

A model for designing action learning and action research programs

Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt

The author

Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt is Director of OZI (Ortrun Zuber International P/L), Adjunct Professor at Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia, and Professor of Professional and Organisational Development in the UK-based International Management Centres Association (IMCA).

Keywords

Action learning, Model

Abstract

Models can be helpful for understanding the essence and/or processes of complex phenomena in a field, because they are simple representations of concept patterns and relationships. This paper presents a generic model for designing action learning programs, including action research projects, within organizations. Core values for action learning programs and explanations for success and potential pitfalls are also discussed. The model has been tested and found useful by many senior managers, academics, postgraduates and consultants in several countries. Readers are encouraged to explore the model in order to apply, refine, adapt it, or to create their own model representing their theoretical framework, concepts, values and systems thinking.

Electronic access

The research register for this journal is available at <http://www.emeraldinsight.com/researchregisters>

The current issue and full text archive of this journal is available at <http://www.emeraldinsight.com/0969-6474.htm>

Introduction

There is an extensive literature on action learning and action research (ALAR), as is evident in this journal issue. It concerns their nature, epistemology, theories, methodologies, methods, techniques, applications, examples, and personal reflections. However, there are gaps in the literature around the actual design and conduct of a program, the reasons for the success and failure of programs, and the core values underpinning ALAR.

This paper aims to address these gaps in the literature. First, I explain the rationale for model building before presenting a generic model for an ALAR program consisting of eight components. This is followed by an explanation of what makes ALAR programs successful (with reference to Glasser's concept of four basic human needs), what are the potential pitfalls and how to avoid them. I then consider nine core values that underpin a successful ALAR program.

Model building

I have defined a model as the representation of a concept or system in a two- or three-dimensional diagram. This representation should be as clear to others as it is to the model constructor (Zuber-Skerritt, 1995, p. 3). Model building is a process of establishing patterns and relationships; it is a simple representation of a theory or message in the form of a concept map or diagram; thus, it is "minessence", that is the essence of a message or theory in minimum form – whether in language and/or graphics.

Models may be built on the basis of quantitative or qualitative data. The model presented in this paper is based on qualitative data from many case studies related to ALAR programs. It has been tested with participants in many workshops and programs in Australia, South Africa and Europe who found it useful for understanding the design, essence and processes of an ALAR program.

However, it is in the nature of ALAR that the model needs to be generic, flexible and

This paper is a substantially revised and extended version of an earlier brief paper by the author, published in the *ALAR Journal*, Vol. 5 No. 1, pp. 41-50.



adaptable. Even if it needs to be replaced by a new one, this model is still useful as a starting point or guide for newcomers to the field, and also as a reminder to experienced facilitators or as re-enforced evidence for their practice.

The process of model building involves the following activities (Zuber-Skerritt, 1995, p. 4):

- looking for core categories, issues or problems in the data;
- identifying sub-categories;
- patterning the relationships;
- drawing various shapes (e.g. circles, spirals, square or round boxes);
- drawing lines and arrows between concepts and labelling the relationships; and
- experimenting, getting feedback from others, revising until the best way of representing the data, results or conclusions gradually emerges.

The following generic model for designing an action learning program, including action research projects, within an organisation has emerged from this process.

A generic model

Figure 1 presents the eight main components of a structured action learning program that uses collaborative action research as a methodology for addressing a major organisational problem, issue or concern.

In all phases of this model there is a cyclical process of planning (including situation and problem analysis), taking action (or implementing the plan), observing (watching and evaluating the action), reflecting (on the ongoing process of planning, acting, observing and evaluating) and, as a result, revising the plan for a new cycle of action research. The following is a brief description of each of the eight major phases in the model (Figure 1). These phases are related to:

- (1) Problem definition and needs analysis.
- (2) Start-up workshop.
- (3) Project work.
- (4) Midway workshop with specialist input.
- (5) Project work continued.
- (6) Concluding workshop.
- (7) Preparing for presentations and publications.
- (8) Final presentation and celebration.

