

## **Abstract**

This paper explores the practice of action learning facilitation in supporting action learning set members to address their ‘messy’ problems through a self-reflexive approach using the concept of ‘living theory’ (Whitehead & McNiff, 2006). The facilitation practice is investigated through personal observations and explanations of learning and action through shift in identity, thinking and approach of action learning members in resolving complex problems raised during the action learning sessions. The paper demonstrates how action learning can be applied as a methodology for supporting leaders to address complex organisational problems through inquiry, critical reflection and advocacy to gain new insights as well as new practice. The findings highlight that key theoretical principles in action learning such as critical reflection and problem solving can be applied to support managers and leaders to analyse and solve complex organisational problems. The paper also contributes to the current literature on action learning through the application of the living theory approach as a discipline for critical inquiry, self-reflection and evaluation.

**Keywords:** action learning; problem solving; critical reflection, messy problems, living theory

## **Introduction**

The growth in the inclusion of action learning (AL) in leadership development has been rapid. Since its inception in the 1940s with Reg Revans's work, there were only pockets of application of AL as a method of management development in large corporations such as the GE Work-out sessions (Casey and Pearce, 1977). But in the recent years a growing number of organisations have turned to AL as one of the most effective ways to develop their leaders (Leonard and Lang, 2010; Dilworth and Boshyk, 2010; O'Neil and Marsick, 2007; Marquardt *et al*, 2009; Raelin, 2008; Boshyk, 2002). This paper provides empirical evidence based research of AL as an effective method for leadership development by providing a safe space for reflection, self- enquiry and action to resolve problems.

Dilworth and Wills (2003) define AL as a process of reflecting on one's work and beliefs in the supportive and sometimes confrontational environment of one's peers for the purpose of gaining new insights and resolving real business and community problems in real time. This emphasis on learning and taking action i.e. problem solving within the AL process is one of the challenges frequently debated in the AL literature (Rigg, 2015). For Revans (1998:14), the two cannot be separated as he noted, "there can be no action without learning and no learning without action". Other authors such as O'Neil and Marsick (2007) and Pedler (2011) also highlight this balance suggesting that AL enables participants to use work project or problems in organisations to learn. More recently, Leonard (2015) in clarifying the relationship between action, learning and solutions within the AL process, argues that the first purpose of AL should be to achieve effective and creative solutions to complex, critical and urgent problems. Therefore, AL can offer an excellent platform for managers to resolve their 'messy' problems (Ravens, 1980, 1982, 1998).

In this paper, I have applied a self-reflexive methodological process, drawing on Whitehead and McNiff's (2006) concept of living theory approach as a discipline for critical inquiry and self-reflection of my AL facilitation practice, with a specific focus on enabling AL members in managerial roles to solve complex problems. This method

of action research, although well established in educational enquiry has not been specifically applied to the facilitation of AL. This is a key contribution of this paper.

The study is positioned within a series of AL sessions which is a part of a UK post-graduate leadership development programme commissioned by an English National Health Service Mental Health Trust with the aim of improving the leadership capacity of mid-level managers. The programme consists of six dedicated study-days incorporating content on managing and leading people and change, service improvement, performance management, team development and personal and leadership development, and a series of four facilitated AL sessions. The assessment comprises a reflective review of professional learning and critical reflection of their personal leadership journey in the implementation of a 'stretch-project' within their workplace. During 2014 and 2015, 30 managers who were sponsored by the Trust successfully completed the programme. Within the programme, I have facilitated the study days and one of the AL sets. I also participated in a series of group reflecting gathering with three other AL facilitators who I have regarded as my 'critical friends' (Whitehead and McNiff, 2006) to share experience and review my practice. In this study, the research lens is focused on my facilitation of the AL members' learning, actions and solutions in AL sets within the programme.

The paper is structured as follows: first, a literature review of AL in leadership development with a focus on problem solving; followed by a discussion on 'living theories' (Whitehead and McNiff, 2006) as a methodological approach and identification of a set of questions to explore my practice and present practice based evidence of facilitating the learning, actions and solutions of the AL members. The paper concludes with final discussions, including limitations and scope for future research.

