

# Working Paper Series

**The Action Learning MBA:  
A New Approach Management Education**

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**THE ACTION LEARNING MBA:  
A NEW APPROACH  
MANAGEMENT EDUCATION**

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**ABSTRACT**

Action learning has had longstanding recognition for its role in ensuring deep and effective learning, and has growing recognition for effective, workplace-centered management development. Take-up of an action learning approach in Business Schools and formal management education has been slower, however, and is often piece-meal, with it only being used for part of a program, or seen as a topic for study. This paper reports on one program where the approach to study is informed and driven by action learning: Bradford University School of Management's MBA in Engineering Management. In the paper, the nature, ethos, and theoretical foundations of the degree are described, and it is suggested that the program's learning outcomes, students' response to their experience and their uptake of learning point to the effectiveness of an action learning approach in management education.

A growing concern expressed by employers is the failure of universities to provide students with the skill sets needed by modern industry and businesses (Hibbert, 2000). Significantly, it has been suggested that the learning afforded an individual by an MBA is of limited relevance to their current employer, being better suited for career progression outside an existing workplace (David, 2000). Recognizing this failing, universities are responding by developing new and innovative approaches to education (*ibid.*). These include the adoption and incorporation of action learning into advanced programs of study (Frank, 1996), and this paper seeks to report on one of these, an MBA in Engineering Management offered by Bradford University School of Management, UK.

This program offers an innovative approach to management education, centered on an action learning approach (Revans, 1980) in which participants come together as a group to work on workplace-centered problems on an ongoing basis. In this paper we begin by outlining the nature and theoretical foundations of action learning, before describing how these are applied to the MBA study program in question. The learning outcomes and effectiveness of this program are then considered, and proposals for assessing ongoing effectiveness will be assessed are discussed.

#### THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

In the 1940s, Reg Revans, then director of education at the National Coal Board in the UK, recognized that colliery managers who were facing complex organizational problems might better learn by talking through the problems with each other. Revans thought that by sharing their concerns and plans with like-minded colleagues, the managers would gain greater insights, inspirations, and motivation to cope with difficult and challenging times. His expectation was that the action managers then took would be better informed by that discussion. Thus Revan's (1980) theory of action learning was born. Since then, the model of learning described and actioned by Revans, has been adopted and utilized by organizations all over the world (Larsen, 1996).

Despite over 50 years of interest in action learning, Revans has never offered a simple definition. Pedler (1996: 13) suggests it is "a method for individual and organizational development". It is, but it is one of many. As a method, it allows individuals to participate in an active, open and developmental learning

experience. It is centered on the premise that formal instruction is not enough to achieve true learning. Revans (1998) suggests **L**, the total of an individual's learning is made up of two elements: **P**, which is *programmed knowledge* and **Q**, which is *questioning insight*. This model of learning is expressed by the simple equation: **L = P + Q**. **P** is characterized by traditional instruction and 'inherited wisdom', e.g. the type of information which appears in a text books and is developed through traditional and formal methods of instruction. **Q** is characterized by the ability to ask penetrating questions, it is the skill and ability to get to the unknown. It is this questioning insight that creates truly effective learning, as it allows the individual to fully explore the nature implications, relevance and application of the learning that they hold. The philosophy of action learning is that learning is not solely about acquiring knowledge or a skill by reading a book or listening to a lecture. Learning is about doing something differently, or behaving differently, about applying and making use of skill or of new knowledge, about thinking differently, or having a new set of values and beliefs. Only when we can transfer our knowledge, skill, behavior, beliefs or insights to something practical, thus providing evidence that we are able to apply (action) it, can we claim that we have really learnt (Weinstien, 1995).

In its practice, action learning relies on four linked elements to ensure effective learning (Johnson, 1998; Pedler, 1996). These are: (i) the person or individual; (ii) the problem they are seeking to solve; (iii) a group of individuals (the learning set) with whom they interact; (iv) action on the problem and learning from this action.

Action learning therefore involves, indeed relies upon, individuals addressing significant problems. As such, it is ideal for workplace-centered learning. It also represents a practical way for individuals to engage in their own personal development through exploring their problems, taking action and responding to this action (learning). Personal development requires a person can reflect on their work and life with a view to making things happen or change. According to Revans (1980: 43) this development works best when it is a natural outcome of a manager's daily practice; "by tackling today's problems more thoughtfully, he automatically learns how better to tackle tomorrow's." At a task level this may involve tackling a problem like making better use of time or working through a project. At a more reflective level it may be

whether to change the direction of a career or achieving the 'right balance' in life. Such reflective learning is more likely to develop new insights, the goal of action learning, and it is normal, therefore, for an individual engaged in action learning to maintain a learning log to encourage more private and reflective development.

