Chapter 17

Action Learning: Inspire Lasting Learning through Truly Applied Projects

Scott P. Roberts
University of Maryland, USA

Steven G. Buzinski
University of Maryland, USA

ABSTRACT

Students, and in particular those that have come to be known as members of the Net Generation, learn best when they are presented with the opportunity to engage relevant material using media which they perceive to be familiar and effective. Going beyond academic exercises, Action Learning assignments cater to the generational expectation that their actions have immediate and meaningful social implications. Through five component steps, Action Learning projects guide students through identifying, implementing, and evaluating an informed attempt to make a measurable impact on the world beyond their academic buildings. In doing so we create purposeful scholarship, move beyond basic demonstrations of learning, and enhance information encoding for future utilization.

INTRODUCTION

The fundamental aim of an instructor could be defined as having clear goals (outcomes), evidence-based approaches for achieving those goals (means), and a way to objectively measure progress towards them (assessment). The means used to guide students toward this end may vary widely, but the end itself should always be to effectively and efficiently support learning beyond the perfunctory memorization of facts and concepts. The problem we wish to address here is what happens when we restrict our scope to a back and forth exchange of knowledge, when students perform well on assessments but soon thereafter cannot reproduce this initial demonstration of expertise.

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Research in pedagogy and the cognitive sciences suggests that some approaches might be better suited than others to ultimately facilitate advanced and lasting learning. Specifically, the use of pedagogies that move student learning beyond discrete principles and towards integration and application to real-world challenges are positively correlated with information learning, memory, and recall (McDaniel & Fisher, 1991; Bjork, 1988). Action Learning, as we refer to it here, is exactly that; presenting students with an opportunity to demonstrate their learning by taking course content from the classroom and putting it to real use in campus, local, national, and even international communities. The framework described here is focused on creating high-impact, action-focused coursework that integrates contemporary learning theory with modern mechanisms of communication, outreach, and activism.

This level of engagement plays a particularly important role in motivating and inspiring a generation of students that are accustomed to immediate and unbounded access to the internet generally, and social networking technologies specifically, which transcend the traditional boundaries of information discovery and dissemination. Much has been made about the divide between the “Net Generation” (Tapscott, 2009) and previous generations of learners, with some arguments going as far as positing a fundamental shift in the basic cognition of the Net Generation, arguing that their brains are “wired” differently (Matulich, Papp, & Haytko, 2008) and therefore process information in a qualitatively unique way. There is, however, limited research supporting a profound cognitive shift beyond that based on personal observation and intuition (Jones & Healing, 2010). While compelling evidence to support such a radical difference in the basic cognitive processes of Net Generation learners is currently unavailable, there is a burgeoning field of work demonstrating that this group generally has a high level of technology use before college (Eynon, 2009), confidence in using basic computing technologies (Jones, Romanau, Cross, & Healing, 2010), preferences for internet based-access to content (Kennedy, Judd, Dalgarnot, & Waycott, 2010), and uses computers to support social and educational activities on a daily basis (Kenedy, Judd, Churchward, Gray, & Krause, 2008). These differences suggest that the Net Generation will profit both from the cognitive benefits of the Action Learning approach common to all learners and from the technology-empowered applications specific to their self-identified learning preferences.

In this chapter we first review some of the underlying theoretical and empirical support for engaging students with truly applied assignments. We then outline the essential components of an Action Learning project and present a case study from a senior-level university course. Finally, we discuss some of the challenges of implementing Action Learning coursework and the pedagogical benefits to students, instructors, and the broader campus community.

PEDAGOGICAL MODELS

Perhaps the most widely referenced model for conceptualizing gradations of learning is Bloom’s Taxonomy (1956). Bloom’s model, which Anderson made minor revisions to (Pohl, 2000), eloquently lays out a continuum of assessment. At the more basic levels a student has demonstrated learning by simply memorizing a fact (remembering) or explaining a concept (understanding). Deeper learning, however, is demonstrated when students use a concept in a novel context (applying), think critically about the validity of the concept and its application (analyzing), defend their analysis (evaluating), and ultimately act upon that analysis and evaluation to develop something meaningful (creating). The essential point here is that instructors must structure assignments and assessments that build on the core knowledge in a meaningful, productive way. Students, regardless of their generational preferences or dispositions, must be