Applying Action Learning Principles to a Learning Session

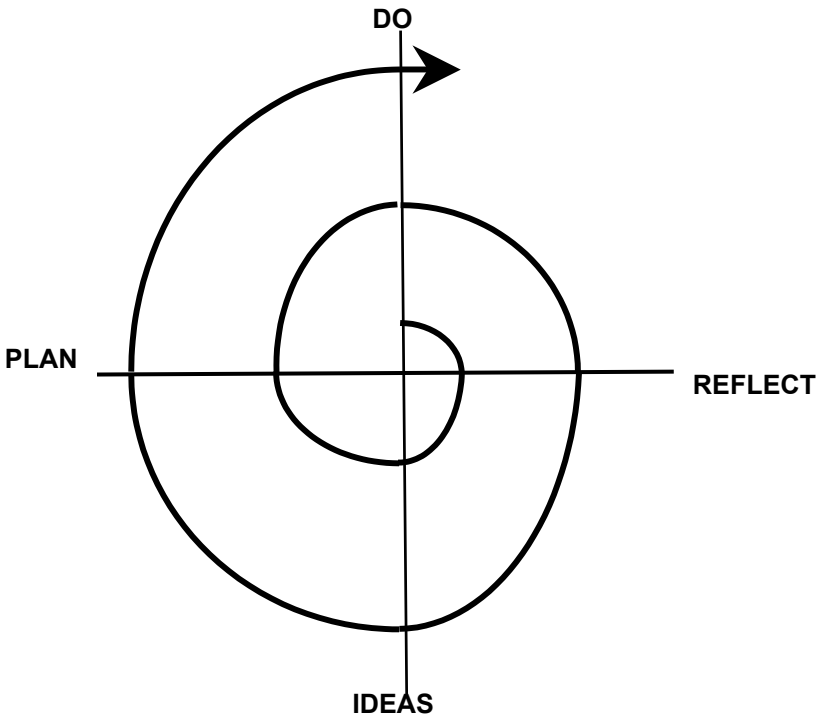
Introduction:

The Action Learning Cycle (also known as the Action Learning Spiral or ALS) provides a basic architecture for the design and delivery of any learning session or workshop.

Trainers and facilitators sometimes are uncertain in how to use the ALS to best effect. The purpose of this paper is to provide some suggestions for effective practice.

The Action Learning Spiral and its Stages:

The spiral can be represented a number of ways. Here is just one way.



The Action Learning Spiral consists of four components:- 1. Action or doing; 2. Reflection, observation, evaluation or review; 3. ideas, generalization or development of theories; and finally, 4. planning or active experimentation.

The spiral is divided vertically into "passive" on the right and "active" on the left. It is divided horizontally into "concrete" in the upper half and "abstract" in the lower half.

Kurt Lewin, who first developed this model of learning, believed that learning involves a balance between the concrete and the abstract, between the passive and the active. This balance generates tension which drives the spiral. Postponement of immediate action is essential for observation, reflection or review, whilst action is necessary to achieve purpose. The integration of these opposing but symbiotically related processes results in learning.

Kurt Lewin's work has been further developed by Professor David Kolb, whose book "Experiential Learning", (Prentice Hall,1984) has had a major impact on our understanding, particularly in relation to adult learning. "Experiential Learning" explains the theory behind the Action Learning Spiral. The

spiralling continuity of experience means that every experience both builds on something that has gone before and modifies in some way whatever comes after.

Some key points about the Action Learning Spiral:-

It does not matter where you start

Effective learning requires at least one round of the spiral to be completed

The stages of the spiral are Action, Reflection, Ideas, and Planning.

People tend to prefer one stage of the spiral, tolerate two others, and neglect the fourth.

There are individual differences in these preferences.

Skipping any stage results in ineffective learning.

Learning can be strengthened by inputs at any stage.

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Sometimes called the Action Learning Cycle (and sometimes drawn as a *circle* – which it is not), the four stages are linked in spiralling fashion.

Learning involves spiralling outward to greater and greater learning.

Lack of use of the learning results in vortexing back towards the middle. Static knowledge is never an option.

The rate of learning is a function of motivation and intelligence. There are within- and between-person differences.

Moving too rapidly around the spiral limits the absorption of learning.

Moving too slowly kills learning from lack of stimulation.

Wherever we are on the spiral represents the sum total of our learning. Everything inward from that point is what we know; everything outward is what we don't.

(i) **The Action Phase**

The *action* or *doing* phase is when some activity is actually occurring. Learning in this phase can be gained either from the *doing* or from *watching* the doing. The *doing* can be full-blown activity, a film, demonstration or a pilot project, or a small simulation or experiment. When the *action* is unplanned, then this is the first phase of the spiral; otherwise this phase can be anywhere in the spiral sequence. This phase occurs in the concrete world and separates the active and the passive.

