

ACCOUNT OF PRACTICE

‘I don’t have any English friends’ : some observations on the practice of action learning with international business students

Cheryl Brook^a and Christopher Milner^b

This account reports on the preliminary findings of a study of experiences of facilitating action learning with international business students. Interest in international student learning and the student experience is significant and increasing with a considerable literature on the subject. Some of this literature is concerned with the perceived ‘problems’ or ‘deficits’ which international learners are said to bring to the UK university experience. Elsewhere the benefits which international students bring to the learning process are highlighted. This paper describes some of the experiences derived from implementing action learning with six groups (sets) of international postgraduate business and management students in an HE setting. Specifically, it considers how educational, learning and cultural differences, expectations and assumptions influence the student experience, and how collaborative learning can be developed.

Key Words:

Action learning , international business students, collaborative learning, peer learning, higher education.

Introduction

The title of this paper comes from an observation made by one of our international students in one of our action learning set discussions. We had been discussing their concerns about improving their written English. One set member asked if the others had any English friends (other than tutors) who could read the students’ work and offer some comments. It saddened us to learn how few English friends some of the students had made despite being in the UK for some time. However, the action learning set was one space within which these and other matters to do with students’ wider learning and development could be discussed.

This account of practice offers some observations and reflections on the practice of action learning with international business students in a UK business school. Specifically, the paper aims to explore some of the issues raised by the students as part of their action learning work, notably educational and learning differences which had not been explicitly surfaced elsewhere on their courses. The paper also considers some of the factors which appear to have enabled successful action learning to take place with these international business students, many of whom had either limited or no experience of collaborative learning prior to taking part.

Our reasons for setting up action learning sets for international students arose out of our experience as dissertation supervisors for international students in the past, and our shared observation concerning the apparent isolation which some of them felt, and also their struggles with some aspects of the UK university experience. This appeared to be especially apparent in group work and in developing autonomous learning skills.

Context

The sets which are the focus of this account had at the onset been working together for six months. Thirty six students out of a total cohort of 106 volunteered to take part in the action learning programme and were split into six action learning sets which the authors facilitated over a period of 7 months. The provisional tone taken here therefore emphasises the limitations of research based on set meetings which have taken place over a comparatively short time scale. In this case, interviews were conducted with individual participants taken together with the set facilitators' written account of set meetings. Rigg and Trehan (2004) have written about the difficulties of conducting research into *critical* action learning practice and negotiating consent because of the power asymmetries inherent in the teacher / student relationship. Because of students' 'lack of familiarity with academic knowledge production rituals' Rigg and Trehan assert that this may well have meant their perspective on the process differs significantly from the reality (2004, 154). For this reason, Rigg and Trehan elected to change names to protect anonymity. For these same reasons, and following discussions with the students themselves, we elected to take the same approach, therefore all the names that are used in this account are pseudonyms.

The students taking part are all in the initial stages of an 18 month masters degree in business. The cohort of students involved in this programme originated from 16 countries. This course is wholly international in complexion with 74% of students coming from outside of Britain. 92% of students volunteering to take part in the sets were international students, thus the sets were made up of participants from China, Ghana, Nigeria, Cameroon, Bulgaria, Greece, Poland, Romania, Britain and Russia. The principal teaching methods adopted on the course were lectures followed by seminars including group discussions. The 'shared problems' on which the students were engaged revolved around their concerns in developing individual reflective portfolios and how to engage in research and complete their forthcoming dissertation projects. However, these may be said to be the *surface* problems. Intercultural anxieties about learning and reflecting openly upon their experiences and practices may be said to constitute the deeper learning task with which the sets were engaged.

Issues arising from the sets: educational and learning differences and cultural adaptation

(i) Cultural adaptation and differences in learning experiences

Whilst the 'overt' task of the sets was to develop their research and reflection skills, it became apparent over time that a 'deeper' action learning task' was focused on opening up and dealing with issues of cultural adaptation and differences in learning experiences. Participants identified two problems upon which to work: how to conduct research and complete the dissertation, and how to produce a reflective portfolio. The challenge of conducting research emerged very early on in discussions as one which most exercised the students. The only non international students who took part, Matthew and Sarah, commented that:

Discussing and debating our approaches and problems, the action learning sets offered us a good opportunity to learn, and to clarify different issues, especially regarding the dissertation. We wanted to ensure that we are on the right track, having in the past ran away down the wrong paths.

