

Action learning, the tool for problem-solving in universities; Uganda Martyrs Nkozi, Makerere and Nkumba universities

Jacinta Bwegyeme & John C. Munene

To cite this article: Jacinta Bwegyeme & John C. Munene (2015) Action learning, the tool for problem-solving in universities; Uganda Martyrs Nkozi, Makerere and Nkumba universities, *Action Learning: Research and Practice*, 12:1, 54-64, DOI: [10.1080/14767333.2015.1001551](https://doi.org/10.1080/14767333.2015.1001551)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767333.2015.1001551>



Published online: 16 Mar 2015.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 298



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

ACCOUNT OF PRACTICE

Action learning, the tool for problem-solving in universities; Uganda Martyrs Nkozi, Makerere and Nkumba universities

Jacinta Bwegyeme^{a*} and John C. Munene^b

^a*Business Administration and Management, Uganda Martyrs University, Mpigi, Uganda;* ^b*Graduate Research Center, Makerere University Business School, Kampala, Uganda*

(Received 17 April 2014; accepted 19 December 2014)

The article presents an account of how action learning principles were implemented to alleviate complex problems in universities. It focuses on the registrars and administrators under the academic Registrar's department. The Marquardt model of action learning was used in combination with the constructivist theories of learning, namely community of practice, experiential learning, discovery learning, problem-based learning and situated learning. The importance of culture and knowledge sharing is also highlighted. The results indicate that action learning contributes to problem-solving. The community of practice creates a conducive environment for successful implementation of action learning, and different organizational cultures impact on the implementation of action learning.

Keywords: action learning; challenges; problem-solving; university

Introduction

As authors of this article, we share a similar research and teaching background, that is, human resource management and development. We have worked with both private and public universities in Uganda, in capacities of departmental administrators and lecturers of human resource management. Given this background, we realized that Universities in Uganda were going through a series of challenges like other universities in the developing world; the main challenges include limited funding coupled with growing student numbers; according to Mamdani (2007), total student admission grew from 2186 in 1992/1993 to 10,666 in 2003/2004. Other challenges included lack of general management and specifically professional human resource skill, inadequate facilities, unsatisfactory pay, disgruntled workers and so on. Because of the challenges mentioned, the universities were finding it difficult to motivate their staff in order to be effective.

*Corresponding author. Email: jbwegyeme@umu.ac.ug

We got involved with the universities to coin a strategy that would help alleviate the complicated challenges; we worked with a few universities focusing on the academic registrar's department. We worked as coach/set advisor in the universities from November 2012 to March 2014.

Incorporating action learning principles

In the trainings, the Marquardt model was combined with constructivist theories of learning. The Marquardt model was selected because it captures the essential components of the process proposed by Revans (Marquardt and Waddil 2010). The learning theories included community of practice, situated learning, experiential learning, discovery learning and problem-based learning, which contribute to problem-solving, while knowledge sharing and organization culture were assumed to be vital for the success of action learning. A complex problem with no single solution was identified by the participants, an action learning set of eight was randomly created and a coach (the authors) was present. Reflection and questioning were emphasized during and outside meetings, an action plan was made for implementation and regular interaction (fortnightly) was present. The set members learned from each other and were able to identify the solutions to the identified problem.

Context

The three university cases (Makerere, Uganda Martyrs and Nkumba universities)

Makerere University Kampala is a public university. It is Uganda's largest and second-oldest higher institution of learning, and was first established as a technical school in 1922. In 1963, it became the University of East Africa, and became an independent national university in 1970. Today, Makerere University constitutes 9 colleges and 1 school, and offers programmes for about 30,000 undergraduates and 3000 postgraduates.

Uganda Martyrs and Nkumba universities are private universities. Uganda Martyrs University is a faith-based private university owned by the Episcopal Conference of the Catholic Bishops of Uganda. It received a charter in 2005 and presently has a student enrolment of 5000 (Uganda Martyrs University 2014). Nkumba University is one of the oldest and largest private tertiary institution in East Africa. It was granted a Charter in 2006. The University is a non-profit, non-denominational institution providing an enabling environment for students to learn. Nkumba University was founded by three individuals; it has no founding body (Nkumba University 2014).

