

IMPROVING PEDAGOGY THROUGH ACTION LEARNING AND SCHOLARSHIP OF TEACHING AND LEARNING*

This ASA Teaching Workshop explored the potential of Action Learning to use teachers' tacit knowledge to collaboratively confront pedagogical issues. The Action Learning model grows out of industrial management and is based on the notion that peers are a valuable resource for learning about how to solve the problems encountered in the workplace. Action Learning groups (called sets) engage in reflection and collaboration with the goal of identifying and implementing strategies that address specific teaching problems. Scholarship of Teaching and Learning provides guidance for systematically documenting and disseminating the impact on student learning that results from changed classroom practice. Together Action Learning and SoTL promote the improvement of teaching through collaborative reflection on tacit knowledge, paired with formal knowledge as documented in the literature.

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THE ACTION LEARNING WORKSHOP conducted at the 2007 ASA meeting presented a model that uses the tacit knowledge of faculty to improve teaching. Action Learning is consistent with three sociological notions. The first is the belief that "the whole is greater than the sum of the parts." For sociologists, understanding social life cannot be achieved through the reduction and examination of component parts. It is the rich interplay among the components and the entities that emerges out of these interactions that defines social life (Giddens 1984). Second is the premise that all social reality is humanly constructed (Berger and Luckmann 1966). In other words, the perceptions with which we filter our day-to-day lives create a reality that determines the way we think and act. These perceptions both grow out of and shape our movement through the world.

These two ideas inform a third notion that

knowledge is collaboratively constructed. Individual knowledge co-emerges in the context of the collective understandings that arise out of human interaction (Bourdieu 1977). For example, in conversation, individuals share perspectives that influence each other and shape the future ideas of contributors (Scott 2002).

Together these three ideas suggest that the work experience of groups of individuals in similar contexts is an untapped resource for improving practice. When they have opportunities to interact with one other, they can more successfully identify and implement solutions to teaching concerns. The experience of colleagues provides a potential source of knowledge about teaching. However, the interaction that occurs in a group must be grounded in principles for constructive collaboration including a shared understanding of the goals and guidelines for operation. As the structure for collaboration matures, opportunities for influencing thought and action increase. New ways of thinking about pedagogical issues have the potential to influence action. This reciprocal relationship between thought and action can change both the individual and the wider institution in which the work group is embedded (Olson 1988).

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ACTION LEARNING

These sociological perspectives are compatible with a body of work called "Action Learning." The Action Learning model grows out of management activities with industrial work groups and is based on the notion that peers are a valuable resource for learning how to solve the problems encountered in the workplace. Peers in similar circumstances, and with similar levels of experience, act as resources for one another to develop strategies for change. Learning occurs through testing and evaluating these strategies in the work setting.

The Action Learning model is attributed to Reg Revans (1907-2003), who lamented that the experimental physics meetings he attended at the Cavendish Laboratories at Cambridge were too often "a way of sharing ignorance" (Burton 2004). Working as the director of education in the British Coal Industry after the Second World War, Revans observed the power of collaboration to arrive at solutions to imminent practical problems. His Action Learning model codified his insights into the process that moves work groups away from shared ignorance toward productive outcomes. In spite of being appointed Manchester University's first professor of Industrial Management in 1955, his notion of bottom-up learning was not highly regarded among his fellow academics. However, shortly after outlining his model in an address in the 1970s to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Growth (OECD), the Japanese Quality Circle, or Q Circle (which bears a strong resemblance to Action Learning), was being lauded by European and American managers.

Today, the journal *Action Learning: Research and Practice* provides evidence of the application of Revans' ideas in an abundance of work settings, national contexts, and academic levels. Boshyk (2000) complements this journal with global examples. This wide variety of contexts has inevitably led to considerable adaptation of the original model (Pedler, Burgoyne, and Brook 2005). Robust alterations have the potential

to expand and strengthen an author's work. However, as noted by Willis (2004), such modifications can also be responsible for unjustified criticisms of the original framework. One reason for this variety of interpretations is that Revans' work focused on Action Learning as an ethos rather than a highly systematic process.

