

## ACTION LEARNING IN A GRADUATE ONLINE COURSE

### Abstract

Today's organizations often face complex problems that do not have readily identifiable solutions. Leadership educators are called upon to implement innovative pedagogical practices to teach students to address such complex problems. Inspired by action learning principles, this application brief describes a group-oriented assignment in an online graduate course on leadership development. Practitioner and student reflections are offered as well as an analysis of student learning. Recommendations from these experiences offer ways to refine this pedagogical practice.

### Introduction

Traditional teaching methods including lectures and conventional assignments are insufficient in preparing individuals to address the complex problems encountered in today's ever changing work environment (Revans, 2012; Scott, 2017). Heifetz (2003) described such problems as adaptive challenges and require people to "change their ways rather than continue to operate according to current structures, procedures and processes" (p. 70). Leadership education programs must then identify strategies which allow students to explore problems without clear solutions.

Research-based, best practices for designing leadership development programs incorporate a variety of learning methods that are both cognitive in nature and through hands-on, experiential learning (Allen & Hartman, 2008; Kolb, 1984), as well as informed by essential principles adult development (Kegan, 1980). While action learning is not explicitly

identified among the signature pedagogies of leadership education (Jenkins, 2012), it is related to other important instructional practices such as small group discussions, interactive lecture and reflection journaling. Since action learning is a student-centered approach to teaching and learning that fosters developmental relationships among a community of learners, action learning can be instrumental in achieving important outcomes associated with high-quality leadership development programs (Eich, 2008). This application brief explains action learning and how the authors applied action learning principles in an online graduate course on leadership development.

### Review of Related Literature

Action Learning. Revans (2012) posited action learning programs must include two key criteria: (1) the field of action, representing the context within which the 'problem' is embedded; and (2) the set, referring to the people and processes that provide

opportunities to challenge, support and reflect with each other. First, the problem arises from real, organizational challenges whereby solutions to the complex problems are not readily identifiable. Revans (2012) differentiates 'puzzle'-solving and 'problem'-solving. A 'puzzle' is described as having a clear solution or end game. In contrast, a problem "has no existing solution, and even after it has been long and deliberately treated by different persons, all skilled and reasonable, it may still suggest to each of them some different course of subsequent action" (Revans, 2012, p. 36). As conceived here, problems are similar to what others define as 'adaptive challenges' (Heifetz, 1996).

Second, the action learning process requires a small 'set' of colleagues working together on real issues (McGill & Brockbank, 2004). Drawing on their unique knowledge and experience, other members of the set engage in dialogue and pose a series of questions to better understand the issue and present suggestions for action. This interaction requires members to build on prior knowledge to fill in the gaps and identify solution alternatives. The individual then contemplates the feedback and takes action accordingly. In an iterative process, subsequent 'set' interaction requires members to provide updates and show progress on their individual projects by explaining what has happened and what they are learning from the experience (Pearce, 2012).

Action learning is a shared social activity (McGill & Brockbank, 2004). The process of familiarizing with the work, analyzing what is presented and offering ideas for resolution, leads to a collective and a reflective learning space. Action learning is different from other types of group work since it does not include any of the formal structures or hierarchical roles and responsibilities. The 'set' members have individual objectives and goals, professional environments, and encourage and challenge each other through constructive feedback. Through this process, students voluntarily engage in

leadership learning while maintaining the autonomy to experiment within their individual environment (McGill & Brockbank, 2004).

Action Learning Practices in Leadership Capacity Development. Even though action learning is not explicitly identified within the taxonomy of 'signature pedagogies' (Jenkins, 2012; Guthrie & Jenkins, 2018), other leadership educators asserted action learning as an important source of learning within leadership development (Allen & Hartman, 2008). We contend that action learning and its corresponding pedagogical practices are highly salient tools to facilitate leadership learning.

First, the intended outcomes of action learning often involve developing knowledge, enhancing problem-solving skills, improving collaboration skills, enhancing social capital and furthering other related skills necessary for continuous learning (Leonard & Lang, 2010; Raelin & Coghlan, 2006), all of which are commonly associated with leadership development and education (Seemiller, 2013).

