



Business Action Learning Tasmania (BALT) in the world of Action Learning

A Literature Survey by Robert F Cother

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Introduction to the literature survey

On completion of the second Business Action Learning (BALT) program in Tasmania, it is appropriate to assess where the BALT initiative stands in the world of Action Learning. How do BALT programs compare with other action learning programs reported in the literature? Are there aspects of BALT that would be of interest to the world? Are there aspects of others' programs that could be adopted and adapted to further enhance BALT programs? This literature survey was undertaken by the Action Learning Institute to address these questions.

Action learning has been a recognised training and development strategy for at least 40 years. The term "action learning" was coined by Reginald Revans¹, who is regarded as the founder of this approach to learning. The literature reveals that action learning can take a number of forms and can be categorised in a number of ways. It is useful to understand these distinctions in order to see where BALT programs fit and reveal where BALT may be unique.

Broadly, action learning can be categorised as follows:

- "Multiple-problem" versus "Single-problem"
- "Action-oriented" versus "Learning-oriented" versus "Balanced"
- "For qualification" versus "Not for qualification"
- "Intra-organisation" versus "Inter-organisation"

Each of these is discussed in turn below. Examples from the literature are provided to clarify the distinctions. BALT is compared to these examples. BALT's particular attributes relative to these examples are explained and further enhancements that could be made to BALT programs are identified.

The role of the facilitator in action learning is also discussed and options for facilitation are considered.

Finally, pointers for the future use of emerging communications technologies to enhance action learning are explored.

Multiple-problem versus single-problem action learning²

In multiple-problem action learning a group of 6 to 10 people (an action learning "set") meets regularly over a period of 6 to 12 months. Each set member has a personal project, task or problem at their workplace that they work on over that time. At each session, the set focuses on each person in turn. Typically each person has the focus for 20 to 30 minutes. By asking effective questions, the set helps the individual reflect on the progress of their project and gain new insights on how to proceed. Initially these sessions may have a facilitator. Over time the set may become self-directing.

¹ Revans, R., ABC of Action Learning, Gower Publishing Ltd, Farnham, 2011,

² Marquardt, Michael J. Optimizing the Power of Action Learning, 2nd Edition, Nicholas Brealey Publishing, Boston and London, 2011, page 6

In single-problem action learning, a team of 3 to 6 is formed to tackle a project that addresses a significant problem for the organisation. The project, and the team participants, are generally nominated by management. The team works intensively together to understand the problem and develop recommendations. The team presents their recommendations and implementation plan to management. Some of the team are new to the problem. Each person brings their unique knowledge and experience to the project. A facilitator guides the process. Specialist subject experts are generally precluded from the team but may well be consulted by the team through the course of the project³.

The BALT programs and the South Australian Lean Action Learning programs before them have essentially involved single-problem action learning. In the case of BALT there are three companies in a program. Each company hosts a project and nominates two of their people to participate in the program. Each project team is a unique combination of participants from the home company and the other companies.

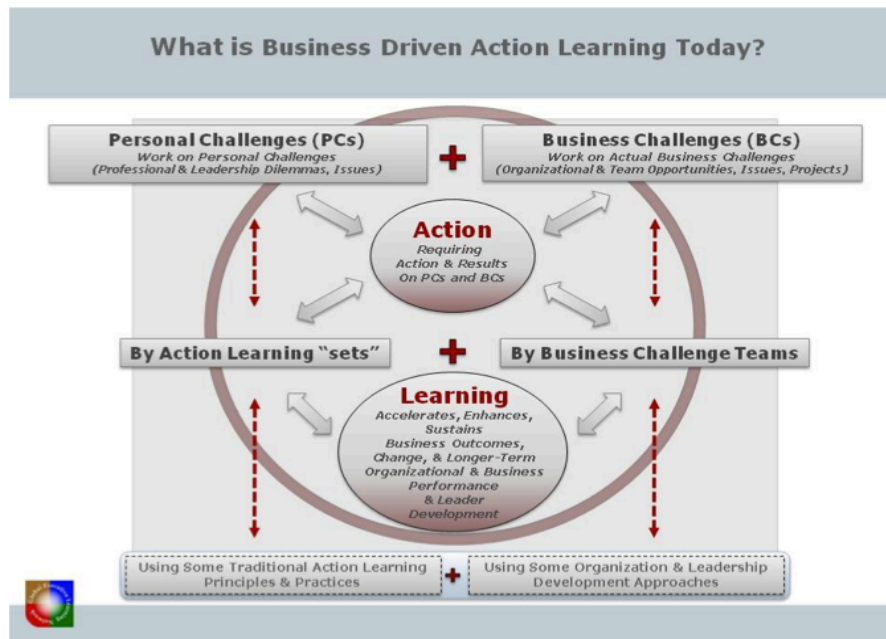
During the workshop phase team members have equal responsibility for the outcomes of the project as in single-problem action learning. However, in the implementation phase the two home team members take over responsibility for the project. They lead the change within their organisation. Given that there are three projects, the three implementations proceed in parallel.

It is during the implementation that participants exercise and develop their change leadership capabilities. Currently one-on-one mentoring is provided by the facilitators during implementation. An obvious enhancement would be to introduce multiple-problem action learning during this phase. In the six to nine months of the implementation period all participants could meet periodically as a group. At these meetings they would address each project in turn. The group would question the implementers to help them reflect on their progress and enhance their implementation actions. Participants could compare and evaluate their experiences. It is expected that this strategy would encourage participants to reflect on and learn more from their experiences thus adding to their learning outcomes. Such meetings would be in addition to the one-on-one mentoring currently provided.

The combination of single-project and multiple-project action learning into a single action learning program is exemplified in Business-driven Action Learning (BDAL)⁴. BDAL is a variant of action learning that emerged in the USA in the 1990s. The BDAL model combines business challenge teams and action learning sets, as shown in the diagram overpage.

³ Revans, Op.cit, Chapter 7

⁴ Boshyk, Y. Accelerating global growth, innovation and leader development through business driven action learning, 19th Global forum on executive development and business driven action learning, 2011



Yoon et al⁵ also describe a dual-project action learning program conducted in South Korea in which each participant is required to carry out both team and individual projects.

Action-oriented versus learning-oriented versus balanced action learning⁶

Action-oriented action learning programs feature action as a central focus. These programs are rooted in the real business concerns and encourage managers and leaders to collaborate on real workplace issues. Kaizen blitzes and similar group problem solving activities could be categorised thus. These programs tend to involve single-problem action learning.

Learning-oriented action learning is centred on learning rather than addressing an issue or solving a problem. This approach is applied chiefly for personal learning and development and not so much for organisational issues. These programs tend to involve multiple-problem action learning.

Balanced action learning strikes a balance between action and learning. Balanced action learning programs focus both on the learning and the task at hand.⁷ Reflective practices and organisational learnings are addressed frequently during the program.

A study of 50 action learning programs from various parts of the world by Cho and Egan revealed 50% learning oriented, 8% action oriented and 42% balanced.⁸

⁵ Yoon, H. J., Cho, Y. and Bong, H-C., The impact of a dual-project action learning program: a case of a large IT manufacturing company in South Korea, *Action Learning: Research and Practice* Vol. 9, No. 3, November 2012, 225-246

⁶ Cho Y. and Egan, T.M., *Action Learning Research: A Systematic Review and Conceptual Framework*, *Human Resources Development Review* 8(4), 2006 SAGE Publications, pp 431-462,

⁷ Cho and Egan, op.cit

Business-driven Action Learning (BDAL) referred to earlier is an example of balanced action learning. BDAL was introduced in response to a perception that too much action learning was on the “learning side” and not enough on the “action side”. It is employed as an executive training strategy by such notable global companies as GE, Intel, BHP Billiton and Johnson and Johnson.

Nonaka et al⁹ have proposed a knowledge conversion model which helps explain how learning occurs within and between people in an action learning team. They propose that there are two types of knowledge; “tacit” knowledge and “explicit” knowledge.

Tacit knowledge encompasses “informal and hard-to-pin-down know-how, crafts, and skills”. Tacit knowledge can also include mental models, paradigms, perspectives, beliefs and viewpoints. Tacit knowledge is developed in a specific context. It is difficult to explain or set down in writing. It can be learnt by working with others who already have the knowledge.