Problem definition and needs analysis

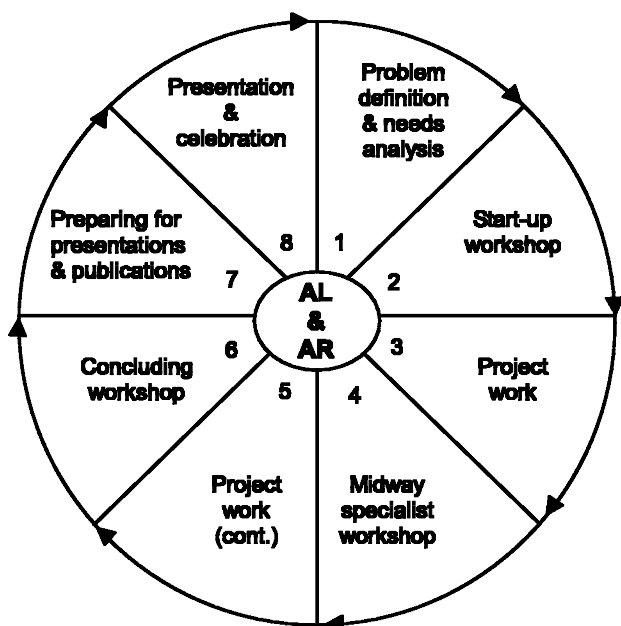
The first step is to identify the most serious concerns that a group of people in an organisation share. Next is to explore and decide upon what project might be feasible for the group to work on to address their concerns. Thus, the group identifies what Kurt Lewin termed a “thematic concern”, so that the team(s) can be selected and the project(s) can be defined. A team project is typically work-based and with significance and benefit not only for the individuals involved, but for the whole organisation or a section of an organisation.

It helps in running the program to provide background reading and resources before the participants begin the program. This enables participants to have a common information base and enhances the possibility that they will have shared understanding of the project’s key issues and its paradigms of learning and research.

Start-up workshop

As the name of this workshop indicates, this is where group or teamwork begins. Ideally, this workshop should be residential, away from the usual workplace and family or other home commitments. The workshop location should be in a pleasant environment conducive to open discussion that promotes learning from and with each other. Learning situations are both formal through specified sessions and informal over coffee, meals, drinks at the bar or any shared activity. Key areas to be covered

Figure 1 A generic model for ALAR programs



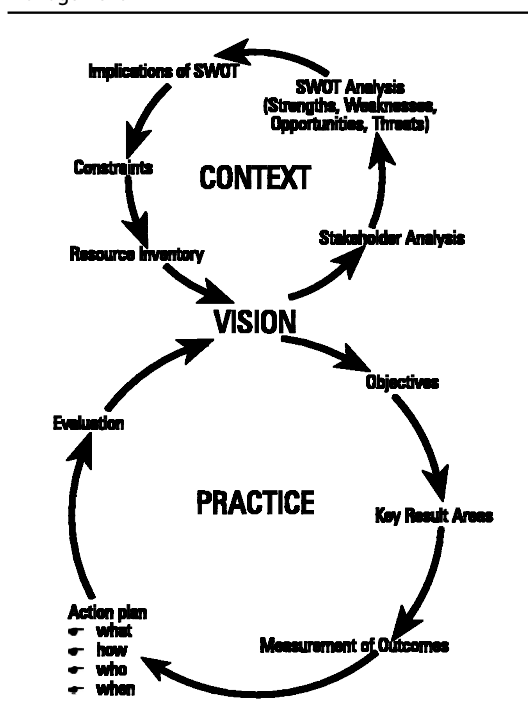
naturally depend on the organisation and the project topic(s) it has chosen on the basis of the needs analysis carried out in the first phase. Key areas include:

- vision building and team building;
- introduction to action learning, action research and process management;
- project design, management and evaluation;
- qualitative research methods;
- using information technology, library resources, electronic databases, and bibliography packages, such as “Endnote”, “Papyrus”, etc.;
- starting the process of project planning, following the “figure eight” process model below.

In Figure 2 we see the process model developed by the design team of the Queensland University action learning (QUAL) program described by Passfield in this journal issue. His consulting firm (SCOPE) has published a workbook for teams who wish to use this process model for their project planning. The workbook has been used widely in action learning and action research programs in Australia, South Africa, Austria, Germany, Hong Kong and Singapore.