The nature of the problem faced by an individual is also significant. Problems may be familiar or unfamiliar to a group, and internal or external, depending on whether, those involved in learning together are drawn from the same organization (Revens, 1980). It may sound like an exercise in semantics, but in action learning there is a clear distinction made between a puzzle which has a correct answer and a problem which has any number of answers. As Revans (1980: 44), put it:

*"The [issue addressed] had not to be a mere puzzle, namely something to which a solution could be said already to exist, provided some specialist acute enough could be let loose to find it; a problem is some embarrassment to the top management to which different reasonable, honest and experienced men would suggest different approaches, according to their personal value systems and individual past achievements."*

Senge (1997) makes the distinction between problems as being characterized by either detail complexity or dynamic complexity. A problem with detail complexity is a problem that can be solved by breaking the problem into smaller constituent parts until a solution is arrived at. Problems of dynamic complexity, on the other hand, are ones in which cause and effect are not so easily separated by time and space. For example, suppressing crime by increasing police levels in a particular area does not solve the problem, usually it merely displaces crime to another area. Action learning requires individuals to address more detailed problems showing dynamic complexity.

In practice, these problems are addressed as part of a group: the action learning set. According to Pedler (1996: 15) "action learning brings people together to exchange, support and challenge each other in seeking to learning. The set's role is absolutely essential to effective action learning (Mercer, 1990). It is through discussion with, and importantly questioning by, the set that individuals develop their understanding of the problem they are facing, and it is the set to which action and its outcomes are reported. In a typical set meeting, individuals will report on their progress against the issue or problem they are facing. The other members of are responsible for challenging the assumptions, views and opinions presented by the individual through effective and insightful questioning. The set therefore requires equality of voice, high levels of trust and confidence, open and frank discussion, a helpful and supportive environment, and works best when of an interdisciplinary nature (Lee, 1996). The philosophy of action learning is about valuing everyone and learning to be tolerant, whilst still being intellectually rigorous and challenging. It acknowledges that learning involves the whole person as one who thinks, feels and makes choices in relation to other people. A healthy set is characterized by fecundity, is fertile in ideas and intellectually productive. Effective action learning lies in maintaining the balance between two slightly opposing forces; the group challenging and, at the same time, supporting the participant.

Typically, in developing and maintaining the set, a facilitator is used. The role of the facilitator is to ensure the set is focused on and effective in its discussions, but ultimately they want the set to work independently from them. In action learning the facilitator is less concerned with formal teaching and course direction than enabling more active and self-directed learning by the participants, directing them towards taking more responsibility for what they learn and how they

**FIGURE ONE: FACILITATOR STYLE CHARACTERISTICS (ADAPTED FROM HERON 1999: 93)**

	<b>Topics</b>	<b>Time</b>	<b>Methods</b>	<b>Resources</b>
Hierarchy: Direction	Major topics pre-selected	Deadlines required	Literature search, minimal application	Limited tutor access
Co-operation: Negotiation	Tutorial in topics - Meets guidelines	Guidance on where they are in the process	Guidance given by Subject Tutor	Negotiated access to tutors
Autonomy: Delegation	Chosen by students	Submitted when complete	Devised by students	Use own initiative, improvise.

learn it, and for assessing whether they have learned it. Heron (1999) identifies three facilitator styles: direction, negotiation, and delegation, the characteristics of which, appropriate to the MBA program described below, are summarized in Figure One. The aim of the action learning set facilitator is to move the set from a stage of development where it relies on direction to become a co-operative and ultimately autonomous learning environment.

The final element identified above, action, is arguably the most important, the term 'action learning' says it all: *learning through action*, essentially, doing better tomorrow by asking how well the job is being done today (Revens, 1980). Action is integral, because the group is more than a simple support group; each member takes action on their own issue after reflection and discussion with the group. Learning comes through the opportunities afforded by the set to reflect on this action.

Underlying the process informed by action learning, as described above is the concept of experiential learning. Most readily identified with Kolb (1984), this assumes a cyclical process of learning and was described by Kolb as the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Following this model, shown in Figure Two, an individual, having had a concrete experience and having made observations about and reflected upon that experience, is in a position to form or develop abstract concepts or generalization based upon their observations and reflections. These concepts can then be tested in a new situation or a changed environment, which will in turn, lead to new concrete experiences. In essence, this can be viewed as a spiral of progress, which extends the

sum total of an individual's learning through time (Mumford, 1991), as once this cycle is complete it begins another based on the experiences generated through the action undertaken. Experiential learning occurs through the action learning set. Set members learn through their experiences of their actions, their observations, reflections, and conceptualizations are developed, encouraged and challenged explicitly through the set, which also provides the support to test the new understanding these discussions develop. The set helps the individual truly engage in learning from experience in order to change, rather than simply repeating previous patterns (McGill and Beaty, 1992).

