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## SUSTAINING COMPETING PROFESSIONAL IDENTITIES: MEASURING ACTION LEARNING 'OUTCOMES' IN AN EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT

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# **Sustaining competing professional identities: Measuring action learning ‘outcomes’ in an educational context**

## **Abstract**

This paper builds on an initial investigation of the process of action learning in a university Management School in New Zealand, where the focus is on sustainability and innovation. Students are encouraged to engage with entrepreneurial practice and develop critical thinking skills. In this study, we recognise the impact of the organisational context both on our own professional practice as teaching staff and on learning outcomes for staff and students.

The emergent nature of action learning outcomes makes the measurement of their effectiveness problematic. Research questions cannot be determined at the outset but are generated in consultation with the research participants. Despite aiming to be collaborative, our focus groups and interviews made explicit the tensions existing in the professional identities of staff. Their expert knowledge as researchers and teachers was challenged by an action learning approach. Consequently, this paper is an example of ongoing critical reflective practice.

We conclude that measuring the effectiveness of action learning outcomes is context-dependent and consider the implications for the teaching of critical management studies. The process of action learning must be considered a key outcome. Individual reflection on professional identity and practice may be as important as the organisational learning and explicit knowledge gained.

## **Sustaining competing professional identities: Measuring action learning 'outcomes' in an educational context**

### Introduction

Business schools have been heavily criticised for emphasising traditional pedagogical techniques and focusing on functional, prescriptive approaches to management, rather than preparing students with critical, analytical skills that can be applied in a rapidly changing environment. Emphasis is often placed on the latest popular management fashion (Collins, 200; Jackson, 2001; Holmes, Cockburn-Wooten, Motion, Zorn & Roper, 2005); yet, there has been extensive critique of the management fashions that have been promoted in popular texts and their influence on teaching approaches (Collins, 200; Jackson, 2001). Critical scholars have called for a radical change towards the teaching of management that fosters and integrates a critical, reflexive approach (Grey, 2004). They argue that this approach helps to prepare students for a complex and ambiguous business environment (Linstead, Fulop & Lilley, 2004; Mintzberg, 2004). Grey and French, for example, call for the re-evaluation of both what we teach and how we teach in management (1996).

This re-evaluation calls for a radical approach towards the context of teaching management as well as the process of learning. The structural, historical, and cultural context in which management practices occur is one that involves “relations among power, discursive practices and conflict suppression as they relate to the production of individual identity and corporate knowledge” (Deetz, 2003, p. 23). Organisations, including universities, are both enabled and contained by particular discursive practices and the positioning of powerful groups. In this University the focus on sustainability challenges existing practices and frames approaches to teaching and research. Indeed, management education has been shaped and influenced by dominant stakeholder groups (Thomas & Anthony, 1996). Gallos (1996), for example, calls on management educators to advocate the value of this new approach to management teaching practice in their institutions, that “good scholarship need not be divorced from good teaching” (p. 10). The context of management teaching is often unacknowledged; rather than focusing on the experience and process of learning, the emphasis is often on the output—the successful completion of courses.

In this context, critical scholars have called for management educators to critically reflect on their professional practice and on how they encourage critical reflexive thinking in their students (French & Grey, 1996; Grey, 2004; Mintzberg, 2004). In encouraging students to become critical reflexive learners, the design of courses needs to allow both the student and teacher to explore the processes of learning (Kolb, 1984). Embracing a critical framework towards teaching requires that both the teacher and student question assumptions, understand the contexts which shape management discourses, and look at alternative ways of practicing and “unmasking hidden tensions and meanings with a goal of emancipating thinking and action” (Holmes et al, 2005, p. 249; Politis, 2005).