The model consists of three major components (vision, context and practice) and several stages and cycles. The cycles are

Figure 2 The process of project design and management



not in spiral form as in the action research model (see also the article by Altrichter *et al.* in issue 3, pp. 125–31), but in two iterative cycles forming a figure eight; hence the name of the model. The major components are:

- (1) *Vision.* We have used various team- and vision-building exercises and questionnaires, such as TMS – team management system – (Margerison and McCann, 1985) and AVI – a values instrument – (<http://www.minessence.net/html/aboutavi.htm>). We have used these instruments as a basis for discussing individual differences in learning and management styles; but we have also facilitated group sessions in which each team brainstorms, discusses and formulates a vision statement or preferably they draw a picture of what and where they envisage their project to be in about three years’ time. Each team vision is then presented to the whole group for questioning and further discussion.
- (2) *Context.* An analysis of the organisational and environmental context includes stakeholder analysis (internal and external stakeholders, those interested in and affected by the implementation of the project, and those with high or low influence/impact on the success of the project); SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) and its implications for the team project; discussion of possible constraints; and an inventory and discussion of the existing resources and additional resources necessary for the project.
- (3) *Vision revisited.* After their context analysis the teams revise their vision, because it might be different now and more realistic in the light of the above discussions.

It is important that enough time is spent on the above three stages before planning for improved practice begins. The reason for failure of many ALAR programs is that the teams start their projects straight away with aims and objectives and how to achieve them, without considering the contextual factors and human relationships first.

- (4) *Practice.* Planning for improved practice includes an analysis of the situation and the organisational problem or “thematic

concern” which must be shared and “owned” by everyone in the project team, followed by a discussion of and agreement on the aims, objectives, desired outcomes, outcome measures, action plan (what has to be done, by whom, how, by when?) and evaluation strategies and methods to be used.

Then this process of revised vision, context analysis and improved practice is repeated several times during the project implementation.

Project work

This is the action part of the project. It includes data collection, analysis, feedback to participants in the research, and collaborative interpretation of results. It also includes an ongoing literature review, and monthly action learning meetings to monitor the progress of, and to support, project teams in their work and provide help when they need it.

Midway workshop with specialist input

By about halfway through the program, the workshop teams will be able to develop a fuller picture of what most teams need to complete the project. So it is cost effective and sensible to bring the teams together at this midway stage. This creates the opportunity for participants to:

- request specialist input as needed;
- share problems and concerns, ask questions, explore answers and solutions;
- discuss “hot” issues and cutting-edge developments;
- hear from key speakers for focussed learning, thought and discussion; and
- reflect and self-assess in the light of other participants’ experiences and contributions to the workshop.

Project work (continued)

This is the stage for further action and reflection as part of the fieldwork. By this stage the participants should be bringing their action in the field – their fieldwork – towards conclusion. This means, for example:

- interpreting results in the light of the literature review;
- model and theory building (grounded theory and personal construct theory) and making tacit knowledge explicit; and
- reflecting on personal and organisational learning.

Concluding workshop

This workshop may be residential or at the regular workplace/organisation venue. Its purpose is to enable project teams to present and discuss their findings in first draft form and to reflect on their learning, as well as share their problems and possible solutions. The following discussion topics or activities might be included for participants to develop skills related to the project work:

- writing for different purposes and audiences;
- publishing reports, articles (in international, refereed journals), monographs and/or books;
- writing a dissertation (optional); and
- skills for presenting to different audiences and media, e.g. for radio and television interviews, the difference between oral and written presentations, the use of OHTs, PowerPoint and other audio-visual techniques, video productions, etc.

Preparing for presentations

Oral and written presentations are vehicles for individual and team learning, reflection and conceptualisation. Written reports also document the processes of organisational learning, development, change, innovation and achievement. In unstructured action learning sessions, public presentation and accountability are often missing. Without them the learning becomes transitory or unnoticed; it is not appreciated and not duly rewarded. If, however, participants make the effort to commit their thoughts and findings to writing and public scrutiny, action learning becomes action research. This effort is of great value to the participants themselves, because they derive further insights and enrichment from the task of formally writing their ideas, experiences and reflections. In this way they grow and develop as professionals. The written works may also add value to the reputation or legacy of their organisation.

This written work may be in the form of a:

- report for the organisation’s executive and/or library;
- newsletter article;
- conference paper;
- published refereed paper in a national or international journal; and
- dissertation for a higher degree, e.g. a graduate certificate, a graduate diploma, a masters or doctoral degree.

