

An Exploratory Critique of Action Learning in Higher Education in South Africa: Barriers and Challenges

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ABSTRACT This exploratory study investigated the perceptions of staff and students about the Action Learning implementation of Action Learning in higher education. Using judgemental sampling, a qualitative approach was adopted to collect primary data. Action Learning focuses on working with realistic life challenges of groups of students, supported and encouraged by a skilled facilitator to reinterpret the dated information and create new knowledge. A thematic approach was employed to analyse the data. Themes focused on the Educational System, Conventional Learning as opposed to Action Learning, and Challenges and Barriers in implementing Action Learning in higher education. The findings concur with the literature, showing that while Action Learning is a powerful tool for educational and personal development, there are several barriers in the present higher education system that impact on implementing Action Learning, including class sizes, inadequate training of lecturers and the diversity of the student population.

INTRODUCTION

The educational scenario in the 21st century differs markedly from that of the 20th century. A century of rapid industrial and technological development; coupled with the economic crisis, and an ever increasing number of students aspiring for higher education has changed the face of higher education.

The challenge for higher education focusses on how to help the thousands of students to navigate the mass of information available on the internet. How do institutions teach students meaningful skills so that they can discern the quality and quantity of knowledge required for their purposes and then act on it in intellectually rigorous ways to create new knowledge, or solve problems? How do institutions cultivate critical and creative intellectual skills, impart ethical and moral values to an ever-increasing diversity of students, while retaining the personal touch? Can Action Learning within the confines of prescriptive syllabi generate an effective and skilled workforce?

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Higher education institutions are facing a real crisis in respect of their abilities to sustain sound, effective, reflexive and affordable education to the thousands of financially and culturally deprived students who register with them (Stevens et al. 2015). Pressure placed on schools and higher education institutions and education departments to meet quantitative performance targets is increasing. This pressure is resulting in lecturers spending the greater part of their time in a conventional lecturer-centric approach, namely stressing the need for success and showing learners on how to achieve success in examinations (Hase 2011), rather than encouraging productive thinking through Action Learning and reflexive thinking (Oliver 2008; Yeadon-Lee 2015a).

Action Learning emphasises that the essence of learning is all about asking the right questions to stimulate deep understanding, innovation, and critical thought (Yeadon-Lee 2015a; Sankaran 2015). The use of Action Learning for enhanced understanding, participation, sharing and acquisition of knowledge forms the bedrock to address the rapid changes in the educational arena (Dick 2015; Brydon-Miller et al. 2015).

However, it is questionable whether Action Learning is being used effectively in South African higher education institutions – therefore, this paper sets out to explore the perceptions of

students and lecturers regarding the implementation of Action Learning in a South African higher education institution in order to provide some understanding of how Action Learning can contribute to improved learning.

Literature Review

Definition and Principles of Classical Action Learning

The concept of Action Learning is perceived as a cyclic relationship between actions and critical reflections on the learning activities ensuing. Hence, all learning is accompanied by actions, which in turn, are accompanied by a knowledge base. This is the ultimate difference between Action Learning on the one hand and traditional learning on the other (Zuber-Skerritt 2001; Ajoku 2015).

The praxis of Action Learning was introduced by Revans in the 1930s. He maintained that one learns best when fresh questions are asked. While this concept is not new, unfortunately, this idea of encouraging questioning in the lecture halls was not encouraged and knowledge was communicated from the lecturers to the students in a one track manner with no dialogue. This system still prevails today with scant attention being paid to developing questioning insight (Hase 2011; Yeadon-Lee 2015a). In addition, the mode of delivery (lectures), lecturer preparation, time frames and a loaded syllabus, not to mention language problems and the diversity of poorly prepared learners for higher education, leave little time to implement the principles of classical Action Learning (Council on Higher Education 2014). According to Pedler et al. (2005) and more recently Skipton (2015) these principles are:

- Requirement for action as a basis for learning
- Profound personal development resulting from reflection upon action
- Working with problems
- Problems being aimed personal development
- Action learners working in sets of peers to support and challenge each other
- The set for fresh questions- questioning takes primacy over expert knowledge

Based on these philosophical assumptions, it can be assumed that learning is a lifelong process occurring in a series of cycles of action and reflection in response to new questions that are

unknown to us and that we seek to resolve. In theory, the assumptions are easier written than applied because of the challenges that face the majority of higher education students and academics who invariably use the 'chalk and talk' method or read from the Tablet PC (Council on Higher Education 2014).