In response to this critique, this paper builds on an initial investigation of the process of action learning in a university management school in New Zealand, where the teaching and research focus is on sustainability and innovation. Participation, dialogue and experiential learning are encouraged in classes by teachers, to develop students’ thinking away from traditional conceptions of management. In this New Zealand management school, students are encouraged to engage with concepts of innovation and entrepreneurial practice, and to develop their critical thinking skills. This paper illustrates this process of encouraging critical, reflective practice through an application of action learning. As learning is an ongoing process, this paper also reflects on critical incidents that have occurred since the action learning study. We recognise the impact of the organisational context both on our own professional practice as teaching staff and on learning outcomes for staff and students. This paper is an example of ongoing critical reflective practice.

### Background

The context for this paper is the Department of Management Communication (MCOM) at the University of Waikato, within the Waikato Management School (WMS). The purpose statement of the WMS states that: “At the heart of our business is transformation – our purpose is to inspire the world with fresh understandings of sustainable success” (Waikato Management School, 2006). The Department has over twenty staff from diverse cultures and with diverse research approaches. It offers undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in management communication and

public relations. Cultural diversity is reflected in both the critical, creative approach applied in teaching and in the Department's research. In addition, the students comprise both bi-cultural and multi-cultural groups, and tensions can arise due both to this diversity in student groups and the desire by the department to 'practice what we preach'. The key tension for staff is to encourage students to move away from their initial functionalist expectations of management education towards the process of critically reflective learning (see Holmes et al, 2005).

#### Literature review

In this section we first explore the relevance of the learning process to the development of sustainable innovation. The literature on entrepreneurship has begun to address the issue of learning, with a specific interest in investigating the key characteristics of how entrepreneurs learn (Cope, 2005; Politis, 2005). Indeed, the main activity associated with being an entrepreneur has been the learning that they encounter while setting up and developing a new venture. This learning has been seen as one that is developed from previous experiences, experiential in nature, a dynamic process, and importantly it should develop from instrumental learning to a higher reflective learning process (Cope, 2005; Politis, 2005).

Entrepreneurs that have learnt from previous experiences and contexts have been identified as more successful in adapting to and foreseeing new ventures. Importantly, the learning that has been deemed successful has developed from both their 'hands on' experiences and ongoing critical reflection of those experiences (Cope, 2005; Kayne & Altman, 2005; Politis, 2005). As Cope asserts, "Entrepreneurs are constantly learning and developing as they manage their business" (2005, p. 384). The desirable characteristics of this learning are that it embraces both a dynamic and ongoing learning process; evaluates how structures and context shape the individual and business; reflects on particular key incidents; and investigates how they overcame problems and challenges that confronted them (Cope, 2005; Politis, 2005). In this sense their learning creates opportunities for sustainable innovation.

The challenge for academics has been to investigate ways that allow the learning acquired by an experienced entrepreneur to be passed on to others. A key point emphasised in the literature has been the social context and

networks for entrepreneurs in passing on and acquiring new learning (Cope, 2005; Gill & Ganesh, forthcoming; Politis, 2005). Action learning potentially offers one method of facilitating these learning processes. It provides the dynamic and social collaboration called for by the entrepreneurship literature, with the aim of individual and organisation change. The following sections in this literature review will define and discuss the key features of learning and describe the process of action learning.

### The process of learning

The emphasis on student-centred learning and teaching has been heavily influenced by Kolb's learning cycle (1984). Learning, in Kolb's model is a continuous process, which involves a dialectic approach to learning and is firmly grounded in experience (Kolb, 1984). Learning is conceived of as a holistic process that involves reflection, adaptation to reality, and relationships. The model's key contribution to management education has been the emphasis on linking theory and practice (Vince, 1998). This has had a significant impact on the movement towards investigating organisational learning (Linstead, Fulop & Lilley 2004).

Definitions of experiential learning are many and varied but all share a belief in the value of learners having a lived, as opposed to a vicarious, experience to learn from (Brookfield, 1983). Managers appear to prefer those forms of learning that are vocationally oriented and 'hands on'; yet, there appears to be a move towards communities of practice that attempt to bridge the gap between theory and practice (Brown & Duguid, 1991). Similarly, Kolb's cycle encourages reflection into the question of how individual and organisational learning occurs, with the aim of solving organisational problems, knowledge acquisition (turning tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge), reducing conflict, and more importantly improving relationships. This has prompted an interest by both managers and academics into the process of individual and organisational learning (Thompson & McHugh, 2002).

