

# ***Critical Learning in the online classroom: An action learning approach to instructor development.***

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## **Abstract**

Teaching in an online classroom is often new to university teachers which highlights the importance of training and development for faculty in on-line instruction in order to realise the promise of this burgeoning form of delivery. However, current research that examines formal training initiatives offered by universities tends to promote an 'instrumental' understanding of online facilitation and teaching. We argue that this promotes a narrow and mechanistic view, reducing successful online teaching to the mere acquisition of a set of technical competencies alongside the mastery of theoretical concepts and models of online learning. Networked learning which emphasises relational and interactional aspects of the online classroom, suggests that it is also important to recognize that teachers play a core role in helping students on their journeys to becoming critically reflective practitioners. From this perspective, facilitating learning in an online environment is not an emotion and value free task for which a set of skills can be easily learnt and later applied. Instead, it suggests the importance of dialogical approaches which pay attention to issues of power, voice, access and inclusion as well as the emotional dynamics which pervade the classroom. This then, unlike dominant forms of university training initiatives, depicts online teaching as a practice with its own ethical values and problematic issues in supporting online students' critical learning. While the argument that teaching online requires changes to conventional teaching approaches is not new, there is a dearth of research on instructors' perspectives on promoting critical learning in classroom relational dialogue. Against this background, and recognising the challenges of advancing critical pedagogies in general, this proposal explores the novel use of an action learning approach to online instructor development in the context of two management education programmes. Action learning, by emphasising learning by doing, represents one of the most commonly used forms of experiential learning. We suggest that the use of action learning sets offers novice instructors the opportunity to consider frequently taken-for-granted aspects of their practice such as the emotions and politics so crucial to promoting critical forms of learning and so facilitating students' journeys towards becoming critically reflective practitioners.

## **Keywords**

Online teaching; Instructor development; Networked learning; Critical teaching pedagogy; Action learning, Online MBA, Management education.

## **Research Background**

Preparing teachers to become online educators is essential to secure their 'buy-in', and to raise their awareness about what the AACSB International's Distance Education Task force described as 'the shifts in their teaching roles' (AACSB, 1999). The majority of instructors' training initiatives are structured to deliver a 'hands-on experience', inviting novices to collaborate in an online, collaborative setting (Ernest et al., 2013) and presenting them with the opportunity to experience positive as well as frustrating aspects embedded in online learning in a way that mirrors their future students' experience (Vaill and Testori, 2012). It is argued that the purpose of these training and professional development initiatives varies from helping teachers 'become more technologically proficient' (Fish and Wickersham, 2009, p.280) to helping gain knowledge on both pedagogical and technical aspects (see for e.g. Barker, 2003; Vaill and Testori, 2012).

However, not all institutions provide support or training prior to engagement in online classrooms (Ocak, 2011) and for those that do, training initiatives typically portray online teaching as a task, for which there exists a set

of technical skills that can be mastered and applied later, rather than a practice. Some even go on to claim that "... (the) more training teachers have, the more aware they are of their skills-gap" (González-Sanmamed et al., 2014, p.179). This concern is echoed by scholars in higher education who argue that these approaches are informed by technicist assumptions and hence reduce training to the acquisition of a set of competencies, which fail to account for the complexity, uncertainty and dilemmas often experienced by teachers (Fitzmaurice, 2010). We suggest that it is important to leverage less restrictive views of learning in order to realise the full potential of the online classroom and suggest the value of a turn to networked learning approaches.

As a pedagogical approach, networked learning has been the subject of a steady stream of research over a number of years (Hodgson, 2002; Ferreday et al., 2006; Hodgson et al., 2014). It defines online learning as learning in which information and communication technology is used to promote negotiation, collaboration and cooperation (McConnell et al., 2012) and where meaning is created through relational dialogue (Hodgson et al., 2012). As networked learning helps learners critically examine the way we work and live, Hodgson et al. (2012) argue that teachers need to pay attention to issues of power, voice, access, and inclusion. In doing so, it allows possibilities for creating 'safe' learning environments which respect diversity and promote democracy. Networked learning then constitutes an important and growing part of a literature on online management education. It contributes to our understanding of reflective and critical learning as well as the role instructors play in creating an environment that would allow for this kind of learning to occur in the online classroom e. Adopting such a critical approach to online teaching and learning resonates with critical management educators' calls for a greater focus on reflexivity (Cunliffe, 2002), on helping students to find their voices (Ellsworth, 1989) and on leveraging alternative ways of understanding the world (Cunliffe; 2002; Hay and Hodgkinson, 2008).