There is little critical and emancipatory learning that aims at students' empowerment, self-confidence and grounded theory as a result of solving problems. Funnel shaped education reigns supreme (Zuber-Skerritt 2001). The use of Action Learning in higher education reshapes the educational landscape from a funnel shaped education into participative and team learning with colleagues from different cultural backgrounds (Schumacher 2015; Rigg 2015; Ajoku 2015).

The Modus Operandi of Action Learning

The success of Action Learning is dependent on a few rules and processes. The action-learning facilitator ensures that these rules and procedures are followed to enable the groups or sets to work comfortably and in harmony. The facilitator creates and ensures that the atmosphere of learning and reflexive inquiry is maintained and sustained throughout the learning programme (Zuber-Skerritt 2001; Oliver 2008; Hase 2011; Ajoku 2015).

Action Learning sets are very effective in a wide variety of situations in an educational context. The sets, generally comprise of 4 to 7 members who meet regularly over a period of time until the learning objectives are achieved (Oliver 2008). The duration of each meeting will be largely determined by the objectives and availability of the team members (Oliver 2008; Stevens et al. 2015). What is important is that the number of meetings must provide the team members with an opportunity to establish relationships, and sufficient time to allow for iterative and reflective processes and encourage learning beyond the lecture rooms (Griffiths et al. 2008; Beatty 2013; Ajoku 2015; Brydon-Miller et al. 2015).

While the academic year provides the ideal setting for Action Learning, not many subjects lend themselves to action learning in the true sense of the word. In addition, the rigid structure of the curriculum in the higher education system, the staff work load and overall student capacity may act as barriers to implementation

of Action Learning (Council on Higher Education 2014).

The Curriculum and Action Learning- the Opportunity in Higher Education

The current emphasis in Technical, Vocational, Higher Education and Training (TVET) programmes lends itself comfortably to Action Learning, as one of the salient requirements in these skill courses is work based placements. The indications are that there is also scope for reflexive Action Learning in higher education at graduate and professional levels (Council on Higher Education 2014).

Delivering content to students is the focus of the lecturer's work. Since the demands of traditional lectures leave much to be desired, reflexive learning is largely left for the students own account to be undertaken if he so desires. As part of the curriculum, a Work Readiness Programme (WRP) is offered to students in a simulated environment. The application of theory to practice is generally done towards the end of the year during Work Integrated Learning (WIL) or Work Placements. Many such courses use projects in order to bridge this gap between learning about a practical area and applying the learning acquired. A real-world project is the start of the process and, an essential element of Action Learning which explicitly supports reflection and action planning (Ajoku 2015). The implications of authentic Action Learning taking place means that higher education will have to not only reconceptualise its very purpose, but also the existing curricula (Council on Higher Education 2014). This requirement creates new challenges for course designers, on how to integrate theory and practice into the existing system to support appropriate student learning.

According to Revans (2012) there are over 20 characteristic features of Action Learning. The main features of Action Learning, for the purposes of this paper, are:

- Collaborative learning is essentially a group based process
- Projects that are linked to the real world of experience for personal development
- Action planning and evaluation are personally constructed rather than given by an expert

- The use of processes that enhance development of interpersonal skills

The appropriate use of Action Learning in course design will be clearly reflected in its outcomes. However, within Action Learning the current, dogmatic, higher education system, this task is made very difficult, though not impossible. For Action Learning to be a powerful educational tool, it must become the core process to which other teaching methods are added to create a fully functioning whole (Revans 2012; Beatty 2013; Skipton 2015). This can be achieved by tackling the design, conduct and review of Action Learning programmes regularly. Furthermore, the effectiveness of the teaching methods and assessments in achieving the learning outcomes to support student learning needs to be monitored (Biggs 1999; Zuber-Skerritt 2015). Tracking student success is part of the lecturers' responsibilities and more important is reporting on the students' achievements in terms of popular courses, qualifications, skills and attributes. This tracking and recording of events in the revised curriculum plays an important role in relation to Action Learning and action research and community engagement (Zuber-Skerritt 2015).

