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Option # 1: Examine your own practice

Action Learning

University of Alberta

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Solving Real Problems in Real Time, Action
Learning Guide

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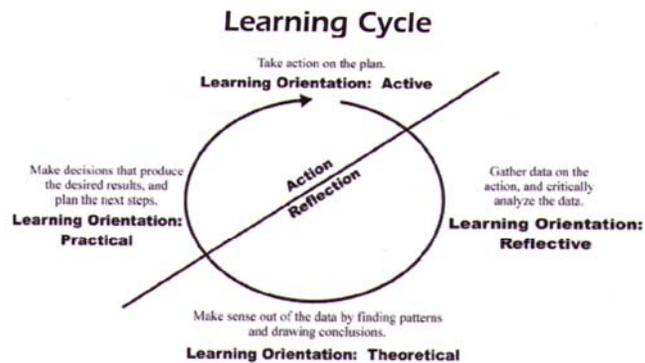
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ACTION LEARNING

I am currently learning about adult education and the concepts and theories that are involved with adult education. One theory I am learning about is solving real problems in real time, better known as action learning. I am going to explain what action learning is, my experience with action learning, and how it applies to my improvement as an adult educator.

Action learning empowers people to contribute to problem solving in any situation. Action learning consists of a process which produces more effective ways of thinking and generating alternatives that lead to a solution. The theory encompasses all learning styles and is not linear in practice. In action learning people move through the learning cycle. The learning cycle is a diagram that enables people to gain insight into behaviours brought on by their learning preference and the conditions surrounding the individual. As learners grow and acquire knowledge they become aware of things that contribute to their success and seem natural to do, and identify areas that they are not comfortable learning in. The learning cycle is comprised of two halves; reflection and action. There are four learning styles described in the learning cycle. Active learning orientation style are doers, they like to try things out right away. Practical learning orientation style are decision makers, they plan then take action. These two styles make up the action half of the learning cycle. The reflective learning orientation style are gatherers and listeners of information. Theoretical learning orientation style like to understand the reason behind everything, they want to

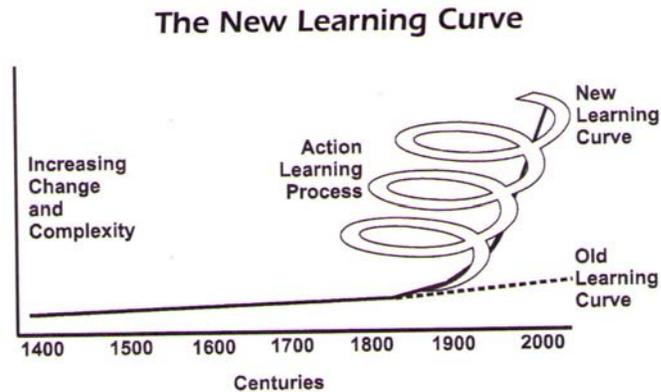
understand why first. These two styles complete the reflection side of the learning cycle.



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Action learning compels people to move around the learning cycle, taking learning style orientations and exposing them to the other styles around the cycle. Learners experience both halves of the learning cycle; action and reflection. As we move through each half of the learning cycle, we learn and create new meaning. We will develop new ways of thinking and knowing as we experience each loop and make our way around the cycle. Moving from reflection through action, creates a learning spiral that keeps up with the speed of change curve. Speed of change is the amount of information we are dealing with and the speed at which information, events and travel occur. The rate of change that is happening in the world is occurring faster than our ability to learn. Action learning suggests that we need to slow down to speed up. The premise being, we need to take time to reflect on the problem and look at challenges and

underlying issues, then use our diversity to brainstorm approaches to solving the problem.



I participated in three rounds of action learning. The experience was personally moving for me. Initially I was skeptical on how we could solve a problem in less than three hours. Once we were introduced to the process and I was able to see the steps, my interest picked up. I really enjoyed Part 1 of the process, gathering data. The questions asked made me really think about my problem and organize my thoughts and feelings around the issue. Everyone in the group shared their problem and we noticed that there were some strong similarities between what each of us were facing. These are my initial experiences with the action learning process. I found writing my own problem out very beneficial, the questions helped me to slow down and guide my thoughts into a more organized structure so that I could articulate my problem clearly to others. Listening to the other group member's problems was insightful, as we all had similar problems. It was reassuring to hear that I was not alone with the struggles at work. My greatest insight came from my frustration. I was frustrated with the pace of the facilitator, who guided us through the steps. I am on the

action side of the learning cycle and the facilitator was on the reflection side. I was able to connect my knowledge of learning styles to the process we were involved in and respect the speed of the facilitator. I was beginning to learn how to work together with different learning styles. My first experience was positive and I was completely impressed with the amount of brainstorming and the end solution that was created. At the end of day one my key learning's was not to give solutions right away, but to go through the steps and use critical thinking along the way. I also became aware of learning styles along with the pace of group members which added to my learning as I tend to be on the action side, and was forced to slow down and spend time on the reflection side. I realized that slowing down and reflection helped me become clearer on assumptions and underlying issues to my problem and understanding other people's problems.