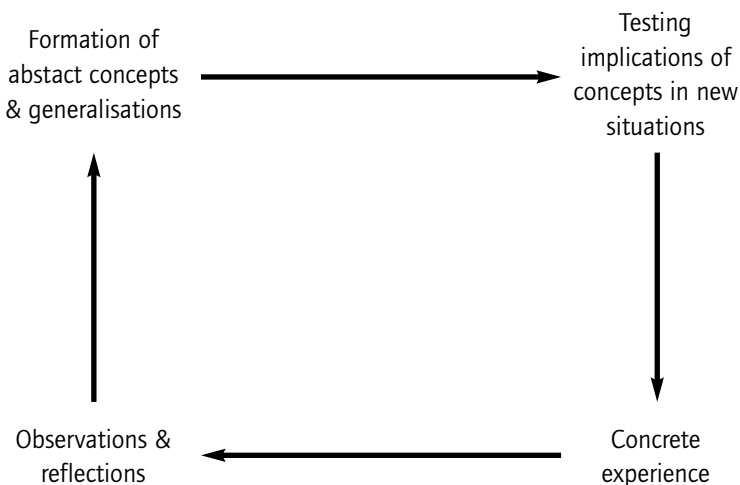
Insert Figure 2 about here

The discussion presented above aims to provide an outline understanding of what is entailed in action learning, so that the approach described below can be considered in context. More detailed discussion of the role, purpose and philosophy of an action learning is provided in several texts, including Pedler (1996) and Weinstein (1995), and of course Revan's own books (1980; 1998) and we would direct readers interested in learning more to these. It should be recognized, from the above that action learning offers an open, in-depth approach to development that hopefully results in learning for the individual and improvements, through action, for the organization in which they are based. A program following such an approach is described below.

**THE MBA IN ENGINEERING MANAGEMENT**

In 1979, the Finniston Report established the need to enable chartered engineers to make a greater contribution in the wider economic context of business in the UK. The Joint Board for

**FIGURE TWO: EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING (AFTER KOLB 1984)**



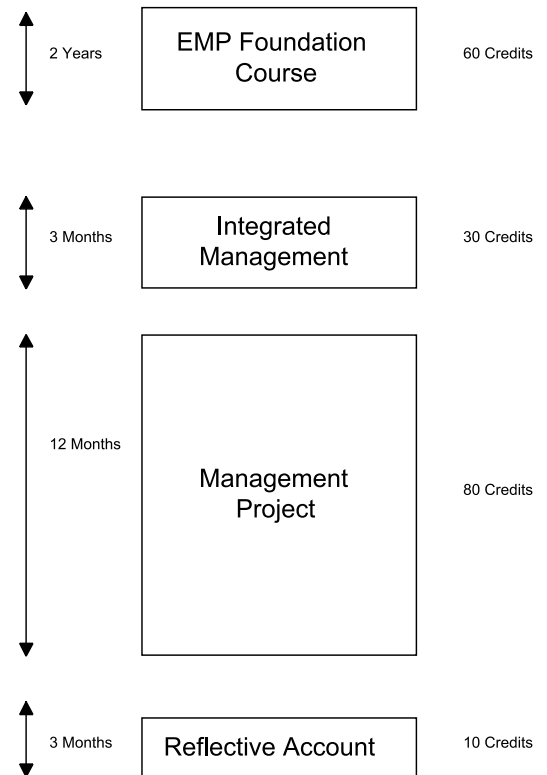
Engineering Management (JBEM) was established to encourage and foster postgraduate education in the art and science of management for engineers. This initiative was sponsored by six of the UK's major engineering professional bodies (Institution of Chemical Engineers; Institution of Civil Engineers; Institution of Electrical Engineers; Institute of Measurement and Control; Institution of Mechanical Engineers; Institute of Physics; Institution of Structural Engineers). As a result of feedback from employers, the JBEM's remit was established with the principal aim of ensuring training programs devised for engineering managers should be linked more closely to the workplace.

The Engineering Management Partnership (EMP) grew out of the JBEM and is led by the University of Bristol. The purpose of the EMP is to provide and support the development of managerial and business skills within professional engineering. This role includes the maintenance and support of study programs in Business and Management. The Engineering Institutions are still closely involved in the EMP syllabus and their endorsement is seen as vital to its continued relevance. The University of Bradford is a partner in the EMP network of universities, and hence came to offer, in partnership with EMP, an MBA in Engineering Management. EMP, in fact, run the Foundation element of this course (Stage I; Figure Three). This is run over a two-year period and carries the equivalent of a Certificate Level qualification. Participants are referred onto the MBA program at Bradford through EMP. To be eligible to join the MBA in Engineering Management participants must have passed all the requirements of the Stage I (Foundation. As Stage I is run by EMP, it is beyond the scope of this paper. In effect, however, this represents development of essential foundation skills and understanding through formal instruction and training that provide the bedrock for the higher-level development that occurs through action learning (Beaty, Lawson, Bourner and O'Hara, 1997).