As the process of learning requires a dialectic relationship, 'communities of practice' have become common place in organisations (Brown & Duguid, 1991; Thompson & McHugh, 2002; Linstead et al, 2005). They are defined as "collections of individuals with varying degrees of expertise in a

particular area, who share insight and a sense of identity” (Linstead et al, 2005, p. 44). These employees are encouraged to draw on tacitly gained workplace experiences in order to solve workplace problems (Smith, 2001). The aim is to accumulate individuals’ experiential and tacit knowledge, gained in the workplace, and to translate this through shared discussion into solving organisational problems (Nonaka, 1991; Smith, 2001).

Criticism, however, has been made of such organisational initiatives regarding individual and organisational learning (Thompson & McHugh, 2002). These criticisms question whether any real collaborative or creative learning is achieved and if any organisational transformation occurs as a result of this learning (Thompson & McHugh, 2002). Instead, Thompson and McHugh argue that “it will be managed learning. The implication here is that organisational initiatives will be dependent on ad hoc instrumental opportunities and functional imperatives” (p. 248, emphasis in the original). Rather than creating change, it is argued that organisational learning will create “defensive routines” and a slide back into typical work practices (Thompson & McHugh, 2002; Linstead et al, 2005).

#### The ethos of action learning

In response to the increased attention directed towards organisational learning and student-centered learning, action learning has become an increasingly popular tool used in both organisations and in some areas of further education (Cusins, 1995; Pedler, 1991; Hoban, 2004). The key tenets of action learning are “reflection, community and action – which interrelate and enhance each other” (Hoban, 2004, p. 204). Employees come together in groups, for example, reflecting on particular problems and endeavoring to generate ideas that can be put into action. The premise in action learning is that through group reflective discussion, where the employees (or students) draw on their experiences, individuals learn to solve work problems and thus enhance the wider group or organisational learning (Pedler 1991; Donnenberg & De Loo, 2004; Vince 2005). The key focus of action learning is that it should be orientated towards changing the organisational learning through individual and group problem solving (Pedler, 2006).

Action learning has been attributed to Reg Revans (1998) and although he never specified a detailed method, “he did expect applications of the theory to be creative, to evolve, and not to be carbon copies of one another” (Willis,

2004, p. 11). Revans did, however, define action learning through what it is not, and, as a result, some key approaches towards implementing the method have developed (Marquardt & Waddill, 2004; Willis, 2004). Action learning tends to begin with a problem or challenge that a group of people want to work on. This group can be up to six or eight members of the organisation; the group needs to question and reflect on the problem and any ideas posed to solve it; a facilitator is required to help this group work; and finally some action or change is generated from the process (O'Hara, Bourner & Webber, 2004; Marquardt & Waddill, 2004).

The challenges for, and criticism of, action learning are that it neglects issues relating to organisational power and identity dynamics. It can be inhibited by pre-defined organisational goals and structures, lacks any strategies for action/change, and it has been difficult to integrate within typical teaching structures (Ashton, 2006; Corley & Thorne, 2006; Vince, 2004; Willis, 2004). The rise of critical action learning has been in response to the political reality and organisational dynamics of trying to implement the method (Pedler, Burgoyne & Brook, 2005).

As mentioned earlier, action learning has been seen as a tool for achieving change within an organisation. The context in which this occurs, however, has rarely been considered. Power within the organisation and an individual investment in professional identity changes the dynamics in the action learning sets used within organisations (Vince, 2004). Importantly, particular dominant groups in the organisation will also have the power to determine what is measurable and is seen as a successful outcome of the action learning process (Corley & Thorne, 2006). A common complaint from many of the senior managers involved in action learning projects, however, is that it did not meet "the organisation's 'real needs for change'" (Corley & Thorne, 2006, p. 39). Yet, these managers had not been involved in the projects, offered little support, and did not provide feedback on any of the employees' recommendations. This poses the question as to who determines the successful outcome of an action learning project. It also brings to light issues of whether the process of learning is as central to the method as the outcomes of the project.

