



Action Learning

Materials in Support of a Pilot Action Learning Set

John Bamber, 2019

What Works

What Works (formerly the Quality and Capacity Building Initiative) is an initiative designed by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA). It aims to maximise the impact of prevention and early intervention to improve outcomes for children and young people living in Ireland. At the core of the initiative is a desire to foster persistent curiosity amongst those working to improve the lives of children and young people.

The focus of What Works is on enhancing and embedding prevention and early intervention in children and young people's policy, service and practice by focusing on the four key areas of:

- Data
- Evidence
- Professional development
- Quality in children and young people's services.

What Works seeks to enhance the skills of practitioners, providers and policymakers to appraise and apply evidence informed prevention and early intervention approaches to their work with children, young people and their families.

Action Learning Sets

As part of What Works Learning and Training, DCYA is facilitating a series of action learning sets for those working with children and young people. What Works Action Learning Sets will be delivered nationwide on a once-off basis for one year, and be open to professionals working with children, young people and their families. Initially, DCYA are working with Dr John Bamber to deliver a pilot set specifically targeted at grantees under the QCBI Innovation Funding Scheme.

The pilot set will be based on the original approach developed by Professor Reg Revans. [Revans](#) worked successfully throughout most of the 20th Century to develop and promote his ideas, but has not always been given the credit that he deserved. The basic tenets of action learning are often referred to without being sourced back to Revans. He published a number of texts outlining his theories, which are only now becoming easier to access. His most comprehensive work, *The Origins and Growth of Action Learning*, was published in 1984. Since then several authors have taken up Revan's ideas, perhaps none more ably than Mike Pedlar, who has provided a useful account of action learning in [Action Learning for Managers](#) (2008). Action learning can be strongly related to theories of professional learning ([Donal Schon](#)), critical thinking ([Stephen Brookfield](#)), reflective practice ([David Kolb](#)), and communicative action ([Jurgen Habermas](#)).

Action Learning Explained

Action learning uses open dialogue between group participants to help them think deeply and critically about their work, to plan for and take action. The work of the group, called a 'set', is to ensure that the results from the action taken feed back into the set for further consideration. Commonly, there are up to 8 people in a group. Sets typically meet 5 or 6 times over a period of 6 months though there is no hard and fast rule about this rhythm or timescale. Set membership should always be voluntary and by agreement with each other and the facilitator.

Action learning is suited to situations where there are no simple or technical solutions, where the precedents might be few, and the way forward daunting and uncertain. People join sets to address these types of complex issues and problems where, crucially, the problem, issue, situation or task, is one for which the participant has significant responsibility, even if they are not acting alone. The word 'problem' is not meant pejoratively, but used as shorthand to convey something that is hard to achieve, even if the goal is desirable and welcomed. The focus can be on individual or organizational development, with an emphasis

