Taking Action on Reflection

13 September 2014
Rationale of Study

Executive Action Learning COR163

• To study to what extent these reflective processes are demonstrated in practice – classroom and practical components

• Any improvements to be considered to improve the delivery of the Action Learning (AL) program in UniSIM

Research Questions:

• What is the extent of reflection that occurs in the classroom component of the AL Course?

• What is the extent of reflection that occurs in the practical component of the AL Course?
What is Action Learning?

Action Learning (AL)
• A problem solving methodology
• Developed by Dr Reginald Revans in the 1940s

AL process
• Involves a group of four to eight people with diverse background
• Each group will have a set advisor
• Asking the right questions to surface the real issues
• Work on a real-life work problem
• Reflecting on the dialogue to learn together with an open mind

Learning through three key components of AL
• Questions – emphasis on questions over programmed knowledge
• Reflection – discovery of one’s own ignorance and through mutual learning exchanges
• Action Inquiry – to solve the problem through a process of reflective
Reflection Phases in the AL process

Dr. Reg Revans envisaged that learning occurred as a result of learners' interactions with three interdependent and progressive reflection phases.

1. **Systems Alpha**
   - Problem diagnosis phase in which learners seek inquiry into the problem occurrence.

2. **Systems Beta**
   - Problem-solving stage where learners attempt to solve the problem by making and working with meaning of what has been said.

3. **Systems Gamma**
   - Focus on the learning that results from AL process for the set members, and the individual learner.
Course Structure

Action Learning is a six weeks elective course, structured into three parts:

- A classroom component
- A practical component
- An online component

Pre-course Work

- Readings & videos
- Submit a real-life work challenge

Class Session 1

- Lecture
- Students select challenge, form groups to work on it

Field Application (3 weeks)

- Meet at least once to work on the challenge

Class Session 2

- Group presentation of action learning experience

Online Forum

2 Threads:
- Personal reflection
- Business application of AL

Data Set 1

Data Set 2
Data Collection Approach

• Qualitative and reflection-on-action approach
• Reflection survey administrated to students
• Set advisor’s observation
• Set advisor focus group
• Number of students surveyed – 50 (out of 100 students)
• Students from different faculty and industry they work in
• Study consist of five AL groups and five set advisors
Findings

System Alpha - Problem diagnosis phase in which learners seek to understand how a problem occurred

- Groups that have formally established norms or ground rules displayed a more open climate environment for reflection

"Ground rules were set such that there is open dialogue and no one person is in charge."

"I asked as many questions and even felt that some questions that I asked might seem silly to me but my group reflected on each question in detail to diagnose the problem."
Findings

System Alpha - Problem diagnosis phase in which learners seek to understand how a problem occurred

• The level of reflection was more focused on one’s own experience - tended to rely on what they knew rather than what they did not know

• There was more telling than asking questions from the group

• Learners were more focused on their own questions than in building on other team members' questions

• The extent of reflection in the System Alpha stage was reduced in the practical component
Findings

System Beta - Linking and integrating ideas or information to have a holistic view and creating new meanings or relationships by linking into other ideas, views or thoughts

• Reflection was based on past experience and combining of existing ideas rather than innovative, new ideas or making new connections - reliance on past experience or expertise

• Group members asked questions in a very factual manner, which limited the imagining aspect of reflection

• Evidence of attempts to create new meanings or relationships by linking to other ideas, views or thoughts were lacking
Findings

System Beta - Linking and integrating ideas or information to have a holistic view and creating new meanings or relationships by linking into other ideas, views or thoughts

- In the practical component there were evidence that group members trying to think of unique ideas, and also searching for possible alternatives outside of their expertise and experience

"I tried to think out-of-the-box to solve the problem"

"I actively look for alternatives by searching for more information on the net and contribute ideas of what could be implemented"

"With the exchange of ideas, it allows me to think deeper and think of new ideas from a different perspective that I did not think before."
Findings

System Beta - Linking and integrating ideas or information to have a holistic view and creating new meanings or relationships by linking into other ideas, views or thoughts

• A deeper level of reflection has taken place in the practical component

• However, both in the classroom and the practical component, attempting to make new meaning by forming new connections or generating unique ideas were limited
Findings

System Gamma - Evidence that new learning have taken place by transforming current understandings through reflection resulted from the AL process

- Evidence of group member realizing the importance of stepping back and removing oneself from one's own perspectives

- Some participants reflected on extending the problem discussed to a social/community-related issue and considered the problem's implications at a societal level

  "How the problem relates not just directly to my current work but also a social issue."

- Evidence of widening their perspectives and getting them to think about issues which they never thought of before take place

  "There were a couple of members who have interesting ideas which triggers me to think what would I do."
Findings

System Gamma - Evidence that new learning have taken place by transforming current understandings through reflection resulted from the AL process

• During the practical component, evidence that group members realised the power of sharing personal experiences for reflection and learning

• A certain awareness of their personal assumptions, which may have blinded them to some very obvious issues in the initial phase, and became apparent in the practical component

• However, though a higher level of transformative reflection took place during the practical component, it was observed that the extent of insight gained by group members looking at the problem through different lenses and perspectives, is still limited
Findings

Conclusion

• Students have indeed experience reflecting progressively in relation to Revans’ three phases of Systems Alpha, Beta and Gamma

• The extent of the reflection at each phase were limited

• May due to the fact that our adult students are too familiar and accustomed to structured process than when place in an unstructured environment during the AL session, the ability to reflect in depth is impacted

• Another possible reason is that students having little knowledge of the importance of reflection and enquiry, and the techniques of asking insightful questions will have an impact on the extent of their reflection.

• Lack of consistent standards and practices on how the set advisors facilitate to encourage reflection and learning
Recommendations

Enhancement of Pre-Work Components

• Incorporate a pre-workshop quiz that ensures learners are aware of the importance of reflection and enquiry to the AL process

• Students are to write a reflective summary after reading the pre-course work of articles on the importance of reflection in the AL process

Emphasis on Questioning Techniques

• During the classroom session, even before the AL sets commence, include a practice session or warm-up activity where learners practice asking questions based on a common business challenge and work on asking deeper, reflective questions lead to analyzing the issue or provoke thinking

• Learners to write down the deep and reflective questions that emerge during the AL process and share their records with the class
Recommendations

Establish a Set of Consistent Practices for Set Advisors
• There is a need to establish a set of consistent standards and practices among the set advisors

Enhancement of Classroom Content and Experience
• Incorporate a small personal reflection plan of about a 1,000 words per participant where the participant records down his/her reflections as part of a journal throughout the learning journey class
Thank You