Final presentation and celebration

The culmination of an action learning program is always the presentation day. Relevant organisation(s), stakeholders and the wider community, the media and press are invited to witness this event and receive brief reports from project teams that outline the teams' aims, objectives, achievements, improved performance, learning outcomes for themselves and their organisation, and future action plans.

What makes action learning and action research programs successful?

I am always impressed by how much time, effort and energy the action learning teams spend to make their project and the final presentation a great success. I believe it is because an action learning program fulfills the basic human needs set out in Glasser's (1984) classic theory. Glasser streams these needs into four categories: success/worth; fun/enjoyment; freedom/choice; and belonging/respect/love. I believe it is participants' quest to satisfy these basic needs that generates the momentum, personal commitment and ultimately then the success of action learning and action research programs. Let us consider how participation satisfies these needs.

Success/worth

The project teams come up with tangible results and success from completing the project. Team members are recognised publicly and acknowledged by their colleagues, top management and a large audience. This gives recognition of participants' contributions and achievements, which enhances feelings of self-worth and worth to the workplace/organisation.

Fun/enjoyment

Project teams work hard. But because team members are sharing and learning together in a collegiate spirit and with a shared goal, they have fun as well, especially in the start-up, midway and concluding workshops. In the monthly meetings and particularly in the final presentation there is usually a lot of energy and excitement.

Freedom/choice

Project teams are free to select their topics and many other aspects of their project. The

structure of projects encourages creativity and innovation throughout, but especially when participants explore alternative solutions. From the start participants are free to choose whether or not they will participate in the program.

Belonging/respect/love

Team members form alliances and networks. They are united by shared goals and actually working in close proximity to each other. Gradually they develop and share a common language and culture, they work in the same paradigm of learning and research, and they usually come to respect and like or at least appreciate each other.

What makes ALAR programs unsuccessful

We might deduce from the previous section that ALAR programs are likely to be unsuccessful if the participants' basic human needs are not met. Indeed, from our experience and observation, it is true to say that participants (and their organisations) fail to learn and develop if they perceive:

- The project to be too difficult for them to bring to a successful completion, or if they feel inadequate (e.g. to make a public presentation or to write a report); this means no self-worth/success.
- Additional work and collaboration (required by the program) to be too demanding, time consuming, strenuous and to be avoided; this means no fun/enjoyment.
- Their participation in the program to be delegated from above and enforced by senior management (like committee work), rather than voluntary; this means no freedom/choice.
- Action learning and action research to be unknown, vague or "soft" methodologies, not "scientific" and "rigorous" enough for them to become involved; this means no respect for, love of, or belonging to an action learning community/culture.

Other potential pitfalls and how to avoid them?

I agree with Marquardt (1999, p. 13) who has identified seven factors that can make action

learning ineffective for problem solving and organisational learning.

- (1) Inappropriate choice of project.
- (2) Lack of support from top management.
- (3) Lack of time.
- (4) Poor mix of participants.
- (5) Lack of commitment by participants.
- (6) All action and no learning.
- (7) Incompetent set advisor.

His advice on how to avoid these pitfalls, in summary, is for organisations and teams to make sure that they are in a position to:

- select a project that lies within the participants' authority and scope of responsibility in the organisation, and we might add that is of great significance, not only to the team members, but primarily to the organisation as a whole;
- have top management, both moral and financial support;
- allocate sufficient time for project completion and for reflection and learning during the meetings;
- form a "winning" team of participants to cover all necessary attributes and skills;
- own the problem and be committed to the program's success;
- emphasise learning, not just action, and maximise long-term organisational benefits; and
- use only trained set advisors.

From this discussion of what makes action learning and action research programs successful or not, we see how individual participants and teams are instrumental in shaping the process and outcome of these programs. However, I hold that learning programs are able to develop core values in participants that determine their action learning culture. From here let us turn to consider these core values.

Core values

I categorise these values into nine concepts: systems thinking; synergy; collaboration and team spirit; openness; trust; focus on learning and questioning insight; symmetrical communication; and creativity. It is useful to consider each concept in turn to deepen our understanding of what happens when action learning and action research programs move from theory to practice.