Peer feedback is an essential feature of action learning. A peer feedback process yields benefits beyond the project outcome at the conclusion of the action learning cycle. By providing and receiving constructive feedback, members cultivate strong relationships with one another and are more comfortable bringing forth real issues and analyzing them collectively. Most formative peer feedback models contend that individual learners assume multiple roles as both an assessee and assessor (McCarthy, 2017). While receiving feedback functions to confirm existing information, add new information, and identify and correct errors (Butler & Winne, 1995), research indicates students may benefit more from providing feedback (Cho & Cho, 2011) by requiring higher level critical thinking skills. Additionally, peer assessment is related to the development self-efficacy, self-awareness and sense of community (Bright, Caza, Turesky, Putzel, Nelson & Luechtefeld,

2016). Since action learning invites set members to provide and receive extensive feedback to and from others, it holds great promise for developing crucial leadership skills (Allen & Hartman, 2008; DeRue & Wellman, 2009).

Another defining feature of the action learning process is the role of reflection (Scott, 2017). Reflection is the process by which individuals construct and make meaning from their experiences (Ash & Clayton, 2009). Action learning integrates intentional and structured opportunities for individuals to reflect upon feedback received to inform future action and improve performance. Not only does reflection positively impact cognitive abilities (Wang & Rodgers, 2006) and moral development (Strain, 2005), but also experience “profound personal development resulting from reflection upon action” (Pedler, Burgoyne & Brook, 2005, p 58). Reflection is a common pedagogical approach among leadership educators (Jenkins, 2012; Guthrie & Jenkins, 2018) and when lead by skilled facilitators, reflection can greatly impact general leadership development (Leonard & Lang, 2010).

## Leadership Development Intervention Strategies: The Course Context

Leadership Development Intervention Strategies is a master’s level course which is a required concentration course for the graduate program in organizational leadership. This 16-week semester course is facilitated entirely online using Blackboard as the institution’s content management system. Offered only during the spring semester, students typically enroll in it during the latter stages of their master’s program in Organizational Leadership.

Focusing on building leadership capacity, this course includes learning objectives such as: describe current trends in leadership development; explain the five general methods of facilitating leadership

development; design a comprehensive leadership development intervention; and determine assessment strategies to evaluate effectiveness of leadership development intervention programs.

Core course content focuses on a taxonomy of five general methods for leadership development which include Developmental Relationships (e.g., mentoring, coaching, social identity networks); Developmental Assignments (e.g., temporary assignments, action learning); Feedback Processes (e.g., 360-degree feedback, performance appraisal); Formal Programs (e.g., skills-based training); and Self-Development (e.g., readings, professional conferences) (McCauley, Kanaga & Lafferty, 2010).

Students create a comprehensive leadership development intervention program for a specific organizational context. This semester-long assignment contains five major deliverables. For the first deliverable students identify an organizational context, evaluate the internal dynamics and detail the leadership development needs within the organization. Second, from a lens of ‘developmental readiness’ (Avolio & Hannah, 2008), students craft a vision for the leadership development intervention program and communicate the vision by articulating appropriate learning objectives. The third component requires students to explain specific intervention strategies in alignment with the stated organizational needs and intended learning objectives. Students are required to incorporate three of the five general methods of leadership development (McCauley, Kanaga, & Lafferty, 2010). The fourth deliverable invites students to integrate appropriate assessment activities to evaluate effectiveness of the leadership development. The final deliverable requires students to submit a comprehensive leadership development intervention plan detailing the organizational needs, learning objectives, methods for development and assessment activities that integrates feedback from previous assignments.

## Action Learning Peer Feedback Assignment

Students are introduced to the Action Learning Peer Feedback assignment during the first week of the semester. While students independently complete the leadership development intervention project, they engage with other students to 'coach' each other periodically during the semester. Students are required to provide peer feedback for the first four deliverables of the leadership development intervention project (Needs Assessment; Learning Objectives; Intervention Strategies; and Assessment Activities). Students offer constructive feedback that include observations of positive aspects as well as critique and opportunities for improvement that integrates key insights from the course.