The Universities in Uganda have been experiencing crises in a number of ways (Musisi and Muwanga 2003; Busingye 2014). The visitation committees of 1987, 1991, 2006 and 2007 echoed a multitude of problems, which included

limited funding with increasing student numbers, inadequate and dilapidated facilities, demoralized staff and inadequate general and human resource management skills (Ministry of Education 2007). According to Mamdani (2007) as the state funding reduced following the 1990s education reforms, the university began raising money by admitting fee-paying students, which led to a mismatch between student growth and facilities. Muhereza (2004) quotes Kajubi, who asserts that the situation was even worse for private institutions. The private universities have had challenges since their inception, according to the National Council of Higher Education Visitation Report (2005). The universities in Uganda lack adequate teaching and non-teaching staff professionals because of inadequate funding (Tibarimbasa 2010); for example, of the 1813 established academic teaching posts in Makerere in 2002, only 952 (53%) were filled (Makerere 2003). Staff and student welfare continue to decline (Ddumba Ssentamu 2013). The multiplicity of challenges stems from lack of funding, and issues such as work overload and failure to enrol professional human skill directly affect employee motivation. The aforementioned challenges necessitated the inventing of a strategy that could create a solution with minimal resources.

The department of academic registrar is the technical arm that supports the University's core job of teaching. It is responsible for quality and the final product of the university. The management function of the senate is affected through the department of the academic registrar. The academic registrar works together with the deans, directors of institutes and heads of departments for overall direction, regulation and harmonization of academic programmes; student enrolment; administration of examinations; processing of results and issuing of certificates. The visitation committee of 2007 noted that the management function of the senate was faced with a multiplicity of problems, which included growing student numbers, heavy teaching loads, delayed processing of results, widespread malpractices and delays in issuing of transcripts and certificates. The university senate is said to have failed to find answers to the problems; these challenges trickle down to the administrative staff.

The findings of the visitation committee are related to the responses we obtained from the administrators during the problem identification stage. The administrators (the participants) in all the three cases revealed a number of similar challenges that affected their performance; these included unmanageable workload resulting from growing student numbers, growing numbers of students with unmatched facilities, lack of physical space, limited funding for university activities, inadequate administrative skills, ineffective data management, ineffective communication, lack of orientation and unclear performance appraisal. It is upon this contextual background that we considered it worth to invest in facilitating the universities in handling some of their challenges.

The purpose of the action learning programme was to help administrators acquire problem-solving capability so that at every level, challenges can innovatively be handled without relying on top management. We perceived action

learning to be appropriate because it is capable of bringing changes amidst financial constraints, so long as there is participant commitment. Action learning was chosen to deliver results because reviewed literature indicated that the theoretical traditional training was not focused on results, while action learning is result oriented and helps in solving complex problems (Dotlich and Noel 1998; O'Neil and Marsick 2007; Boshyk and Dilworth 2010). Three universities, Uganda Martyrs University Nkozi, Makerere University Kampala and Nkumba University, were selected for this account to illustrate how action learning can help solve complicated problems.

The steps taken to implement action learning in the universities

In this account, we combined programmed teaching and situated activities. Two facilitators worked with us to conduct JIT (just in time) courses, which were designed according to the constructivist theories of learning. The purpose was to create an interest in learning which would inspire personal and group change. Action learning sets of eight, which were randomly selected, met fortnightly for two hours. Six action learning meetings were held for an action learning set for over three months. The meetings were held at the convenience of the participants. At these meetings, tea would be served and a small transport refund was given to motivate participants. The coach (the authors) facilitated the groups to learn and solve problems.

With the participants, we laid down ground rules for the group that guided the meetings and operations of the action learning team. The set created a communication platform with our guidance and an environment of a community of practice was created, with a community leader who coordinated all meetings and activities of the group. The community of practice was to create an environment for group problem-solving.

Every participant had a chance to share his experience, ask questions, reflect on issues and record points of interest. The discussions were usually stimulated by an emerging issue or opportunity to exchange ideas. Through reflective questioning by the coach, the participants were able to go through the problem-solving process.

After the designated meetings, we left the participants to implement the action plan. The coach followed up the group's progress until the expiry of the set duration. Throughout the whole process we observed the group actions, and kept a note book where all points of interest were recorded. We had reflective informal conversations with the participants and non-participants who offered constructive contribution.

Our role as coach and facilitator of the action learning programme

We organized a launch meeting to which the University management and all administrators were invited. The purpose of inviting the management was to

attract management support from the onset, as reviewed in the literature; action learning will only succeed if it has management support (Krystna-Weistein 1999; Marquardt 2004). However, at Makerere, we were unable to attract the attendance of top management. Through a short presentation, we explained to the administrators and management the concept of action learning and its benefits, so that they fully understood what they were to enter into.