Systems thinking

Systems thinking is the ability to see the big picture (the whole rather than only its parts); to connect issues, events and facts in a holistic way; and to appreciate organisational learning as the basis of long-term competitive advantage.

Synergy

Synergy is the willingness to share knowledge, information and skills for problem solving. A synergy brings the value that comes when the whole adds up to more than the sum of its parts. In other words, an action learning group can achieve more collectively than each member could individually.

Collaboration and team spirit

Team spirit is the willingness or enthusiasm of team members to co-operate and collaborate in a team in order to create change and to make a significant contribution to the organisation(s) in which they work.

Admitting ignorance or failure

Permeability, a term used in personal construct theory, means a readiness to be receptive of self-criticism and critique from others, to admit one's ignorance or failure, to be honest to others and oneself, and to use processes of self-reflection and reflection with others on and in action. For example, Revans (1991a,b) encourages reflection through discussion of what is not going well and sharing this with "comrades in adversity".

Openness

Openness to new ideas, challenges and feedback from "critical friends" means participants must be willing to suspend their need for power, authority and control.

Trust

Trust must be twofold: trust in our own ability to find solutions to a problem, and trust in our co-learners or co-researchers to have our, the team's and the organisation's benefits at heart.

Focus on learning and questioning insight

Participants are encouraged to focus on the learning process, as well as on action, tasks, products and improved performance, through reflecting on their work, thought and decisions, and questioning their insights as

they move through the project. For example, reflection can be aided by keeping a log book or learning diary; insight and tacit knowledge can be elicited through questions like “What have you learnt from today’s session (or from the whole project or from the whole process of research and thesis writing)?”, “What were the milestones in your organisation’s learning?” and “What really brought about organisational change?”.

Symmetrical communication

Symmetrical communication is a term used by the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory. It refers to mutual respect for individual needs and differences, recognition of each other as equal team members, and sharing responsibility for project outcomes as well as for processes of learning and team building.

Creativity

This requires people to be willing to take risks, to be flexible and innovative, and to encourage others to be likewise.

When we consider the nature of action learning and action research programs, it becomes clear that having these nine core values among all participants is crucial in shaping both the process and the outcome of these learning programs.

Conclusion

Here I have presented a generic model that uses collaborative action learning/research as its methodology for addressing a major issue in a workplace/organisation. This model offers a useful guide for conducting action learning/research programs since design is crucial to the program’s successful outcome. I have also discussed here the nine core values that I believe underpin action learning and action research because I recognise this is particularly important for those who conduct or participate in programs, aimed at major transformation, change or innovation in an organisation.

A well designed and structured action learning program becomes successful because

it develops these core values among participants. Process in action learning programs helps to satisfy participants’ basic human needs and contributes significantly to the participants’ professional development. Successful action learning programs also contribute to organisation development and innovation through addressing a major shared issue or thematic concern.

Successful action learning programs have much to offer workplace programs because these programs are flexible, creative and inspiring. The process model discussed here is particularly useful towards this end. However, I encourage the readers of this article to create and develop their own models representing their particular theoretical framework, concepts and systems of action learning and action research programs. Model building generally – that is, adapting, refining or modifying existing models and creating new models – is important, especially for postgraduate research students who are required to make an original contribution to knowledge in the field; and abstract concepts and generalisations are often easier to represent in the form of graphic design, such as mind maps, flow charts and diagrams.

References

- Glasser, W. (1984), *Take Effective Control of Your Life*, Harper & Row, New York, NY.
- Margerison, C. and McCann, D. (1985), *Team Management Systems: How to Lead a Winning Team*, MCB University Press, Bradford.
- Marquardt, M. (1999), “Action learning”, *Info-line. Organizational Development*, No. 9704, pp. 1-16.
- Revans, R. (1991a), “The concept, origin and growth of action learning”, in Zuber-Skerritt, O. (Ed.), *Action Learning for Improved Performance*, AEBIS Publishing, Brisbane, pp. 14-25.
- Revans, R. (1991b), *Reg Revans Speaks about Action Learning*, a video program produced by Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt, TV Centre, University of Queensland, Brisbane.
- Zuber-Skerritt, O. (1995), “Models for action research”, in Pinchen, S. and Passfield, R. (Eds), *Moving on: Creative Applications of Action Learning and Action Research*, ALARPM Association, Brisbane, pp. 2-29.