The instructor establishes action learning 'sets' by aligning groups comprised of three or four students and creates the action learning space using the group feature in Blackboard. When submitting each phase of the Leadership Development Intervention project, students upload their assignments in two locations within Blackboard: first, within the assignment dropbox and second, to the designated group discussion board forum. All feedback that students provide each other is text-based, and provided via the group discussion board threads.

Students receive a grading rubric detailing expectations regarding content and style of the feedback they provide to others. The Content dimensions include key elements such as "constructively evaluates the peer assignment with specific, detailed information by describing specific examples related to course content" and "generates several alternatives for improvement." Additionally, students are instructed to ground their feedback in literature with an expectation of citing a minimum of two references. One reference must be from the required reading list; the other reference must be from a peer-review journal article not affiliated with

the course readings.

Stylistic considerations include concepts such as providing "clear, nonjudgmental and non-biased by focusing on the peer's paper rather than the individual" and feedback provided "is highly cognizant of word choice and general tenor involved in the feedback." Supplemental resources on how to provide (Blue Pencil Institute, 2017a) and receive (Blue Pencil Institute, 2017b) feedback are also available to students.

At the conclusion of the semester students develop a final paper reflecting upon key insights they developed by encouraging and challenging each other during the semester. The reflection paper is not intended for students to simply describe the technical comments provided to or received from others; rather, students are required to reflect upon higher-order thinking regarding the feedback process. Students are encouraged to reflect on the experience from two perspectives. First, they contemplate the unique insights gleaned during the process of providing feedback to others. Second, they reflect upon the distinctive insights acquired from the feedback received from others. Combined, the action learning feedback and reflection assignments represent approximately one-third of the student's final course grade.

## Analysis of Outcomes

**Student Performance.** The aim of the student project is to develop a comprehensive leadership development intervention program for a specific organizational context. The final submission represents a culmination of course content and integration of peer feedback.

A grading rubric is used to evaluate student performance and includes the following dimensions: Organizational Context; Audience Analysis; Learning Objectives; Intervention Strategies; and Assessment

of Intervention Strategies (see Figure 1). Each dimension contains four categories: Distinguished (equivalent to an "A"); Proficient (equivalent to a "B"); Apprentice (equivalent to a "C"); and Novice (equivalent to a "D" or lower).

Dimension	Qualities of a Distinguished Submission
<i>Organizational Context</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clear description of the organization; rich with specific details; strong reader interest.</li> <li>• Clearly identified strengths and weaknesses regarding both "leader development" and "leadership development" issues.</li> </ul>
<i>Audience: Adult Learning Theory and Learning Styles</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Displays general and specific understanding of audience differences (e.g., development and learning styles) that may affect learning.</li> <li>• Displays general and specific understanding of audience's skills and prior learning that may affect learning.</li> </ul>
<i>Learning Objectives</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Taken together, the objectives present a very clear purpose of the leader/ship development intervention.</li> </ul>
<i>Intervention Strategy</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All interventions are explicitly linked to learning objectives.</li> <li>• Significant variety across instruction, activities and/or resources. This variety makes a clear contribution to learning.</li> <li>• Most instruction has been designed with reference to contextual factors and needs assessment data.</li> <li>• All activities appear productive and appropriate for the target audience.</li> <li>• Clear, well-chosen timeline with well-defined dates for key benchmarks; rich with specific and relevant details that support the timeline.</li> </ul>
<i>Assessment of Intervention Strategy</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning objective(s) for intervention strategies are assessed through the assessment plan; assessment activities are congruent with the learning objective(s) in content and complexity.</li> <li>• Assessment activities are appropriately designed and relevant for the leader/ship development intervention.</li> <li>• Assessment activities appear to be valid with directions and procedures that are abundantly clear.</li> </ul>

Figure 1. Rubric Dimensions at Distinguished Level: Leader and Leadership Development Intervention Project: Final Paper

The Intervention Strategies comprise half of the project grade and serves as a key indicator of student learning. Student performance on the final project are consistently strong on the Intervention Strategy dimension. Students during the spring 2017 semester performed at the Proficient level or higher 92.9 percent of the time and 66.7 percent performed at the Distinguished level. Likewise, during the spring 2018 semester, students performed at the Proficient level or higher 94.5 percent of the time and 63.7 percent performed at the Distinguished level.

