

A GUIDE TO **ACTION LEARNING** IN TRANSNATIONAL EDUCATION

Action learning is a term used to broadly describe a type of professional development project in which a group of people work together to actively seek to address an issue, solve a problem or improve a process, and to learn from each other and through the project. The groups are referred to as action learning sets. Participants in action learning sets take action, reflect on critical questions and learn from each other and from what they do.

For transnational teaching teams active learning is an effective professional development model situated in the teaching and learning context. It enables teaching team members to work collectively on common issues with a view to building cross-border international teams sharing challenges and responsibilities.

Example 1 AL project: Internationalising the science curriculum

The Science academics in this set believed science students should be equipped to work within the global science networks, to seek solutions to a wide range of issues affecting the planet, and have the capacity to be engaged as international citizens.

They planned an AL project with the agreed aim of developing a 'global learning' subject (an approach that utilises videoconferencing for international student collaboration) with the 'home' University in another country.

The participants met every two weeks by videoconference to discuss progress as they went about designing, planning and implementing the subject. During the trial delivery they observed and discussed the facilitation of the videoconferences and met with small groups of the students to discuss their perceptions.

They discussed and recorded their own learning about facilitation, inter-cultural issues, technological issues and evaluated the subject at the end of the semester.

The group developed a report on the subject, gave presentations to staff, and submitted a paper to an education conference.

Key elements in the transnational context

Collegial - values collaboration and mutual understanding, deals with issues of concern to participants individually and as a whole and shares the outcomes within and beyond the group.

Supported – a facilitator provides support as the group works and learns together.

Planned - participants meet regularly to work together in a supportive yet challenging way.

Practice-based - involves action on authentic, work-based issues, problems, questions.

Evidence-based - participants seek information from stakeholders to inform their actions while addressing the issue.

Outcomes-based - the team works towards an outcome that improves practice for the group and beyond.

Developmental - emphasis is on professional learning that emerges from both working on the project and from working with the group.

Empowering - engages participants in finding their own solutions, gaining confidence and achieving outcomes.

Formative - the team seeks and reflects on feedback throughout the project.

Iterative - the project moves through stages each of which, through reflection and formative evaluation, may affect and possibly change the next stage.

Experiential - based in experiential learning and critical reflection on key questions.

What is the action learning process?

Any action learning project involves a series of planned steps.

Step 1

Discuss and decide

Decide on the issue you would like to collaborate on

- Discuss the issues of importance to the group.
- Why are you concerned about this?
- What do you think you could do about this?
- What are the constraints and enablers?
- How might you choose between alternative ideas?
- Decide on the issue you will work on.

Decide how you will go about it

- Critically assess feasibility and suitability of project ideas.
- How disruptive is each of the options?
- What are the strengths and limitations of the various approaches?
- How acceptable are these approaches to all the people involved?
- What do you know? What do you need to know?

Step 2

Plan

Aims and objectives

- Develop clear aims and objectives that meet participants' individual and team development needs.
- Develop a set of key questions you want to answer.
- What products will you create?

Decide on the process, eg:

- A small study into learning within a subject.
- A peer observation of teaching project.
- Peer review of assessment tasks and moderation process.

Decide on the details

- Plan the activities - who, what, when, where?
- Develop the timetable and milestones.
- Include regular meetings for discussion.
- What resources and support do you need?

Plan the evaluation

- How will you evaluate the project?
- How will you gather data, eg observations, interviews, questionnaires?
- You may need ethics approval for a research project – talk to your AL team facilitator.

Step 3

Act

Carry out your plan

Observe, record, reflect and discuss

Step 4

Evaluate and disseminate

Complete your evaluation

Write up your project

'Publish' the outcomes

Related concepts - Action research and experiential learning

Action learning is based in experiential learning and is a close cousin to action research. Action research is a method by which a group of practitioners 'research' their own practice. In a methodical way they seek 'data' from their own observations, then develop a 'theory' about what they have observed to inform further refinement and testing. They 'publish' their findings by sharing what they do and what they discover with their colleagues.

Within education, action research involves a group of teachers planning and working together on a common issue or problem in teaching. They decide on an issue or problem to address, plan some action to address it, carry out the plan, observe and reflect on what happened, make refinements, and then go around the cycle again trying to get closer to the best solution. The group might continue on this cyclic process for as long as they wish, as their reflections will surface new issues and ideas for improvement that they can try out and evaluate.

Experiential learning is learning that comes from a 'real-life' experience. However, just having the experience is not enough for learning. In order to learn from the experience we need to reflect on it, develop ideas, try them out and reflect on these trials through an ongoing process.