Explicit knowledge can be expressed in formal, systematic language that can be shared as data, formulae, specifications, manuals etc. Explicit knowledge is context free ie once made explicit it can be applied in a range of different situations.

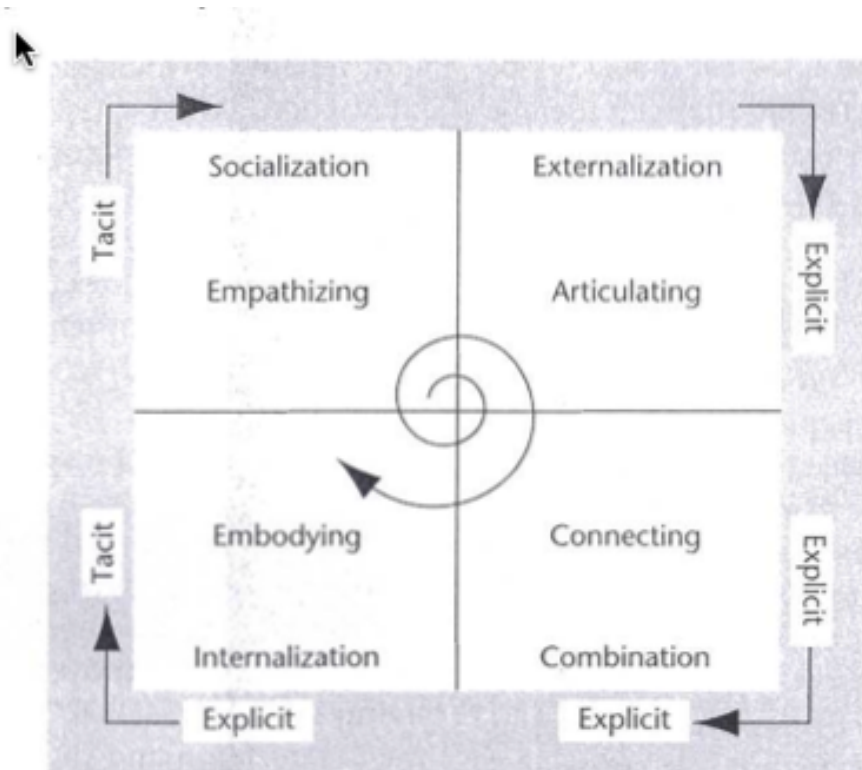
Nonaka et al propose that tacit knowledge and explicit knowledge interact through a knowledge conversion process. Knowledge conversion is a social process *between* individuals who have different types and contents of knowledge. It does not occur *within* an individual. It takes place in a team or organisation.

According to Nonaka et al there are four stages in knowledge conversion; socialisation, externalisation, combination and internalisation. *Socialisation* is the process of bringing together tacit knowledge by sharing the same experience through joint activities. Individuals respond differently to the activities, depending on the tacit knowledge they bring to the project. Individuals observe, listen to and learn from each other. *Externalisation* is the process of creating new, explicit concepts from the tacit knowledge, thereby crystalizing the knowledge so that it can be explained to others. *Combination* is the process of drawing together discrete elements of explicit knowledge into more complex systems eg new approaches, new ways of working, new thought processes, new patterns of behaviour which can be applied in other circumstances. *Internalisation* involves converting this explicit knowledge back to tacit knowledge so that the new ways of working, new thought processes, new patterns of behaviour become second nature and are applied unconsciously.

Nonaka et al see this four-stage process as a continuously evolving spiral, as shown in the following diagram taken from their paper:

⁸ Cho and Egan, op. cit

⁹ Ikujiro Nonaka, Ryoko Toyama and Philippe Byosiere, A theory of organizational knowledge creation: understanding the dynamic process of creating knowledge, *Knowledge Creation Diffusion Utilization*, Vol. 1, No. Pfeifer. (1998), pp. 491-517



The Nonaka model can be used to understand and explain the shortcomings of both action-oriented and learning-oriented action learning. In action-oriented action learning a team is brought together to tackle a specific business problem. This problem sets the context for tacit learning to take place. Participants learn with and from each other in tackling the problem and achieving an outcome. However in the absence of adequate reflection and discussion, much of the learning remains tacit. If this tacit learning is not articulated and made explicit it is unlikely that it will be applied in other contexts.

With learning-oriented action learning, in the absence of a specific business problem there is no context for tacit learning to occur. There is no compelling joint activity to share. Participants can discuss their individual experiences but there is no common experience. There is little opportunity to model or observe skills and behaviour.

The Nonaka model helps explain why balanced action learning is important. The business problem is important, to establish the context in which tacit learning can occur. However adequate time and attention also needs to be given to reflection and discussion in order to articulate and connect what has been learnt. The resulting explicit knowledge is then more likely to be internalised and applied in future.

This still leaves the inherent difficulty in articulating and externalising tacit knowledge. The literature emphasises that reflection is important, but reflection about what? The action learning literature tends to be vague about this. Results oriented people caught up in the excitement of an action learning project may well think time spent on reflection is idle navel gazing. For such people the first challenge is to convince them that it is important. What approaches are there to assist this?

Law and Chuah¹⁰ have proposed a methodology and survey instruments for evaluating the learning that occurs in a project-based action learning team. This involves individual evaluation, team evaluation and efficacy measures. Individuals are rated on their performance by themselves, their peers and the observer. Individuals also rate their personal effectiveness and the collective effectiveness of the team. The Law and Chuah survey instruments are detailed. They are intended to be used throughout the program rather than at the end only. This provides feedback to the individual and the team on how they are progressing and developing.

Based on the discussion above, the thirteen Lean Action Learning programs conducted in South Australia were somewhat “action-oriented”. The main focus was on achieving the project outcomes. Efforts were made to articulate and externalise the learning. Time was set aside at the end of each day for the team to reflect on what had been learnt and how effectively they had worked together. A rather longer debriefing was conducted at the end of the five days of team sessions. Participants reflected on what they had learnt and what they would/could apply in future. They generally believed they had learnt a lot. However they were not always able to articulate what they had learnt. Such is the nature of tacit learning. Anecdotally, participants in that program that are encountered several years on still talk enthusiastically about their action learning experience. It would be useful to conduct a formal survey of past participants in the South Australian program to get a better understanding of the extent to which learning from those projects has subsequently been applied in other contexts.

With the BALT programs in Tasmania several enhancements have been introduced to balance action and learning. The introduction of the Certificate IV in Competitive Systems and Practices means that considerable attention is now given to mapping the activities and actions of the team to units and performance criteria in the qualification. This provides the basis for assessing the competence of the team members against the qualification.

Note that the units are not “taught” in the traditional sense. The team is observed and corroborative evidence is collected and cross-referenced to individuals. All of this is reviewed and discussed with each candidate. This puts some structure to the reflective process. The candidate is able to see the competencies they have developed and displayed in the course of participating in the program. Equally importantly they are able to appreciate the ways in which these competencies were connected and combined to achieve the project outcomes. It would be interesting to learn how the wider world of action learning would regard this as a strategy to promote reflection.

Another enhancement introduced with the BALT programs is the requirement for each person to participate in two project teams; one in their “home” company and one in an “away” company. This occurred informally in the South Australian program but was formalised for BALT. By participating in two project teams in two different organisations participants have an opportunity to compare and contrast how competencies can be adapted and applied in different contexts.

As in the South Australian program, teams in BALT programs are encouraged to discuss their performance and what they have learnt at the end of each of the five workshop sessions. In

¹⁰ Law, K.M.Y. and Chuah, K.B., Project-based action learning as learning approach in learning organization: the theory and framework, Team Performance Management Volume 10 No.7/8, 2004 pp178-186, Emerald Group Publishing Limited

addition, for BALT programs, a formal survey was introduced, and conducted at the end of the program. This survey includes questions relating to personal effectiveness, team effectiveness and project outcomes. Consideration should be given to developing this survey further, using the approach proposed by Law and Chuah, referred to above.

It is also planned to introduce a learning logbook in the next program, for participants to keep a more personal log of their learning through the program. The purpose of the logbook is to encourage participants to articulate what they are learning, not only as they work on their project, but during the course of a normal working day. The logbook will also form part of the assessment evidence. A further enhancement would be to introduce a short “storyboarding” session at the end of each workshop to encourage participants to think more broadly on what they have learnt, in order to share and discuss this with the team.