Students reflect upon the action learning process by not only contemplating the feedback they received from others, but also the feedback they provided to others. The grading rubric for this assignment contains the same categories of performance (e.g., Distinguished, Proficient, Apprentice, Novice). Eighty percent of the grade is weighted for the combined reflection elements of the feedback provided and feedback received. Figure two describes expectations to receive distinguished marks on this assignment:

Dimension	Qualities of a Distinguished Submission
<i>Reflection: Feedback Provided TO Others</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Response demonstrates an in-depth reflection on, and personalization of, the theories, concepts, and/or strategies presented in the course materials.</li> <li>• Reflection moves beyond simple description of the experience or feedback provided to an analysis of how the experience contributed to understanding of self, others, and/or course concepts.</li> <li>• Reflection demonstrates at an exceptional level ability of the student to question their own biases, preconceptions or assumptions and define new modes of thinking as a result.</li> <li>• Viewpoints and interpretations are insightful and well supported. Clear, detailed examples are provided, as applicable.</li> </ul>
<i>Reflection: Feedback Received FROM Others</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Response demonstrates an in-depth reflection on, and personalization of, the theories, concepts, and/or strategies presented in the course materials.</li> <li>• Reflection moves beyond simple description of the experience or feedback provided to an analysis of how the experience contributed to understanding of self, others, and/or course concepts.</li> <li>• Reflection demonstrates at an exceptional level ability of the student to question their own biases, preconceptions or assumptions and define new modes of thinking as a result.</li> <li>• Viewpoints and interpretations are insightful and well supported. Clear, detailed examples are provided, as applicable.</li> </ul>

Figure 2. Rubric Dimensions at Distinguished Level: Action Learning Peer Feedback Reflection .

Students displayed consistently strong ratings for their reflection assignments. During the spring 2017 semester, 89.3 percent of the time students performed at the Proficient level or higher and 46.4 percent of the time at the Distinguished level. Students in the spring 2018 course, performed at the Proficient level or higher 100 percent of the time whereas 68.1 percent of the time scored at the Distinguished level.

Student Reflection. Student reflections offer rich information and a more complete representation of student learning beyond simple metrics gleaned from an evaluation of grading rubrics. A content analysis of student reflections from the action learning experience yields four primary themes: Deeper understanding of the course content; Coaching other group members; Processing the critique from others; and Personal leadership development.

Deeper understanding of course content. The action learning process challenged students toward a sophisticated understanding of course content. One

student explained the action learning groups were a new experience that challenged him in unique ways. He remarked “the processes of both giving and receiving feedback on a topic in which I have little direct experience required additional reflection beyond developing the project and writing the paper (as we have in other courses).” Another student expressed how she achieved deep level learning. This student remarked that she was:

exposed (to) different perspectives and challenged personal assumptions... This process allowed us to expand on the course materials, analyze the new leadership concepts on a deeper level, and challenge our preconceived personal biases and assumptions to define new mental models... This drove additional review and research in areas where I felt less familiar with the new concepts being presented and allowed me to develop my

understanding on a greater level.

Coaching other group members. Students also expressed value in serving as a coach to their peers. One student explained “throughout this action learning process, I wanted to be seen as a partner, on our shared journey of developing our projects. I wanted to be a resource, or a sounding board, for discussing ways to integrate key concepts provided in the course material within the assignments.” Within the role of coaching, they were uniquely challenged to provide feedback in a meaningful way. One student stated:

providing feedback to others was rewarding because it allowed me to be the person from the outside that knew nothing about what my teammates were hoping to accomplish...I always kept the focus of leader development in mind when providing feedback to my team.

Through the action learning process students developed connections whereby they had vested interest in the success of their peers. One student explained, “what I wasn’t expecting is that I would grow attached to the projects, that is to say, as a coach and observer I wanted to see how each project progressed and how the authors would resolve the problems they had identified.”