For Action Learning to be effective, the team members must be available for the duration of the programme and be committed to learning from this shared experience (Griffiths et al. 2008; Beatty 2013). The theoretical content is often best dealt within the confines of a traditional lecture in a resource-based learning centre. Students can access the information when they need to work on their projects. In terms of assessments, portfolio development and project reports align themselves comfortably with Action Learning processes (McGill and Beatty 2001; Beatty 2013). Self-assessment, peer assessment and team work are important components within a responsible Action Learning programme (Alf and Wilson 2004; Ajoku 2015; Bwegyeme et al. 2015).

Using Action Learning in Higher Education

It is important that any course using Action Learning as a core process identifies and differentiates between theory and practice. WIL provides the ideal platform for the use of Action Learning. During WIL undergraduates focus on experiential learning and the need to link their formal theoretical study with an area of practice

(Council on Higher Education 2011; Zuber-Skerritt et al. 2015). Action Learning sets provide the opportunity to individualise learning but helps to retain the group process so vital for student engagement. The migration of the lecturer from teacher to facilitator in Action Learning helps students with problem solving and analyses of real-life experiences. In addition, it emphasises the importance of the facilitators' role and the connection between formal teaching and real life experiences (Council on Higher Education 2011; Kearney et al. 2015).

Taking part in Action Learning, therefore, requires commitment to moving on and, equally, to supporting the learning and development of others. The ideals are laudable, but we need to consider time constraints and the mind-sets of the diversity of students; the majority of whom have not experienced teamwork and or collaboration and may very easily get frustrated and say 'why don't you just tell me what is the right thing to do and then I can get on with it'. In an Action Learning set a clash between the expectations of student and tutor (participant and facilitator) is self-evident in the process (Oliver 2008; Ajoku 2015; Antell et al. 2015; Yeadon-Lee 2015b). While students in a lecture may value and understand what is said in their own cultural ways, in team work this anomaly is immediately obvious. In the traditional lecture halls, cooperation and collaboration are not encouraged as the current system is designed to promote competition (Brydon-Miller et al. 2015).

At the heart of all learning is the way students and lecturers process their experiences and reflect on these experiences. Experiential learning engages students in critical thinking, problem solving and decision making in contexts that are personally relevant to them. This approach to learning also involves making opportunities to test knowledge, consolidate ideas and skills through feedback, reflection, and the application of the ideas and skills to new situations (Canning 2010). Zuber-Skerritt's contributions to Action Learning for improving teaching and learning in higher education practices and for paving the way to challenge the foundations and philosophical underpinnings of higher education (Brydon-Miller et al. 2015) have been well documented and applauded by followers of Action Learning (Kearney et al. 2015).

The studies of Alf and Wilson (2004) presented preliminary evidence of new, improved

programmes that incorporate principles of Action Learning that significantly improve student performance and expertise. The studies of Kian (2015) in Singapore support the views of Alf and Wilson (2004) that learning sets and a team based approach considerably improve understanding of students in chemistry. Although these types of course design can produce implementation challenges for both staff and students, differences in approaches to learning and student learning outcomes are particularly encouraging (Brydon-Miller et al. 2015).

Lecturer/Graduate Preparedness and Action Learning

Higher Education institutions are confronted with a genuine crisis in respect of their abilities to retain and attract academic staff of suitable calibre. In addition, Higher Education institutions are experiencing alarming levels of aging academics who are not easily replaced by the younger generation academics who contribute to changed staff profiles which display greater race and gender equity (HESA 2014).

The school leaving class of 2013 in South Africa achieved a pass rate of 78 percent, the highest in 20 years (Department of Basic Education 2014). A similar success rate of 70.7 percent was recorded in the 2015 examinations. Suffice to say, the high number of matriculates will flood universities, colleges and other tertiary training institutions. But what about the quality of graduates' preparedness for the world of work? Are universities and training institutions providing lecturers with the appropriate skills necessary to lecture to a diversity of students who have just barely passed their school leaving examinations?