The ethos of Action Learning is best conveyed through the assumptions and principles implicit in the model. While Revans based the model on his experience in the industrial sector, its grounding in adult learning theory (Marquardt and Waddill 2004) and its applicability to higher education have been demonstrated. John Biggs credits Action Learning with bringing about a "remarkable transformation" in higher education in eight universities in Hong Kong after finding that the "managerial quality assurance model is not cost-effective and is not working" (Kember 2000:vii). As early as 1991 Revans was suggesting that the best course for improving college level teaching was to tap the tacit knowledge of faculty. "The 'market-place philosophy,' by disrupting integration of learning, now makes us face the menace of experts; and, by denying those who practice it any knowledge of themselves, ranks fraud and self-deception among our high technologies" (Revans 1991:80). The following four principles that ground Revans' model illustrate how different it is from the growing trend toward top-down attempts to improve teaching in higher education.

First, colleagues' experience results in valuable practical knowledge, "the kind of knowledge which guides a person's practice, a practice which deals with unique events and where action involves judgment about what ought to be done" (Olson 1988:169-70). Rather than using outside "experts" to improve practice, the Action Learning model provides a structure which builds on and refines an individual's experiential knowledge to improve practice.

Second, tacit knowledge is enhanced through sharing it with others working in similar circumstances. As individuals share their successes and challenges, they begin to

assess their own performance by reflecting on strengths and weaknesses. Members of the group ask for and share with one another the knowledge stored in their consciousness.

Third, real life problems and situations provide the most fertile ground for genuine learning. The potential improvement of the work context provides strong motivation for learning. The focus is on actively effecting change by understanding the impact of behavior on outcomes.

Finally, the institution as a whole benefits from encouraging interaction among colleagues. Collaborative problem solving has the potential to raise performance standards by developing peer norms based on learning from one another's successes and working together to effectively overcome individual challenges.

Revans never operationalized Action Learning into a standard method (Marsick and O'Neil 2007). However, a number of staff developers, consultants and human resource specialists have created structured programs and models based on the key

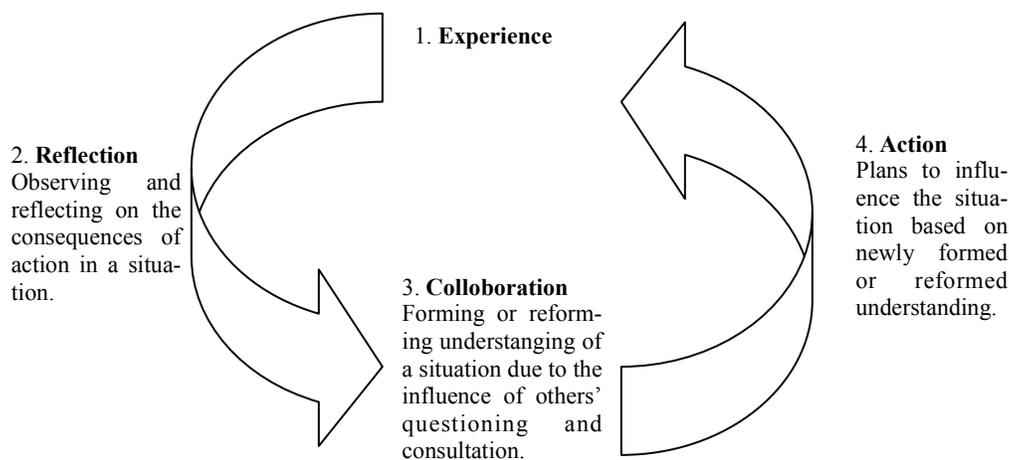
components of Revans' work (McGill and Beaty 2001; McGill and Brockbank 2004; Rothwell 1999). A critical review of these approaches falls outside of the purview of this article, but books and articles that do so are easily accessed in the management libraries of most academic institutions.