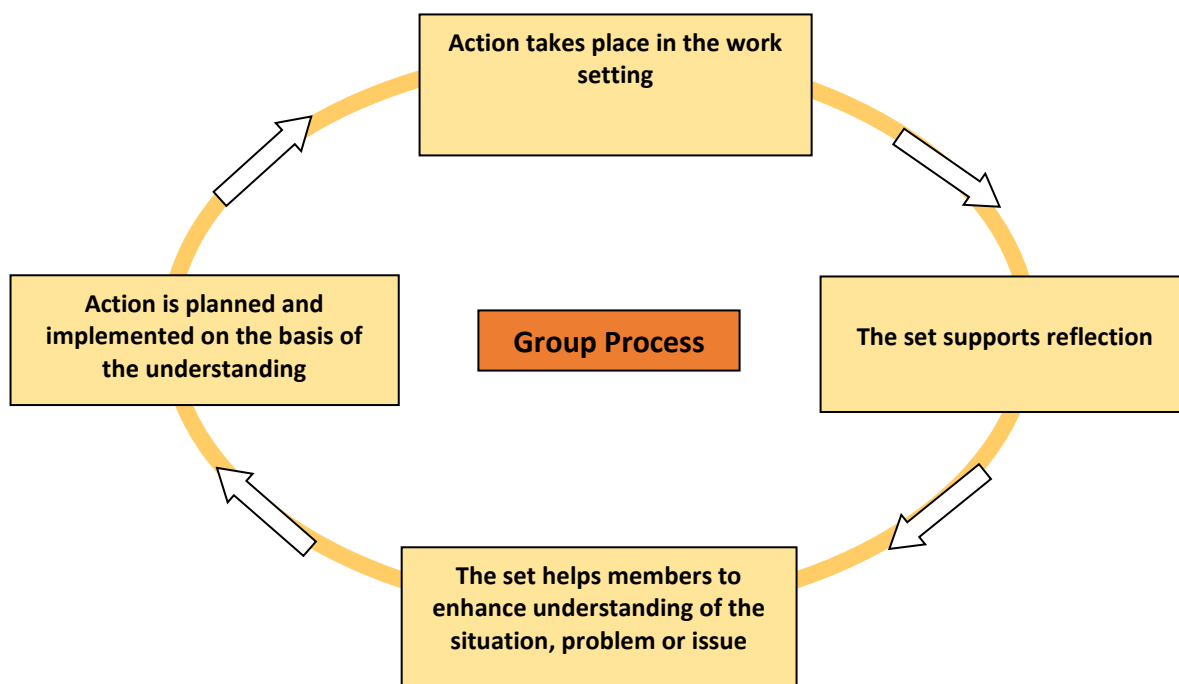
on solutions coming from the participants themselves rather than experts. The emphasis on personal responsibility means that learners are compelled to adopt a deep rather than surface approach to learning.

The Work of the Set

Members bring to the set a problematic situation that they wish to address in the work setting. The group gives each person the space to present their ideas. This necessitates a description of the situation and an initial analysis of the nature of the problem, issues or task involved. Typically, members allow up to 30 minutes per participant plus some time for general group discussion. A typical meeting with 8 people therefore, might take between 4 to 5 hours.

The intended process can be described in similar terms to Kolb's experiential learning cycle, with the added element that individual learning is purposefully aided in a group setting (see Figure 1):