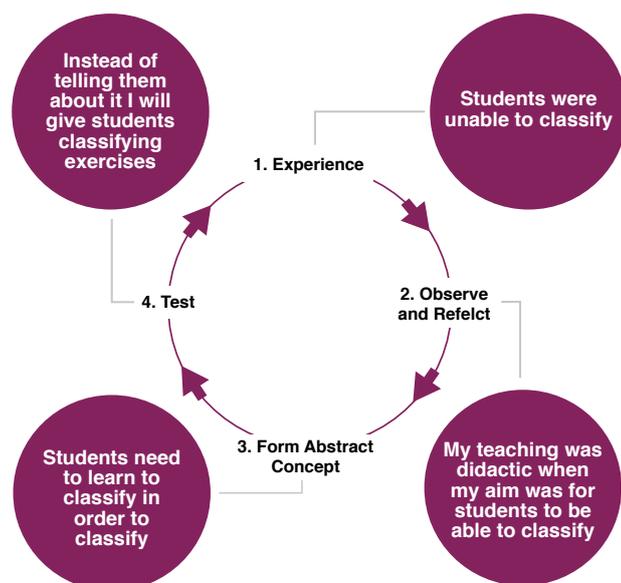


Figure 1 A single cycle of Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle as applied to a teaching experience¹

¹Adapted from Bell, M.(2012) Peer Observation Partnerships in Higher Education (2nd ed.). Milperra, NSW: HERDSA.

Is action learning cyclic?

An action learning project has some of the characteristics of action research but may not be cyclic in nature. An action learning project has a set end point and generally has a team leader and a supporter/advisor. An action learning project may look something like this.

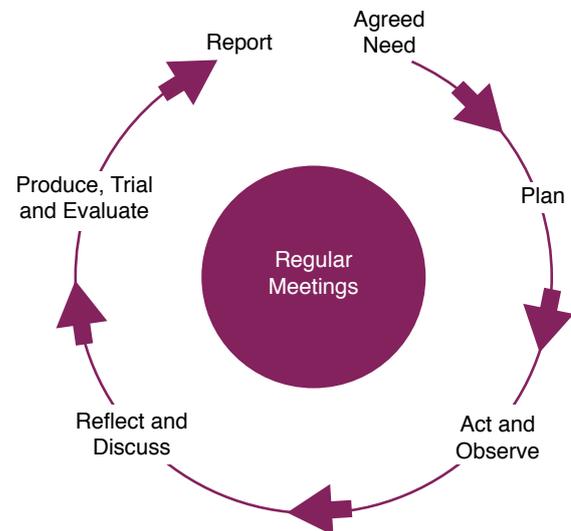


Figure 2 Example of single cycle action learning project

Example 2 AL project: Peer observation of teaching

The subject coordinator of a first year economics subject was concerned about the student evaluations of teaching from the previous year. She discussed this with the teaching team and they decided to carry out an action learning project using peer observation, with the agreed aims of improving lecturing and developing teaching approaches.

They decided to have four observation sessions through the semester at the 'home' and 'offshore' campuses so that all were observed twice and observed another member of the team twice.

The groups met for feedback after each set of observations and discussed their learning and progress as an AL group. They each kept a learning journal through the process.

The teaching team then wrote an article on their work for the university newsletter and published it in an online journal.

Action learning project planning template

Project title
Project leader
Project team members
Date

Vision (What we want to achieve)
Purpose (Why we want to achieve this vision)
Context (Opportunities, constraints, enablers)
Questions (The central questions we will address)
Assistance and support (The assistance we need)
Evaluation (How we will measure success of process and outcomes)
Strategies (The strategies we will use, how we will overcome constraints)
Action Plan (Steps, tasks, responsibilities)
Timeline (Timeline, milestones)

Action learning project report template

Project leader
Project team members
Project start date
Project report date

Our original vision
Our purpose, why we wanted to achieve this vision
Our achievements and any continuing progress towards or beyond the vision
Evaluation of the project results with evidence to support the evaluation
Strategies we used and the reasons for any variations from the plan
Unexpected issues, actions, outcomes
Good practices, resources we used or developed
Lessons we learned from the experience
Concepts, models, techniques that were helpful
Support provided

Professional Development Principles

A set of professional development principles for transnational teaching teams informed, and were refined through, the work of the participatory action learning groups in this project.

The principles can be accessed at:
transnationalteachingteams.org

References

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- 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.
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A useful resource

McGill, I. & Brockbank, A. (2004). *The Action Learning Handbook: Powerful Techniques for education, professional development and training* (Revised ed). RoutledgeFalmer, Taylor & Francis Group, UK.

This is a useful practical guide describing procedures and skills for implementing action learning.



Professional development for quality enhancement of learning and teaching

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