KEY COMPONENTS OF ACTION LEARNING

The ASA teaching workshop focused on understanding how essential elements of Action Learning—*reflection*, *collaboration*, and *action*, enhanced by *feedback* from students regarding their perception of the teaching-learning context, could be used by sociology faculty to confront pressing pedagogical issues (see Figure 1). Used in tandem with the principles outlined above, this model embeds learning about pedagogy and improvement of practice into the work culture (Pedler 2005).

Action Learning collaborators come together as a learning set. A learning set is a formal group engaged in the Action Learn-

Figure 1.



Adapted from:

Enderby, John, Dean Phelam, and Greg Birchall. 1998. "Organizational Leadership: A Case Study and Model for Intervention and Change." P. 143 in *Action Learning*, edited by W. Gasparski and D. Botham. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.

Pedler, Mike, John Burgoyne, and Tom Boydell. 1994. *A Managers Guide to Self Development*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

ing process. Learning sets are structured so that each individual has an allocated time to present the specifics of the teaching issue he or she wants to address. The role of the other set members is to ask questions directed at focusing, probing, and clarifying the specifics of the issue. However, the goal throughout is to assist the person who presents the issue to reflect on the context and circumstances of the situation. Over the life of an Action Learning set, each member has an opportunity to present an issue, such as the following, to the group.

Provost Lowe is concerned. For the second time, first-year students at Greenwood College have scored significantly below the averages of all comparison groups on the Active and Collaborative Learning index of the National Survey of Student Engagement. Lowe announces that each academic department needs to address this issue in the assessment section of their annual report. In addition, this year's discretionary awards will be given to individuals who identify and document effective means of increasing active and collaborative activity in first-year classes. The Sociology Department has decided to accept this challenge by forming a voluntary Action Learning set. Four of the six faculty members who regularly teach the introductory class volunteer to spend one lunch time together every other week throughout the semester.

Reflection

Reflection is a way of analyzing personal experience, to increase understanding of a situation. In order to learn from experience, the practitioner engages in conscious observation of behavior. Identification of patterns of behavior serves as the basis for generalizations which signal situations that can be dealt with easily and those which are likely to lead to stress. For many practitioners, this becomes an implicit part of functioning on the job; the process occurs without deliberate analysis. However, for most, reflective practice is not automatically generated from experience. The second component of Action Learning, *collaboration*, promotes putting experience into words in order to be conveyed to colleagues, which in turn cre-

ates the impetus for learning from experience through reflection.

The first meeting of the Greenwood set consists of a short orientation to Action Learning and one member of the group agrees to act as a facilitator. For the second meeting, Professor Thomas volunteers to present a specific problem that constrains active and collaborative activity in his introductory course. He is instructed to choose a real situation that is of importance to him, to reflect on, and convey the details of the situation to the rest of the group. To facilitate reflection, some guiding questions are agreed upon: What did I do? What did I want to happen? What did I expect to happen? How did students respond to my actions? How did I react to their response?

Collaboration

While there is great potential for improving teaching through reflective practice, the potential is expanded by sharing experience with peers. Reflection in isolation will necessarily be limited by the individual's knowledge and insight. Deliberate inclusion of the perspectives of others enriches the reflective process. Action Learning presents a focused and intentional process of deliberate, shared reflection. It is a cooperative process involving mutual collaboration to improve the learning environment (Mumford 2006).

In the second meeting, Thomas tells his story and has full control of the group for that meeting. "The last time I taught Introduction to Sociology, I decided to use cooperative learning groups. Introduction classes can be impersonal because the students come from a wide range of majors so I thought this would be good way for them to get to know a few of their classmates. I also figured the groups would provide a concrete example when we talked about group process. And we are always hearing about how employers want graduates who can work on a team, so I thought this would give them that experience too. I expected there to be problems if I determined the groups' composition so I let students choose their own groups. Since meeting outside of class time was required, students were encouraged to find people they could

work with and who had similar schedules. The complaints started the second week. Someone wasn't showing up for group meetings, someone else was not doing his or her share. It drove me nuts. I started out being sympathetic, offering suggestions. Then it got so out of control I finally just told them to go away and figure it out or the group's grade would suffer. In the end, the students were frustrated, I was annoyed, and to top it off, the projects were not very good. There has to be a better way.