### **Action learning in leadership development**

Literature highlights that facilitation of AL is used by the human resource development community to solve problems, develop leaders and build teams (Dilworth and Willis 2003; Marquardt *et al.*, 2009; Leonard and Marquardt, 2010; Leonard and Lang 2010). AL was originally developed as an approach specifically for developing managers by

Revans (1980). His view was that learning is a social process in which managers who are faced with real life messy problems will learn best with and from others as 'comrades in adversity'. As organisations, challenged with limited time and fewer resources need to be able develop their leaders while at the same time getting 'real' work done, AL has become a popular tool for developing leaders (Marquardt, 2011, Marquardt *et al*, 2009). Leonard and Lang (2010) have identified a set of leadership competencies on cognitive, relationship, execution and self-management skills that can be developed by AL. Marquardt *et al* (2009) also agrees that leadership competencies can be practised and demonstrated as AL group members work on a problem together. More recent research by Volz-Peacock, Carson and Marquardt (2016) highlight that AL provides a safe, social and collaborative environment for developing leaders around the world in public and private sectors.

### **Action learning and problem solving**

The facilitation processes within AL can help to resolve issues or problems by encouraging the members to think in a systematic way, seek out new possibilities, develop critical reflection and inquiry (Marquardt, 1999). In AL, this can begin by a participant's sense that things could be better or not being as they should be (Burgoyne, 2009). This enables members to see and understand the concomitant change that is happening inside them (McNutly and Canty, 1995); this change in the individual is 'learning' and the change that is made as a result to the system is 'action' (Revans, 1980).

The process of critical reflection has been highlighted by Densten and Gray (2001) as a way of encouraging multiple perspectives to address complex leadership challenges. These authors recognise that through continually asking questions, gathering informing and analysing the situation in their AL sets, leaders learn to handle problems and coordinate confusions. This process of reflection-on-action, aimed at improving effectiveness of action i.e. resolving the problem in AL sets (Bourner *et al*, 1996) distinguishes it from other forms of thoughts because it involves a state of inquiry to resolve a 'messy problem' (Revans, 1980, 1982, 1998). Therefore, this pragmatic focus on learning for the sake of problem solving (Marsick and O'Neil, 1999; Raelin, 1999) is

a unique value of AL. According to Leonard (2015: 23), ‘action learning provides a disciplined process for integrating everything that we know about or can learn about, to come up with fresh, tested and effective solutions’. He suggests that the power of AL to promote deep learning is substantially and fundamentally related to the process of finding great solutions to real problems that are complex, critical and urgent.

However, the complexities of working with AL such as power dynamics in groups, in individual manager’s lives and their organisational context (Trehan and Pedler, 2009), facilitating dissonance and disruptions arising from critical AL (Rigg and Trehan, 2008) and offering critical environment to surface gender power relations (Stead, 2014) are some of challenges of AL. Here, the importance of an active facilitation role with the ability to ask good questions that challenge and support AL group members to see when and how they are, or are not, practising leadership skills is a central aspect of AL in leadership and management development (Rigg and Trehan, 2008; Leonard and Long, 2010; Stead, 2014).

### **The role of the action learning facilitator**

In current literature, the role of the AL facilitator is referred to as a ‘coach’ (Leonard and Long 2010; O’Neil and Marsick, 2014), ‘set advisor’ (Pedler and Abbott, 2013) or an ‘enabler and trusted inquisitor’ (Thornton and Yoong, 2011). Marquardt (2004) discovered that if one of the group members (referred to as the ‘action learning’ coach) focuses solely on the group’s learning and not on the problem, that the group will become effective more quickly both in problem-solving abilities and in group interaction. Pedler and Abbott (2013) suggests that the ‘set advisor’ will to help the AL ‘set’ to become an effective source of action, learning and reflection. This involves encouraging the development of skills such as presenting issues, listening, questioning, reflecting and acting.

However, it is important to note that Revans (1998) was wary of AL groups becoming dependent on facilitators or professional educators as he felt that this could hinder the group’s growth. To offset this potential negative impact, Marquardt and Waddill (2004)

observe that AL coaches should only ask questions related to the learning of the group, individuals and the organisation. They must have the wisdom and self-restraint to let the participants learn for themselves and from each other. Revans (1980: 9) also noted the value of this approach when he stated: ‘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’. This self-discovery through one’s own experience and critical reflection can be enabled by an ‘action learning coach’.

In conclusion, it is evident that over recent years organisations have turned to AL as an adaptive and effective methodology for developing their managers (Dotlich and Noel, 1998; Boshyk, 2002; O’Neil and Marsick, 2007; Boshyk and Dilworth, 2010; Volz-Peacock, Carson and Marquardt, 2016). The focus on learning while working through challenging work problems has also been clearly highlighted in the literature. However, research work specifically on the role of the AL facilitator appears to be limited (O’Neil and Marsick, 2014). The study will address this gap by providing empirical evidence on the practice of the AL facilitation with further insights into the role of AL in leadership development, with a specific focus on enabling managers to solve complex problems.

