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'Action Learning Sets: the case for running them online'

Len Bird
Work-Based Learning Unit
Coventry Business School
L.Bird@Coventry.ac.uk

It is not difficult to see why universities are enthusiastic about exploiting online action learning. Online learning offers the prospect of delivering action learning courses to student groups previously excluded. If students don't need to meet face-to-face then the geographical limitation on student recruitment is lifted. With action learning sets online a totally virtual version of many existing personal development programmes becomes a reality. A reality that can be 'scaled-up' without the constraints imposed by the need to assemble the learners for set meetings. However, we need to be cautious: is this drive for efficiency determining pedagogy? Is the opportunity too good to miss, such that, in the rush to increase student numbers, the essence of the complex human learning process of the set is lost? In this paper I intend to address these questions by considering the theoretical case for running the action learning set process within an asynchronous online learning community.

I develop an argument for using asynchronous online computer mediated conferencing, (CMC), to facilitate the action learning set process by starting with a definition of action learning, derived from the literature, and then tracing the roots of the action learning set process back to the philosophical position of social constructionism. From this analysis the paper establishes that the key feature of action learning is the promotion of reflexivity and the social construction of knowledge through language. The paper then examines the literature on online communication to answer the question, "can an action learning set community be created via a text only CMC?" Having examined competing responses to this question the paper concludes by confronting the main challenge to the argument, - i.e the loss of co-presence, and considering the role of the online facilitator redefined as an 'online discourse analyst' rather than a face-to-face enabler.

The result of the analysis is open to challenge, although the extensive literature examined shows that language, dialogue and narrative play a major part in the action learning process and that the online medium can replicate the conditions that allows these issues to converge in the social construction of knowledge. The paper clearly demonstrates that face-to-face communication is not the only meaningful way to create knowledge and meaning, and many authors feel that the alternative – text based communication – can in fact be superior in creating the type of learning communities which are at the heart of action learning.