Hence, such students entering higher education have been ill equipped for critical, independent thinking and application of knowledge to real life challenges and problems. The quality of academic staff in higher education is problematic. Retaining talented and appropriately qualified academics is now a nightmare in many higher education institutions (HESA 2014). While there are several factors contributing to the difficulties, the generally low level of salaries for academics as compared to other professionally oriented careers is undoubtedly the major contributory factor.

While the South African higher education system is a vast improvement on the apartheid

regime of 20 years ago, yet, sadly the emphasis is on high throughput rates rather than on quality education. This focus fails to develop students' capabilities or expand their economic opportunities, and denies them employment. Will such academics meaningfully engage the diversity of students in quality education that is fit for purpose in the workplace? In the context of the Quality Enhancement Project (QEP), plans are afoot to improve the quality of teaching as well improving the number and quality of graduates who will make meaningful contributions to society (CHE 2014). Will the training needs in higher education be reconceptualised to satisfy the needs of facilitators more than satisfying the needs of lecturers?

Brydon-Miller et al. (2015) emphasise the need to promote teaching and learning practice through professional development. While community engagement is encouraged in higher education, few academics and postgraduate students know how to conduct research and development in this field. Therefore, it is imperative to reconsider learning environments in terms of curriculum redesign, training needs and capacity building in theory and practice (Zuber-Skerritt 2015).

Barriers to Action Learning

Time Constraints

A move toward more engaged and practical "experiential" teaching and learning in the traditional lecturer hall, emphasises the need to change not only the syllabus but also the time tables and workloads of lecturers. Experiential learning, while useful in supporting learning, is a time-consuming activity for both learners and teachers (McGill and Beatty 2001; Beatty 2013). Critical Action Learning is now a practice rather than a purely theoretical construct and, therefore, raises practical questions in terms of time constraints, challenging organisational practices, and making use of expert facilitators. Action Learning sets generally last for three hours for five participants and a full day for seven participants (Oliver 2008; Yeadon-Lee 2015b). This strategy has serious implications for staffing as well as for preparing the institution's timetables.

Curriculum

Since the curriculum is one of the foundational elements of effective schooling and teach-

ing, it requires reform in several areas to cater for the needs of Action Learning. In addition, the traditional infrastructure comprising of lecturer halls will have to be replaced with venues that encourage group work, team discussion and workshops. Improving education and training by reviewing the curricula and the role of the sector education and training will undoubtedly help to support the development of students who are fit for purpose in a changing society (Council on Higher Education 2014; Brydon-Miller et al. 2015).

Lecturer/Institution Preparedness

A major challenge is that universities and colleges are not geared for collaborative and emergent forms of reflexive thinking and critical Action Learning research. Traditional teaching and research which is still dominant, is more standardised, pre-determined, and controlled by the lecturer. Even if academics are open to emergent approaches to lecturing and research, they often lack knowledge and experience in the new paradigm and slide back into the old methods of traditional lecturers. Improving student success requires systematic, concerted and coordinated action by appropriately qualified academics, willing learners and community engagement (Tinto 2012; Antell et al. 2015; Zuber-Skerritt 2015). The quality of lecturers currently emerging from training institutions and universities find it very difficult to cope with the young generation including the diversity of poorly equipped learners in higher education institutions. In addition, the cost factor involved in implementing successful Action Learning sessions with trained facilitators is a major barrier.

College Students

While today's college students are more pragmatic than before, they have this rare ability to work on several projects simultaneously: deal with diversity, talk, and listen to music, text friends, browse the Internet, engage in homework and even listen to the lecturer (Fudin 2012). They believe they can do it all at the same time, but with serious implications for the conventional lecture room. There is some consensus among lecturers that the attention span of this generation is more limited compared to previous ones (Fudin 2012).

Currently, educational institutions in South Africa are swamped with young students many of whom barely make the grade despite being technological savvy. Yet, policy stipulates that they are eligible for placement in higher education. Many of them have language problems, finance problems, accommodation problems, and tend to mingle only with “their own kind”. Reluctance to integrate and or communicate in English add to the problems of creating successful Action Learning sets as the majority are reluctant to work in groups. To make matters worse, the young generation want immediate results, and Action Learning is a process, the results are not immediate. While Action Learning is not a therapeutic group technique, it relies to a large extent on similar personal qualities of the learners, verbal fluency, emotional intelligence and possession of rich life experiences (Griffiths et al. 2008; Brydon-Miller et al. 2015).