The MBA therefore begins at what is effectively Stage II, (the whole program is summarized in Figure Three), with cohorts, organized into action learning sets of between 6 - 8 participants, normally starting in September and February. Sets, with a facilitator, then meet on a monthly basis. The objective of the MBA in Engineering Management is to enable participants to fulfill the role of a senior manager in an engineering firm. The approach is predicated upon the idea that to bring this about participants need to

consider managerial effectiveness in three key areas: (i) knowledge and understanding; (ii) skills and competence; and (iii) personal development. All three aspects are covered within the program and are dependent upon action learning. Knowledge and understanding, or cognitive learning is achieved through reading and lectures from external speakers. Personal development is progressed through the use of a learning log, whilst skills and competence is dependant upon progression of and within the action learning set.

**FIGURE THREE: OUTLINE OF THE PROGRAM**



From the perspective of the participants, the MBA in Engineering Management is a course, which appears to evolve slowly over time. From a regulatory point of view, however, it can be divided into the four discrete stages (Figure Three) of the Foundation Course (Stage I, undertaken with EMP and outlined above), Integrated Management (Stage II), a Management Project (Stage III), and a Reflective Account (Stage IV).

During Stage II, Integrated Management, students are required to present and submit five 'assignments', of between 2,500 and 3,000 words. Stage II is the only fixed period in the program as all subsequent stages are dependant upon individual progress and thus allow a great deal of flexibility in a participant's professional and personal circumstances. This stage is designed to instill the rigors of self-directed, autonomous learning in an experiential context. The educational value, in action learning terms, of

these first five assignments are in terms of concentrating the set on a series of homogenous themes; Strategic Management, Financial Management, Change Management, Human Resources Management and Marketing. Furthermore, during this period the set begins to develop its own personality as the participants compare their learning and understanding after each of their presentations. Normally, this is done in the morning, with the afternoon being given over to a tutorial with a subject specialist to discuss their next assignment. As questioning insight is encouraged, this session can be considered more as an interview with an expert, rather than a tutorial.

In Stage II, as a feeling of trust develops within the set, the facilitator concentrates on the process elements of developing the emerging norms that the set will use in later stages of the program. During this early stage the facilitator will pay particular attention to developing the questioning insight, or **Q** of the set. Whilst **P**, or programmed knowledge content, is being enhanced by participants submitting assignments. The facilitator will ensure the set adheres to the rule of not giving advice, but instead they should providing questions that enable questioning insight. It is hoped that through this process, the participants begin to learn through experience, the merits of learning from fellow set members, and our experiences suggest that the set begins to value the synergistic learning opportunities the meetings create: that the sum of learning (**P**) and insight (**Q**) is greater than each individual could achieve operating independently. During these early stages the participants also develop the essential habit of producing progress reports for the monthly meetings in the form of their assignments, and develop the skill of writing erudite and cogent assignments with limited direction in a large subject area. This is essential for effective completion of Stage III, their management project.

In essence, therefore, Stage II is designed to give participants time to adjust from formal modes of learning previously undertaken, to adopt an action learning approach, and to allow the set to develop together as an effective learning unit. By the end of Stage II the participants finalize their proposal for their Management Project (Stage III) by submitting a work-related case study of between 7,500 and 9,000 words. The foundation for this piece of work is constituted from the five previous reports. The intention of the Case Study is for students to demonstrate the

interdisciplinary nature of the organization problem they intend to work on through their project, as well as their intended intervention strategy. As well as being an assessed piece of course work this document needs to be acceptable as a project to their sponsoring organization, to the University and, of course, to themselves.

The three main requirements for the Management Project are:

- It needs to be of real value to the participant's organization and deal with a strategically important issue that requires analyzing, resolving and implementing in order to make a positive contribution to the well-being of the participant's organization.
- It needs to be multidisciplinary in nature to allow the participant to demonstrate a clear understanding of the relationships between the different management disciplines and functions and how these may support or conflict with corporate policies.
- It needs to be 'actionable in the workplace'.