The above enhancements should ensure that BALT programs retain a desirable balance between action and learning.

For qualification versus not for qualification action learning

There are a number of examples around the world of institutions that offer action learning programs that lead to a formal qualification.

- International Management Centres Association (IMCA) offer qualifications from Undergraduate Certificate, Undergraduate Diploma, Associate in Management, Bachelor of Management, Bachelor of Science up to MBA and Doctor of Management. IMCA are the qualification awarding body. Other organisations can have their action learning programs accredited with IMCA and thereby award IMCA qualifications.
- Revans University offers Associate Degree, Bachelor Degree and Masters Degree by a distance learning/action learning model.
- Business School Netherlands offers an MBA program with significant action learning plus exams and dissertation..

These are not pre-eminent universities. No matter how effective their programs are they face a certain amount of scepticism as to the legitimacy of their programs. For example degrees awarded by IMCA and the Revans University are no longer recognised in the UK.¹¹

Numerous MBA programs in more established universities incorporate action learning into some aspects of their programs. The MIT Sloan School of Management promotes examples of how they use action learning in their programs.¹²

Johnson and Spicer¹³ describe a case study of an MBA in Engineering Management program at Bradford University School of Management. This program is a hybrid of a traditional approach and action learning. In addition to the action learning component candidates must attend conventional lectures, sit exams and produce a 20,000 to 30,000 word dissertation. Johnson and Spicer conclude that the depth, quality and application of the learning outcomes from the hybrid program compare favourably with other more conventional

¹¹ Cyber university's credibility in question, Times Educational Supplement, October 10, 2008

¹² <http://mitsloan.mit.edu/mba/program-components/beyond-best-practice/action-learning/>

¹³ Johnson, C., and Spicer, D., A case study of action learning in an MBA program, Education and Training, Vol. 48 No. 1, 2006 pp39-54, Emerald Group Publishing Limited

modes of study. The deeper applied learning afforded by the action learning process produces work of an excellent standard within the expectations of the MBA. However the program is more expensive to deliver than conventional tuition because of the lower student to staff ratio. They also observe that “within a university regulatory framework, there is a challenge created by employing an action learning approach alongside traditional academic, educational and pedagogical frameworks. The nature of action learning is at odds with typical approaches to higher education and maintaining and running a true action learning program when faced with the constraints and assumptions of the higher education environment is problematic.”¹⁴

Pell¹⁵ reports a similar experience at Dearne Valley Business School (now Doncaster Business School). Pell undertook a statistical analysis of the performances of two groups of candidates from five consecutive annual intakes into the DVBS Master of Business Administration program. One group had previously undertaken an Institute of Management Foundation action learning Post Graduate Diploma. The other group had undertaken a traditional theoretical Diploma in Management Studies. His findings were that the ex-Action Learning candidates out performed the ex-Diploma in Management Studies candidates in the MBA. However Pell also reports that the Post Graduate Diploma was subsequently significantly altered, not for pedagogic (ie learning effectiveness) reasons but in order to meet the requirements of the awarding university.¹⁶

These two examples, and a third that will be referred to later in this literature survey, suggest that “true action learning” may have to be compromised to meet conventional views of what constitutes academic acceptability when conducted within a university.

It is not claimed that the BALT programs are at MBA level. What works for a Certificate IV in Competitive Systems and Practices is not necessarily appropriate for an MBA. However the BALT programs have demonstrated that it is possible to deliver a nationally recognised qualification entirely by action learning.

Australia’s national qualifications framework is the most established national qualifications framework in the world and has significant standing. The Australian Qualifications Framework is a model that other countries are emulating.¹⁷ Within the Australian VET framework the competency-based training packages are remarkable for their breadth, rigour and their recognition as the national standard.

The Competitive Systems and Practices qualifications could have been written with action learning in mind. While these qualifications draw upon Lean, Six Sigma, Total Productive Maintenance and similar schools of thought they have been very intelligently structured to provide a great deal of flexibility. They do not dictate that particular concepts, tools or techniques must be applied in every case. In the action learning process the team discover, develop and adapt the concepts, tools and techniques relevant to the project. Participants apply these and evaluate their effectiveness. The core units and Group A electives are

¹⁴ Johnson, Op.cit pp51-52

¹⁵ Pell, G., 2001, Action learning vs. traditional learning in a management development context: a longitudinal study of MBA candidates, International Journal of Management Education, LTSN, Norwich

¹⁶ Ibid. p 37

¹⁷ Korobaz, V., Booker, D., AQF Implementation Workshops, VET and HE Providers, August – September 2003, AQF Council.

compatible with the implementation phase of any action learning project¹⁸. The other electives provide ample scope and flexibility to match the needs of a particular project.

At the project planning stage the facilitator needs to speculate on where the project is likely to head and therefore what units are likely to be involved. This is not a rigid plan. As the project unfolds it may take a different turn. However with a plan, the facilitator is immediately prompted to look for other units that will fit if the project takes a new direction. Without a plan the facilitator is flying blind. Matching the plan to the current reality of the project can be an interesting challenge. A lot of this happens behind the scenes while the team get on with their project.

The delivery and assessment systems and processes employed for BALT programs have been audited by the Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA) and have been found to entirely satisfy requirements. This is achieved without compromising the quality of the action learning. Indeed as claimed earlier, it has the potential to enhance the quality of the learning by assisting the process of converting tacit knowledge to explicit knowledge.

Having said this, the Australian VET qualifications do have their critics, even within Australia. Wheelahan and Moodie¹⁹ suggest that VET qualifications start with the smallest components and aggregate these units of competency to make a whole qualification. They assert that an individual may be deemed competent in the individual components but does not necessarily know how to integrate these competencies to behave and perform like a truly qualified person. To use a crude analogy, a person who learns to paint by numbers may not emerge as a true artist. Wheelahan and Moodie suggest that the Australian VET training packages, by focusing on detailed competencies, neglect the broader capabilities that a person truly qualified in a particular field or vocation should have. They claim that it is these broad capabilities that are more important than the detailed competencies, particularly in times of rapid change.

The BALT programs have put an interesting perspective on this. An action learning project is an effective vehicle for team members to develop and display the sort of capabilities that Wheelahan and Moodie allude to; to work effectively with others, gather data and evidence to better understand the problem, identify and consult with stakeholders, ask effective questions, bring together previously unconnected concepts or ideas in novel ways, develop and communicate a plan of action etc. Individuals develop these capabilities as they learn with and from each other in an action learning team.²⁰ With the BALT programs the outcomes are then deconstructed and mapped against the units of competency, elements and performance criteria. This is done progressively as the project proceeds. The principal purpose is to ensure that the competency requirements of the qualification have been demonstrated but it can also assist the process of making tacit learning explicit as previously indicated.

¹⁸ The possible exception is the addition of the new compulsory unit, MSAENV472B Implement and monitor environmentally sustainable work practices. In two of the three projects in BALT program 2 this unit was entirely relevant. In the third it was not and an additional mini-project had to be undertaken to satisfy the requirements of this unit.

¹⁹ Wheelahan, L. and Moodie, G., Rethinking skills in vocational education and training: from competencies to capabilities, NSW Department of Education and Communities, 2011, p13

²⁰ To be fair to the Certificate IV in Competitive Systems and Practices, most of these capabilities can be found as competency elements in various units of the qualification. Perhaps this is not the case for qualifications from other training packages.

As further BALT programs are conducted there is an opportunity for BALT to inform the debate for and against competency-based qualifications. This could be done by comparing the learning outcomes determined from the action learning reflective process with the learning outcomes determined from the competency-based assessment. Are they consistent? Do they emphasise the same things? Does one render the other redundant or are they complementary? It would also be of interest to see how amenable qualifications from other training packages are to an action learning approach. This could form the basis of an over-arching action research project.

Intra-organisation versus Inter-organisation action learning

Intra-organisation action learning programs are focused within one company or organisation. Inter-organisation action learning programs involve a number of companies and other organisations working in collaboration. The preponderance of action learning programs described in the literature tend to be intra-organisational, albeit with large organisations such as LG Electronics the teams can be made up of people from several divisions and can include suppliers and other external stakeholders²¹.