We oriented and prepared sets for the fundamentals of action learning by ensuring that the sets were created according to action learning principles. We agreed with the participants on the process of set creation. Action learning principles require a diverse set that is randomly created; therefore, diverse sets of eight participants were created randomly, where a set had a mix of experiences. In two of the Universities we used voting, and in another, participants were randomly assigned groups because efforts to bring them together at the same time were futile. We worked with the groups to set up the action learning ground rules. The ground rules were mainly to guide the working of the group and to ensure that action learning principles were adhered to.

In order to prepare the action learning sets for action, we had to carry out coaching and classroom teaching. We used reflective questioning to help the groups examine their actions and interactions. Through reflective questioning, we assisted the group in discovering what they had to do during the problem-solving process. We always listened and guided the discussions of the groups.

We held programmed teaching on the principles of action learning and the concepts of learning that were relevant for action stimulation. Some concepts that we emphasized as vital included reflective practice, mentoring, communication skills, knowledge sharing and the community of practice. We highlighted the benefits of reflective practice and the use of a diary as a reflection tool. We programmed the action learning meetings for two hours, in which half the time was utilized for programmed learning and the other half was dedicated to problem-solving. We encouraged the sets to interact informally after the officially designated meetings. Our job did not stop at the meeting, rather it continued even to the workplace. We would follow up the set actions; for example, we regularly followed up to check whether a community of practice was developing.

We taught the participants the benefits of mentoring and who should be mentored. We encouraged seniors to mentor the juniors. We also highlighted what effective mentoring requires and the benefits of mentoring at workplace and outside. We excited the group into mentoring by pointing to encouraging experiences of those who had been mentored.

We created a good working environment. We made sure that tea or a meal was served during the meetings. We had to be innovative in order to have people attend the meetings regularly; for example, in some cases we would schedule the meeting between 12:00 noon and 2:00 p.m. (we had working lunch).

We built a rapport with the participants, which helped in the development of free interactions during the meetings. We helped the group to set the climate of learning, whereby there was openness and trust. We did this by being frank and

using targeted questioning. We encouraged free sharing of experiences and emphasized that for success to be attained, everyone had to consider himself a learner and not an expert. Confidentiality was also reassured.

We carried out the overall coordination of the programme to see that everything was working well, which was a heavy task on the part of the coach and could explain why some organizations are reluctant to take up action learning methodology in their training.

Results of the action learning programme

Bonding and collegiality

As a result of action learning training, there was bonding and collegiality. In the universities, we had a community of administrators of registry department who shared knowledge and practice, and interacted regularly with the goal of handling the identified problem and providing training; these characteristics qualified them to be called a community of practice. Wenger summarizes Communities of Practice as ‘groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly’ (Wenger 1998). There was bonding among the action learning sets in two of the universities, such that even when the training ended, a tie remained. At another University, where also regular interactions were carried out, a feeling of collegiality among the set members was reported which grew out of regular meetings held for three months. When the action learning training ended, the group felt that they had a relationship which they could exploit in the future.

Participants developed reflective practice and the use of a diary

A number of participants acknowledged having acquired the reflective practice; they regularly contemplated on workplace-related issues and life in general. Participants learnt that a diary was a reflection tool and almost every participant acquired a diary. A few testified that they were effectively using the diaries after the training. The participants indicated using the diary to record critical issues agreed on in meetings other than the action learning meetings. They would note the action points and their due dates, and from time to time, peruse the diary to note what was discussed and what action on their part was required. As compared to the period prior to the training, some had diaries but were claiming that they did not have anything to note in them; others said they were using notebooks as diaries, which would get misplaced at times.

The problems identified by different sets were to a certain extent solved

In the three institutions, it was recognized that there was success registered in the area of problem-solving. At one university, participants admitted that the

problem of communication, which was their focus, was to a certain extent handled. One participant indicated in the evaluation form that ‘Some issues in communication have been resolved to a certain extent. The registry department now attempts to send e-mails, every now and then, to its staff informing them of ongoing activities.’ Another set member (assistant registrar) admitted using the electronic mail more frequently than before the training. She indicated that she even consults the registrar more often on matters pertaining to administrators’ issues and she regularly receives feedback from the registrar. She mentioned that the administrators are regularly updated on senate decision unlike in the past. The participants claimed to be using the group mail to communicate more often.

In another university where records management was identified as the problem to solve, the participant acknowledged that to a certain extent they had dealt with the problem. For example, it was indicated that duplication of documents had been minimized, and the receiving and dispatch of records in office had improved greatly. The filing had also improved in some offices. One set member indicated: ‘Yes the problem has been handled because documents are no longer misplaced like it used to be the case.’