As identified above, in order for the set to work effectively there must be some form of problem for each participant to address, in this instance this is the focus of the Management Project. Projects that are undertaken on the MBA in Engineering Management are required to be interdisciplinary problems of *dynamic* complexity (Senge, 1997). For many of the engineers who make up the course's participants, this will be in stark contrast to the work they will have completed thus far, which will have tended to lean towards projects of *detail* complexity (*ibid.*).

The program subtly changes direction between Stage II and III, with the set moving from a situation in which direction is provided by the facilitator, to one where it becomes self-directed by the participants. This necessitates the gradual change in facilitator's emphasis suggested above from direction through co-operation to a more autonomous approach (Figure One; Heron, 1999). Furthermore, as the participants move from the first five assignments to the Case Study, the homogenous monthly task of set members is replaced by ones that are divergent in nature, and, the questioning insight, or **Q** developed within the set becomes second nature to its members. Ultimately sets can (and in some instances, have) become autonomous or self-

facilitated in nature. By the time the set members are six months into their projects their problems typically have become totally divergent, and if programmed knowledge, or **P** was relied upon to keep the set cohesive it would begin to fail at this point. Whilst the set will develop an outline of understanding of each problem, it is only through questioning insight, or **Q**, the ability to pose penetrating challenges to the presenter's assumptions that the set are able to support and learn from one another.

Once the participants have submitted their Case Study they find a subject specialist to act as tutor from the Bradford staff. Participants will meet their subject tutor on a two-month cycle and continue the monthly cycle of set meetings. This maintains the requisite balance between **P** and **Q** whilst ensuring academic standards are maintained. The Set Facilitator remains concerned with the context of **Q**, whilst the Subject Tutor is concerned with the context of **P**. The role of the Subject Tutor is to guide the participant towards relevant part of the literature. The Set Facilitator is the first marker of the Dissertation, whilst the Subject Tutor of is the second marker; the Set Facilitator is familiar with the interdisciplinary nature of the project as a whole, whilst the Subject Tutor is a specialist within the field. Using the Set Facilitator and Subject Specialist as first and second markers ensures any gaps in knowledge from current practice are picked up on.

By the end of Stage III, participants will have produced a dissertation of between 20,000 and 30,000 words. This will be a major project at Master's Level, which will be made available in the library, provided it is not of a commercially sensitive nature. In such instances the participant must request a letter of embargo. Participants are also required to undertake a Viva-voce examination at the University.

Stage IV requires participants to compete a 4,000 to 5,000 word Reflective Account that covers the implementation stage of their dissertation. In this, they are expected to consider the learning they have gained though the critical dissertation phase of the program. In preparation for the completion of this account, throughout Stages II and III, course participants are required to complete a learning log. This furnishes participants with a formal opportunity for reflecting upon the learning experience they have undertaken.

Whilst a structure was outlined for the program above, it should be recognized that this is

deliberately open, and, as was suggested, seen more as emergent than directive by participants. This apparent lack of structure may appear to be counter-intuitive to our expectations in regard to taught courses, but it is integral here, as it is a prototype of what will be required of participants during the Management Project phase, which is truly self-directed and autonomous. On a smaller scale this part of the course enables the participants to start to become 'familiar with the unfamiliar', or at least become comfortable with it. The Management Project represents the core of the program, through which the deepest and most fundamental learning occurs. It could not however, exist without the support and development afforded by the other stages, and, in its entirety, the action learning approach used in the MBA in Engineering Management can be described as truly experiential, self-directed and autonomous learning. It is experiential through the set, sharing the challenges and successes of their Management Project and recording these events in their learning logs. Self-directed because the participants retain control over their problem, and autonomous in terms of the independent work and learning undertaken by participants between set meetings.

#### **LEARNING OUTCOMES**

The validity of action learning, as suggested above, stems from the quality of the learning outcomes it creates for individuals and organizations. Our experiences with students on the MBA in Engineering Management, suggest a depth, quality, and above all, application of learning that compares favorably with other modes of study.