Three notable inter-organisation action learning programs are:

- National Action Learning Programme 1997-2001
- Co-Improve 2001-2004
- The Product Innovation Engineering Program 2009 – 2013

The National Action Learning Programme (NALP)²² was initiated by the Irish Management Institute, with funding from the European Commission. The program objectives were:

- To facilitate improvement of operations practice and performance in a small number of firms through collaborative action learning
- To develop an approach, of a contingent nature, to address the need for improvement of operations practice and performance which could be replicable both in Ireland and throughout Europe.

The program was facilitated by researchers from Trinity College Dublin. The first round of the program involved 20 companies in four networks. The second round involved 70 organisations in 13 networks.

Each network had a theme. The companies in the network were quite dissimilar. The authors describe an example of one network that included a developer and manufacturer of electrical systems, a provider of geophysical information services and a financial services firm. Their common objective was “adopting ‘world class’ practices in the well-established organization”. Because these firms were engaged in very different industries they initially thought they had little in common. This attitude changed as the program progressed.

The elements of the program included:

²¹ Marquadt, M. J., *Optimizing the Power of Action Learning*, 2nd Edition, p 10, Nicholas Brealey Publishing, Boston London, 2011

²² Coughlan, P., Coughlan, D., Dromgoole, T., Duff, D., Caffrey, R., Lynch, K., Rose, I., Stack, P., McGill, A., and Sheridan, P., *Effecting operational improvement through inter-organisational action learning*, *Integrated Manufacturing Systems* 13/3 [2002] 131-140

- A detailed assessment (diagnostic) of the company's current situation to identify where the company needed to take action
- Monthly presentations by each firm on their progress
- Feedback from the group on their change initiatives
- A tailored set of reading materials and targeted presentations by specialists
- One-on-one coaching to the firm
- Firm visits and business consulting

Each company in the example network achieved significant, measurable improvements in performance measures such as customer service, purchased costs and operational effectiveness. Despite the disparity in the businesses there were common lessons learnt, particularly the need to understand and respond rapidly to customer needs.

The authors report that the inter-organisational learning encouraged pragmatic managers to begin to use models, take advice from other firms, use facilitators and welcome evaluation of processes. The composition of the action learning groups:

- Helped translate academic ideas into management language
- Provided emotional support and empathy for members in implementing change
- Provided mutual education and training in how new ideas can be implemented
- Provided a setting of psychological safety to overcome the learning anxiety that creates resistance to change and paralyses action

The CO-IMPROVE program followed on from NALP. In this case there were three networks of companies in the program. Unlike the NALP program the companies in each network were in existing business relationships. Each network was built around a principal company, (the system integrator) with a number of their strategic suppliers. The term used for such a network is an extended manufacturing enterprise (EME). The three networks were centred in Denmark, Italy and the Netherlands respectively. Suppliers included companies from Sweden, Austria, and Germany. The academic partners in the program were Aalborg University (Denmark), Politecnico di Milano (Italy), University of Dublin (Ireland) and University of Twente (The Netherlands).

The objectives of CO-IMPROVE were to develop a business model, supported by a web-based software system, and action learning-based implementation guidelines to support the design, implementation and ongoing development of collaborative improvement between partners in EMEs. The project extended over three years.

Collaborative improvement between firms concerned communication between partner firms, the measurement of the process outcomes and learning transfer across organisational boundaries. The action learning approach challenged priorities and developed openness between parties, with the existing relationship between partner companies as the starting point. Benefits derived from the inter-firm collaboration included risk sharing, access to new markets and technologies, speeding products to market, pooling complementary skills, or simply optimizing overall performance and reducing costs.

The Production Innovation Engineering Program (PIEP) was facilitated by Lund University, Sweden. The program focused on the medical products industry and involved organisations from the public health care system, industry and academia. The aims were to facilitate

innovation capability and develop sustainable relations and trust, including trust between universities and business.

Participating organisations included two county councils representing the healthcare system, three medical technology companies, the engineering faculties of two universities and the faculty of social science from a third university plus the Centre for Technology in Medicine and Health.

The principle activities of the program were:

- An action learning network with a series of meetings involving all parties to feed in knowledge and set new goals for local projects.
- Local empirical research studies to coach the change process.
- Local driven innovation-fostering projects including innovations in product, organization etc.

These activities proceeded in parallel.

Each of the three medical device companies brought one innovation project to the program. These projects related to mobility devices, sterilisation equipment and anaesthesia systems. Both of the county councils also brought a project to the program; a tool for heart failure diagnosis and an IT system in healthcare.

A steering committee was formed, made up of professors, CEOs and directors from the participating organisations. The steering committee monitored and supported the project and provided top down support for the actions taken in the organisations. They also provided feedback to their home organisations on progress and outcomes of the program.

The Centre for Technology in Medicine and Health were responsible for planning and co-ordinating network meetings. Different guest lecturers were invited to introduce a topic for each meeting. The lecturer could be a practitioner with relevant experience or a researcher with interesting research results. The role of the researchers was to facilitate, challenge and inspire the group and to analyse, document and discuss learning outcomes from the meetings.

Development of trust between partners was essential. This progressed through three stages; *commitment trust, companion trust and competence trust*. Initially the other participants, particularly the medical device companies, saw the researchers as the experts who would come up with the solutions. Over time a more enlightened relationship was achieved with all partners collaborating to produce new knowledge (ie competence trust). The closer relationships developed between the partners began to transform the medical device companies from producer companies to innovative companies. They learnt to recognise the needs of current and potential users, involve users in developing products and differentiate between users' needs and purchasers' incentives to buy. (Users and purchasers are generally not one and the same in the health care sector.)

The conclusion was that action learning is suitable for enhancing innovation capability of organisations in an inter-organisational setting. However a code of conduct and contracts are essential at the start of the project for commitment of trust in such a complex setting.

The BALT programs have demonstrated the effectiveness of inter-organisation action learning. Having "fresh eyes" involved in a project is one of the advantages of the BALT

programs cited most frequently by participants. BALT has demonstrated that projects can be equally effective either where the participating companies are from disparate industries (as in NALP) or are supply chain partners (as in CO-IMPROVE).

BALT has also demonstrated that as companies build their relationships and trust by tackling action learning projects together they find other opportunities to collaborate for mutual advantage. The awarding of a \$3.7 million contract to CPT Engineering by Bell Bay Aluminium for manufacture of a new fleet of 13,000 anode rods has been attributed by both parties as a flow on effect of working together on a BALT project.²³ This work would otherwise have gone to China.

A common feature of NALP, CO-IMPROVE and PIEP is the supporting learning events eg presentations by practitioners with relevant experience or researchers with interesting research results as in PIEP. These activities ran in parallel with the projects. In BALT we have already seen the benefits of supporting networking activities such as project presentation forums, Insight tours, manufacturing forums etc. This aspect could be developed further with a series of events through the course of a program. These events would enable participating companies (in particular the senior management) to continue to engage with each other.

NALP, CO-IMPROVE and PIEP also demonstrate that inter-organisation action learning projects can be used to build bridges between industry and universities. In the BALT program a good starting point could be to selectively offer places to undergraduates in project teams. This has already been proposed. Academics and researchers could also be involved on a similar basis providing it was clearly understood by all parties that they were participating neither as experts nor as observers but as team members with no higher or lower standing than the other team members.

BALT could also consider a parallel program for students, with interdisciplinary teams of students working on projects for host companies, under the BALT banner.

The PIEP program is of particular interest because of its focus on product innovation. BALT projects to date have been focused on process or operational innovation. While this has achieved significant improvements, operational innovation will be to no avail if the company is producing the wrong products or selling to the wrong markets. BALT should consider project opportunities relating innovation in product, marketing and distribution, in addition to operational innovation.

The role of the facilitator in action learning

A good deal has been written in the literature on the action learning facilitator; their role, the qualities and qualifications they require, where to find them, how much they cost and indeed whether one is needed at all.

Reg Revans was of the view that a facilitator's role was to get the action learning set underway and, once it is operating effectively, to depart.²⁴ According to Revans, the facilitator is there merely to help break the ice and speed up the integration process. Revans

²³ Joint media release, Bell Bay Aluminium and CPT Engineering, February 17, 2014

²⁴ Revans, Op. cit, Chapter 1

believed that managers from within the organisation who already have experience in action learning could perform this role.