Processing the critique from others. Students commonly expressed the significance of the feedback they received. They experienced the tension in their own attitudes regarding both the desire to receive feedback and their emotive responses to receiving feedback. A student expressed “my experience highlighted the difference of how affirming feedback makes me feel, versus how it benefits me.”

Another student commented:

After some reflection, I accepted that the class was designed to make us engage in an intervention, action learning type process and that this discomfort was, in fact, good for me. I embraced the feedback I received as the semester continued forward and I am truly appreciative for the genuine, honest, and detailed responses given to me.

Students frequently acknowledged the unique perspectives their peers possess and the value from feedback from those perspectives. One student explained:

Seeing this assignment through my classmates’ eyes helped me to better understand the differences in interpretation of assignments, readings, and reflection which has helped me to better my assignments through my own students’ eyes.... In order to better understand the suggestions from my classmates, I really had to work to see my organization from an outsider’s perspective.

While students were challenged by their peers to receive and understand the feedback, they were further challenged through the process of incorporating the feedback into their projects. A student explained, “the reality is that while my peers may have thought I dismissed their concerns, I found that the only way I could deal with the truths they posed to me was to move the project away from any hierarchy in the organization and create interventions that could affect change regardless of the position of the employee.”

Personal leadership development. Moreover, action learning groups can be a transformative experience for students in their journey in refining their leadership self-identities and how they engage in leadership within other contexts. A student revealed, "this process of coaching and then self-reflection has made me think differently about 'where I am' currently in terms of leadership and my role, (it) helped me identify where some of these opportunities might be applied to my daily work, and I've gotten a bit clearer about what some of my own personal 'needs' are in working in teams."

## Practitioner Reflection

Overall, the action learning project has been a positive experience, yet the experience is not without challenges. This section explains the challenges in facilitating the action learning projects along with instructor observations of the experience.

Students are provided an overview of the Action Learning project within the course syllabus and supplemental information detailing the nature of action learning along with specific expectations for the assignment. The supplemental information contains both a narrative description and corresponding grading rubric used to evaluate the quality of the peer feedback. I dedicated significant investment of time and energy to provide detailed feedback to students on the quality of their peer feedback. I found this to be particularly important at the first deliverable in order to establish shared expectations for the assignment.

During the first three iterations of the course students were required to record a six to eight minute VoiceThread™ presentation each of the five project deliverables. Students were expected to

use the presentations as a source of information on which to base their feedback. Students commonly submitted presentations ranging between 20 to 30 minutes. Even after repeated reminders to limit their presentations to the expected parameters, few students conformed to the time constraints.

For pragmatic reasons, I eliminated the VoiceThread™ requirement in the most recent iteration of the course. This alleviated a significant burden of the time necessary to evaluate student performance. I also observed a notable, unintended consequence. Overall, the quality of the student-to-student feedback improved dramatically. This leads me to believe that some students were providing peer feedback based primarily from the general content of the presentation rather than reviewing each other's written assignments. Additionally, more students adopted the my practice of using the Comment feature in Microsoft Word to provide specific observations directly within each other's written work.

Additionally, peer feedback is required to be provided within one week of the due date for each assignment. I selected one week in order to create urgency but also to afford a substantial opportunity to revise their assignments as they continue to build on their projects. The instructor observed that timely submissions of each assignment is critical to afford peers the necessary time to provide peer feedback. For instance, a student may be required to take a business-related trip outside the country while another student may simply stop participating in the class. Both scenarios may cause a student to fail to meet an assignment deadline which can disrupt the overall flow and interpersonal dynamics of the action learning groups. It is paramount that members establish and maintain effective communication to minimize the impact on group dynamics.

Finally, I have received anecdotal comments from direct communication with students along with anonymous feedback on course evaluations of their



interest being able to interact with students beyond those of their action learning groups. They often acknowledge the benefit of developing intentional relationships to provide meaningful feedback among a core group of students. However, they also desire the ability to glean insights from other students by reviewing other's assignments and interacting with them.