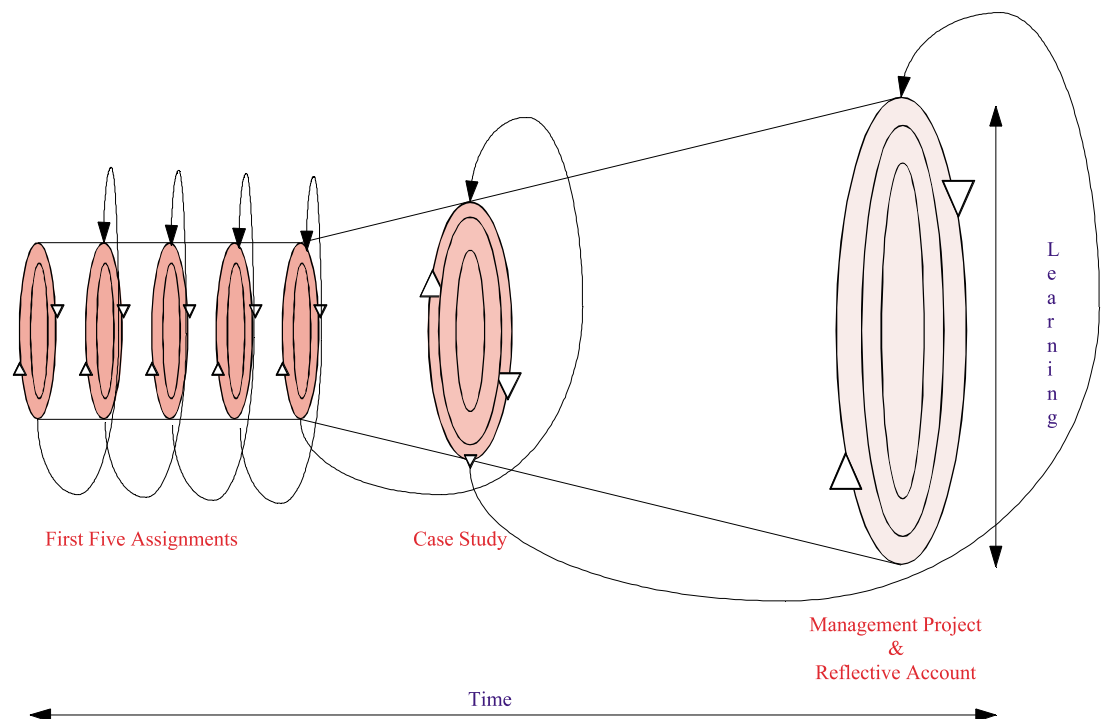
Firstly, experiential learning (Figure Two; Kolb 1984) is both implicit and integral in the learning undertaken through the program. The learning generated through the Management Project, begins with the 'Formulation of Abstract Concepts and Generalizations'. Participants cycle between this stage of their learning and 'Testing Implications of Concepts in New Situations' as they formulate and clarify the objectives of their research. Typically this incorporates cognitive learning, either by locating the relevant literature (programmed knowledge) or generating a new insight into the problem (questioning insight). 'Concrete Experiences' are reached through the implementation of the project in the workplace, and these are formalized when the Management Project is written up for final submission. Once this is complete the participants proceed to the Reflective Account, which drives their

'Observations and Reflections', and completes the cycle of learning. Concurrently with this, program participants are experiencing a similar cycle of learning about action learning. Here, however, learning begins with the 'Concrete Experience' of the Set, and learning develops from this, through ongoing reflection to the adoption of questioning as a guiding concept and the testing (and hopefully validation) of a questioning approach with the set. In essence, the latter learning (related to the Management Project comes from the 'learning to learn' developed through experiencing and developing an action learning approach in Stage II. This suggests that action learning mechanisms are fundamental to the experiential process of learning, as it employed here.

Furthermore, the phase difference between these two learning cycles accounts for the participant's synthesis of both propositional knowledge and knowledge by acquaintance. According to Heron (1999), experiential learning relies distinction between knowledge created by acquaintance ('knowledge of') through our encounters and first-hand experiences, and propositional knowledge, ('knowledge about'), which is developed indirectly. During the Formulation of Abstract Concepts stage of the Management Project the knowledge being acquired is of a propositional nature. It can be asserted that the learning becomes more deeply ingrained during the experiential parts of the learning cycle, because it is relevant to the success of a problem in the 'real world'. Participants are

effectively engaged in a 'learning spiral' (Figure Four) of the type espoused by Mumford (1991). Starting with the first five assignments the participants learn, during Stage II, the principles of synthesizing theory and practice from five different subject areas. This leads on to the Case Study, which is basically a propositional account of their learning expectations. Course Participants' demonstration of knowledge is captured in the Management Project & Reflective Account, with the difference between this end point and the extent of their knowledge at the Case Study (the area of the spiral segments), demonstrating the total learning undertaken, relevant to the organizational problem addressed. Each of the major learning stages (shown as differentially shaded segments) is a microcosm of what will happen at the next stage, but at a higher level of understanding. Thus the assignment stage is characterized three stages: (i) formulating an assignment; (ii) making a presentation; and (iii) receiving feedback. This three-stage cycle is repeated at the Case Study stage, and at the final stage, when drafts of management projects are reviewed by tutors, and through a final viva-voce examination, carried out in the presence of the Set Facilitator and Subject Tutor. During these iterations, the participant's work becomes less theoretical and abstract, becoming more pragmatic as they develop the practical application of their ongoing learning to a 'real world' problem, building on the basis of good practice developed through previous iterations.