In particular, Revans saw no role for an external expert to guide the team. In his view “the undue intervention of experts carrying no personal responsibility for the real-life actions that bring the set together is, at best, ambiguous, in general, opinionative; and, at worst, reactionary.”

Likewise, Marquardt warns, “Experts can be detrimental to the success of problem-solving groups for a number of reasons. Although experts can provide valuable information, they can also think too much within the box – the natural tendency when one has become highly specialized in a subject area. With their superior knowledge, experts will tend to dominate the group’s discussions. Those with less expertise, in turn, will become uncomfortable in making statements or even raising questions they fear will be perceived as “dumb” by the experts.”²⁵

In respect to intrusive observers, Revans advises “...it must be remembered that interruptions by outsiders to the deep and very personal involvement of the participants in each others’ projects will be violently resented, and it is not unknown for behavioural scientists to be physically thrown out of the meeting room when incautious enough to offer professional advice to managers with real tasks to accomplish.”²⁶

Like Revans, Dixon²⁷ suggests that the ideal facilitator models the skills for a period of time then withdraws as soon as possible to allow members of the group to take over the role of facilitator. She says that this tends not to happen because on the one hand the facilitator becomes subconsciously addicted to the adulation they receive from the group and wants to stay on for more, while the group on the other hand are frightened by the prospect of being left to fend for themselves and thus urge the facilitator to stay on.

Pedler and Abbott²⁸ see facilitation as “much more than running action learning sets”. They suggest “the hard bits are setting it up well in the first place, and spreading the learning from the sets into the wider organisation or community”.

Accordingly Pedler and Abbott see three roles for the facilitator; the *accoucher*, the *set adviser* and the *organisation developer*.

- The *accoucher* plans and organises the action learning program and ensures that everything is in place for the success of the program. This includes working with senior management of the host organisation to identify; the issues to be addressed, the project champion, the project client, the membership of the team or set and the support to be provided to the set.
- The *set adviser* helps the set develop action learning skills such as presenting issues, listening, questioning, reflecting and taking action. The set adviser encourages members to support and challenge each other. The set adviser withdraws as set members grow in confidence.

²⁵ Marquardt, Op. cit, pp 60-61

²⁶ Revans, Op. cit.

²⁷ Dixon, N., (1998) *Dialogue at Work*, London: Lemos and Crane

²⁸ Pedler, M. and Abbott, C., *Facilitating action learning, a practitioner’s guide*, McGraw-Hill Open University Press, 2013

- The organisation developer works between the set and the sponsoring managers, clients and other stakeholders to promote communication, build commitment to the actions proposed by the set and promote wider organisational learning from the set projects.

Of these three roles, Pedler and Abbott contend that the first and third are the most demanding.

Marquardt²⁹ prefers the term Action Learning Coach to facilitator. Marquardt contends that a coach is essential for single-problem action learning because of the strategic benefits and high return on investment sought. According to Marquardt, while the rest of the group concentrates on the project and its outcomes, the coach focuses on the learning that is taking place. The key role of the coach is to optimise the group's ability to learn. The more the coach can improve the effectiveness of the learning the more successful the outcomes of the group's work will be. The coach uses effective questions to help group members reflect on their actions and interactions. This improves their ability to solve the current problem and builds their skills to tackle future problems. Marquardt recommends that the facilitator be formally trained and qualified in the coaching of action learning groups.

For multiple-problem action learning Marquardt sees less of a need for a skilled and experienced action learning coach because the problems presented are generally less complex.³⁰ Marquardt suggests that under these circumstances, the role of facilitator can be taken in rotation by the set members themselves.

This distinction drawn by Marquardt between the facilitation needs of single-problem and multiple-problem action learning possibly explains the divergence of opinion in the literature on the role and importance of the facilitator. Rarely do authors make it clear whether they have in mind single-problem or multiple-problem action learning when discussing the role of the facilitator.

Accepting that a facilitator is required, at least at the outset, what sort of person makes the ideal facilitator? What skills, knowledge, attitudes and beliefs do they need? Casey³¹ proposes that, first of all, the facilitator requires the characteristics of a successful teacher, namely:

- Sensitivity to people and situations
- Perception
- A quickness of mind and
- Conceptual ability, to help others conceptualise

Additional characteristics specifically required of the action learning facilitator, according to Casey, are:

- Tolerance of ambiguity
- A quality of openness and frankness

²⁹ Marquardt, Op. cit., pp 140 – 141

³⁰ Marquardt, Op. cit., p 143

³¹ Casey, D., The Emerging Role of the Set Adviser in Action Learning Programmes, Journal of European Training 5 (3) 1976

- Endless patience
- An overwhelming desire to see others learn
- Empathy.

Skills no longer required when traditional teachers or trainers become action learning facilitators are:

- Presentation skill
- Structuring skills
- The skill of preparation

Facilitators may have these skills but they will have less need to exercise them when facilitating action learning. Casey suggests that traditional teachers and trainers who pride themselves on these skills and enjoy exercising them, might find the transition to action learning facilitation something of a wrench.

On the other hand Casey advises that the skills that are required for effective facilitation are:

- Timing interventions
- Asking exceptionally good questions
- Using the language of the participants
- Selecting and applying the appropriate model to reflect processes taking place at a particular time
- Saying nothing and being invisible
- Hearing two or three processes at the same time
- Making statements truthfully.

The qualities and skills outlined by Casey are certainly required by a BALT facilitator. In addition to these the BALT facilitator needs a broad general knowledge of business and how a business works. They need to appreciate the difference between small, medium and large companies and how each operates. To achieve this the BALT facilitator should preferably have been exposed to a wide variety of workplaces and industry sectors; the wider the better. This provides the context for making comparisons and prompting effective questions. They should feel equally comfortable discussing the technical, human or economic aspects of a business. They need to be confident that they can quickly develop a reasonable grasp of any technology, having done so in the past. The BALT facilitator should be abreast of the strategies and processes that can be applied to improve business performance, while maintaining a healthy scepticism of fads that offer simplistic solutions to complex problems. They should be driven by an equal desire to get business outcomes for the business and learning outcomes for the individual participants.

The above qualities are required first at the accoucher stage when the BALT facilitator works with the senior management of the host company to help them identify the strategically important opportunity or problem that will become the subject of their action learning project. At this stage they will also be working with the prospective participants, understanding their needs and assessing their potential for development. The capabilities apply again at the set advisor stage where the facilitator needs to be able to follow the drift of discussions, ask challenging questions to test team assumptions and open up lines of thinking. Finally in the organisation developer role the facilitator needs to be able to find

their way around the organisation structure and communicate effectively with people in all roles, be they in the design department, accounting, the warehouse, the board room or the factory floor, in order to support the implementation.

The fact that a BALT program leads to the award of a nationally recognised qualification places a further demand on the BALT facilitator. If the person is to act both as facilitator and assessor they must have the qualification TAE 40110 Certificate IV in Training and Assessment. They need a thorough knowledge of the particular qualification that applies to their action learning program to firstly plan the projects and participant learning plans, and subsequently to relate what they observe back to the appropriate units, elements and performance criteria within the qualification. In addition, to deliver and assess a qualification they need to hold the particular qualification or equivalent themselves. Finally they need to understand and follow the procedures set out by the registered training organisation for planning, conducting and assessing the program³².

A program has been designed to train and develop BALT facilitators. Before describing this program it is useful to review how action learning facilitators are developed in other parts of the world. Abbott and Boydell³³ have identified three approaches:

- self learning/self development
- proprietary or private training
- a qualification officially recognised by a regulatory body

The Institute for Leadership and Management (ILM) is one such regulatory body. The ILM is the UK's largest management body. They offer industry qualifications and specialist member services. They have 35,000 manager members. They are part of the City and Guilds Group. Founded in 1878, City and Guilds work with over 10,000 centres and training providers in 80 countries around the world, offering more than 500 qualifications across 28 industries.³⁴ This suggests that their qualifications have significant credibility.

ILM currently offer two qualifications in action learning facilitation; the Level 5 Certificate and Diploma in Action Learning Facilitation. At Certificate level, there are three mandatory units which cover improving performance through action learning, reviewing own ability to facilitate and support action learning, and facilitating action learning. At Diploma level, there is an additional unit which requires learners to design and deliver 100 hours of action learning facilitation under their training provider's supervision³⁵.