### **Research methodology**

My research is aimed at exploring and understanding my practice of AL facilitation with a view to improving my practice. Taking the ‘living theory’ (Whitehead and McNiff, 2006) approach to action research I have undertaken a critical enquiry and self-reflection of my AL facilitation practice, with a specific focus on enabling AL members in managerial roles to solve complex problems. This process has enabled me to gather empirical evidence of the practice of AL facilitation and how this can support managers to learn and take actions to resolve work problems as a part of their leadership development.

As the ‘living theory’ (Whitehead and McNiff, 2006) engages in systematic enquiries, focusing on improving practice and generating knowledge by asking the questions ‘*How do I improve what I am doing?*’, this interpretative approach has provided me with an appropriate framework to enquire into my own practice. Through this method, explanations produced by me, of my own learning, in the learning of others and in the learning of the social formation in which I work and practice has enabled me to build

my own ‘living theories’(Whitehead, 1989; Whitehead and McNiff, 2006) of AL facilitation. This concept of ‘theory and practice as integrated and as a generative transformational cycle that has the potential for infinite self-renewal’ (Whitehead and McNiff, 2006: 155) has enabled me as a practitioner action researcher to gather the kind of data that has helped me to examine and improve my practice and share my learning with others. This form of self-reflective inquiry to improve one’s own practices (Carr and Kemmis, 1986) is also described as ‘first person action research’ (Marshall, 2011).

Therefore, my methodological approach to this qualitative study is a self-reflexive first person action research, drawing on the concept of ‘living theory’ which focuses on the importance of *praxis* in which “...practitioners investigate their own practice through [self] observation, describing and explaining what they are doing in company with one another, and producing their own explanations for what they are doing and why” (Whitehead and McNiff, 2006:68). I gathered the data and generated evidence to support my claims and then tested these knowledge claims for their validity through the critical feedback of others. To ensure robustness of my research, I adapted and applied a set of questions based on Whitehead and McNiff’s (2006) living theory approach for my own enquiry. My enquiry questions were:

- What is my concern?
- What will I do about it?
- What kind of evidence do I produce to show that what I am doing is having an influence?
- How do I ensure that any judgements I make are reasonably fair and accurate?
- How do I modify my practice in the light of my enquiry?

I applied these questions to examine my practice and understand how I facilitated the learning, actions and solutions of the AL participants. My research findings and analysis are presented within the framework for these enquiry questions.

I facilitated two AL sets between 2014 and 2015 which was a component of a postgraduate leadership programme. There were six AL members in cohort 1 (2014) and five in cohort 2 (2015). They were in management roles either with direct line management responsibilities or with supervision and project involvement requiring people management capabilities, working at operational levels, in clinical and non-clinical services. They all identified ‘a real-life, work-based problem which they were

grappling with' (Revans 1998) and were able to use the AL process to reflect, learn and take action to find solutions to their 'messy' problems.

### **Examining my practice and gathering data**

The purpose of AL within this leadership and management programme was to provide the participants a safe and confidential forum to gain deeper and new insights of their management practices to enable them to resolve real work problems (Dilworth and Willis, 2003). So the emphasis was on practice-based learning in which AL was used for personal development, enhancement and impact on own and organisational practice. Therefore, the AL member's 'messy' problem in the context of this programme could be any issues, problem or a challenge in the participant's work place which was complex and they were uncertain about the best way to find a solution, in most cases in collaboration with others.

I investigated my practice of AL facilitation through *first*, a self-reflexive process drawing on data from my personal narratives (using reflective diary entries), *second*, describe, explain and examine observations from my practice with other AL facilitators, my 'critical friends' (using digital voice recordings of four reflective gatherings) and *third*, analyse AL participants' feedback (using focused group feedback and reflective accounts from assessed work). The digital recordings have been transcribed for the purpose of data analysis. The example of messy/complex problems are generalised and specific details of individual problems are avoided in the narrative for confidentiality.

In examining my practice of AL facilitation I have addressed these questions as identified earlier:

#### ***What is my concern?***

Through the process of self-reflexivity of my practice I have identified my concerns to be as follows:

- What is happening in the learning space to enable AL participants to solve their messy problems?
- In supporting the AL members to resolve their 'messy problem' do I focus on the problem or the process or both?