(ii) The Reflection or Review Phase

The *reflection*, *review* or *evaluation* phase generally involves disengagement from the *doing*. This is, at least partially, an in-the-head activity, where people contemplate what it was they had just experienced, what seemed to be effective and should be retained and what might be modified. This phase occurs in the passive world , bridging the concrete and the abstract. Reflection can be conducted in two phases. The

first is to invite people to write down the major impacts the experience had on them. Do this without any discussion whatsoever. The second stage is to invite people to discuss and share their reflections.

(iii) The Ideas Phase

The *ideas* phase, also know as *generalizing*, can be either a starting point for the ALS or just another phase on the spiral. It is a starting point when the *ideas* are an act of creative or original thought, or when they are obtained from another party or information source, such as a book or a presenter. Otherwise, this phase generates its ideas from prior reflection, assimilating thoughts, and occurs in the abstract world, bridging the passive to the active. Like the *reflection* phase, the *ideas* phase too is divided into individual writing and then paired or small group discussion.

(iv) The Planning Phase

The *planning* phase, also sometimes referred to as *active experimentation*, is where the ideas from the previous phase are organized and massaged before being used. This active phase bridges the abstract world of ideas with the concrete world of action.

Cycle Times:

The Action Learning Spiral is dynamic. Standing still is not an option. Yet the dynamic nature of the spiral might be conceived in a number of different time frames.

For example, we could imagine using it in short cycles of several minutes. Imagine being confronted with a row of lit candles, never having seen a candle before. Fascinated, you reach out to touch the first flame (*action*), where you experience intense pain and a reflex action to withdraw; you associate the pain with the flame (*reflection)*, from which you generalize that flames can cause pain (*idea*). That general idea converts itself into a *plan* not to touch the remaining candle flames just to see if the experience is any different. You then move away (*action*) from the remaining candles.

From no prior knowledge, you have now "learned" that candle flames cause pain, based on one experience only and you have resolved to be careful of them in future. The whole learning experience probably took less than a couple of seconds.

One could also envisage an hourly cycle time, where 15 minutes was allocated to some action experience, 15 minutes to reflection, 15 minutes to the generation of ideas, and a further 15 minutes to planning. It is not being suggested that each phase necessarily occupy one quarter of the available time, though that may not be a bad idea.

Another cycle time is daily. Both the end of the day and the beginning of the day are suitable times for reflection, ideas and planning.

Weekly is also a common cycle time – it's no accident that most societies have a day of rest (*reflection??)*; annual cycle times , aligning with the four seasons are also common, – annual holidays and festivals.

Not only might the spiral be thought of in different time frames, cycles can be embedded with cycles. For example, a number of training topics might be addressed in one day. Each of those could be designed around the spiral architecture, whilst the whole day itself could conclude with a one hour reflection, ideas and planning session.

Building the Learning Spiral into the Session Design.

Trainers are often experts in their particular field of knowledge, knowledge that they endeavour to impart to their learners. Responsibility for learning rests with learners; the trainer's responsibility is not to provide content knowledge alone. More important is to create a set of conditions within which learners can learn. The Action Learning Spiral is that set of conditions.

Here is how they might be applied. These four different designs are examples only. Modify them to suit yourself. Two conditions only are essential: 1. Go round the spiral at least once, 2. The order of the four phases is not to be altered.

Option 1:

Create a small exercise that participants will undertake. Hence *doing*. That exercise is designed to cotain some of the key elements the session will deal with. Have the participants debrief the exercise (*reflection*), noting what worked and what did not. Then invite them to extract *ideas* from the exercise. Those ideas can then be reinforced or strengthened by an information session – the trainers expert knowledge, for example. Participants are then invited to consider how those ideas might apply (*planning*) to the exercise they conducted earlier or to their own context. The more specific the plans are the more effective they will be. (Eg who will now do what by when?). Participants are then invited to apply those plans to a new round of *doing*.

Option 2:

Invite participants to *reflect* upon their own context with respect to a particular frame of reference the trainer offers. Against that reflection, the trainer asks certain questions, generating a collection of *ideas* drawn from that reflection. Again the presenter might add to those ideas from their own expert knowledge. Participants *plan* to use that knowledge in their own context, to go and *do* it, and then to *reflect* upon how the new experience differed from the old.

Option 3:

Provide participants with some expert knowledge or information (*ideas*). Have them *plan* how they are going to use it, perhaps in an exercise in the learning setting. Go and *do* it. Then have them *reflect* upon what worked and what did not. Then invite them to generate their own ideas, drawn both from the original input and from their own experience of its application. Next invite them to *plan* the application of these assimilated ideas to their own context.

Option 4:

Invite participants to *plan* some activity that will elicit (hopefully) the learning experience sought. Conduct the activity (*doing*), then debrief it, *reflecting* on what worked and what did not. Extract from that reflection some *ideas*, which are then added to by video, guest presenter, handouts or site visit, before reentering the *planning* phase and trying it all again.