Figure 1: A group assisted learning cycle

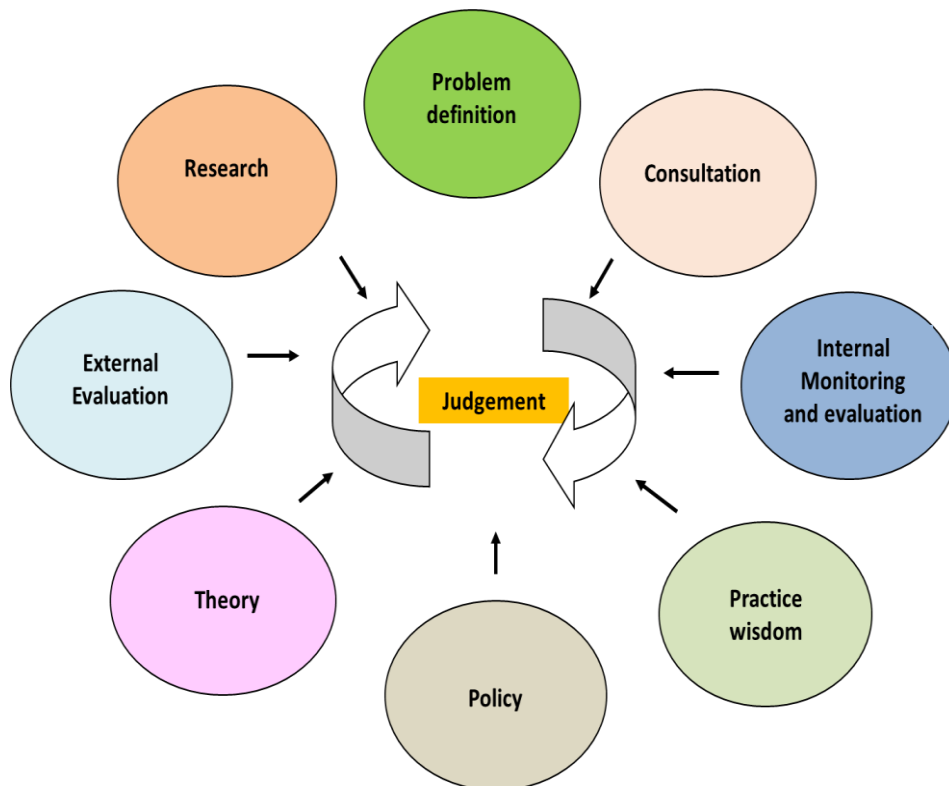


The group process assists the presenter to consider the problem in more detail, or from different perspectives. This can be done through posing fresh questions or offering alternative readings. The process is about drawing out understanding and developing insight, rather than seeking to impose 'superior' or ready-made solutions. The way that a person feels about the situation is as important as their thoughts, and space must be given to explore this dimension of the participant's total response to the situation.

While the set can help put situations into perspective, and assuage the anxiety that someone might be feeling about taking action, it can also help members to draw from and to develop relevant theoretical understandings. The aim is to bring together the 'why', 'what' and 'how' of action informed by evidence.

The term 'evidence-informed' describes decision-making about practice, policy and/or commissioning, which is based on the integration of experience, judgement and expertise with the best available external evidence from systematic research. Figure 2 shows the different sources of evidence that can be brought into play in support of judgement.

Figure 2: Sources of evidence in support of judgement



Having considered matters it is essential that members commit to specific actions and declare these to the group. In effect, participants develop and then successively test a 'theory of change'; the means by which they hope to bring about improvements in the situation. Following the meeting, the intended action is carried out in the work context, the results brought back to the set for further analysis, and the cycle begins afresh. Thus there is an important balance to be struck between challenge and support. The point is to make needed changes in the work setting, not to offer shoulders to cry on!

Requirements for Successful Sets

Remaining true to the approach developed by Revans, means not mystifying or over complicating what is essentially a simple process. Effective sets rely on members:

- Committing to and trusting the process and acting in good faith
- Taking responsibility for one's learning and actions
- Carrying out the plans that are formed at the end of sessions
- Reflecting on progress and plans in order to learn from experience
- Maintaining the confidentiality of other people's issues between set meetings

Members also need to exercise good interpersonal and communication skills including:

- Listening actively, paying attention to others, and encouraging others to speak
- Allowing time for others to reflect and not always filling a silence
- Not offering one's own solutions as someone else's action plan
- Collaborating with others to make it work as well as possible
- Being honest and open to the other members
- Speaking for yourself without generalizations

Facilitation of Sets

Revans was not convinced that facilitators are necessary as long as set members are committed to the process and each other. This set, however, will be facilitated by John Bamber. John will assist members to develop their theories of change, and also to make links to relevant theories and concepts where appropriate. John will also encourage members to write up a brief account of their learning as part of the reflective process.

Becoming Reflective and Critical

Finally, a few words about reflection-in-action, which is a term associated with Schon (1983, 1987). He makes a useful distinction between 'espoused theory' and 'theory in action'; what people say they are committed to and what they actually do. A practitioner might claim to favour a participative style, for example, but in reality act in a dictatorial way. In short, they may themselves be part of the problem. Action learning helps participants to become more aware of the fit between what they say and what they do. In Schon's view, resolving issues requires practitioners to surface and then change their habitual ways of thinking and acting.

For Brookfield (2000), the change inevitably involves 'incremental fluctuation', in which small but progressive movements through the various stages of critical reflection are more likely than paradigm shifts. In this view, workplace learning can be characterised by evidence of an increasing ability to take different perspectives on situations, but also by fluctuating moments of falling back, or apparent regression. He summarises this extended learning process as follows (2000: 96):

Arising out of this process of exploring and testing new identities, assumptions, explanations, roles, values, beliefs and behaviours, is the development of a changed way of thinking and acting which 'makes sense' or 'fits' the disorienting dilemma. This new perspective is constructed by the person involved, and is liable to be, initially at least, partial, tentative and fragile. Indeed there is often a series of incremental confirmations of the validity of elements of this new perspective as this informs people's actions. The perspective becomes judged to be increasingly valid, and its features refined, as experience confirms its validity. Having decided that new norms, assumptions, beliefs and behaviours make sense in the context of our experiences, we seek for ways to integrate these permanently into our lives.

References, materials and resources

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