Numerous private and not-for-profit providers in the UK and elsewhere are accredited to deliver programs leading to these ILM qualifications. Action Learning Associates are one such provider. They offer action learning training for individuals and organisations. They also offer virtual training (ie online) in action learning facilitation. The Centre for Action Learning Facilitation is another ILM recognised provider. In addition to the Level 5 Certificate and Diploma in Action Learning Facilitation they also offer postgraduate programs in action learning facilitation with Leeds Metropolitan University.

³² For example, Facilitator Handbook, Action Learning Institute, Cother Consulting Pty Ltd, 2012

³³ Abbott, C. and Boydell, T., Learning to be an Action Learning Facilitator: Three Approaches, Action Learning in Practice (ed Mike Pedler), Gower, 2011, Chapter 23

³⁴ <https://www.i-l-m.com/about-ilm/the-city-and-guilds-group>

³⁵ Technical specifications for ILM Level 5 Certificate and Diploma in Action Learning Facilitation (8759) Version 230812, Institute of Leadership and Management (ILM) 2012

The World Institute for Action Learning (WIAL) had its origins in the USA but now has affiliates in 20 countries around the world. WIAL is a not-for-profit organisation. They offer four levels of certification:

- Certified Action Learning Coach (CALC)
- Professional Action Learning Coach (PALC)
- Senior Action Learning Coach (SALC)
- Master Action Learning Coach (MALC)

Certification as an Action Learning Team Coach requires participation in three two-day workshops (Foundations, CALC1, CALC2) to build coaching skills in:

- action learning,
- the development and implementation of an action learning project,
- reflection and writing on action learning experiences.

In the first workshop, participants learn the theoretical and practical aspects of action learning. They experience action learning as a participant and/or coach. In the second and third workshops participants develop their skills as team coaches and get feedback on their proficiency from peers and the session leader. At various stages through the process the participant acts as action team coach and as observer. Participants must also complete a paper describing an action learning project in which they interface with the client and facilitate the project through to implementation plan stage. The project should involve a minimum of two team sessions each of at least 90 minutes duration.

A CALC with 100 hours of documented Action Learning coaching hours spanning 12 months is eligible to become a Professional Action Learning Coach (PALC). CALCs with 100 hours of documented Action Learning coaching hours spanning 2 years are eligible to become a Senior Action Learning Coach (SALC). A SALC with 500 documented hours of coaching and/or training and/or consulting in action learning is eligible to become a Master Action Learning Coach (MALC). At each of these levels there are requirements to co-lead sessions, submit supporting documentary evidence and obtain a suitably qualified sponsor to propose the candidate. There are also requirements for qualification maintenance.

In addition to action learning coach training and certification, WIAL offers consulting and training services direct to organisations. Their client base includes major multi-national corporations.

The Korean Action Learning Association (KALA) was formed in 2005 to share best practices and develop learning coaches. As of 2011 KALA has more than 700 individual members and 35 organisation members and has developed about 1,000 learning coaches.³⁶ Cho and Bong describe the introduction of action learning in two major Korean corporations.³⁷ Both companies mandated that all employees regularly participate in action learning teams. Learning coaches were managers with 12 to 15 years work experience. These learning coaches were developed by KALA. Their training included an introduction to action learning, problem solving processes and tools, and facilitation skills. Coaching and feedback was

³⁶ Cho, Y. and Bong, H-C, Action Learning for Organisation Development in South Korea, Action Learning in Practice (ed Mike Pedler), Goer, 2011, Chapter 21

³⁷ Cho and Bong, Op. cit.

provided to these new coaches as they tackled their first projects. Coaching became part of their job role. The organisations became self-sufficient.

There are two other not-for-profit organisations of international standing set up to promote action learning and support practitioners. These are the International Foundation for Action Learning (IFAL) (UK) and the Action Learning Action Research Association (ALARA) (Australia). These organisations do not issue their own certification for action learning facilitators however IFAL does provide details of member organisations that offer facilitator training and certification through ILM. The IFAL website also lists numerous member organisations and individuals available to provide action learning facilitation services.

Given this international background on facilitator training, how is it proposed to train and develop BALT facilitators? If a BALT facilitator is to act as both facilitator and assessor it is essential that they achieve a Certificate IV TAE40110, the nationally recognised qualification for trainers and assessors. The proposed program achieves these requirements. Candidates will be employees of participating companies who have already completed a BALT program and achieved a Certificate IV in Competitive Systems and Practices, thereby complying with the requirement to have the qualification they are delivering. (If they have experience facilitating Six Sigma, Kaizen or similar Lean training programs there may be scope for recognition of prior learning.) By completing the Certificate IV in Competitive Systems and Practices they will have experienced the action learning process and they will have broadened their outlook by exposure to at least one other industry. In the course of completing the TAE40110 they will have exposure to two more industries.

The candidates will be involved in all phases of the planning, delivery and assessment of a BALT program. In the course of planning the program, the candidates will carry out all planning tasks in parallel to a TAE40110 qualified facilitator. At appropriate points the candidates will meet with the qualified facilitator either face-to-face or remotely via teleconference, Skype or Facetime to compare the outcomes of their planning with those of the qualified facilitator. The candidate and the qualified facilitator will then discuss these outcomes to arrive at an agreed collective plan. In the first two projects the candidate will assist the TAE40110 qualified facilitator. To complete the demonstration of their competency they will then plan, deliver and assess the third project, with the qualified facilitator acting as mentor and assessor, participating remotely via Skype, Facetime or similar technology.

By combining facilitator development with delivery of a BALT program, there should be an overall cost saving compared to delivering each separately. It is suggested that the development process will be more rigorous than either the ILM Diploma or the CALC qualifications. Aspects of the process have already been prototyped with Bill Woodworth's involvement in the second BALT program. Although Bill undertook his TAE 40110 training independently many of the other aspects of the proposed approach were modelled successfully.

Facilitation of action learning teams by external providers is inherently expensive. The ideal size for an action learning team according to Marquardt is four to eight.³⁸ Dilworth suggests 5 to 6.³⁹ This group size is small compared to conventional class sizes but it is essential for

³⁸ Marquardt, Op. cit. p 22

³⁹ Dilworth, R., Action Learning in a Nutshell, Performance Improvement Quarterly, 1998, Volume 11, Number 1, pp. 28-43

optimum interaction. Generally the higher cost is more than offset by the business benefits that flow directly from the action learning projects.

In order for BALT to be sustainable, it is important that local facilitators are developed and ideally they will come from participating companies. However this does beg the question as to why companies would want to give up the time of valuable and talented employees to facilitate BALT programs. There needs to be a compelling imperative. Bell Bay Aluminium have shown an admirable willingness to make one of their Business Improvement Specialists (Bill Woodworth) available for this purpose. By working with suppliers on BALT projects, Bell Bay Aluminium have realised some significant cost savings. It is realistic that companies should expect such benefits if they are to continue to provide facilitators. If there were a number of such companies who wanted to host projects to improve their businesses and had qualified facilitators to facilitate the projects presumably other companies would be interested in providing the “fresh eyes” and take advantage of the learning opportunity. This suggests a model where the host company either provides a facilitator from their own number or pays for an external provider to facilitate their project. They then invite other companies to participate. These companies may be suppliers or they may be from totally unrelated industries. Experience thus far has shown that either way there are benefits.

The award of a nationally recognised qualification as an outcome of both the first and second BALT programs was highly valued by employers, according to end of program survey results. Taken overall the qualification was also valued by the participants although less so for some individuals. Where the qualification was less important the individual may have been satisfied with their current qualifications or perhaps they saw less importance in qualifications per se. Skills Tasmania quite reasonably regard the issue of qualifications as a prerequisite for funding. However the requirement to provide a qualification adds to the cost of delivery. There may be some circumstances where a company wishes to conduct an action learning project without awarding a qualification. If they have a capable internal facilitator the project could be run for minimal cash cost.

Assuming a qualification is desirable, another means of reducing the cost of qualifications would be to separate the facilitation role from the assessment role. For the Kempe Engineering George Town project Bill Woodworth facilitated the five workshops while Bob Cother sat in as observer/assessor via Facetime on an iPad. In this situation the facilitator does not need to have the full TAE 40110 qualification; possibly a “skills set” from the qualification, or perhaps not even that. Given that the observer does not have to travel to the site, the daily rate could be reduced compared to a full facilitation rate. This approach could be extended to the implementation phase. Earlier it was proposed that meetings be conducted of all program participants during the implementation phase. These meetings would take the form of multiple-project action learning sets. As Marquardt suggests, such meetings can be facilitated by the participants. Under these circumstances the observer could participate remotely, largely to gather evidence for assessment purposes.

