

Skill Development with Action Learning within A Group of MBA Students: A Mixed Method Evaluation

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to better understand the dynamics and possible impact of the 'Action Learning' (AL) approach on MBA students during an introduction class on their own skill development to better prepare them for their MBA. Even so the findings might be unique to that particular group and generalizations cannot be made as the sample size is quite small, the originality and value of this study provides a deeper and better understanding of the group dynamics and learning potential of the AL in an international MBA class context. The setting and length of this AL study makes it challenging to replicate such a study which makes it a valuable contribution to practice and theory.

Keywords: MBA; Action Learning; Adult Education; Evaluation Research

Introduction

The world is changing faster and faster and companies and their employees are under tremendous pressure to keep up with those changes in order to stay competitive (Colvile, 2016). Starting more than 20 years ago, as (Albert, 2000) points out, an increasing amount of companies demanding employees that have a higher

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education as it was the case in the past and this trend is going forward. Graduates that enter the job market have a vital role to play to help to develop companies, to make them more competitive, help growing prosperities in societies, regions and even entire countries (Symonds, Schwartz, & Ferguson, 2011).

A vital role for business success can be linked to employees and entrepreneurs who possess the appropriate set of skills. One of the degrees that has been identified to have a significant impact on developing essential skills and knowledge that are demanded by companies is the Master of Business Administration (MBA) (Kuratko, 2003). However, financial success is not the only important aspect in business. Wellbeing and happiness of employees are considered important to. Even self-employment can have a positive effect on health. According to a recent study by (Nikolova, 2019), in that research, using the Job Demand-Control model, with the intention to make a connection between occupational characteristics to health and wellbeing, it can be seen that there is indeed a positive link between self-employment and mental health in many and in some cases physical and mental health gains (Nikolova, 2019).

MBA programs therefore also need to focus on entrepreneurial skill and knowledge development as outlined by (Binks, Starkey, & Mahon, 2006). As a consequence, modern MBA programs should focus on the development of interpersonal skills (IPS) because those IPS are considered crucial in today's business environment. As the study of (Bedwell, Fiore, & Salas, 2014) suggest, IPS development approaches should be implemented early in the design and subsequent implementation of MBA programs to enhance the employability and success potential in later careers of the participants.

Literature review and development of research questions

The concept of learning has been widely explored in previous research. In their work, De Houwer et al, argue that traditionally learning was either defined as "changes in behavior that result from experience or mechanistically as changes in the organism that result from experience" (De Houwer, Barnes-Holmes, & Moors,

2013, p. 1). From learning, the theory of learning styles has been evolved. Perhaps the most influential theory on learning styles is known as the Kolb's learning cycle theory in which four important aspects to learning are pictured in a circle (Kolb, 1985).

According to (McLeod, 2017) important are the implication from the Kolb's learning cycle for educators to be able to critically evaluate their own programs and as a consequence to incorporate the various learning styles appropriately to facilitate learning. Within a wide body of literature, (Altrichter, Kemmis, McTaggart, & Zuber-Skerritt, 2002; Kramer, 2008; Zuber-Skerritt, 2002) AL has been acknowledged as one of the most effective type of professional managerial training and development approaches. But what exactly is AL and how can it be distinguished to other forms of learning styles?

Revans defines AL as “a means of development, intellectual, emotional or physical that requires its subjects, through responsible involvement in some real, complex and stressful problem, to achieve intended change to improve their observable behavior henceforth in the problem field” (R. Revans, 1982: 626-627). Revans further points out (R. W. Revans, 2011), AL should not be considered to be a useful approach to solve simple ‘puzzles’ in which the answer might be hidden but is otherwise obvious, but rather to help to solve complex and difficult to achieve (e.g. due to the complex nature of the tasks ahead) challenges (p.20). Pedler, on the other hand characterize AL as “an approach to the development of people in organizations which takes the task as the vehicle for learning.

It is based on the premise that there is no learning without action and no sober and deliberate action without learning has three main components—people, who accept the responsibility for taking action on a particular issue; problems, or the tasks that people set themselves; and a set of six or so colleagues who support and challenge each other to make progress on problems”(Pedler, 1991, pp. xxii-xxiii).It can therefore be noted that all approaches of AL share the involvement of people that directly or indirectly are working toward, “resolving and taking action on real problems in real time, and learning through questioning and reflection while doing so”(M. Marquardt & Waddill, 2004, p. 2).

Action Learning in MBA programs

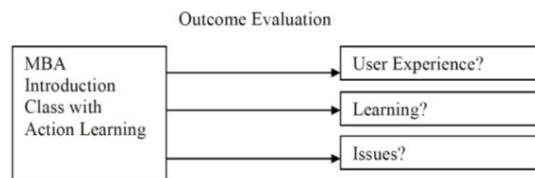
Research on MBA programs that have reported on their experiences with AL already exist and are of mixed results. In an early study of (Caie, 1987) reports, the reflections of the effectiveness of AL as a learning method/style on their MBA program has been positive as it is “immediate relevance to their needs (students) and its focus on application and implementation, as well as theory” (Caie, 1987, p. 1). As a contrary, in the study of (Johnson & Spicer, 2006), they shared that in their MBA program overall the AL approach was considered a successful approach to management education mainly because the students had the chance to bring in and reflect own their own experience and how students are able to develop their own new managerial mindsets.

