practice. Action Learning is about doing but it does not stop there. Generally doing may be vital, but it is not sufficient in itself for learning. Learning by doing may be sufficient if during the process of trying it we acquire the basic mechanical skills.

In addition, in the learning experience and problem solving process there is an important factor - a reflect on this experience - which determines exactly what you have learned. It is also important to develop strategies to be able to take steps directed towards the

efficient operation of the new situation, both now and in the future. That is what action learning does. That is how it differs from learning by doing.

In the context of asking questions in action learning an attention should be paid to the issue of the right questions and what exactly are the 'right questions'?

The 'right questions' are those which can be answered at the right time and give us the information we need, for example: *What are we trying to do? What is stopping us from doing it? What might we be able to do about it? Who knows about the problem? Who can do anything about it? Where can we find out about it?*

These are only examples of questions that appear in the literature. We can also provide many similar. If the questions are poorly worded, we cannot get the answers that would help us solve the problem. That is why it is important to pay particular attention to ask questions which are thoughtful and lead to effective solutions.

2.1 Quality Teaching framework

Action learning provides an appropriate and sustainable way of building the capacity of schools to improve practice. Some of the advantages of action learning are flexibility, respect for the knowledge and experience of participants, involvement, collegiality, empowerment and ownership. The challenge for schools is to engage students in the activity and the development of skills necessary to function in today's society.

To improve teaching practice and thus the effective learning of students The Quality Teaching framework model has been created. The model has been designed to be used by principals, school executive and teachers '(...) to lead and focus the work of the school community on improving teaching practice and hence student learning outcomes'.

The model has been designed to be an aid and framework for reflection, action and evaluation. Quality Teaching framework includes three dimensions of pedagogy:

1. *Intellectual quality*, which is based on the promotion of a high intellectual level. The elements of this dimension are: deep knowledge, deep understanding, problematic knowledge, higher-order thinking, metalanguage and substantive communication.
2. *Quality learning environment*, which is based on promoting productive learning environments focused on learning, positive relationships and clear expectations between teachers and student. The elements of this dimension are: explicit quality criteria, engagement, high expectations, social support, students' selfregulation and student direction.

3. *Significance* which is based on involving meaningful learning that connects learning to prior experience, multiple perspectives and contexts beyond the classroom. It is comprised of the following elements: background knowledge, cultural knowledge, knowledge integration, inclusivity, connectedness and narrative.

These elements are incorporated into three dimensions relating to classroom practice.

Action learning allows students to work in a team and create a new foundation to solve problems. Students with the ability of expression are more motivated to take action. This method focuses on improving and changing the current situation. To achieve the desired educational goals we should improve the quality of implementing and promoting a conscious and critical thinking leading to the formation of many effective and efficient ways of doing things.

Sources

1. BOURNER, T. & FROST, P. *In their Own Words: The Experience of Action Learning in Higher Education*. In: Education and Training, Vol. 38, Iss: 8, 1996. 22–31 p. ISSN 0040-0912.
2. CARDNO, C. *Action Research: a developmental approach*. Wellington: New Zealand Council for Educational Research, 2003. 74 p. ISBN 1-877293-20-2.
3. COGHLAN, D. & BRANNICK, T. *Doing Action Research In Your Own Organisation*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2009. 184 p. ISBN 1848602162.
4. MARQUARDT, M. *Harnessing the power of action learning*. In: *Training and Development*, vol.58, no.6, 2004. 26-32 p. ISSN 1055-9760.
5. MEZIROW, J. *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1991. 247 p. ISBN 1555423396.
6. MUMFORD, A. (Ed.) *Action Learning at Work*. Aldershot, Hampshire: Gower Publishing Limited, 1997. 408 p. ISBN 0566078902.
7. MUMFORD, A. *Managers Developing Others through Action Learning*. In: *Industrial & Commercial Training* Vol. 27, Iss: 2, 1995. 19–27 p. ISSN 0019-7858.
8. MUMFORD, A. *Practice of Action Learning*. Brookfield, VT: Gower Publishers, 1997. 250 p. ISBN 0566078902.
9. NSW Department of Education and Training. *Quality teaching in NSW public schools: Discussion paper*. Sydney: Professional Support and Curriculum Directorate, 2003. 16 p. ISBN: 0 7313 8255 2.

10. O'HARA, S., WEBBER, T. & REEVE, S. *Action Learning in Management Education*. In: *Education & Training*, Vol. 38, No. 8, 1996. 16–21 p. . ISSN 0040-0912.
11. O'NEIL, J. & MARSICK, V. (Eds.) *Action Learning: Successful Strategies for Individual, Team and Organization*. *Advances in Developing Human Resources – Academy of Human Resources Development*, 2000. 140 p. ISBN 1583760229.
12. PEDLAR, M. (Ed.) *Action Learning in Practice*. Hampshire, England: Gower Publishing, 1997. 403 p. ISBN 0566077957.
13. REVANS, R.W. *The ABC of Action Learning*. Bromley-Kent: Chartwell-Bratt, 1983. 84 p. ISBN 0862380448.
14. REVANS, R. W. *The Origin and Growth of Action Learning*. London: Chartwell Bratt, 1982. 846 p. ISBN 0862380200.
15. WEINSTEIN, K. *Action Learning: A Journey in Discovery and Development*. London: Harper Collins., 1995. 329 p. ISBN 000638224X.
16. YORKS, L., O'NEIL, J. & MARSICK, V. *Action learning: Theoretical Bases and Varieties of Practice*. In: *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, Vol. 2, 1999. 1–18 p. ISSN 1552-3055.

Contact

Dr Wojciech Welskop, Ph.D.

Academy of Business Administration and Health Sciences in Lodz

278 Piotrkowska Street

90-361 Lodz, Poland

Tel: +48 608 659 766

email: wojciech.welskop@o2.pl