A more radical option to reduce the facilitation cost is Self-managed Action Learning (SMAL). SMAL is action learning conducted without a facilitator. Bourner⁴⁰ describes a SMAL program with the Health Board of Ireland. This was conducted by the Management Development unit of the University of Brighton. An initial 5 day workshop was conducted with a cohort of 40 participants to develop their skills in questioning, listening, reflection, giving and receiving

⁴⁰ Bourner, T., *Self Managed Action Learning, Action Learning in Practice* (ed Mike Pedler), Gower, 2011, Chapter 10

feedback, creative problem solving, group processes and learning processes. Participants then worked in self-managing sets for a period of some four months. A facilitator was provided for the first two meetings. Sets could also call in a facilitator at other times if required. A review and evaluation workshop was conducted after four months to share learning, develop action plans and address problems. A further review and evaluation workshop was conducted after 12 months. The program ran from early 1999 to September 2003 and involved 10 cohorts and 380 managers in more than 60 action learning sets. An independent assessment of the program concluded that it was “positive and courageous in changing the culture of the Health Board”.

Bourner advocates SMAL for the following reasons:

- It is less expensive thereby enabling more people to benefit from action learning
- It is empowering for participants to accomplish action learning outcomes without the continuing help of set advisers
- It is a more authentic form of action learning ie closer to Revan’s original vision

Shurville and Rospigliosi⁴¹ describe a SMAL program that blended face-to-face and virtual action learning. The program was conducted within graduate and post-graduate courses in digital entrepreneurship at the University of Brighton. The authors report that for four of the five sets SMAL was highly motivating and integrated well with other learning. In the fifth case the set broke down due to a “charismatic learner who was visibly biased against SMAL”. The authors concluded that such breakdowns could be avoided by improved pre-assessment of participant’s readiness for SMAL and increased support during SMAL set meetings. This suggests that at least one of the self-managed sets could have benefited from some level of facilitation or coaching.

As an ideal, action learning teams or sets should be self-managing and self-sustaining. They would form spontaneously any time there is a significant business problem to be solved or business opportunity to be exploited. These would be more than just project teams or task forces but true action learning teams aiming to achieve both business outcomes and learning outcomes. Enlightened senior management would actively sponsor projects, always looking for new opportunities for action learning. Outsiders from other companies equally skilled in action learning could be brought in to provide the “fresh eyes” and challenge current practices. Action learning skills would be sufficiently widespread throughout the participating organisations that support could be provided to counsel and encourage the teams. Action learning would become a natural part of doing business. This is the vision for action learning; one that every action learning facilitator should be working towards.

There is an opportunity to introduce self-managed action learning in to the BALT program. The self-managing team are unlikely to be novices to action learning. This would be a Lean Leadership program. Participants in this program would have successfully completed a Certificate IV CSP through participation in a BALT program, and have been identified by management for further leadership development. They would be candidates for a Diploma in Competitive Systems and Practices.

⁴¹ Shurville, S. and Rospigliosi, A., Implementing blended self-managed action learning for digital entrepreneurs in higher education, *Action Learning: Research and Practice*, Vol. 6, No. 1, March 2009, 53-61

Their objective of these Lean Leaders would be to spread lessons learnt from earlier BALT projects deeper into each of the participating companies. A Lean Leadership program would involve three companies, each nominating one person to the program. The basic format of the program would be similar to the Certificate IV CSP program ie:

- Each company will host a project
- Five workshop sessions per project
- Six to nine months implementation

The team of three would be self-directing with remote mentoring and assessment via Skype, Facetime or similar. For assessment purposes the team would need to take responsibility for capturing all evidence eg butcher's paper, results of storyboards, workings on white board etc and uploading these to the server.

Whereas regular BALT projects tend to be specific to a particular process or system these would be higher-level strategic projects involving a comprehensive improvement plan for each company. Each plan would involve a series of projects to be led by the Lean Leader internally within their company. Participants would work together as a team to develop the three plans ie each person would be involved in three projects. Each individual would then be responsible for leading implementation of their plan in their company, as an internal change agent. The team would meet regularly as a cohort to review progress and share their learnings.

Virtual action learning

According to Dickinson et al, Virtual action learning (VAL) is action learning which takes place in a virtual environment via a range of enabling, interactive and collaborative communication technologies.⁴² These include video and web-based conferencing (eg Skype, Facetime, WebEx and GoToMeeting), text-only email and audio-only telephone conferencing.

According to Dickinson et al⁴³ VAL can be classified as "synchronous" or "asynchronous" according to whether the communications take place simultaneously eg as in a telephone call or sequentially eg as in a series of email exchanges. VAL can also be classified according to the communication media used; text, voice and visual. This leads to six combinations, as shown in the table overpage:

⁴² Dickenson, M., M. Pedler and J. Burgoyne. 2008. Virtual action learning. *People Management*: 14, no. 21.

⁴³ Dickenson, M., Burgoyne, J., Pedler, M. 2010: Virtual action learning: practices and challenges, *Action Learning; Research and Practice*, 7:1, 59-72

	Temporality (Timing)	
Technology Medium	Synchronous (simultaneous interaction, all participants present at once)	Asynchronous (intermittent over an extended period, not all participants present at once)
Text	Instant messaging	Email, text messaging
Audio	Live tele/audio conferencing Discussion forums Chat rooms	Audio recordings
Visual	Video/web-based conferencing	Video recordings

The authors report that in a pilot program for health services managers in remote areas of Western Australia, face-to-face was preferred to virtual working and email and teleconferencing were preferred to video-conferencing because of lack of access to and problems with the technology for video conferencing. Dickinson et al⁴⁴ stress the importance of familiarity with the technology by the facilitators and the set members. Issues can include access, connectivity and time zone differences. They suggest that VAL set members need to develop a higher level of listening skills, to sense others' feelings in the absence of non-verbal cues. Facilitation is more important in VAL, especially in the early stages to overcome the barriers of working virtually. On the other hand VAL has a number of advantages. The slower, more measured communication gives participants more time to think before asking or responding to questions. Dickinson et al suggest that of the six forms shown in the table, asynchronous email and text is the most popular. Of the available technologies, none has worked as well as email. Video/web-based conferencing while showing promise, thus far is hampered by limitations of the current technology. They conclude that readily available technologies such as phone conferencing and email have the advantage of maximising availability and minimising the need to learn to use a new technology. They also suggest that VAL is a form of action learning in its own right, with its own strengths and weaknesses. A younger generation brought up with the internet will be more likely to embrace VAL.

Hauser⁴⁵ describes how "semi-virtual" action learning is applied within a Bachelors' degree at the University of Applied Management, Germany. There are a few on-site sessions where participants meet face-to-face. Apart from that the action learning sets work and communicate virtually. Sets have a choice to work on individual projects or a common project. To date all have chosen a common project.

⁴⁴ Dickinson et al, Ibid, p 65

⁴⁵ Hauser, B., Practising virtual action learning at university, Action Learning; Research and Practice Vol. 7, No. 2. July 2010, 229-235

The outcomes of the experience have been:

- Each virtual set is different and to some extent unpredictable
- Most but not all students accept virtual meetings and typically describe the experience as “cool”
- Good quality electronic devices are essential, be they internet or teleconference. The technology needs to be affordable
- Clear, deliberate communication is essential, to avoid misunderstandings
- Clear rules and a clearly defined schedule is essential
- When people do meet face-to-face the communications seem to be more intensive as a result of the prior virtual communication experience
- Many students report that the intermittent face-to-face meetings are extremely helpful. A blend of face-to-face and virtual interaction seems to suit most participants.