Yeadon-Lee & Worsdale, 2012 on the other hand reported in their experience with AL during their part time MBA program that not every student liked to work in groups and also that power plays among group members and hierarchy, as naturally occurred during the time members worked together, had a negative impact on the overall learning of some students. But they also remarked that if it is possible to create the right, secure atmosphere among the students, deep sharing of experience and therefore learning occurred. “a climate in which (learning) set members feel both emotionally and psychologically secure. If this is place then action learning has a very positive impact on the learning process” (Yeadon-Lee & Worsdale, 2012: 18).

According to the study of (Schaupp & Vitullo, 2019), they have reported to have successfully implemented the AL in their MBA program. In that class students worked on a real situation with a company and the overall experiences with AL was overall very satisfactory from a learner’s perspective point of view. In their work (Belet, 2019) point out that “mainstream management educational system based on the old MBA model has become obsolete and inadequate”, as it failed to efficient enough prepare students to be skilled enough in their management and leadership responsibilities. The AL based management education model promised to have qualities to be much better suited to, as Belet describes as “develop and prepare

the “manager-leaders” of tomorrow who will need to be much more equipped with adequate human management and leadership competences than the present graduates of most traditional business schools or universities” (Belet, 2019, pp. 10-11). This has raised the overall question if AL would be an appropriate alternative method to be applied in an MBA introductory course?

Conceptual Framework



Source: The researcher

Research Questions

The research was guided by the following research questions:

How is the Action Learning approach being experienced by the students?

What is the learning Impact from the Action Learning approach?

What are the possible issues with the Action Learning approach?

Methodology

In the early planning phase of this AL class several aspects had to be considered: (1) the course design (2) how to build skills during class? (3) what would be the appropriate research methodology? And (4) what would be the right timing?

It was taken into consideration that the disadvantage found in previous research (Yeadon-Lee & Worsdale, 2012) with their experience with AL during their MBA program, when would be the right time to introduce the AL and learning sets as some students don't like to work in groups. As they state: “arguably it should be introduced (group work) at the start of a programmed when groups have not yet formed” (Yeadon-Lee & Worsdale, 2012, p. 18).

The learning outcomes have been drafted together with what topic should be introduced in each week. After analysis and consideration of the various approaches to AL the Marquardt approach to AL was chosen as described in (M. Marquardt & Waddill, 2004), which consist of 6 unique aspects as the most feasible and useful. According to Marquardt and Waddill, the Marquardt model to AL has been developed from essential parts of the European and American type of AL (M. Marquardt & Waddill, 2004). This approach has six elements that are supposed to be used mutually supporting and is interactive to each other. Those elements are, according to (M. J. Marquardt, 2011). (1) A problem (project, challenge, opportunity, issue or task), (2) An action learning group or team, (3) A process that emphasizes insightful questioning and reflective listening, (4) Taking action on the problem, (5) A commitment to learning, and (6) An action learning coach.

According to Marquardt, in addition to the above 6 elements two important rules must be followed: (1) statements can only be made in response to questions, and (2) the action learning coach has the power to intervene whenever he/she sees an opportunity for learning (M. J. Marquardt, 2011).

Data collection

Observation

Data collection was done from various sources. One method was observation, which has been considered a very important aspect in this evaluation research to understand and see how AL has worked in practice. This correlates with White (2000), as he describes, "it could be argued that the most obvious method of data collection is observation: an accurate record of what people do and say in real – life situations" (White, 2000, p. 34)

Learning Reflection

In addition, each student submitted every two weeks of the course individual qualitative learning reflections. The task was about to reflect on what the

student had learned during the last two weeks of the course? In addition, there was also a section about what surprised or impressed the student.

Satisfaction Questionnaire

At the end of the course an overall satisfaction questionnaire with quantitative (6-point scale from 1 very unsatisfactory to 6 very satisfactory) questions and qualitative elements in which students could leave comments about the course, or what needs improvement had been administered.

Focus Group

After the end of the MBA program, exactly one year later, a focus group with 9 randomly selected students from that class had been conducted. The focus was about the overall experience of the MBA course in contrast to the introductory class with AL? In addition, based on own reflections of the students what has helped them from that class for their MBA?

Data analysis

In addition to the above-mentioned Kirkpatrick, four level of evaluation method, the researcher used the Miles and Hubermann approach and template analysis for the qualitative data analysis. As no advanced statistical methods have been used no further quantitative data analysis has been applied. For the Miles and Hubermann approach, first we used data collection (as outlined above), second data display (in which we transcribed observational information and information from the focus group), third we copied over paragraphs from the various sources to order and display. Then, fived data reduction, (in which we reduced the information to chunks), and sixed, conclusion/drawing/verifying (to make sense of the gathered information) and the same steps backward and forward as deemed necessary (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

For the 'template analysis' to “thematically organizing and analyzing textural data” (King, 2004), in which the researcher created an initial template with

codes and sub codes. Those codes have then been put into the chunks of text. This initial template has then been expanded to new codes, parent codes, children codes etc. when new topics emerged in the analysis process.