A key feature of the organisational political context which can shape the process and outcomes of action learning is that pre-defined organisational



(and individual) goals and agendas will inhibit the outcomes of the set. Corley and Thorne (2006), for example, found that organisational structures, customs and practice, work routines, individual job focus, and context affected the individual's desire to continue. Corley and Thorne suggested that:

[S]ome groups and individuals felt unsupported and unable to drive through change...Feedback from some senior managers hindered change... [participants] 'lost motivation' and perceived lack of 'power' was also evidenced when participants received no feedback. (2006, p. 38)

An organisation with a focus on sustainability, however, is more likely to recognise the emotional well-being of groups and individuals within the organisation (see, for example, Clarke & Roome, 1999). It might acknowledge all participants in an action learning set, rather than allowing the learning process to be compromised by power structures dictated by the organisational structure, customs or practices.

Sustainability in organisations can additionally be defined in terms of either entrepreneurship—sustainable, ongoing innovation, or stability—maintaining current best practice, and the status quo. If an organisational culture demonstrates dynamic adaptability (see Gioia, Schultz & Corley, 2004), and embraces innovation and entrepreneurship, then it is the processes of reflection and innovation which are foregrounded (and stable), not the defensive systems maintaining the dominant organisational hierarchy and organisational practices (Thompson & McHugh, 2002). Such a dynamic learning environment which is both innovative and sustainable may also foster action learning.

When integrating action learning into an educational context, then, the question must be asked whether the method can promote critical reflective learning and change, while avoiding the typical organisational political games. In this paper, we reflect on a case study to illustrate these concerns.

We seek to demonstrate the relevance of this literature to the sustainable and innovative research and teaching of critical management studies in our aim to ensure that students can incubate ideas and offer creative solutions to organisational problems.

## The Research Project

In the following sections, we describe the original action learning case study (Cockburn-Wooten, Henderson & Rix, 2005) and our initial reflections, before moving on to reflect on the learning and changes that have occurred since the study was completed. We recognise the limitations of focusing on a single case study. At the same time, this is an opportunity for in-depth analysis of individual and organisational learning on how we teach critical management studies. This reflection on the process of a single case study is also an example of critical action learning.

MCOM staff had identified that the MCOM Department web site did not communicate effectively with key users or stakeholders, nor did it serve the internal users of the department, and students complained that they could not find key documents to help with their assignments. As the Department was seen as a leading department in teaching organisational communication and public relations, having an effective web site that communicated to both external and internal members was particularly important.

Staff agreed that an action learning approach would create an interactive, ongoing forum that could convert staff members' tacit knowledge into a shared resource site on the web page. The Department's web page could be updated and adapted to the needs of both staff and other significant stakeholders. Staff also agreed that an individual student research project, supervised by a staff member, could address this need. The individual research project paper, (called a '599'), unlike a traditional semester paper, had the flexibility in both structure and content to include an action learning approach.

The initial aim of Caroline, the student researcher, was to only focus on the external communication features of the website, as this was deemed more important by the Department. Her project was envisaged as an ongoing one, which would be continued by staff once she had completed her study. Cheryl was Caroline's first supervisor, and Alison, (a doctoral assistant at the time), was her second supervisor, and action learning methods were new for both supervisors. Indeed, at the time of study there had only been one action learning research project in the Department; this was a doctoral study, co-supervised by a member of MCOM and another department. Although the MCOM department was relatively unfamiliar with the action learning

methodology, they were keen to apply the approach as it embraced a collaborative perspective to learning and organisational problem solving.

Caroline's first task was to talk to key members of the Department to elicit current views and attitudes regarding the web site and to encourage discussion with staff regarding suggestions for site improvement. These interviews were exploratory and intended to promote some data for discussion at the larger set discussions. In the second stage of the project, Caroline organised a collaborative discussion format to gain additional staff involvement and ideas regarding the web site. The participants for the discussion group were selected on the basis of their knowledge of the Department, length of employment, and their current connection with the web site.