- Should I help and support the members to solve their problems at individual levels or should I encourage them to consider organisational impact as well?
- What does this mean for me and my practice as the ‘professional’ supporting these processes?

***What will I do about it?***

These arising questions have made me realise that although based on simple ideas, the process of effective AL facilitation is not simple. This has led to my curiosity about the processes that enable participants to learn, act and find solutions to the work based problems raised within their AL sets. Therefore, in this study I have examined my practice of the AL facilitation to understand what I *did* to enable individuals to address their complex or messy problems, assess what worked well and also the challenges and uncertainties I faced and then explore what I need to consider to improve my practice.

***What kind of evidence do I produce to show what I am doing is having an influence?***

To build my ‘living theories’ I needed to observe and monitor what I was doing during the AL sessions and consider the quality of my influence i.e the impact of the facilitation in enabling the participants to learn and take action. Here, through a self-reflexive process I have considered extracts from my personal reflective logs, transcriptions of group reflections of AL facilitators, participants’ comments at focus groups and brief accounts from their assessed work to access what I was doing and its influence on the AL members. This helped to describe my data in rich details to develop my ‘living theories’.

**Personal reflective accounts - the ‘messy’ problems of the AL members**

The problems raised by the participants in my AL sets were wide ranging. Some faced management challenges with individual members of staff and were struggling with the difficult conversations around performance. With others, there were problems of team conflict where lack of shared understanding of work processes was heightened by differences in personal perspectives. A couple of the participants were going through personal dilemma in managing working relationship with line managers and felt unsupported and demoralised. One particular participant shared his experience of managing change without him or his team fully engaging in the process. Generally, the

issues raised had some level of complexity and the individuals dealing with them were grappling to find suitable solutions.

My overall approach in the practice of AL is to facilitate the learning and development of each member of the group by encouraging him or her to be the focal point of the learning process. In my personal reflection I have recorded this and the challenges of focusing on the 'process' and the 'problem':

*I try my best to always think about the individual, step into their shoes, share their problem, but at the same time stay outside of it, so I can facilitate the learning process without getting too involved in their problem... I have to manage my own sense-making while helping them to gain new insights, resolving real problems.*

Here, my living theory of the practice of AL facilitation is that the process i.e enabling the AL members to engage, ask questions, reframe and consider options is imperative to finding the solutions to their messy problems. The sense making is an ongoing process both at individual and group level which needs skilful facilitation to maximise learning and action.

Another key aspect is the role of the members within the AL set. Although the AL members were at different management levels within their organisational structure, their experience of the sector as well as their understanding of the governance structure placed them in unique position to contribute as experts within the AL process. I recorded several instances where their expertise supported the problem solving process in my personal reflections:

*I found myself listening actively and did not feel the need to be ask questions myself as I saw that there was great expertise on the subject in the room. I managed the process by rephrasing, summarising the options to consider and key points made by the AL members.*

*One experienced manager had an issue with a member of staff which she was really struggling to resolve....the group helped her to see things in a different way. She came back at the next AL session and said, I've done it! This was an*

*excellent example of problem solving. She had a problem, the group helped her to reflect on it and she followed through the actions successfully.*

*Another manager had concerns over one of her team members. Initial discussions confirmed that this was a challenging situation and that the manager was doing everything right so far. Two of the action learning members had lots of expertise in this area; some excellent 'advocacy' was offered which gave her 2/3 other avenues to consider. I managed the process by listening and encouraging open discussion (asking questions such as 'Is this something you can consider'? 'How do you feel about this suggestion'?).*

Here, my experience confirms the significance of the facilitation role within the AL process to support, encourage and guide the members through their course of enquiry and learning. The skills of active listening and asking open questions are therefore essential within AL facilitation.

In other instances, in supporting the problem solving process I have been more directive and challenging; and through a process of enquiry and critical reflection I have encouraged members to become critically conscious of their values, assumptions and actions by reframe their situation. This process has enabled them to review their behaviours and its impact on others. For example, in a conflict scenario raised by two AL members, I applied the Gestalt 'empty chair'<sup>1</sup> technique with the group's consent to explore interactions, language and behaviours. This offered multi-perspectives to their complex problem and helped them to reflect and consider the right solutions. This was confirmed by the participants - *'I found the chair technique very useful...it give me lots to think about'; 'opportunity to reflect on own behaviour was very useful'*.