On day two we completed another round of action learning and I experienced different feelings from the first round. By this time I knew what the process entailed so I had some expectations going into the action learning process. I really enjoyed the questioning tools we were given in Part 4 to increase our knowledge around assumptions and the situation owners problem. I was more comfortable with the pace of the activity this round, and was learning to hold in my 'add on' comments and fight the urge to finish sentences for others. I was disappointed in the brainstorming section. I felt as though we were not as creative and did not come up with many ideas compared to the first round. My key learning's from round two were how to ask better questions, and test

assumptions. I was also more accepting of the slower pace and was able to focus my attention on the content in round two without worrying about the process and time as much. At the end of day two I was connecting my feelings and reactions to the behaviors of other learning styles, and I had a heightened awareness of my preferred and non preferred areas. I was able to discover why I felt frustrated at times; I could locate the behavior, not the person that triggered this feeling. I am becoming more conscious of others behaviors and how to work with their learning style.

Day three was a surprise to our group. We had completed two rounds of action learning and knew each persons problem, picking the next situation owner was already well thought out by our group. Then we switched groups. At first I was anxious, as I was comfortable with my group and we worked well together. My anxiety turned into excitement when we began at the beginning of the process, telling our story. It was great to have an infusion of new situations. During this round I really enjoyed the summary generation. We were able to take parts of each person's summary of the situation and create an all encompassing summary. My expectations of the process did create some frustration for me when we were partaking in Part 4, question assumptions. We had the questioning tools to use and yet I found that the quality of the questions asked were poor. I was frustrated that people in the group were not challenging themselves to ask open ended questions. I felt myself sliding into my theorist orientation and wanting to explain why we need to ask better questions. My key

learning's that came from round three were the pace of the activities needs to be balanced between a quick and slow pace. The group facilitator needs to be assertive and if they are of a reflective nature, I need to lend my support to their pace and decisions. Being positive and flexible throughout the process helped increase my knowledge. I am able to control my behavior and reactions significantly more than during my initial experience with action learning.

Learning about action learning and how I learn through action was very insightful. I am an action person, I like to make a plan then execute it. Action learning showed me that I can get things done more effectively by slowing down and reflecting first. It also allowed me to learn about how others learn through action. Looking back I believe that I did not always wait for a more reflective person to contribute to solving the problem, I assumed that they had nothing to say or I was too impatient to wait for their input. I learned that reflection orientations had very useful and insightful information to add. I am working on my desire for a faster pace to be more receptive to slowing down.

I believe my questioning and critical thinking skills align with the action learning process. I will generally ask questions that are thought provoking or help to direct thinking to another side of the problem in my workshops and at meetings with my team. I also value diversity and try to create groups with a multitude of perspectives.

I have not always taken time to reflect on a problem and answer questions like the ones found in Part 1, gather data. My action based learning style usually leads to creating a solution right away, not at the end of the process like in action learning.

Based on what I have learned about action learning, I plan to slow down to speed up. I have realized that I need to spend more time in my non preferred learning environment to create new knowledge and gain an appreciation for reflection and a slower pace. I need to consider other learning styles and stretch myself in areas that I may not be comfortable facilitating in so that all my participants can spend time in my workshops learning in their preferred style at some point. I will include activities/tasks for all four learning styles at some point in my facilitation. The more aware I am of how learning occurs during the action learning process the more effective facilitator I can become. I plan to utilize the questioning tools in my daily activities and focus more on principals to adult education that align with action learning. My increase in knowledge of action learning, will allow me to become a better facilitator, resulting in participants learning to achieve their best.

I admit I was skeptical to start, however this course gave me the tools to solve real problems in real time. The guide is very practical and proved to me that people really know more about the problem than they think, and that I can utilize that in problem solving. I believe that applying this process will not be

difficult at all. I really think that the questions around the problem to help clarify and challenge assumptions will be well received at work and in workshops. I plan to keep the inquiry tool close to me. If a problem arises, I will be able to help people down the path of action learning and problem solving.

References

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