Thirteen of the twenty four staff in the Department were involved in the project. They comprised both senior and junior staff who were either new employees or who had been working at the university for five or more years. In addition to the interviews and discussion group, ongoing informal conversations helped to supplement the data collection. All of the data was analysed using thematic analysis based on Patton's (2002) work.

### Discussion

The emergent nature of action learning outcomes makes the measurement of their effectiveness problematic. Research questions cannot be determined at the outset but are generated in consultation with the research participants. Despite aiming to be collaborative, our focus groups and interviews made explicit the tensions existing in the professional identities of staff. Their expert knowledge as researchers and teachers was challenged by an action learning approach.

The staff were initially committed to, and involved in, the action learning project. They discussed the issues several times during staff meetings, all agreeing to select a suitable student to progress the study and reach the desired outcome of change to the web site. All staff were willing to participate in any group/set discussions organised by the student and the feeling was one of excitement that finally something was happening. It was also anticipated that as academics who all embrace critical perspectives there would be a lack of 'group think', a substantial dose of the 'wisdom of peers'

(Pedler, 2005) and that individual staff would avoid the problem of “feel[ing] isolated from his or her community” (Corley & Thorne, 2006, p. 41). As the study progressed, however, it soon became evident that the university context and academic professional identities came to influence the study and eventual outcomes.

The key problems were that the objectives of the project changed, and staff felt vulnerable due to their perceived lack of knowledge/expertise, issues of power and credibility, role conflict, and lack of organisational support. After several meetings held by Caroline, the student researcher, the focus of the research question and problem was questioned by staff. Despite initial agreement before the project began, staff started to diverge on the nature of the website problems and what the focus of the project should be. Some staff, for example, wanted to focus exclusively on the aesthetic aspects of the website rather than ensuring that the content was firmly established first, while others felt that one of the key priorities of the webpage should be an alumni site. Agreement was required on key aspects of the content and design of the site and staff needed to decide how to effectively manage the website on an ongoing basis.

The professional identities of the staff also impacted on the eventual outcomes of the study. Academic staff were involved in a research project driven by a student, supervised by a peer, with the second supervisor being a doctoral student in the Department. Issues of power and credibility arose from the fact that the research process was guided by a student researcher. Staff additionally felt vulnerable because they had limited skills regarding technology and felt uneasy about the amount of work involved in the study that was taking time away from the ‘real job’ of research and teaching.

As she was relatively unfamiliar with research, and as she was both a student and tutor in the Department, Caroline found that coordinating the project within the constraints of completing her assessed student paper raised conflicting issues regarding her roles. Was she a student learner or actually part of the research community? Caroline conducted the interviews on her own and noted the initial reluctance from staff to become involved in the interviews. Staff, unintentionally, increased her conflict when they directly questioned the focus of the project and expressed strong concerns that it should be focusing on other website issues. In an attempt to help ease

Caroline's anxiety, Cheryl took on an advocacy and mediating role, explaining the reasoning behind certain choices to both Caroline and the staff as required.

On reflection, this advocacy role, although it did ease some of the conflict, should not have been necessary if time for more reflective discussion had been included in the study (see Clarke, 2005). Instead, the constraints of the paper timeframes and assessment dictated the research design and actually inhibited establishing a longer process that could have allowed for ongoing discussion and reflection. The action learning process was also incompatible with Caroline's individual aim of successfully completing the project within paper timelines, in order to gain a good grade.

Reflecting further on this project, Cheryl and Alison also experienced role conflict, as supervisors of this project and members of staff within the Department. Although Cheryl took on an advocacy role for Caroline, a fine balance was required to ensure that other staff felt that their 'voices' were also heard. Cheryl acted as co-facilitator of the action learning project, in her role of supervisor, yet she herself was unfamiliar with action learning perspectives. This investigation provided some valuable lessons to pass on to other management students, given Cheryl's responsibility for coordinating student research projects and teaching in a Master's level research methodology course.