Research Objective and Questions

The objective of this paper was to explore the perceptions of tertiary students and lecturers regarding the implementation of Action Learning in order to provide some understanding of how Action Learning can contribute to improved learning in higher education.

To meet this objective, the paper attempts to answer the following research questions:

- Does the current system in higher education allow for implementing authentic Action Learning?
- What are the specific barriers and challenges that impact on the implementation of Action Learning in higher education?

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Qualitative research pertains to research methodologies undertaken in a natural environment. This type of research lends emphasis to the value of examining variables in their natural setting. The interviewer plays a vital role in the investigation and collects comprehensive data with open ended questions (Sekaran and Bougie 2013). The researchers, therefore, considered it important to explore the process of Action Learning and its impact on students and lecturers through a qualitative research approach.

Sample

According to Sekaran and Bougie (2013), interviewing a small group of respondents who are familiar and knowledgeable about their educational experiences, and their realities regarding the phenomenon under investigation is acceptable. Hence, six respondents, selected through judgemental, or purposive, sampling, were interviewed regarding the phenomenon under investigation. The interviewees were selected on the basis of their experiences in higher education. The sample comprised of two lecturers with 2 and 6 years lecturing experience respectively, one campus manager with 18 years of educational experience (high school and tertiary education), two second year business studies students and one third year student. Judgemental sampling was chosen as it was necessary to obtain information urgently and get a feel of the phenomenon under investigation, and this method ensured that the sample units with knowledge about the research phenomenon were selected (Quinlan 2011).

Procedure

The researchers met the respondents on two predetermined days for a period of 2 hours and outlined the procedure of the study and the reasons for undertaking such a study. An in-depth explanation of Action Learning was given. Respondents were also advised to undertake their own research into Action Learning on day 1. On day 2 (after a week), all respondents provided feedback into their findings on action research. The feedback was interrogated for best practice.

All respondents were advised to be alert and vigilant during the observation research period of 4 weeks and were instructed to write down evaluative notes during their daily teaching for learning experiences. Lecturers kept notes of issues raised in student consultations as well as in the lecture rooms. The students likewise kept notes.

The focus areas comprised of lecturer planning/preparation (content, time, qualification, student diversity), student activity and involvement (culture, mind-sets, negative attitudes) and challenges.

The respondents were given four weeks to become aware of all their teaching activities, learning experiences, the educational environ-

ment, and the feasibility of Action Learning in higher education.

After four weeks, respondents were subjected to in-depth interviews based on the following questions:

1. Does the current educational/academic system allow for active implementation of Action Learning?
2. Which subjects lend themselves to Action Learning?
3. Will you be happier with Action Learning rather than conventional learning?
4. Are you satisfied with the conventional mode of lecturing?
5. What are your perceptions of your current lecturers? Will they be able to manage the change over from conventional lecturing to Action Learning? Why?
6. Identify some challenges of conventional lecturing that will impact on action learning.

Data Collection and Analysis

Prior to the interviews, the researchers developed a trust relationship with the participants so that they would be confident and willing to share their experiences without fear, to produce useful knowledge (Quinlan 2011).

During the course of the interviews, the researchers made detailed notes concerning the original comments, observations, and feelings regarding Action Learning. The data was deconstructed and then reconstructed and grouped together around the core concepts and themes of the study (Quinlan 2011).

Ensuring Trustworthiness

Ensuring trustworthiness focusses on determining whether the findings are credible or plausible. In this paper the data speaks for itself as the research was heavily embedded in real life situations, settings and circumstances. Thus, the method used catered for prolonged engagement, persistent observation and triangulation (staff and students). While there were only six participants, the adequacy of the sample was confirmed by the richness of the quality of data collected and not by the number of participants (Quinlan 2011; Sekaran and Bougie 2013). This, together with the purposive sampling, ensured transferability. According to Babbie and Mouton (2001) the trustworthiness of a qualitative

study is ensured through achieving credibility and transferability.