**FIGURE FOUR: THE LEARNING SPIRAL AT DIFFERENT ASSESSMENT STAGES**



More generally, learning can be characterized as being either intentional and incidental (Deese, 1958 ), and in a self-directed and collaborative environment, such as the learning set, the accumulation of learning through dialogue could be said to be geometric in nature. Not only do participants learn about their own organizational problem, they also learn, from similarities and differences, from the other organizations represented in the set. This diversity in programmed information is demonstrated in the different titles of the Management Project within each Set, and from these and the action learning process, outcomes against both learning strategies, identified above, can be seen as occurring:

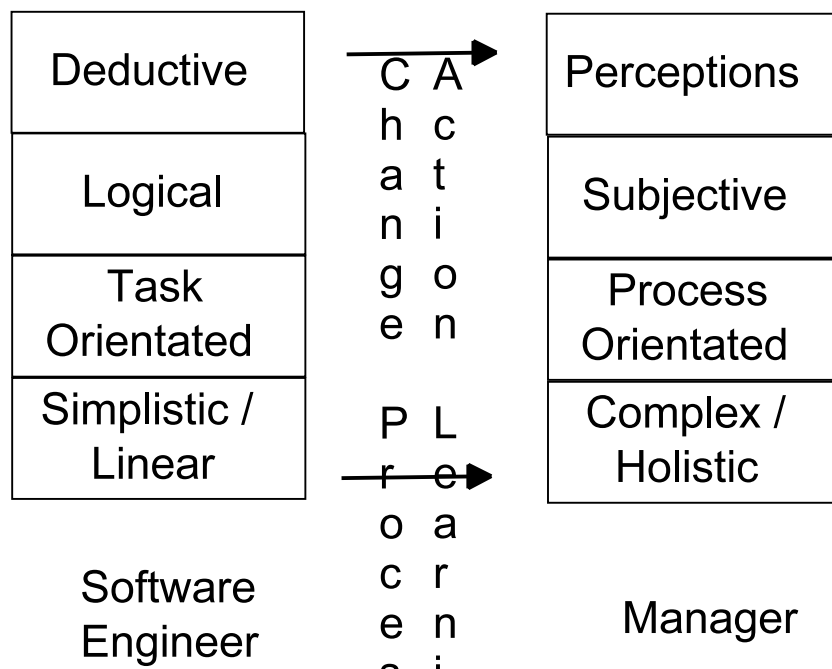
- Intentional learning is demonstrated by the participant in their Case Study, and Management Project, not least of all through the explicit developments that occur between these.
- Incidental learning occurs through intra-group learning as a result of questioning and discussing the organizational problems addressed by a set. This is evidenced by such things as discussion of one participant's problem helping another set member better understand the issue they are facing.

To these, we add *insightful learning*, which occurs through the questioning and reflection processes at the heart of action learning. This is typically recorded as part of monthly reports, learning logs and reflective accounts. Participants are encouraged to answer the following questions: (i)

How did you feel when you arrived at the set?; (ii) What insight(s) did you gain from the set meeting?; (iii) What was your agenda?; (iv) What will you do differently as a result of your deliberations at the set meeting? These demonstrate how well the vehicle of action learning is working.

Returning to the overall aim of the MBA in Engineering Management: to enable participants to fulfil the role of a senior manager in an engineering firm. This outcome requires a significant change in mindset. Figure Five demonstrates the change required of and created through the action learning process. The engineer's perspective is typically strongly mechanistic in nature, whilst managers are often required to be more holistic. According to Weinstein (1995), action learning develops people who can think clearly, who listen, challenge, question, value perspectives, and know the benefits of collaboration rather than confrontation, and our experiences suggest that through exposure to a holistic process such as action learning, participants on the MBA in Engineering Management gain a greater insight into the softer issues of people-management whilst retaining the knowledge & skills they learnt as engineers. Additionally, in terms of a post-graduate, post-experience course, action learning is advantageous to practitioners faced with considerable demands on their time, affording them flexibility, independence and experience that is immediately relevant to their challenges and problems.

FIGURE FIVE: CHANGE PERSPECTIVES BETWEEN AN ENGINEER AND A MANAGER



**COURSE EVALUATION**

As the course is predominantly about learning from experience, feedback from the participants is essential to improve the course for future generations. Harrison (1996) has made the point that that more rigorous and longer-term evaluation of action learning courses is required. It is also important that the effectiveness of the course for participants be clearly demonstrated. The discussion in terms of learning outcomes above demonstrates the effectiveness of the learning in the broadest terms, but significantly, to ensure the ongoing validation, accreditation (the MBA in Engineering Management is accredited by the Association of MBAs in the UK) and support for the program, evidence of success and effectiveness is required.