Alison took on the role of second supervisor to learn more about supervision, but again was unfamiliar with action learning approaches. However, as a doctoral assistant, rather than a tenured staff member, Alison, like Caroline, at times felt that her status in the department inhibited her interaction in the focus group discussions and was uncertain of her role in the ongoing management and development of the project.

Since the majority of the staff in the MCOM Department had not experienced action learning approaches as part of their own research programmes, despite their initial enthusiasm, they had uncertain expectations about the project at the outset. On reflection, we suspect that, as experienced academics, part of the staff reticence in becoming involved and supporting the development of the project was due to their discomfort with the novelty of the experience, particularly the role conflict they experienced

in being part of a student-directed, but staff-focused, action learning project. Staff may have seen the project as relinquishing control and power of the MCOM website, rather than finding the action learning process an empowering one.

The full website development was not completed by the end of the research project, since no staff member(s) took responsibility to continue Caroline's role once she had completed her paper. Although several staff individually took on specific responsibilities for particular aspects of the website development, with multiple demands on their time, such development has often been shelved. Additionally, development of the website relied on a support unit outside the department for technical aspects of the implementation, and much of the initial momentum created by the research investigation has therefore been lost.

Overall, the study raised questions regarding the difficulty in implementing an action learning approach without collective ownership and participation. This difficulty in implementation influenced the outcomes for both individual and organisational learning. We became particularly interested in how the context of the research had constrained the project's outcomes, and, in addition, how issues of professional identity and image shaped the research process and the participants' willingness to discuss problems and vulnerabilities in group sessions.

On reflection on the case study, the two key explicit tensions raised by the action learning approach were the influence of the organisational context and professional identities. These tensions shaped participation, progress, and the role of the facilitators. The department was relatively unfamiliar with action learning projects, yet, this unfamiliarity is not unusual within university departments. As McNiff and Whitehead (2000) have commented, the university context only validates "real research in conventional terms" and tends to neglect the "swamps" of real-life experience (p. 95). Academic conventions call for the presentation of linear outcomes produced at conferences and for journals. The 'messy', emergent and 'unhygienic' nature of research is rarely discussed in the dominant quarters of university life (Stanley & Wise, 1993; Bloch, 2002).

Conclusion and implications for the teaching of critical management studies  
The learning outcomes of this action learning project illustrate the difficulty of implementing a collaborative and holistic approach to solving organisational problems. The focus on measuring the successful action learning project based solely on functional or instrumental outcomes should be avoided (Raelin & Raelin, 2006). Reflecting on the process of learning, and encouraging the questioning of assumptions in a collaborative environment is just as important as the changes initiated from the project. Raelin and Raelin (2006) warn that we must be wary of action learning projects which “have a tendency to foster action at the expense of learning” (p. 46). Action learning for both the individuals involved and for the organisation evolves within a particular context. It is this context, which Vince (2004) calls “organising insight” in which the learning occurs, and individuals draw on this insight to understand, defend practices, or change actions. As Vince (2004) argues:

Questioning the impact of the organisation on action learning implies a willingness to try to understand how assumptions constrain and define action. The focus here is not only on how individuals’ behaviour or ‘ordeals by practice’ are themselves defined by assumptions. It is also about the organising that takes place to foster particular assumptions. (p. 74)

For the MCOM department, the individual learning was greater than any organisational learning. It was evident that the organisational structures and professional identity of the staff groups shaped the level of motivation, support and participation towards the project. Using a student, doctoral student, and peer to drive the project was a challenge to these ingrained organisational hierarchies. In addition we learned that action learning is as much about the development of the process as the outcomes and the effect of trying to contain the project within university timelines was to discourage discussion and collaboration. Another key learning was the problem in achieving change in organisations from the ‘bottom up’ (Vince, 2004). In this study the research project was situated in just one academic department and although supported by senior staff in the Department other wider School support was not considered.