On another occasion, a participant's frustration was apparent as she explored her challenging relationship with her line manager. In my reflective account, I recorded:

---

<sup>1</sup> The 'client' sits opposite an empty chair and must imagine someone in it. They then communicate with this imaginary being - asking questions and engaging with what they represent. Next, they switch chairs so the client is now speaking on behalf of the imagined part of his or her problem. This technique aims to enable participants to locate a specific feeling or a side of their personalities they had 'disowned' or tried to ignore.

*...she shared her perspectives in response to questions from her group members and this continued for a while. After the first 10/15 minutes or so I found my body position change, I came forward in my chair, offering an indication to be more directly involved in the questioning as the conversation was becoming repetitive and not getting anywhere. I asked questions such as, how do you feel about your manager? .....Is there anything you want to change about this situation? I asked her ....what advice would she give me if I was in her situation?*

Here, my living theory of AL practice is that I need to create opportunity for critical reflection, not necessarily seeking the correct answer or an immediate solution. By asking questions to frame the problem differently, the multiple perspectives within the situation was surfaced and this empowered the AL member to define her reality. This helped her to consider the power dynamics and question her own assumptions as the first steps to resolving her problem.

### **Participants' feedback on action learning**

The participants' responses using focus group feedback confirms that AL creates a safe learning space. Comments such as '*I valued the opportunity to share problems and get others' perspectives to address my challenges*', '*I was permitted to go on a meandering journey rather than straight lines and quick solutions*' show that AL members had the opportunity to consider and explore their 'messy problems'. Responses from more than half of the participants highlight that this learning space offered time to think and reflect. Several comments such as: '*It helped me to think more clearly about the situation*', '*it provided direction and encourage thinking.....*', '*the supportive process and in-put from action learning members very helpful though on occasions painful ....but very reflective and self-affirming*', '*having the time to think, the shared experience of others, the questioning process...helped*' demonstrate that the AL facilitation provided opportunity for reflective thinking which contributed significantly to the problem solving process (Marquardt, 1999; Marsick and O'Neil, 1999; Densten and Gray, 2001).

Several participants also highlighted that the process of reflective thinking '*developed and enhanced their active listening skills*' and gave them the '*space to develop wider organisational knowledge to understand and address individual problems*'. The role of the other AL members is also recognised in this process. Comments such as '*I have changed as a person, have recognised the politics of the place and feel confident in what I can do*', '*getting the outsider perspective helped me to reassess my problem*' demonstrates this.

Overall, the feedback from the AL members highlight that the AL sessions provides a valued opportunity to share problems and get others' perspectives to consider suitable actions to resolve managerial problems (Bourner *et al*, 1996; Leonard, 2015)

### **Participants' account of assessed work**

Extracts from the participant's assessed work provide further evidence of critical reflection leading to self-awareness and personal insights. These reflective writings highlight this:

*Through the action learning process I feel my self-awareness has increased as I have found that I am able to respond to staff with more confidence and present myself authentically...thankfully with this new insight I can see my attitudes changing.*

*Upon reflection... the team was stuck in the forming stage of Tuckman's model...by holding the meeting I enabled them to enter the storming stage....which made it possible to move to the norming stage where agreements were made... (reflection-on-action). I now take time to consider my responses (reflection-in-action).*

This shows that the participants have applied the 'learning' in the AL session to 'take action' for personal development. Another 'learning' for some of the managers was a shift in identity through the process of reflection within the AL sessions. Several managers clearly articulate their understanding of the difference between managing and leading a team. One of the participants writes: '*I used to adopt telling style and this alienated the key stakeholders.....now my approach has changed from managing to leading....*'. The shift to a more strategic management approach was also recognised:

*I had before now, not often engaged in seeing the organization as interdependent and interconnected .....moving away from silo-working, increased networking, being more challenged and removed from my comfort zone, via the action learning process work has enabled me to be well on my way from moving from a functionalist leader to a more strategic leader.*

*I have been overwhelmed by the multi-tasking and juggling of the thought process around change management.....however, I have now come to realise that seeing 'change' as a holistic process can make the entire change process more manageable and this has helped me to manage my change management challenges.*

This ability to understanding the change that is happening inside them (McNutly and Canty, 1995) demonstrates the ability to think systematically, seek new possibility and take necessary action in their leadership roles ( Revans, 1980; Marquardt, 1999). Finally, enhancement of a set of skills to analyse and take action was apparent from observations such as, *'I have developed good communication which is key to overcoming barriers..; 'I developed my self-awareness; ..... be in touch with the thoughts and feelings of my team members'. 'I have recognised skills such as negotiation, compromise, time management'.*