Sade, who had a broader set of concerns, commented on the clear differences in the structure of the educational system at home in Nigeria and the system she was experiencing in this country, differences shared by many of the students involved in the sets:

A project was not necessary as part of my bachelor studies, I was interested in learning about the different structure, and hearing about other people's experience and plans on how to successfully complete it.

With the challenge in mind, and in order for the students to share their thoughts and concerns, we shared experiences of learning at school or university and focused on those which were either especially good or bad, reflecting openly upon what these experiences taught us. This discussion surfaced the topic of the emotions and anxieties which so often accompany the learning process, and is something which is, in our experience, often talked about in action learning set meetings, especially in the earlier stages. Thi, for example, spoke about her experience of a teacher who had criticised her publicly. This kind of experience was shared by Vein and Yang, from Vietnam and China respectively. Yang commented that:

Remembering is important whilst we are now expected to be far more critical and reflective in thinking and written work...questioning a teacher in China is seen as rude, where here some teachers encourage it.

Jian was keen to emphasise the changing approach to learning in China and said that although there had been a lot of emphasis on things like memorising facts, there was now more group work and discussion. Zhia said that in the Chinese culture questions are not normally encouraged but that, over time, this was also changing.

Revans spoke about action learning helping to manage the 'micropolitics' of organisations but the international action learning sets also raised the issue of the impact of national political agendas on relationships within the sets, and the difficult choices faced by participants who came from cultures in which personal disclosure is not encouraged, and may even be a dangerous thing to do. This is still an issue with which we, as action learning facilitators are still grappling.

Problems with Critical Reflection

The whole discussion of educational experiences led to conversations regarding the different academic expectations which the students faced in the UK and at home, especially the focus on reflection. Victoria, for example, was very worried about the idea of critical reflection, and articulating thoughts and ideas in small groups:

But the idea we must critically reflect in our work is still difficult for me, and also where we have to bring our own thoughts. I felt confident in Nigeria, but now I have to stop and think what I want to say and I feel I have to twist my tongue more.

Critical self-reflection can prove to be a challenge for many international students and the sharing of opinion, discussion and debate proved to help the vast majority of the thirty six members to feel far more comfortable with the requirements of the project, especially working with others who expressed the same anxieties. Sade suggested that:

The system of writing research in the UK is different from the Nigerian system, the action learning group has helped me to design and conduct it with much greater confidence.

The students spoke quite a bit about the perceived differences in learning approaches and adjustments they have had to make in relation to learning methods. This has enabled a greater shared understanding of, for example, the reasons for reticence in speaking English. For example Thi's points:

At home we don't question so much. I like to ask questions and so it's been good to adapt to a changed style. It was difficult to adapt at first but I found the change a good one because I like to ask questions. In China my experience is we don't question the teacher so much. We are having more group working in China now. But we don't have so many arguments and discussions, and we write a lot of things down, have things on paper.

Some Social Benefits of Action Learning

Action learning has social as well as developmental benefits, and this has proved to be especially the case with international students who can be very isolated, and can at times feel abandoned by those from the 'host' culture. Marjorie made the point that:

It has been very lonely at times, not having friends here but when I am done I will get back to my people. I don't have any English friends. People tend to stick to their own. The weather is a very big challenge. When I first came here I had flu for a month and no-one knew and I didn't see anyone.

Ground rules were a critical 'jumping off point' for the sets. This often over-looked opening stratagem is extremely important, especially in making the students aware that these were self-imposed norms and not generated by us as facilitators. The students decide upon, take ownership of and follow them once agreed by all; in this case these ranged from confidentiality, to respecting each other even when offering challenges, and time management. The students at first looked at each other to voice their thoughts regarding the ground rules through a basic brainstorming exercise, and through discussion and agreement, it was a good leveller in surfacing very similar ideas as to what was important, and in making a promise to each other to follow them brought a bond and group cohesion between the members that proved to be the foundations of individual and group development, setting the tone of a boundary of confidentiality where they could grow to be more open in critical discussion.