RESULTS

Given the current young generation of students who are more into social media, 'chilling out' and 'having fun', more than seriously concentrating on their studies, it was imperative to prepare the respondents to observe their conventional lecturing environment so that informed responses would be forthcoming during the interview sessions. In addition, as the respondents had only been exposed to conventional lecturing it was deemed necessary for them to compare the Action Learning theory as opposed to conventional lecturing/learning in practice.

The results of the research reveal the following:

Question: *Does the current educational/academic system allow for the implementation of Action Learning?*

All the respondents were unanimous in their decision that while Action Learning is a powerful learning tool over a period of time, given the present educational system which is largely dogmatic and prescribed, it would be very difficult to implement 'real' Action Learning.

Question: *Will you be happier with Action Learning than conventional learning?*

There were mixed feelings regarding this question, as all the respondents did not experience Action Learning to fully appreciate the strengths and weaknesses of the system

Question: *What are your perceptions of your current lecturers? Will they be able to manage the change over from conventional lecturing to Action Learning? Why?*

The students believed that while their lecturers have the necessary paper qualifications, they lack classroom didactics and content knowledge. Hence, many of them resort to reading from textbooks, PowerPoint presentations or the Tablet PC.

Question: *Identify some challenges of conventional lecturing that will impact on Action Learning. Do you believe that there is place for an Action Learning methodology in our undergraduate colleges?*

In the main, all the respondents identified a number of challenges that impact on current lecturer and student performance during conventional lecturing and they believed that these challenges would most certainly impact nega-

tively on the Action Learning paradigm. The challenges identified were time constraints, curriculum-design and implementation, quality of lecturers, diversity of students and the low levels of salary for academics.

DISCUSSION

An analysis of findings of the participants' experiences with regard to their conventional learning approach and perceptions of Action Learning that emerged during the interviews forms the foundation of this section. The themes are grouped under broad headings which are subdivided for in-depth discussion. It is gratifying to note that all the responses of the participants concur with the latest research findings in terms of changing mind-sets (Zuber-Skerritt, 2015), building capacity (Zuber-Skerritt et al. 2015), engaging with smaller groups (Kian 2015), problem solving (Rigg 2015), innovation (Sankaran 2015) and diversity challenges (Stevens et al. 2015).

Theme 1: Educational/Academic System

Question: *Does the current educational/academic system allow for the implementation of Action Learning?*

All the respondents were unanimous in their decision that while Action Learning is a powerful learning tool over a period of time, given the present educational system which is largely dogmatic and prescribed, it would be very difficult to implement 'real' Action Learning. Students were of the view that the current lecturers do not have the time to research and engage in discussion and debate in the conventional lecture room. It would be highly unlikely that they will be able to research and prepare for a three hour session. In addition, the student attention span is limited in a normal lecture; it is highly unlikely that they will be attentive throughout a three hour session. The need to build lecturing capacity and to change mindsets is evident (Zuber-Skerritt 2015).

The lecturers responded that with smaller numbers, more attention would be focussed on involving the students to steer the discussion, ask questions and provide solutions, as the lecturer is then a facilitator. However, the lecturers did concede that getting students to talk during conventional lectures is like looking for a needle

in haystack! What will happen in a three hour session? Nevertheless, they believed that Action Learning could contribute to the students' personal development if nothing else (Rigg 2008). Given the time, and a changed curricula, they will be able to maximise the benefits of experiential Action Learning (Skipton 2015).

All the respondents believed that the regulatory authorities should revisit the educational system. They should pilot a programme on the feasibility of Action Learning for enhancing comprehension and spoken language in the first year of higher education as a bridging module for one semester. The respondents believed that in the current situation, the majority of the subjects do not lend themselves to Action Learning. Their responses support the views of Skipton (2015) and Zuber-Skerritt (2015) who believe that the Action Learning methodology can produce excellent results, providing that academics and regulatory authorities are open to Action Learning.

The lecturer with two years lecturing experience indicated that training institutions do not prepare lecturers for facilitating courses, rather they are observed for strong/weak points during practice teaching sessions. He believed that personal, individualized, one-on-one tutoring generally works best, and careful tutor training is a key element of a tutoring programme's success. But given the large numbers and diversity of students, it is impossible to engage in one to one sessions.

