

Action Learning in the Classroom

What is Action Learning?

Action learning is an approach to solving problems that involves taking action and reflecting on the outcomes. According to the **World Institute for Action Learning**:

Action learning is a process that involves a small group working on real problems, taking action, and learning as individuals, as a team, and as an organization. It helps organizations develop creative, flexible, and successful strategies to pressing problems.

Action learning is fundamentally based on achieving optimum learning through the actions of programming, questioning, and reflecting, which leads to the action-learning equation:

Learning = Problem + Questions + Reflection

Action learning is a team- or group-based learning approach that requires a facilitator who enables the learning activity. Developed by Reg Revans in the early 1980s, the concept of action learning was first applied to support organizational and business development, problem solving, and improvement. Several scholarly publications determined action learning can have a very effective impact on developing individual leadership and team problem-solving skills, justifying the extensive integration of action learning as a component in corporate and organizational leadership development programs. The figure below summarizes the basic requirements of action learning.



Figure 1. The problem-solving concept within action learning.

Focusing on the classroom setting, action learning must create an experience that engages learners who then debrief the experience and, based on their results and findings,

generalize lessons learned for the future. Despite the efficacy of action learning, integrating this method into classroom environments presents challenges that we identify and address in this article.

Why Action Learning?

As Marquardt (1999) states: “Education is not truly valuable unless it is translated into action.” The rapid changes seen in today’s world prove that the traditional form of education is inadequate for identifying and solving tomorrow’s challenges. While the world enters an era of quantum computation and artificial intelligence, the traditional, individual-based learning process is insufficiently responsive to the needs of our quickly evolving and emerging future. Therefore, it is necessary to integrate action learning into all aspects of education in order to facilitate transitioning from the industrial era to the information era. Action learning provides solid resources for educational institutions to successfully identify imminent problems and respond to future needs by developing an advanced, interactive form of education.

Our approach to action learning in the classroom builds upon the initial concept to improve teaching and learning. Additionally, our approach draws from problem-based learning and active-learning approaches to instructional and teaching development.

As we consider students’ classroom learning, we are mindful that effective learning is often a result of multiple actions. The widespread accessibility to technology and multimedia disrupts the way students learn today; therefore, teaching and instruction must adapt to be effective. When considering effective classroom strategies, we go back to fundamental educational psychology. Learning is essentially a step-by-step process in which individual experiences become permanent, lasting changes in knowledge, behaviors, and/or ways of processing the world. Creating an action-learning strategy depends on the specific context of classrooms and students and, consequently, instructors must adapt the strategy to their classroom’s learning framework. In a sense, action learning is not a “one size fits all” solution.

To understand why we focus on action learning, it is important to describe the context for which our strategy was initially developed: the Bachelor of Science degree program in Construction Project Management at the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology (SAIT). Designed to meet the growing need for management professionals who play an important role on project teams, SAIT’s Bachelor of Science in Construction Project Management is a construction degree with a management-based course of study that prepares

students for leadership roles in the construction industry. Within the context and framework of this program, our goals and objectives behind implementing an action-learning strategy include:

- An effective transfer of knowledge;
- Performing and learning;
- Enabling and promoting team learning; and
- Developing capabilities for creative thinking and leadership competencies.

What are the Basic Components of Action Learning?

Action learning as described in the definition above includes the following key and necessary components:

- **A Problem:** The problem should be urgent and significant and the responsibility of the team to resolve.
- **An Action-Learning Group or Team:** The action-learning team is composed of four to eight people, ideally with diverse backgrounds and experiences.
- **A Process of Insightful Questioning and Reflective Listening:** The process of first asking questions to clarify the exact nature of the problem is a pivotal part of action learning, followed by reflection and identifying possible solutions. Questioning builds group dialogue and cohesiveness, generates innovative and systems thinking, and enhances learning results.
- **An Action Taken on the Problem:** Action learning requires that the group take action on the problem. Members of the group must have the power to take action themselves or know that their solution can be implemented by others. If the group only makes recommendations instead of taking action, it loses its energy, creativity, and commitment.

Additionally, team members must commit to learning individually and as a group. Finally, the facilitator acts as a coach and guides the questioning and reflection processes, thus enabling the team to learn from these processes.

What is the Process of Action Learning?

Instructors can design the process of action learning with an educational emphasis using the following steps:

1. Present a problem, issue, or challenge.
2. Have teams/groups create constructive questions to challenge views, perceptions, and assumptions.
3. Invite teams to share knowledge about solutions and recommendations.
4. Offer insight and understanding of ideas for taking action.
5. Have students test out actions.
6. Students report results regarding what worked, what did not, and why.
7. Draw conclusions and lessons learned from the

experiences before integrating new knowledge into the practice.

In action learning, learning and team development are as important as solving the problem.

Action Learning in the Classroom

Aside from fundamental concepts in construction project management, students acquire essential learning through problem solving and critical thinking. Building experience acumen, while also empowering leadership skills and team-based collaborative engagement, can be increased through action-learning activities. Below is an example of how we implement action learning in the classroom.

- **Strategy**

We apply single-project strategy in some senior construction management courses to implement the action-learning process. The professor integrates several student groups into action-learning sets to work on a project (i.e., problem), which the professor also provides. The groups' productivity directly depends on the level of critical thinking, collaborative problem analysis, and interaction with internal and external resources.

1. **Introductory Period:** Students are placed in learning groups for an assignment or final project to explore the nature of the problem (i.e., questioning).
2. **Diagnostic Period:** Students share their individual understanding and definition of the problem. In a later stage, the groups develop a cumulative knowledge and understanding of the problem.
3. **Consultation Period:** Students examine other available resources (i.e., other professors, industry experts, etc.). Then, the groups use critical-thinking methods to collectively redefine the problem based on their own understanding and perspectives from external resources.
4. **Implementation Period:** Students develop an action plan from their collaborative query and problem identification.
5. **Review Period:** Students share their learning with the professor and apply the proposed solutions systematically to each step of their project.

- **Challenges**

There can be a few challenges associated with implementing effective action-learning practices. We find that the major barrier to successful action learning is the reliance and assumption about students' individual readiness, engagement, and commitment. Additionally, assuring students that

their solutions to the problem can be implemented as a way to validate the process proves difficult. This is especially true given the time and physical constraints of most problems brought forward as part of the action-learning process.

It remains to be validated whether a lack of engagement results from students not having a stake in the recommended actions, from their reluctance to group work, and/or from their rejection of the method. However, despite mixed student feedback, more than 50 percent of students report a positive acceptance of action learning and substantial learning of the content.

Conclusion

Action learning in education has outstanding benefits that support successful learning. Most importantly, it helps build students' individual skills. However, prior to implementation, instructors must address students' readiness and preparedness in order to achieve a successful learning experience.

Do you have ideas for implementing action learning in the classroom? Share them in the comment section or on [Facebook!](#)

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Join the authors during NISOD's March 9 webinar and continue the discussion on implementing action learning in the classroom. [Register now!](#)

References

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Marsick, V. and O'Neil, J. 1999, *The Many Faces of Action Learning in Management Learning*. Sage Publications, London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi Vol. 30(2): 159–176.

World Institute for Action Learning, www.wial.org/action-learning/.