In one University where the focus was on relevant skills, participants admitted to having acquired some relevant skills such as report writing, minute writing and good public relations. These they acquired by learning from each other, not from any programmed teaching. One participant mentioned: ‘We left the training with one most important idea i.e. to teach each other on how to do our work.’ One participant who was enthused by the training, in a bid to improve his administrative skills, enrolled for an MBA programme in one of the neighbouring universities; this is an indicator that the results of action learning are boundless. One participant claimed to have earned her promotion after the training as a result of improvement in performance and the fact that her competencies were highlighted during and after the training. The supervisor affirmed the participant’s claims.

Mentoring of the junior staff by the senior staff

The junior staffs were mentored by the senior staff: ‘Yes we knew about mentoring but we never took it seriously but now we recognize its value.’ Participants took an initiative to identify mentors whom they started looking up to in performing their regular tasks. The novices learnt from the seniors through sharing of experiences in class and outside class; the regular interaction abridged the power of distance in some instances. For example in one of the action learning meetings, a senior staff shared with the set how he developed the multitasking skill. He narrated his experience of how students sneakily took his jacket when he lost his cool because of a long cue. This experience, he said, taught him to always remain calm, even in circumstances where there was work pressure.

Participants developed confidence

Some participants developed a certain level of confidence. One participant indicated, 'The training gave me confidence to approach situations and challenges in the department that I was previously scared of, for example nobody can take advantage of me, I stand out and talk what is right.' Another member mentioned having drafted a prospectus for a young department which was not in the area of her understanding; but using action learning principles she drafted a document that was acceptable to the academic Board. This indicates a certain level of confidence attained by the administrator, which could be partly attributed to the university culture which does not emphasize power distance.

Team work was enhanced among the groups

By observation members who attended action learning group portrayed great cohesion. The regular interactions created trust among set members. Most of the participants were not pleased to see the training end; they pledged to continue with their regular meetings. 'At least colleagues work together most especially with the software system that is in place. This has really boosted the teamwork spirit' (set member). In one of the universities, participants acknowledged improvement in team work in their evaluation forms.

Drafting and retrieval of departmental mission, vision and values

The action learning training led to the drafting and retrieval of the departmental vision, mission and values. At one university, the administrators drafted the mission, vision and values that were owned by the department of registry. In another university, the participants retrieved the mission, vision and values from the university website after which they made an effort to sensitize their colleagues. The vision, mission and values gave a sense of identity and affiliation to the administrators.

Spread of action learning to the non-trained group

After the first three months of training, the participants in two of the universities took it upon themselves and organized a special meeting with the academic registrar and other untrained administrators. The purpose of the meeting was to forge a way forward and lay strategies on how they could implement what they had acquired through action learning training. In this meeting, we realized that even administrators who had not been trained had to be part of the implementation; therefore, issues such as owning the vision, mission and values were for the whole of the registry department. The trained group teamed up with the untrained group.

Participants recommended training to staff members

Although at the beginning the participants were sceptical, after comprehending the benefits and principles of action learning, they appreciated the training and recommended it to everyone, especially to top management, deans and heads of departments. One set member wrote in the evaluation form: 'I recommend the training to other members of staff because this kind of training is self-enriching; it opened our eyes and gave us confidence in solving our problems.' At one university participants planned to train their colleagues.

Problems were handled in a systematic approach

Problems were solved using a systematic approach. Each set identified one problem, but in the due course other challenges were handled. For example, participants mentioned improvement in their customer care, listening skills and team working; yet these were not the focus problems of the sets. This finding is in agreement with Marquardt (2004) who asserts that action learning solves problems using a systematic thinking approach.

Resistance

In some cases, resistance was met from the heads of departments and the junior administrators. For example, at Makerere University because of the resistance, we failed to get representation from some departments. The resistance had an effect on the registered success of action learning.

In conclusion, there are variations in how action learning affected each university; however, it had a remarkable impact in each university.

Lessons learnt from the three cases

Timekeeping and regular meetings are important if results are to be achieved and group problems are to be solved. Timekeeping is key because, since action learning advocates for diversity so that experiences can be rich and an action learning set is therefore composed of people from different offices with special responsibilities, holding people for long hours is a challenge. Time management is important if every set member is to attend.

Motivation and commitment of participants are very important. We learnt that actual commitment to attendance was a personal issue and that it had nothing to do with the departmental load; if one was motivated to attend, he would create time. Efforts were made to woo the participants to win over their support. Action learning is voluntary; when you force it on the person, it does not work well. The participants must fully understand how action learning works and of what benefit it would be to the organization and the individual. People will use workload as an excuse, but when it is lack of commitment.