The Russian and Nigerian members of the sets appeared over the initial meetings to be more direct in their communication style, and more comfortable in expressing their opinions, ideas and questions. The Chinese members of the set came across, at least in early stages, as less direct and forthcoming, and this has led to some key shared learning. One of the Chinese students, Yifei, scarcely spoke at all in the set, and when we discussed this she said it was because she did not feel her English was good enough. Despite encouragement from others and offers of help she is still very reticent. It has to be acknowledged that the collaborative and reflective approach of action learning does not suit all.

Wang et al (2011) made the same observation in their study of cross-cultural group work at its early stages, and added that the reason for this apparent lack of participation may be to do with 'their habits of pursuing conformity and keeping harmonious relations' (2011, 7) They take the view that perseverance and open-mindedness, especially on the part of the facilitator in helping and encouraging students to work together can ultimately prove overcome initial

reticence or even resistance. This places some emphasis upon the role of the facilitator in such a set.

Given that the Russian and Nigerian students did appear to be more direct and willing to voice opinions, degrees of tension could be discerned from a number of the first set meetings when ground-rules were being established. For example, Victoria wanted English to be spoken at all times in the set, which may be related to the fact that the Chinese students sometimes converse in Chinese before joining in wider discussion with the whole group. Victoria observed:

I don't know if this is a culture issue or may be it's to do with personality, but I think the Chinese students are very inward looking, the girls in the class talk, talk, talk but in their own language. They speak it more often than English. May be its different cultures playing out in their personalities. It could be a language barrier but we are all still learning. They were very withdrawn in the first semester, but it is better now. But overall it is positive because I now know much more of the Chinese culture.

This issue has proved to be a key action learning task for one of the sets in particular. We have spent some time discussing the implications of people choosing or not choosing to speak English in set meetings at various times, especially in the very early stages of the course and the life of the set. Feelings of frustration were manifest in these early stages, for example:

I wanted to scream "English please" – even if you don't know how to say something exactly in English just try and say it out loud!

But as set meetings have progressed and we have surfaced this issue and discussed it openly, there have been some shifts in understanding. Yet it may be that what the set is observing here is some form of learning inaction (Vince, 2008) in which certain members of the group are choosing not to engage in order to avoid the potential for further challenge or conflict within the set.

Marjorie observed of working with people from other countries that it has been:

Simply amazing. I would have loved being the only Nigerian in the group. But the Chinese are difficult because they find it difficult to understand what I say, but they are mixing more since we do more group work. Last year everyone was in their own little group, and if I passed one of the others on the street I wouldn't necessarily have recognised them or spoken to them. But I think the Chinese students find it difficult to express themselves, it's not their fault. And when they are together in a group they will speak Chinese because they find it easier.

This observed behaviour of conversing in a Chinese language before joining in the wider group discussion was also noted in Wang et al's study. They argue that one possible reason for doing this was 'fear that their expression was not correct or clear enough for other students to understand' and that they were 'trying to seek approval among their in-group before they were brave enough to speak in public' (2011, 8). Nonetheless, it is possible that this behaviour is not fully understood by other set members: Wang et al even suggest that it may be seen as 'rude or offensive'. They go on to comment that 'Public image is important to Chinese people. Consequently Chinese students tended to think twice before they spoke out, whilst western students have little hesitation in so doing...Chinese students are not brought up in a society which allows them much space to develop argument skills, particularly in

academic situations' (2011, 7), through the action learning sets they have learnt that such is welcomed, and can have a positive effect on their development.

From another perception though, the two English participants, Matthew and Sarah commented respectively:

I feel that I have improved as a person; I have found myself making a conscious effort in trying harder to understand others and taking greater consideration of the pace of English that I speak.

It can be frustrating working alongside people who have limited English....nationalities tend to stick together in the classroom environment....the action groups have broken the ice and given a number of us a greater understanding of each other.

And so it is not just an adjustment in the actions of those that may struggle at time with the language, but from those who build a greater understanding of the issues that such can bring; this with the potential benefit outside the action learning set and within the classroom.