Thus, the participants' feedback and the extracts above provide strong evidence of reflection, insightful learning, and development of new leadership skills as highlighted in the literature (Revans, 1980, 1982, 1998; McNutly and Canty, 1995; Densten and Gray, 2001; Leonard and Lang, 2010; Volz-Peacock, Carson and Marquardt, 2016). It is evident that the AL process supports managerial leaders to address their complex problems by, first acknowledgement, in most cases that they 'are doing the right thing' and that they are 'not on their own' in dealing with such issues. Second, they welcome the 'space' to discuss openly and have the opportunity to think and reflect. Third, there is resounding acknowledgement of the role of the facilitator and their peers in asking questioning and sharing insights. And finally, by considering multi perspectives and reframing the situation, the next steps or ways of moving forward can be explored with the view to resolving the problem.

### **How do I ensure that any conclusions I draw are reasonably fair and accurate?**

I have established through my self-analysis that individuals can be supported through AL to address problems in the work place which is also grounded in the literature (McNulty and Canty, 1995; Marsick and O'Neil, 1999; Raelin, 1999; Marquardt, 1999). I have drawn on the feedback and assessed work of the AL members to validate that AL offers each member through questioning (by me and other members) opportunity to reflect and think, to make connections, analyse the issue/s and to consider new possibilities to resolve complex problems. This process of personal validation has helped me to understand that as an AL facilitator I need to facilitate the learning process to ensure that the individual is able to reflect on and reframe his or her situation i.e. the problem. So it is not about either the process or the problem but about facilitating learning and action for all. Similarly, although my focus is on the individual, as the organisation is the context, my facilitation is context-specific which impacts on both individual and the organisation.

The next step in drawing my conclusions about my AL practice is that my data needs to be understood and tested to justify my personal validation. I have done this through a process of social validation in the form of regular reflective gatherings of the AL facilitators who have been my 'critical friends' (Whitehead and McNiff, 2006). This approach of involving people coming together to inquire into issues of mutual interests in a process of co-operative inquiry (Heron and Reason, 2008) is also referred to as the 'second person action research' (Marshall, 2011). These group reflective gathering sessions, one after each AL sessions, have enable me to share and consider the practice of AL facilitation with my 'critical friends' and draw conclusions from our shared experience. This has enabled a robust critique of my AL practice.

The conclusions I have drawn though my personal validation process have been endorsed through this process of social validation. Observations from my 'critical friends' highlight that I have significantly increased my self-awareness as an AL practitioner through critical reflection and self-analysis: *'....increasing awareness, increasing in inverted commas, of the theoretical basis of the things that you do.....'*; *'I think what really struck me about what you said is that a couple of times you've used the word instinct, working on your instincts.... and your instincts clearly worked*

*here'; '....I think all the things that you've raised is really genuine and it's really authentic, is the questioning of yourself in terms of how do you handle... '.*

This process of personal and social validation as advocated by Whitehead and McNiff (2006), has enabled me to test the evidence I have gathered of my AL practice and draw conclusions from within my own practice. Through this self-reflexive enquiry I have developed my 'living theories' of how AL facilitation can support managerial leaders to resolve complex problems through three interrelated processes:

### ***1. Enquiry – Asking the right question***

Through the process of personal and social validation I have identified that the first step to enabling the AL member to consider suitable solutions to his or her problem is to encourage open as well as socratic style of questioning within the group. Through my reflections and in discussion with my 'critical friends' I have recognised that knowing the right question to ask at the right time is an essential facilitation skill. These questions can help to structure the conversations, facilitate reflections to improve thinking, promote learning and change (Revans, 1980; Marsick and O'Neil, 1999). Questioning that focus on examining underlying causes and long-range solutions seek to provide the greatest leverage (Marquardt, 1999, 2004). I have referred to specific questions I have asked to explore issues; at the same time there have been occasions where my role has been to encourage other AL members to engage in questioning. Such questions have helped to frame problems differently and define reality. This enables members to look at situations from multiple perspectives so that options to the problem or at least the initial exploration to finding a solution can begin. Each AL member can then to get a more realistic and truthful impression of him/herself as a person, increase their ability to self-question, reflect and take action.

### ***2. Reflections – Think about thinking***

Each member is encouraged by the comments and questions of their peers and the facilitator, to reflect and think, to make connections, analyse seemingly contradictory data to consider new possibilities. This enhances the ability to learn how to think in a systematic way and handle problems in complex organisational context (Marquardt 1999). This process of clarifying one's thinking will enable AL members to begin to

think about their thinking. This relates to the metacognition process (Flavell, 1979) which encompasses the processes of planning, tracking, and assessing own understanding or performance. Participants' feedback and written work also provide strong evidence of the opportunity to think and reflect within the AL space. Therefore, learning can take a collective social process within the AL sets, building the skills of reflection for creative problem solving.