Other members of the learning set then engage in a dialogue with Thomas. Their goal is to enable him to probe his understanding of the situation by reflecting on his and his students' actions in a way that would lead to developing a plan for change. To achieve this goal they use what McGill and Brockbank (2004) call enabling questions, which aim to "enable the presenter to struggle with the issue under consideration, challenging embedded paradigms, encouraging consideration of possibilities, without restricting the range of possible solutions, and without providing a ready-made solution" (p180).

Thomas is asked questions such as: Why did you choose to talk about how the groups were formed? How much do you think group composition contributed to this being an unsatisfactory learning experience? What other factors do you think prevented these groups from working the way you wanted them to? Do you have control over any of the things you just mentioned? What could you have done differently to prevent these from becoming barriers to the effectiveness of the groups? You mentioned a few reasons why you wanted students to work in groups. Are there other outcomes that you want for students as a result of working in groups?

As Thomas thinks about his answers to these questions, he begins to realize that his primary motivation for using groups was to break down the egocentrism that often characterizes first year students. He wanted to open up a space in his classes for student to become aware of the wide range of experiences and backgrounds of other students in the class and to use this exposure to question some of their values and beliefs. This clarification of purpose leads Thomas to believe that creating collaborative learning groups to work on a

joint project might not be the best way to achieve this goal.

Action

Talking about and planning strategies to improve teaching are not the same as doing it. The determination of what to change grows out of reflection with peers. Strategies for implementing change can also emerge from collaboration. It is not enough to know how to improve a situation; ideas have to be put into action in order to test the transference of understanding into the context of a specific teaching situation. A crucial element in Action Learning is the necessity for individuals to test, experiment, or otherwise engage themselves based on what they have learned through mutual collaboration (Revens 1998).

In the last part of the hour, Thomas uses his colleagues to explore a variety of ways to restructure group work to better achieve his goals. The next topic to be covered in his introductory course is socialization. The week before Thomas introduces this topic, he has required a posting on the class web site from each member of the class. They are to write a 100-200 word answer to the question, "What has influenced your current habits and attitudes toward food?" During the first class on socialization, students are handed one of these cards: 1-media, 2-family, 3-ethnic/racial, 4-geography, 5-friends, 6-economics. The class begins with a short lecture highlighting the information in the text about agents of socialization. Then Thomas divides the class into groups so that each member has a different number. The class takes fifteen minutes to introduce themselves and talk about how the agent on their card has played a role in socializing them into their habits and attitudes toward food.

Feedback

After taking deliberate action to enact change, individuals need to assess the impact of their action. The influence of pedagogical changes on student learning pro-

vides important input for further reflection and analysis. Teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of their actions can be reinforced or challenged through data on student learning. Such data often includes, but should not be limited to, students' perceptions about teaching strategies that facilitate and hinder their learning.

On the mid-term exam, Thomas includes an essay question that asks students to describe how their food habits and attitudes differ from those of someone else in the class, and what role agents of socialization have played in these differences.

While Thomas is testing out these changes in his instructional strategies, each of the other members of the learning set has an opportunity to present a teaching problem to the group. After answering enabling questions, the presenter develops an action plan for addressing the problem. By the fifth meeting, Thomas is ready to use the group to help him assess the effectiveness of his new use of groups in achieving his goals. He brings to this meeting an analysis of the impact of the group work on students' understanding of socialization, based on comparing the students' first posting with their answers to the mid-term exam question.

At its core, the Action Learning framework suggests that professors learn about their teaching by reflecting on their practice in a community of colleagues and that improving practice can be a collaborative endeavor. Scholarship of Teaching and Learning provides guidance for documenting the impact on student learning that results from implementing the plans developed in Action Learning sets. The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning pushes Action Learning sets beyond work-based support groups. The pairing of Action Learning sets and SoTL means that individuals investigate a specific issue that has relevance to them by using the experience and knowledge of others, in addition to what is available in the formal literature.