Findings

Topics of the focus group, observations and overall evaluation results:

How was the Action Learning approach being experienced by the students during the class?

During the course student expressed their concerns that AL was new to them and even teamwork was not well experienced.

The observation also indicated that in the beginning students acted with mixed feelings toward the AL approach and that they had to work together as a team made obviously some students uncomfortable. One major reason seemed to be that a lot of students never experienced that no lecture was given to them but rather they had to work out the issues presented to them (as part of the case study) and to create solutions by themselves.

Another major aspect of the AL approach was that students felt that they could better understand the various aspects of the challenges in the case because they had to use questions first.

The observations also confirmed that students asked a lot of question during their team sessions. A central aspect of the AL approach is to ask questions before a statement can be made and it seems that this helped students to communicate better with each other.

Also, the feedback from Professor was important to students. "I like the feedback that we get from our professor when we do the PowerPoint presentation at the next class. That has helped me to build confidence that what we came up with (solutions) did actually make sense". Building trust among team members and in their own capability was also often mentioned.

What was the learning Impact from the Action Learning approach?

It appears that the ability to do research for new information or concepts was a very important aspect for the students. Also, to be able to more effectively self-study and how to identify topics, how to understand concepts have been mentioned several times. The observation showed that students learned to trust themselves more. In the first two classes, only some people were talking most of the time. But in later classes everyone was sharing their thoughts.

Another skill that was mentioned several times by students in their learning reflections was how to better plan work.

Apart from team working skills, communication skills, and problem-solving skills, analysis skills, confidence building, and leadership skill building also how to motivate others has been mentioned by several students. Or as the following student shares her experience. "Motivating others is not easy. But I understand now how important that is. In (the other class) when we are asked to do some group work, we really struggled as others did not want to join in. Luckily with the team leader (Action Learning Coach) we have to contribute. That really helped"

What have been the issues with the Action Learning approach?

Some of the main issues with the AL approach have been with the notion that students, particularly from Asian background like China, Vietnam, Thailand and others struggled quite a bit in the beginning that nobody told them what to do? What they should learn. How they should work? Next point what researcher notice is that some students who are very good at making PowerPoint slides are weak in group discussion. As the following student noticed "May be because we come from different culture and background. For e.g.: Asian people are willing to work in a group while European people just want to study themselves and they are independent. As a result, I see his or her contribution to the group discussion is fewer than others even though he or she may be expert at preparing PowerPoint slides. Overall, I am very happy to be one of your students in this class. I've learned new things and got

unexpected experiences week by week. And I do have a preference for Action learning session which makes me progress for my study"

Discussion

Within the quantitative questionnaire the question "I was satisfied with the course" got 5.21 out of 6. This is overall a very high result and indicates that students have been quite happy how the course went for the class. Also, the focus group indicated that students really liked the course and all agreed it was at the right level for them given it was an introductory course to their MBA. The focus group also agreed that it took time to get used to the AL approach (ca 3 weeks) before noticeable improvements in the workflow of the teams and the output of the teams being achieved.

As many students noticed in their learning reflections and the focus group this can be explained by being introduced to a completely new way of working as students usually got lectures in their undergraduate degrees. During this MBA introductory class, only one lecture was given (about the principles of AL approach) in the first class and after this student had to work by themselves as teams. It was like a shock to many first but students quickly made the AL principles work for them. Only very few students disagreed about AL. They had to work harder as in other classes when they didn't need to work, only to listen to lectures in previous classes. The learning reflections also showed that students actually learned quite a lot of content (knowledge) they did not possess before and overall the course achieved its learning objectives.

Surprisingly the team working aspect created the largest controversy among the students. Everyone agreed that it was the most important skill they learned during the AL approach, but that it was also the most pain during the class and even later in their other classes. This phenomenon was also observed and describe at (Yeadon-Lee & Worsdale, 2012) who confirmed in their study that not everyone likes working

in a team. As with the study of (Johnson & Spicer, 2006), students really enjoyed that they could reflect on their own experience and felt that they could contribute to the tasks. Even later in other courses. Another interesting finding was that students liked the class setting being a consultant - even so the case was not real as the statement on the questionnaire demonstrates.

"Action learning is quite efficient for educating to the students to learn something from being a consultant"

This also correlates with the finding of (Schaupp & Vitullo, 2019), who successfully implemented AL in their MBA as part of a consultancy project. However, the statement from (Belet 2019) cannot easily be agreed on that AL is one of the most appropriate 'new' management education approaches as other, more traditional methods fail to create new leaders to be skilled enough in their management and leadership responsibilities? Yes, AL has a lot to offer and we are convinced that every MBA or other management related education system would greatly benefit incorporating AL method in their approach to teaching and learning.

The biggest challenge to make AL work is to design a course around this approach. This requires a lot of effort from the course designer, a good and deep understanding about AL by the course designer and the lecturer teaching with this method. Above all, as this research demonstrated, AL can only be truly useful if student have at least a couple of weeks' times to apply the AL approach in their course(es) to really benefit from it.

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