### **3. *Advocacy – taking action***

The third integral process is to support and enable the AL members to express their views and concerns, ensure access to relevant information and services, exercise their rights and responsibilities and explore choices and options. The participants' comments clearly acknowledge this supportive process. I have also reflected on how I have encouraged each member to put forward their plan of action and make their thinking and reasons explicit. The AL members are supported to consider the 'action' that is appropriate for them in their personal and organisational context. The other AL members are encouraged to ask rather than tell and if and when personal insights/examples are shared this is done in agreement with the group.

#### **How do I modify my practice in the light of my enquiry?**

As a process of human enquiry, as suggested by Whitehead and McNiff (2006) I believe that on-going action-reflection has to be integrated within the practice of AL. Through the self-reflexive process and group reflections of the AL facilitators, while validating current good practices I have also identified key areas that require on-going critical reflection and analysis as well as limitations of this study.

The areas of practice are listed below (Table: 1) with suggested 'so what' questions for the practitioners of AL to enhance and improve the practice of AL. I will endeavour to gain further insight into my own practice through these questions.

#### **Insert Table 1: Key questions to improve AL practice**

These questions could also form the basis for further research on AL facilitation, particularly as so far there is limited literature specifically on the role of the AL facilitator (O'Neil and Marsick, 2014). There is also scope for comparative study on AL facilitation skills such as asking the right question, enabling reflective thinking and

supporting the process of taking actions with other learning interventions such as coaching, specifically team coaching. The concept of metacognition (Flavell, 1978) could also be explored further within the process of ‘thinking about thinking’ by the AL members.

### **Limitations of the study**

The limitations of the research are, first, that the study involves only a small sample within one particular programme, second, the AL is one of the components of the programme and although feedback was sought specifically on this, the overall experiences of the programme may have influenced the managers’ responses, particularly in their assessed work.

### **Conclusions**

Through this self-reflexive enquiry of my practice of AL facilitation I have developed my own ‘living theories’ of AL facilitation with a specific focus on enabling AL members in managerial roles to solve complex problems. The study highlights that for participants to reflect on, capture and apply their learning, a facilitation role is required within the AL process to enabling participants to address their complex issues (Marquardt and Banks, 2010). Hence, the ability of the AL facilitator to enable participants to present their issues, listen, question, reflect and take action (Pelder and Abbott, 2013) as well as encourage and empower other AL members to engage in this social learning process can create a learning environment for solving problems. My ‘living theories’ confirm this and provides empirical evidence of AL as an effective method for leadership development by providing a safe space for reflection, self-enquiry and action to resolve problems. Thus, my ‘living theories’ of AL facilitation and areas for on-going development make a contribution to the literature on the role of the AL facilitator and also offers a method of learning for others in the way their enquiry into their own practice (Whitehead and McNiff, 2006).

### **References:**

- Boshyk, Y. (Ed) 2002. *Action learning worldwide: Experiences of leadership and organisational development*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Boshyk, Y., and Dilworth, D. R. 2010. *Action Learning*. Palgrave Macmillan
- Bourner, T. Beaty, L. Lawson, J. and Ohara, S. 1996. Action Learning comes of age-part 3: action learning for what? *Education & Training*. 39 (5):184-8.