## Student Reflection

By participating in a semester-long action peer feedback process, I was able to receive feedback from other individuals with an advantage of observing my project from a 10,000 foot view. This process forced me to carefully connect the pieces which ultimately formed a clear picture of a leader and leadership development intervention. In turn, I was also challenged with examining another project from a holistic perspective allowing me to exercise systems thinking. The following sections include my reflections on both providing feedback in this project as well as in receiving feedback.

**Giving Feedback.** In reviewing the work of my classmates, I approached the process of providing feedback with a lens of how each objective or intervention presented fit within the larger organization. From a smaller scale it was important to consider how the ideas built from one another and could include individuals within the organization. Using a real work situation can be delicate and requires additional support from the peer feedback process (Van Velsor, McCauley, & Ruderman, 2010). With an understanding my classmates were personally invested in the proposed project, I discovered how crucial it was to present suggestions in a positive and constructive manner. Particularly at the conclusion of the project, my classmate effortlessly addressed the implications of the set outcomes for long-term effectiveness of the program. By engaging in a strategic conversation about the potential outcomes,

we came to the understanding there are multiple possible solutions to any situation.

**Receiving Feedback.** Incorporating feedback from individuals who come from different perspectives was valuable in order to fill the gaps within my experiences. From the feedback I received, I was explicitly challenged to further expand on my objectives with specific intervention plans. Remaining open to the feedback given and thinking critically about how to incorporate the suggestions I received, I had an opportunity to cultivate my strategic thinking, acting and influencing skills. These skills were improved by both providing and receiving feedback in the intervention project.

In this particular course, the assigned readings and the intervention project were most relevant to my professional work. Not only did I have an opportunity to learn about appropriate intervention frameworks, I was able to put them into action with a real work situation (Van Velsor, et. al., 2010). The individual portion and the action learning peer feedback portion of this project was practical and applicable.

## Recommendations and Conclusion

Based on our experiences we offer several recommendations as we continue to integrate action learning groups into our courses. Recommendations involve curriculum design and other pre-course considerations to 'set' composition. First, students participating in this leadership development course typically enroll during the second half of their graduate program. Students may have familiarity with one another since many have interacted in prior leadership classes and may be readily willing to provide their peers with a critique of their work.

Second, instructors should exercise care in aligning the action learning groups. Previously, instructors

applied a 'stratified random' design by aligning groups to create a gender mix within the groups. Alternatively, instructors could determine group alignments by industry. Nearly all of the non-traditional students that comprise the student body of our graduate program are employed full-time. They represent a wide range of professions including education, human resources, public safety, and social services. Students representing similar industries may possess a natural familiarity with the challenges and opportunities associated with their field of expertise.

Another important consideration is the appropriate size of action learning groups. Revans (2012) asserted small groups were more effective than simple pairs to facilitate learning. Our experience indicates that groups between three to four students is ideal as this enhances the diversity of perspectives in giving and receiving of feedback. Additionally, we have experienced several scenarios when groups are comprised of three students with one member electing to withdraw from the course. This leaves the group with just two members for the remainder of the course. While two members can develop strong interpersonal dynamics and provide meaningful feedback, they lose the depth and richness of the feedback for their project from multiple students.

To set the stage for group success, instructors should require action learning groups to coordinate a real-time meeting at the start of the semester. This initial meeting could be facilitated through any number of free, online platforms (e.g., Skype, Zoom). An initial 'relationship building' session can establish group norms, particularly involving communication expectations. They can discuss known personal or professional challenges that may impact group dynamics during the semester.

Anecdotal and students' comments indicate some desire for a mechanism by which they can interact with students beyond their immediate action learning

groups. Rather than utilizing the group features in Blackboard, instructors should consider alternative methods fostering student interaction. Perhaps instructors could create threads for each action learning group using the general discussion board forum making each students' contribution available to all.

While there are considerations to be made regarding the structural components of action learning, it can be an effective approach to ensuring quality leadership education. This pedagogy offers students the opportunity to not only learn by doing but to truly identify problems, think critically about solutions and the best way to implement them and finally to reflect upon the process. These steps allow set members to continue creating change in their professional environments.

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