Action learning is about ownership. The participant must realize that the task of problem-solving is in his or her hands, and not in management's or any other's hands.

There is a need to remain focused on the purpose of action learning, which is learning and problem-solving; if the coach is not focused, he may be derailed from the real issues, as some participants may see the action learning meetings as forums to express their dissatisfaction with the organization.

The formation of the community of practice is essential for it allows for easy bonding, and regular interaction in and out of office. At Makerere University, the community of practice did not form as expected; this was partly due to the ongoing strike and the termination of some employees which created a lot of uncertainty and made bonding difficult; this impacted negatively on problem-solving. At Nkozi and Nkumba universities, the community of practice was successfully created, and this contributed to positive results in problem-solving.

Management support is important for action learning training and in matters of policy during change. At Makerere, there was resistance from heads of departments. At Nkozi and Nkumba, management support was excellent and positive results were registered.

Interpersonal skills are a prerequisite in circumstances of resistance. Some people may be disinterested in the training, which may make mobilization of participants difficult for the coach. Resilience is required on the part of the coach to be able to penetrate the system of the organization despite the odds prevailing.

It is important for the coach to understand the culture and philosophy of the organization. In this experience, there was disparity in the responses of participants from the private and government universities towards action learning, which required different strategies in implementing action learning.

Conclusion

Action learning contributes to problem-solving. In the three case studies, positive outcomes were realized despite the challenges encountered. The environment of a community of practice is vital for action learning and problem-solving. Knowledge sharing and organization culture should not be ignored because they apparently have an impact on the success of action learning. The three universities exposed three different cultures that had negative and positive effects on problem-solving.

Notes on contributors

Jacinta Bwegyeme is a senior lecturer in human resource, and other management courses, at Uganda Martyrs University, a former human resource practitioner with a bank and a Ph.D. student at Makerere University Business School.

John C. Munene is a professor of Industrial/Organisational Psychology with a focus on Organisational Development and Human Resource and Programme Director at the Graduate Research Centre, Makerere Business School. He is the lead consultant at PILA Consultants (U).

References

- Boshyk, Y., and L. Dilworth. 2010. *Action Learning and Its Applications: Present and Future*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Busingye, C. 2014. "New Vision Paper." Accessed March 31. www.newvision.co.ug
- Dotlich, D., and J. Noel. 1998. *Action Learning*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Ddumba Ssentamu, J. 2013. "Prospects and Challenges of Higher Education in Uganda." Unpublished paper.
- Kystna-Weistein. 1999. *Action Learning: A practical Guide*. 2nd ed. England: Gower.
- Makerere University. 2003. *Annual Report 2002: A Review of the Institutional Development Plan 2000/01–2004/05*. Kampala: Planning & Development Dept.
- Mamdani, M. 2007. *Scholars in the Market Place. The dilemmas of Neo-liberal Reform at Makerere University, 1989–2005*. Kampala: Fountain Publishers.
- Marquardt, M. 2004. *Optimising the Power of Action Learning, Solving Problems and Building Leaders in Real Time*. Mountain View, CA: Davies-Black publishing.
- Marquardt, M., and D. Waddil. 2010. "The Power of Learning in Action Learning a Conceptual Analysis of How Five Schools of Adult Learning Theories are Incorporated within the Practice of Action Learning." *Action Learning; Research and Practice* 1 (2): 185–202.
- Ministry of Education. 2007. *Administrative Affairs*. Report of the Visitation Committee to Public Universities. Republic of Uganda. February.
- Muhereza, K. February 23, 2004. "Kajubi Makes Case for Vocational Education." *The Monitor Newspaper*, p. 18.
- Musisi, N. B., and N. K. Muwanga. 2003. *Makerere University in Transition 1993–2000 Opportunities & Challenges*. Oxford: James Currey Ltd and Kampala: Fountain Publishers.
- National Council of Higher Education. 2005. *The State of higher Education in Uganda*. Kampala: National Council of Higher Education.
- Nkumba University. Accessed March 4, 2014. www.nkumba.ac.ug.
- O'Neil, J., and V. J. Marsick. 2007. *Understanding Action Learning*. New York: American Management Association.
- Tibarimbasa, A. 2010. "Factors Affecting the Management of Private Universities in Uganda." PhD diss., Thesis in Education Management, Makerere University.
- Uganda Martyrs University. Accessed March 4, 2014. www.umu.ac.ug.
- Wenger, E. 1998. *Communities of Practice, Learning, Meaning and Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.