(ii) Factors enabling effective action learning with international business students

As a facilitator it is important to encourage an interactive and supportive atmosphere in which all students feel enabled to express their ideas and to reflect on their actions and their learning. The action learning approach of encouraging people to ask questions and raise challenges in a supportive environment, and not to feel trapped into 'solution giving', is especially helpful in this regard. One activity, suggested by participants themselves, was a review of each others' literature reviews. This generated some interesting discussion about what some students' felt to be a dearth of 'context sensitive' literature and how to go about trying to find literature which might offer insights into, for example, more culturally specific HRM or HRD practices relevant to their home countries.

We found that giving the students plenty of opportunities for sharing resources and peer marking was very beneficial. This helped the students to develop the skills of questioning and challenging. The sharing of material including journal papers and case studies, the student led face book page and the drop box setup seemed key milestones to group development.

We found that a greater level of openness appeared to be generated during the life of the sets, building a reflective space within which constructive questions and challenges could occur, and a developing critical awareness became more evident. Commitment grew during the process. For example, when students returned to their home countries, virtual action learning set meetings continued through the use of Skype.

Through an iterative process of questioning, the set challenged and supported each other to reflect on ways of approaching the problem of developing the portfolio and the dissertation, but the social aspect of the sets' functioning allowed for exchanges on such issues as approaches to learning and expectations of each other in terms of exchange and disclosure. Set members became more aware of each other's limitations and strengths, and open to the potential of working effectively together as a group.

This account suggests that a significant majority of the set members felt they would have like the action learning sets to have been an option from the beginning of the course, in large measure because it offered opportunities to open up differences (such as educational experiences and expectations) for discussion and comment. The Chinese participants in particular were eager to share their thoughts regarding a growing confidence in collaborating with those of other nationalities, and also with the lecturers, from whom they initially felt somewhat distant.

Conclusion

Facilitators need to be aware of some of the complexities involved in engaging in action learning with international students and mindful of the importance of maintaining an open-minded and supportive attitude whilst holding to the central importance of encouraging students to develop 'questioning insight'. Learning is in and of itself an emotional and complex process and students may feel (but not always overtly exhibit) emotions connected with learning which facilitators of conventional action learning programmes may consider are best left buried because of the potential for conflict and discomfort which may then arise. But action learning sets are not always in any case warm and comfortable places to be, and the style and approach does not suit all. Challenge is part of the process.

Notes on contributors

Cheryl Brook is a senior lecturer in Human Resource Management at Portsmouth Business School, and course leader for the MSc in Human Resource Management, She has a PhD in management learning from Lancaster University.

Christopher Milner joined Portsmouth Business School in 2009, and is a senior lecturer in the Operations Management team, specialising in lean synchronisation, improvement and creativity, which is where his PhD research and consulting work is focused.

References

Baker, S. 2012. *Shared mission but still different* in Times Higher Education Magazine, January 26, 2012.

Boshyk, Y., and R. Dilworth. 2010. *Action Learning: History and Evolution*, Palgrave Macmillan: Hampshire

Brook, C. 2012. Cross Cultural Action Learning in Higher Education: Some questions and observations for facilitators and participants *Working Paper presented at International Action Learning Conference: The Impact of Action Learning: what difference are we making in the world?, June 2012, in Ashridge Business School.*

Carroll, J., and J.Ryan. 2005. *Teaching International Students: Improving Learning for All*, Routledge: Oxon

Lee, M. 1996. Action Learning as a Cross-Cultural Tool in Stewart, J and J. McGoldrick. 1996. *Human Resource Development: Perspectives, Strategies and Practice*, Pitman: London

Revans, R.W. 2011. *ABC of Action Learning* Surrey: Gower.

Rigg, C. and K. Trehan. 2004. Reflections on working with critical action learning, *Action Learning Research and Practice* 1, no. 2: 149-165.

Wang, Y., R. Harding., and L.W. Mai. 2011. Impact of cultural exposure on young Chinese students' adaptation in a UK business school. *Studies in Higher Education*, 1: 19.