Theme 2: Conventional Learning as Opposed to Action Learning

Question: *Will you be happier with Action Learning than conventional learning?*

There were mixed feelings regarding this question, as not all the respondents had experienced Action Learning to appreciate fully the strengths and weaknesses of the system. However, the lecturers commented positively on the two day session that the researcher planned and facilitated at the beginning of the study. They indicated that if such sessions were a prelude to Action Learning, then they would welcome it. However, the campus manager argued that in the current situation, organising the lecturers' timetables, getting students from different cultures/destinations to meet at scheduled times, encouraging them to mingle and communicate

and the availability of venues could prove to be problematic. This finding concurs with the views of Griffiths et al. (2008) and Brydon-Miller et al. (2015) who stress that successful action relies on similar personal qualities of the learners, verbal fluency, emotional intelligence and possession of rich life experiences.

The students were of the opinion that much time would be wasted in listening to “stories” rather than learning about theories and concepts for which they can be examined and graded. Assessments in Action Learning take the form of portfolios, and, in the opinion of the students, this mode of assessment lends itself to plagiarism and use of ghost writers. More important, the students want immediate results and do not want to wait for a whole year to submit a portfolio.

Question: *Are you satisfied with the conventional mode of lecturing?*

The lecturers were of the opinion that they would prefer to engage in group discussions, and other innovative strategies as postulated by Zuber-Skerritt (2001, 2015), Schumacher (2015) and Kian (2015). However, given their heavy workloads with multiple disciplines, as well as the large classes and a rigid syllabus, they were left with little choice but to opt for the conventional lecturing method. Some attempts are made to use teaching aids to introduce variety but problems occur when there is load shedding and when technology fails to operate successfully. The campus manager supported the decisions of the lecturers, and added that they had tried team teaching with little success.

The students believed that there are several categories of students who will respond differently to the question. The high achievers would not be satisfied with conventional lecturing, the average learner would be satisfied with some variety, while the struggler would be happy as long as the lecturer provides the scope for the tests and examinations. The quality of the lecture is not important as long as the strugglers can memorise and repeat to pass an assessment. The third year student argued that college success requires not just content mastery, but a set of higher-level learning skills and competencies. The two second year students would welcome more interaction and engagement in the lecture room, but one of them was quick to point out that young lecturers fail to control the whole class, and the interaction shrivels down to communication with only one or two students, while

the rest engage with their cell phones and /or Tablet PCs.

Question: *What are your perceptions of your current lecturers? Will they be able to manage the change over from conventional lecturing to Action Learning? Why?*

As part of their self-appraisal, the lecturers indicated that the quality of didactical training received did not prepare them for the realities of the lecture rooms and for dealing with a diversity of students with multiple problems that impact on their performance. Managing student attendance, resistance to learning and discipline were major problems. The lecturers were of the opinion that without adequate and informed training about Action Learning, and unless and until students saw merit in the Action Learning paradigm, it would be very difficult to introduce it in undergraduate programmes.

The students believed that while their lecturers have the necessary paper qualifications, they lack classroom didactics and content knowledge. Hence, many of them resort to reading from textbooks, PowerPoint presentations or the Tablet PC. They believed that the older generation lecturers have more to offer in terms of teaching /lecturing skills, knowledge and are in a better position to manage the students. This finding lends credibility to Zuber-Skerritt’s (2015) postulations for the dire need of enhancing training of academics.

Theme 3: Challenges and Barriers

Question: *Identify some challenges of conventional lecturing that will impact on Action Learning. Do you believe that there is place for an Action Learning methodology in our undergraduate colleges?*

In the main, all the respondents identified a number of challenges that impact on current lecturer and student performance during conventional lecturing and they believed that these challenges would most certainly impact negatively on the Action Learning paradigm. The challenges identified were time constraints (Beatty 2013), curriculum-design and implementation, quality of lecturers (Antell et al. 2015), diversity of students and the low levels of salary for academics.

All the respondents agreed that while Action Learning is time consuming, it nevertheless gives the students and facilitator the opportuni-

ty to get to know each other. This in turn would contribute to mentoring and tutoring the students, getting to know them as persons, in the hope that such personal connections would promote self-efficacy and success.