The success of the program is, in part, demonstrated by the quality of the work produced by its graduating students. To date, 40% of Management Projects submitted for MBA in Engineering Management have been awarded a distinction, a percentage that compares favorably with other modes of MBA study. It appears that the deeper applied learning afforded by the action learning process, consistently produces work of an excellent academic standard.

In terms of formal evaluations, in line with University custom and practice, a questionnaire survey is administered when the participants have completed the course. This information is collated and fed back to the Course Management Committee for any further action. Whilst such forms of structured feedback do have a role to play, they can be criticized for both their simplicity and short-term perspectives, and could be seen as contrary to the open questioning approach that is at the core of action learning.

Consequently, further formal, but more open, feedback is elicited from participants on a six-monthly basis. This equates with the first, second and third quarters of the course. The first is done during the pre-project phase (Stage II), the remaining two undertaken during the Management Project (Stage III). This feedback takes the form of a 360-degree appraisal between the participant and the Set Facilitator using the format:

- What went well?
- What could be improved?
- What shall be done differently in the future?

Thus, a course of action will be agreed between the participant and the Set Facilitator. Generally, the outcome of these meetings is positive, with issues raised in respect of the second two questions concerning administrative or procedural issues, which are rectified as they arise. The appraisals undertaken to date show general support for the action learning process, and significantly allow for dialogue between the Facilitator and participant as to their role in or response to the set as required.

Participants also provide a rich source of information on the effectiveness and impact of the program. One of the best benchmarks of the process is the successful students themselves, and the impact that an experiential learning MBA has had on them as people, and managers. One of our recent graduates, Paul Carpenter, received the course's IFAL (International Foundation for Action Learning) Prize in November 2001. In a presentation at an IFAL workshop he asserted:

*What makes the Action Learning MBA so distinct...is the focus is on developing ones' learning abilities. My experience leads me to believe that in a rapidly changing environment this is a fundamentally superior approach to that undertaken in traditional instruction based programs.*

Paul's opinion of the depth, quality and applicability of his learning point to the success of action learning for him. Others have felt the same way. Another recent graduate, George Reeves, stated in his reflective account:

*At my annual appraisal in April 2001 my previous manager, the MD, undertook the review of the "past", and it was pleasing to be told that I had developed and improved my approach considerably over recent years. This from a project engineer with an "isolated" approach, to a manager demonstrating a more "considered" approach to the management of the team and the business when compared to my predecessor. I believe that my studies and learning had achieved the objectives of the [EMP] and the Bradford MBA i.e. whilst adequately trained in engineering, what my earlier education and learning had lacked was an overall appreciation of management. The [EMP] and Bradford MBA had given me the capability to stand back from the business and understand the wider perspectives of management. Understanding or at least a fuller*

*understanding provided the tools necessary to make an effective contribution at senior management level.*

George has expressed a development of managerial perspective; the development expected through the action learning program and summarized in Figure 5. Still others have embraced the model of learning in which they have been immersed. One example of this is David Fitzwilliam, a third recent graduate, who has adopted action learning in his workplace as a method of individual and organizational development.

Longer-term assessments of the program's impact and effectiveness are nevertheless required. In addition to the data described above, two further, longer-term evaluations, which address the wider impact of an action learning approach, are underway. The first is a proposal to track the learning styles and preferred modes of learning and study of participants engaged in the program. The expectation here is that, if action learning does impact upon our 'learning to learn', participants will evidence this through their changing attitudes and preferences. The second effectively takes the form of participant observation, through which Set Facilitators collect information on the 'unanticipated learning' evidenced by a set in its discussions. Given the adoption of this approach is new, evidence is, as yet, limited, but initial responses suggest that the extent of this will be varied. Existing examples already include specific evidence of insights developed through a set questioning a participant, and examples of how learning undertaken through the MBA has had an impact in the workplace. Collation of this information is ongoing, with the ultimate aim of a database detailing the types and extent of wider learning that occurs through this action learning MBA.

### **SUMMARY**

The ethos, practice, and processes of action learning have been outlined above and their application in a particular program of study, Bradford University's MBA in Engineering Management, described. The outcomes and effectiveness of this program suggest that the applied, workplace-centered learning it represents provides students with deep, experiential learning. This experiential learning produces a *learning* manager as opposed to a *learned* manager, one who can transform themselves according to their environment by learning and can continue to take responsibility for their own development as

managers long after the course has concluded. It produces learning that is truly beneficial to the individual and their organization, in both the short and the longer term. These benefits are open to any individuals or organizations who engage in action learning, and in line with the ethos espoused, we would strongly advise those who are interested to take action and try it for themselves.

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