GETTING STARTED

Because they came from so many different

work settings, the participants in the ASA workshop did not meet the criteria for an Action Learning set. We did however, spend some time engaging in reflection and questioning as a foray into some of the key components of Action Learning. One task used dialogue to identify and clarify a teaching problem suitable to bring to an Action Learning set. A few of Revans' notions guided our work. First, we drew problems from a real work context. Second, the set member who posed the issue was invested in taking action to address the problem. Third, issues selected could be suitably dealt with during the expected duration of a learning set, usually a semester.

Members of the ASA workshop determined that a feasible problem for an Action Learning set would be to identify and test out teaching strategies aimed at increasing student engagement with sociological content. Other kinds of teaching issues that could be addressed through Action Learning include: assessing the impact of specific practices on student learning; understanding how contextual factors impact pedagogy; identifying classroom practices that foster specific orientations in students, e.g., positivism, critical thinking, the sociological imagination; or, determining methods, measurement, and documentation that contribute to an understanding of student learning.

WORKSHOP OUTCOMES

Two points of interest arose in the discussion that followed our exploration of suitable teaching issues. First was the observation that this process could be useful in conducting departmental assessment. Assessment activities are often viewed as an added responsibility and therefore engaged in with less than full enthusiasm. Some participants saw significant value in using Action Learning to identify issues of concern to the department as a whole, then pairing it with SoTL to systematically document the outcomes of pedagogical change on student learning. The growing number of outlets for publishing and presenting the results of

SoTL would provide motivation for a member of the department to accept the responsibility of documenting and writing up the results of the project.

Departments might use Action Learning and SoTL to answer assessment questions such as: Where in our curriculum do majors practice thinking like a sociologist? What opportunities do majors have to apply sociological understandings to real world issues? Would student learning benefit from sequencing skills, courses, or content in our department? In what ways do we help students develop the skills to succeed in graduate school?

A second topic explored by participants was whether Action Learning could be used with students. I had to admit that I had not considered that possibility. My own experience was in using Action Learning with an interdisciplinary group of faculty who were engaged in teaching a class within their field to first year students in a learning community. In conducting research on Action Learning in preparation for the workshop, I had not encountered any examples of its use with students. Therefore, I asked the group to speculate on its potential success. The conclusion of the group was that a mature and motivated group of students could bring to the task many of the characteristics needed for an effective learning set. Since the workshop, I have found published examples of Action Learning used with college students (Penney and Leggett 2005).

Students might form Action Learning sets around issues such as learning study skills, addressing problems encountered at internship sites, conducting a job search, or writing letters for graduate school.

CONCLUSION

Many resources are invested in garnering the wisdom of “experts” on how to improve college level teaching. But while books, workshops, and guest speakers provide initial motivation for change, sustaining momentum is difficult once individuals return

to their day-to-day routine. The power of the group to influence behavior is a central tenet of sociology. Yet improving teaching practice is seldom thought of as a group endeavor. Action Learning sets provide colleagues who are thoroughly familiar with the work context a chance to come together out of a desire for change. Groups are grounded in the understanding that change is most likely when an individual works on issues with personal relevance. In turn, colleagues facilitate one another’s understanding of the complexity of teaching issues. The experience and insight of the group are employed to guide individuals toward new insights and solutions.

In his role as Director of Education for the newly nationalized British coal industry, Revans faced the challenge of rapidly reviving an industry that was key to national post war recovery. This challenge prompted Revans to refer to the employees he worked with as “comrades in adversity,” who, when exposed to Action Learning sets “...can suddenly begin to see, with the help of such comrades, the immense, unused—indeed unknown—assets that are their own lived experience” (Revans 1984:87).

External pressures to reform higher education leave some of us with an appreciation of the term “comrades in adversity.” Experts, politicians, and even scam artists are quick to present their solutions to what they perceive as our problems. Action Learning provides us an opportunity to define our own problems and find contextually relevant solutions.

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

An annotated SoTL bibliography: <http://www.buffalostate.edu/orgs/castl/resources.html>.

A list of SoTL bibliographies: <http://www.sotl.ilstu.edu/resLinks/bibl.shtml>.

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