However, over the years, management educators have reported that introducing critical thinking into management education classrooms is often met with strong opposition (Reynolds, 1999) and might lead to students' feelings of uncertainty, discomfort, vulnerability and defensiveness (Cunliffe, 2002). In particular where a learning situation involves challenging ideas, assumptions and one's values, feelings of anxiety can be translated into feelings of uncertainty and discomfort (Antonacopoulou and Gabriel, 2001). Notably given our focus here, teachers can also experience anxiety themselves which inevitably influences their teaching practices (Vince, 2010), and this may be especially pertinent in the online classroom for a number of reasons. First, teachers' anxiety can stem from their unfamiliarity with a new learning environment which is especially relevant here given that teaching online is a new challenge for many. Second, teaching online can be stressful where faculty find themselves struggling to meet students' expectations about their presence (Bailey and Card, 2009). Third, teachers' anxiety might also be evoked by the absence of visual cues since the online environment leaves them a "bit in the dark"; not being able to see students' body language and reaction in their written texts (Conrad, 2004, p.35-36). A networked learning perspective then draws attention to the complexities and dilemmas of the online classroom which may simultaneously enable and constrain possibilities for developing critical forms of learning. While there is an agreement on the shift in online instructors' roles, questions such as 'how principles of respecting diversity and promoting democracy are practiced in online facilitation?' 'how can emotions, power and politics enable and constrain teaching/learning (Rigg & Trehan, 2004), in particular where there is no face-to-face interactions?' continue to receive less attention in online management education. Hodgson et al.'s (2016) study begins to address some of these questions, using a practical action approach they examined the practices embedded in becoming a networked learner educator with a focus on recognising the pedagogical similarities and differences between working in the physical and the online classroom spaces. Through this practice-based approach, Hodgson et al. (2016) suggest that teachers who had no experience of teaching online began to feel more comfortable with their online experiences.

Our proposal suggests that we need to enlarge current approaches to faculty training for the online classroom to include insights gleaned from both networked learning and critical management education approaches. As described by Fitzmaurice (2010), the virtues and disposition of teachers are shaped by the contextual conditions where this teaching take place. These 'internal goods', Fitzmaurice (2010) suggests, cannot be taught but are developed within the practice of teaching, in-situ. This research proposes that the use of action learning sets, which is based on the assumption that learning take place while working on real-time problems occurring in practice (Hay, 2011), provides one route which can help novice instructors to attend to critical aspects of teaching online such as dealing with anxiety and promoting diversity and democracy. In so doing, it begins to move us towards realising the full potential of the online classroom.

Action learning, according to Raelin (1997) who cites Revans (1979) as its founder, is based on a pedagogical notion that learning occurs when participants work on real-time problems occurring in their own setting. This emphasises learning that is grounded in one's own experience and directed toward self-development where participants can openly share and acknowledge ignorance, confusion and uncertainty (Willmott, 1997). Action learning sets act as forum for reflection and discussion that are facilitated by an adviser (Anderson and Thorpe, 2004). Crucially, work also suggests action learning offers much space for the exploration of social and political aspects of practice (Hay, 2011; Vince, 2004). Action learning then provides an approach which is both consistent with critical understandings of teaching and learning and teaching and learning as a practice.

## Aims and Objectives

This research proposal aims at exploring the use of action learning sets as a space to help university teachers to: (a) develop a practical understanding of their pedagogical role (Argyris and Schon, 1974), and (b) critically reflect on their practices in enacting critical, reflective learning (Carr and Kemmis, 1986), including becoming aware of the interplay of emotions and politics involved in becoming online instructors. The intention is to help novice instructors feel more comfortable with their online teaching experiences by learning from and with others and more importantly learning about themselves. A wider objective of the study is to explore how the study's findings can be used to develop our understanding of critical instruction in online management classroom. We address the following research question: How can the use of action learning sets help instructors attend to issues of power, voices, access and inclusion in constructing an environment that promotes the values of diversity and democracy?

## Proposed Research Design

This research project is at an early stage of development and contact with potential case studies is still in progress. A case study approach will be used to gain an in depth understanding of the phenomenon under investigation within its natural setting (Yin, 1994). Two UK AACSB accredited business schools are being considered for the purpose of this research. Both schools provide online management education programmes. One of the proposed schools is part of one of the leading UK new universities, and which has been acknowledged for its teaching excellence in 2015 and 2016 consecutively, and has just launched its first online MBA. The selection of cases to represent will purposefully depend on the criteria of whether they help to elucidate the research question, which according to Patton (2002), are a small sample of information-rich cases. The methodology is informed by the ethnographic approach (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995, p.1), where data will be collected through participant observation and interviews. The researchers will observe the action learning sets and follow-up interviews will be conducted with members after their meetings to gain more understanding of issues discussed. Data will be analysed using a grounded theory approach, allowing themes to emerge from the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

## Design of Action Learning Sets in Online Instructor Development Initiative

In this study, action learning sets will be designed to complement a conventional online teacher training, which aims at preparing university teachers to become online educators. Each learning set will be comprised of a group of four to six university teachers. Groups or learning sets will hold a meeting periodically to discuss issues as they arise and share their online teaching experiences. If appropriate, participants may be introduced to concepts from critical management education and critical pedagogy.

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