All the respondents believed that there would be a place for Action Learning, in the real sense of the word, only when the educational system is reconceptualised. Such reconceptualization would include focusing on the person as an individual, when numbers are not important, where students and lecturers take ownership of their teaching and lecturing roles, and when transfer of learning is practiced. The lecturers commented on the need for improving the training of educators to meet the challenges of a diverse student population, coping with low performing students, and advancing technology. These findings concur with the views of Zuber-Skerritt (2015) and Steven et al. (2015) for enhanced teacher education and coping with diversity. Emphasis needs to be geared towards reflexive practices that can be introduced into higher education. Special qualifications need to be offered in Action Learning facilitation as part of the university curriculum for teacher education (Zuber-Skerritt 2015). In addition, they expressed the desire to see an improvement in the salary structures for academics to motivate and increase productivity and performance. Until this is accomplished, education in the main will be lecturer-centric as opposed to learner-centric and action-centric.

However, the campus manager argued that while reflexive practices are admirable, the lecturers do not have the time to reflect on their practices as they are engaged in a continuous stream of work related activities that have to be completed within tight timeframes.

LIMITATIONS

The non-probability sampling design, which does not facilitate generalization of findings, was a limiting factor. This was not significant, as the purpose of the study was to understand the research problem, rather than to extrapolate the findings. Nevertheless, it is prudent to advise that the results and recommendations are based solely on the perceptions of the students' and lecturers' experience of the phenomenon under investigation.

The lack of experience in Action Learning environments of the respondents was another limitation. However, research has to start somewhere, and their opinions, even with limited experience, will be valuable at this early stage of development of experiential Action Learning in South African tertiary institutions.

CONCLUSION

This paper provides indicators, based on student and lecturer perceptions, that to implement Action Learning designs in the current educational context of higher education is going to be very difficult and challenging. The students and lecturers agree that Action Learning does produce challenges, but in the long run the outcomes in terms of personal enhancement, knowledge relationships, mentoring and coaching are more rewarding. Hence, Action Learning as a unique process in which students define and refine their experiences through cyclic, iterative sequences of theory, practice, and reflection, becomes an inherent part of their lives. The integration of theory and practice is critical to the student's success in securing a dignified job.

The regulatory authorities' strategic aim of developing and fostering quality enhancement in learning and teaching and its emphasis on a reconceptualization of the curriculum provides the ideal setting for piloting Action Learning in higher education. However, educational institutions must be wary of using lecturers as facilitators in authentic Action Learning environments as lecturers have not been trained as facilitators.

Since Action Learning is focussed more on practice rather than theory, there is every likelihood that the perceptions of respondents with Action Learning experience would have been different, as none of the respondents had experienced Action Learning in practice.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The literature review and the findings of the research indicate that Action Learning has numerous benefits for all stakeholders involved in education and community engagement. Therefore, it is recommended that the training of lecturers be enhanced to include a course in Action Learning methodology. Such training in Action Learning will help lecturers become better facilitators in an Action Learning set.

It is recommended that higher education institutions revisit their course designs and integrate Action Learning into their existing curricula. It is prudent to advise that provisions must be made to include extra facilitation time on the timetable. In addition, implementation of Action Learning courses requires a different mind-set as well different infrastructure. Therefore, it is recommended that facilitation rooms and workshop venues be budgeted for in the new academic financial year.

Since experiential learning is increasingly valued across academia, it is recommended that higher education qualifications and programmes develop capacity for self-directed learning, resourcefulness and collaborative problem-solving skills.

For Action Learning to be sustainable and meaningful to higher education learners, it is imperative that the quality of the throughput rates be improved at high school level through the use of qualified subject specialists, raising the percentage pass requirements as well as improving literacy skills.

To obtain a true reflection of whether Action Learning does indeed make a positive contribution to all the stakeholders (the student, the lecturer and the workplace), it would be necessary to conduct a similar investigation with a larger sample, with lecturers and students who have engaged in both Action Learning as well as conventional learning. It is recommended that other researchers engage in a comparative, quantitative study to gauge the benefits and challenges of Action Learning both nationally and internationally in higher education. Furthermore, research using methods that are not “perception” based would be beneficial, for example measurement of the impact of Action Learning or quantitative surveys of actual use of Action Learning.

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