Hauser describes how the virtual action learning process at the University of Applied Management developed over time. A Virtual Action Learning Community evolved. This involved facilitators and senior participants. The VAL Community met every four to six weeks face-to-face and on-line. The circle integrated people of many different backgrounds. This diversity enhanced the understanding of the dynamics of action learning. Profound questions emerged including the potential role conflict when one person acts as set facilitator, instructor and examiner. They also questioned what was required to earn credit points; a good project outcome, a good analysis irrespective of the outcome, or the quality of reflection leading to a change in personal behaviour? Finally they considered the place of action learning within a university environment. “...how does the concept of action learning with its primacy for exploration over ‘programmed learning’ fit into an environment that is designed to produce and deliver finest theory?” According to Hauser, “Apparently, action learning fulfils many needs of an applied university but it also deeply challenges traditional teaching.”⁴⁶

Convenience and cost are not necessarily the only advantages of VAL. In some respects VAL can be more effective than face-to-face action learning.⁴⁷ VAL offers ways to share learning outside the sets. This can be achieved by sharing learning with other sets via bulletin boards, posting questions to other sets, proposing new opportunities for projects, progress reports to stakeholders and sponsors etc.

Pedler et al.⁴⁸ suggest that VAL imposes additional administrative and professional demands. For the facilitator, remoteness from the workplace means that they are unlikely to know the organisation or context of a set’s project. This may make it “harder to make sense of the conflicts, contradictions and nuances of the culture”. While a full day workshop may be seen as acceptable in face-to-face action learning, a two and a half hour teleconference is about as long as most companies would see as acceptable for VAL. It is also important for participants to be alone in a quiet room during the session, to avoid distractions.

⁴⁶ Hauser, Ibid. p234

⁴⁷ Pedler, M., Hauser, B., Caulat, G., Reflections on working with virtual action learning pp92-93

⁴⁸ Pedler et al, Ibid p 89

For self-managed VAL, Pedler et al. suggest that at least one or two of the set members should have a deeper understanding of how the action learning process works.⁴⁹ They see self-managed VAL as even more challenging than face-to-face self-managed action learning. According to Pedler et al, aspects of VAL that require particular attention are:

- Contracting and commitment eg to a fixed number of meetings with a schedule set in advance.
- Effective start-up or launch
- Selection of problems and projects tackled
- Ground rules and “netiquette”
- Administrative support
- Facilitated sessions at start up and at various stages through the process
- Visible management support and participation eg on bulletin boards or webinars
- Technology – keeping it simple and ensuring it is an enabler and not a barrier.

Some components of VAL are already employed in BALT programs. Email has been used extensively between sessions and during the implementation phase for communications between team members and with the facilitator. The BALT Co-ordination Team has met some 21 times via teleconference. These meetings have been very effective. Participants use the World Wide Web extensively to research topics relevant to their projects. The Lean Action Learning website and server has been used for file sharing, particularly for large files containing video. The Action Learning Institute now has a dedicated server that will enable these possibilities to be extended to include facilities for remote upload of evidence, files for sharing, bulletin boards etc.

As described previously, for the Kempe Engineering George Town project Bill Woodworth facilitated the five workshops while Bob Cother sat in as observer/assessor via Facetime on an iPad. There were some technical problems with this. Although Kempe had a wi-fi facility they were unable to organise with their head office in Geelong to make this available in time for the project. As a result Bill and Bob had to resort to Telstra roving broadband. This service dropped out numerous times which was very frustrating. Nevertheless the potential was clearly evident and with a properly functional wi-fi connection it would be feasible for an assessor to unobtrusively observe the activities of a team, including tours of the factory etc, (providing they remembered to take the iPad). For this purpose the wi-fi connection would need to cover the entire site.

There are several advantages to this scenario. With the observer freed up from facilitating the session they are able to observe the dynamics of the team much more keenly. Proceedings can be captured on video off Facetime, to be referred back to as required. Detailed notes can be made by the observer as the session proceeds and later edited in several ways; one for the key discussion points and decisions of the team, another for the individual contributions and behaviour of each participant. This feedback can be provided to the team after the session to enhance their learning. Such detail is difficult to provide if one is both the facilitator and observer. Keeping in mind Revans negative views on obtrusive observers, keeping the observer out of the room makes them less intrusive. The remote

⁴⁹ Pedler et al, Ibid p 92

observer should only comment when invited by the team or the facilitator. Otherwise their role is to observe and record evidence for the assessment.

The disadvantage of remote observation is that details of the project are more difficult to follow for the observer, particularly discussions of physical features of equipment and processes.

Remote facilitation of a novice BALT team is unlikely to be successful. However as indicated in the previous section, remote mentoring and assessment of a self-managing BALT team made up of experienced action learners is a possibility. Remote facilitation of cohort meetings during the implementation phase of a BALT program is also a possibility.

Remote participation of team members in workshop sessions is unlikely. It is difficult to see how a BALT action learning team could operate, with each team member in a different location. Over the five days of the workshop sessions they need to be on site at the host company. A lot of time is spent by the team observing the operations under study. A lot of visual material is generated and used; diagrams and flow charts, workings on butcher's paper, storyboards, discussions around layouts etc. This would be very difficult to achieve with the team members dispersed. However the provision of a teleconferencing facility for the team to use between sessions could be an advantage, particularly between the fourth and fifth sessions when they are generally under pressure to assemble and edit their presentation. A facility such as GoToMeeting or WebEx could be used to share and discuss presentation content.

GoToMeeting or WebEx could also be used by a team to hold meetings with remote stakeholders or technical experts. In the CPT Engineering project the team consulted with Pacific Technologies, the Pacific Aluminium research and development centre. A team member was tasked to do this between sessions and report back to the team at the next session. With GoToMeeting or WebEx the entire team could have been in on the discussion, either during the session or between sessions.

Video is already used extensively in projects as a tool to study operations and identify possible improvements. Team members view the videos together during the sessions, analyse them and brainstorm improvements. An enhancement would be to share these videos with a wider alumni to obtain their ideas as well. Permission would need to be obtained from the host company to do this. Videos would be password protected to prevent public exposure. Apart from the benefit of input from a wider group of "fresh eyes", this would be a good strategy for maintaining engagement with participants from previous programs, senior management and other stakeholders.

As the number of local facilitators grows a virtual learning community should be developed, along the lines described by Hauser. This would provide a platform for facilitators and other BALT enthusiasts to share knowledge and experiences.

These are seen as the principal areas where VAL could be applied to BALT programs.

Conclusions from this literature survey

Various features of the BALT program taken individually have precedents in other programs reported in the literature. The particular way in which these are brought together as an effective model is possibly unique. BALT programs achieve effective outcomes for organisations and individuals as shown by survey outcomes and measurable project

outcomes. This suggests that the design of the program is well founded and would be of interest to those wishing to conduct similar programs in other regions in Australia and around the world. The award of a nationally recognised qualification entirely by action learning is possibly unique in the world.

There are a number of enhancements that could be made to BALT programs to further improve their effectiveness. These include:

- Introduce multiple-problem action learning into the implementation phase with participants meeting periodically as a group to compare and evaluate their experiences.
- Introduce learning logbooks and end of session storyboarding, together with more detailed surveys, to encourage more effective reflection.
- Conduct a series of supporting events through the course of a program to enable participating companies to continue to engage with each other, in particular the senior managers.
- Selectively offer places to undergraduates in BALT project teams to provide them with an industry-based learning experience and to build links between industry and universities.
- Further enhance links between industry and universities by conducting a parallel BALT program with multi-disciplinary project teams comprised entirely of students.
- Consider including academics, TAFE and secondary teachers in BALT project teams.
- Broaden the scope of BALT projects to include projects focused on product, marketing and distribution innovation.
- Conduct an over-arching action research project to compare and contrast the effectiveness of action learning reflection versus competency-based assessment in identifying and evaluating the learning outcomes of action learning projects.
- Develop more local qualified facilitators drawn from participating companies. Integrate their training and qualification with BALT programs. Establish a virtual learning community for continuing support and professional development of facilitators
- Provide virtual conferencing facilities for teams eg GoToMeeting, WebEx or teleconferencing to facilitate team meetings outside face-to-face sessions and meetings with remote stakeholders and technical experts
- Engage the wider alumni in analysing processes and brainstorming solutions by selectively sharing videos of processes under examination.
- Establish a pilot self-managing action learning program. Participants in this program would have successfully completed a Certificate IV CSP by participating in a BALT program, and have been identified by management for further leadership development. They would be candidates for a Diploma in Competitive Systems and Practices. Trial remote observation and assessment as part of this pilot program.
- Engage with organisations, industry bodies and institutions around the world that conduct similar programs, to share experiences and ideas for mutual benefit.