On a more positive note, the project did encourage reflection by individuals in the Department regarding how they ‘practice what they preach’. Staff met informally to discuss how they integrate critical pedagogy within their papers and the outcome was a continuing commitment to the teaching of

critical approaches to management. Another outcome was that tacit knowledge was converted to explicit knowledge, for example in the creation of a student learning resources and a tutor manual. A group of staff additionally, co-authored a journal article as a result of their reflection on critical pedagogy (see Holmes et al, 2005), and Jean McNiff was invited by the Department and the University's Teaching Learning and Development Unit to deliver a variety of seminars on action research and action learning.

The action learning process did, therefore, result in individual learning outcomes. For example, partly as a result of the reflections triggered by this project, Alison, who is now a lecturer in the MCOM Department, has introduced a number of experiential learning scenarios in lectures and tutorials with her Media and Public Relations class. She also encourages her postgraduate students in Corporate Public Relations to move from a functional perspective to critical, problem-solving, and innovative solutions when discussing how public relations theory can inform professional practice.

Cheryl adapted the learning she gained from being involved in the project to her teaching and in particular her compulsory undergraduate second year class, Introduction to Management Communication (MCOM200). She realised that this course provided an ideal opportunity to achieve the learning goals of management communication and encourage an innovative, problem solving approach to the students' assignments. After several tutorial discussions from the course in semester B 2005, Cheryl decided to focus on one of the recurrent problems identified by the B semester 2005 students, team/group work in an intercultural environment.

This semester, a key assignment that has been introduced into the course has been teamwork with a focus on investigating the intercultural issues of team/group work in an educational environment. The aim of this team assignment is that the students are investigating a problem that they have identified in their own university experiences. The assignment encourages them to focus on both individual learning and to consider practical changes and recommendations for the organisation.

The challenge in facilitating and teaching this assignment has been in balancing the process of learning in the team assignment with the outputs. If



too high a percentage is placed on the final grade, for example, the students tend to disregard time for reflection and discussion of team members' ideas. If the lecture and tutorial time does not value and encourage discussion regarding their teamwork, they again tend to neglect the process of teamwork focusing only on the final grade. In addition to the various tools we use to encourage the teams in the tutorial to reflect and discuss teamwork, the final assignment, called an 'individual critical evaluation of team communications' asks them to reflect on their experiences. They have to review the tools and methods used within the team to progress with the problem solving as well as the contribution of their own actions and learning achievements.

After two semesters, similar findings and recommendations to the problem were being suggested by the student projects. They called for a more explicit discussion of the rules, rewards and assumptions regarding team/group work in each course outline that contains team/group work assignments. Their main concern was that the lecturers tend to assume that the students know how to manage and 'be' in a team/group. They also found that none of the course outlines directly addressed the issue of conflict especially regarding laziness or social loafing. They also recommended a third year course that provides both theoretical and practical content regarding team and group work.

A further independent student research project was sponsored by Cheryl to investigate these recommendations on a wider School level. This 499 student-led research project, supervised by another member of the Department raised a variety of similar concerns and calls for a course for students and for the university to provide staff training on teaching team and group work. The results of the student projects and the 499 were taken to a meeting with the Deans and Cheryl has been asked along with another staff member to develop and implement a course on team/group work for the School.

The above example in particular illustrates that although the initial action learning project did not gain immediate changes in the Departmental web site it did provide ongoing reflection and learning for both Alison and Cheryl. The final example from the MCOM200 course illustrates how these

student 'mini' action learning projects did instigate changes at the individual, course, and organisational levels.

It seems that action learning is not served well by having deadlines and structures imposed. As our reflection on this project demonstrates, organisational learning, and student learning in a Management Education setting, is limited by an emphasis on outputs. Learning occurs outside these boundaries, and depends on the commitment and motivation of both the individuals and the organisation involved. It is the experience and process of the learning which may ensure that it is both sustainable and innovative, triggering ongoing reflection, allowing the transferability of tacit knowledge, and fostering entrepreneurship.

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