- Burgoyne, J. 2009. Issues in action learning: a critical realist interpretation. *Action Learning: Research and Practice*. 6(2): 149-161.
- Carr, W. and Kemmis, S. 1986. *Becoming Critical: Education, Knowledge and Action Research*, London: The Falmer Express.
- Casey, D., and Pearce, D. 1977. *More than management development: Action learning at GEC*. Gower Publishing Company, Limited.
- Densten, I. L., and Gray, J. H. 2001. Leadership development and reflection: what is the connection? *International Journal of Educational Management*. 15(3): 119-124.
- Dilworth, R., and Willis, V. 2003. *Action Learning: Images and pathways*. Malabar, FL: Criegee.
- Dilworth, D. R., and Boshyk, D. Y. 2010. *Action learning and its applications*. London: Palgrave: Macmillan.
- Dotlich, D. L., and Noel, J. L. 1998. *Action learning: How the world's top companies are re-creating their leaders and themselves*. Jossey-Bass, Incorporated.
- Flavell, J. H. 1979. Metacognition and cognitive monitoring: A new area of cognitive-developmental inquiry. *American Psychologist*, Vol 34(10), Oct 1979, 906-911.
- Heron, J. and Reason, P. 2008. *Extending epistemology within a co-operative inquiry*, in Reason, P and Bradbury, H (eds) *The Sage Handbook of Action Research*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., London: Sage, pp366-380.
- Leonard, H. S., and Lang, F. 2010. Leadership Development via Action Learning. *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, 12(2):225 -240.
- Leonard, H. S., and Marquardt, M. J. 2010. The evidence for the effectiveness of action learning. *Action Learning: Research and Practice*. 7(2): 121-136.
- Leonard, H. S. 2015. Understanding the causal path between action, learning, and solutions: Maximizing the power of action learning to achieve great results. *Action Learning: Research and Practice*. 12(1): 22-36.
- Marquardt, M. J. 1999. *Action Learning in action: Transforming problems and people for world-class organisational learning* (1st Ed.) Palo Alto. CA: Davies-Black.
- Marquardt, M. J. 2004. *Optimising the power of action learning*. Palo Alto, CA: Davies-Black
- Marquardt, M. J. 2011. *Optimizing the power of action learning: Real-time strategies for developing leaders, building teams and transforming organizations*. Hachette UK.
- Marquardt, M., and Wddill, D. 2004. The power of learning in action learning: A conceptual analysis of how five schools of adult learning theories are incorporated within the practice of action learning. *Action Learning: Research and Practice*, 1(2):185-202.
- Marquardt, M., Leonard, H.S., Freedman, A.M., and Hill, C.C. 2009. *Action learning for developing leaders and managers: Principles, strategies and cases*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Marquardt, M., and Banks, S. 2010. Theory to practice: Action learning. *Advances in Developing Human Resources*. 12(2): 159-162.
- Marshall, J. 2011. Images of changing practice through reflective action research, *Journal of Organisational Change Management*, Vol 24 No 2.
- Marsick, V. J., and O'Neil, J. 1999. The many faces of action learning. *Management learning*, 30(2), 159-176.

- McNulty, N. G., and Canty, Robson. G. 1995. Proof of the pudding. *Journal of Management Development*. 14(1): 53-66.
- O'Neil, J., and Marsick, V. J. 2007. Understanding Action Learning. New York, NY: AMA-COM
- O'Neil, J. and Marsick, V. J. 2014 Action Learning Coaching, *Advances in Developing Human Resources*. 16 (2): 202-221.
- Pedler, M. 2011. *Action learning in practice*. Gower Publishing, Ltd.
- Pedler, M and Abbott, C. 2013. *Facilitating Action Learning*. Open University Press.
- Raelin, J. A. 1999. The design of the action project in work-based learning. *People and Strategy*. 22(3): 12.
- Raelin J.A. 2008. *Work-based learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Revens, R.W. 1980. *Action Learning: New techniques of management* (1<sup>st</sup> Ed) London:Anchor Press.
- Revens, R.W. 1982. *The origin and growth of action learning*. London: Chartwell-Bratt.
- Revens, R.W. 1998. *ABC of Action Learning: Empowering managers to act and learn from action*. London: Tavistock.
- Rigg, C., & Trehan, K. 2008. Critical reflection in the workplace: is it just too difficult? *Journal of European Industrial Training*, 32(5), 374-384.
- Rigg, C. 2015. Problem solving or learning—which is priority? *Action Learning: Research and Practice*. 12(1): 1-2.
- Thornton, K., and Yoong, P. 2011. The role of the blended action learning facilitator: an enabler of learning and a trusted inquisitor. *Action Learning: Research and Practice*. 8(2): 129-146.
- Trehan, K., & Pedler, M. 2009. Animating critical action learning: process-based leadership and management development. *Action Learning: Research and Practice*, 6(1), 35-49.
- Stead, V. 2014. The gendered power relations of action learning: A critical analysis of women's reflections on a leadership development programme. *Human Resource Development International*, 17(4), 416-437.
- Volz-Peacock, M., Carson, B., & Marquardt, M. 2016. Action learning and leadership development. *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, 18(3), 318-333.
- Whitehead, J. 1989. Creating a living educational theory from questions of the kind, 'How do I improve my practice?' *Cambridge journal of Education*. 19(1): 41-52.
- Whitehead, J. and McNiff, J. 2006. *Action Research Living Theory*. London: Sage.

