
Blending-in: the contribution of action learning to a masters programme in human resources in health

John Edmonstone*

Institute for International Health and Development,
Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh, UK,
Old School House, Littlethorpe, Ripon,
North Yorkshire, HG4 3LG, UK
E-mail: john.edmonstone@btinternet.com
*Corresponding author

Jean Robson

Institute for International Health and Development,
Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh, UK,
Queen Margaret University Drive,
Musselburgh, East Lothian, EH21, 6UU, UK
E-mail: jrobson@qmu.ac.uk

Abstract: This study explores the introduction of a European Union (EU) – accredited postgraduate management qualification using a blended action learning approach into a fragile cross-border setting outside the EU, based on situation analysis, client needs and the providers’ need to make effective use of available educational resources. Conventional management education has been challenged on grounds of relevance, efficacy and value. Action learning was combined with blended learning over a two-year period with excellent results, academic performance and satisfaction levels being positive, completion and progression rates exceptional and returns to the sponsors and employing organisations high. An action research methodology was adopted to enable simultaneous problem-solving and knowledge creation regarding the appropriateness and utility of action learning. Participant managers’ gained an academic qualification and through action learning they also gained added-value through personal development, became capable of independent learning, and experienced renewed social capital within their professional community.

Keywords: action learning; human resources for health; HRH; masters programme; blended learning; Bosnia-Herzegovina.

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Biographical notes: John Edmonstone is an Honorary Fellow at the Institute for International Health and Development, Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh and Director of MTDS Consultancy, Ripon. He is an experienced leadership, management and organisation development consultant with extensive experience in the public sector in the UK and internationally, working in healthcare, local government, civil service and further and higher

education. He is author or co-author of over 80 journal articles, 16 conference papers, four occasional papers, five book chapters and six books. These are *Shared Governance: Making It Happen* (2003), *The Action Learner's Toolkit* (2003), *The Facilitator's Toolkit* (2nd ed., 2003), *Clinical Leadership: A Book of Readings* (2005), *Building on the Best: An Introduction to Appreciative Inquiry in Healthcare* (2006) and *Action Learning in Healthcare: A Practical Handbook* (2011).

Jean Robson is a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for International Health and Development, Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh. She is an experienced university academic with extensive international health programme experience. She has been the programme lead for international health management and human resource management programmes since 2000 with current special interests in workforce management and development, organisation development and quality standards assurance in human resources in health. As a staff member with the UN Population Fund and World Health Organisation, she has worked in many countries in the management and workforce development field and on capacity development at country level. She has designed and delivered professional development for all elements in the healthcare workforce.

1 Introduction

The paper aims to provide an insight into the educational dynamics of an international development project which sought to contribute to strengthening national capacity for human resource management and development to meet the changing needs of the healthcare sector. The growing need for partnership working between higher education institutions, donor agencies and local administrations in order to design and deliver innovative approaches to learning is highlighted. The central theme of the paper is the masters programme in human resources for health (HRH) run in Bosnia-Herzegovina between 2007 and 2009 for mature adult learners through a blended learning approach, where action learning was used as a key learning methodology, alongside more conventional approaches.

2 Action learning and higher education

Action learning is defined for the purpose of this paper as:

“a method for individual and organisational development based upon small groups of colleagues meeting over time to tackle real problems or issues in order to get things done, reflecting and learning with and from their experience and from each other as they attempt to change things” (Edmonstone, 2003).

The key components to action learning are *work* – the ongoing role of a set member, with all the real-time issues, opportunities, and experiences which the workplace offers; the *set member* – an individual with particular work and life experiences, preferences and styles, who faces workplace challenges and who opts to be part of a peer group of people addressing similar issues and who brings to the set their context, their characteristics and the challenge of the issue they are working on; *a problem* – the issue that the set member

is working on which is salient to both the individual set member and to their organisation; *information* – knowledge acquired by set members and generated by individual search and research and from interacting with other set members; *the set* – the small and stable group of colleagues formed together into a supportive but challenging partnership and meeting over an agreed timescale to help individuals to take action on problems; *the facilitator* – an individual who sets the scene and acts as initiator, role model and catalyst for the set meetings and who is particularly active in the early days of the set., and the *learning process* – this involves observation of the issue; reflection, the formation of explanations or theories and the taking of action. Reflection typically takes place before, during and after set meetings and action takes place in the workplace. Learning is seen to be made up of two elements. The first is *programmed knowledge*, which includes all the pre-packaged information prepared for learners by experts and produced to capture what has already been learned in order to avoid learners ‘re-inventing the wheel’. Programmed knowledge also includes individual set members’ mindsets derived from their prior experience. The other element is *questioning insight* – a process of active listening, questioning and reflecting, leading to review and revision of personal experience. This supports the development of so-called ‘ambidextrous organisations’ – aligned and efficient in the management of current organisational demands, while simultaneously adaptive to changes in their environment (Tushman and O’Reilly, 1996).

Action learning and the world of higher education have long had a tense and ambiguous relationship. Outside the world of higher education, action learning has been described as both an ethos and a method (Pedler et al., 2005). It has taken on, in practice, a range of guises which Scowcroft (2005) has described as including a planned and timetabled activity interwoven with the other formal aspects of an in-house development programme (with the action learning set either ceasing at the end of the programme or continuing in a self-managed fashion for as long as benefit continues to be derived by set members); an activity introduced towards the end of a formal development programme, in anticipation that the programme’s participants would then use the set as a way of continuing their development and thus as a bridge between the potential divide between the programme and work and a discrete development activity in its own right, neither relying on nor continuing the momentum of a formal programme.

However, action learning has continued over time to interact with higher education in a number of ways although this relationship carries a continual tension and ambiguity. In the 1990s and early 2000s in particular, attention to this interface grew significantly (Gosling and Ashton, 1994; Frank, 1996a, 1996b; Naftalin, 1996; Craig and Spicer, 2006; Coghlan and Pedler, 2006; Griffiths et al., 2008; Dalrymple and Smith, 2010) and the ongoing tension has continued to be noted (Boak, 2011). There are three main areas of difficulty – resourcing action learning in a higher education context; the validation of action learning in formal higher education; and the evaluation of learning outcomes. There is considerable evidence that the switch to the use of more learner-centred experiential methods increases demands on staff time – frequently in the region of a 50% increase over the more conventional methods used in university teaching. The validation concerns focus on access to programmed knowledge and the kind and frequency of support learners must have in order for any formal programme to receive validation. Universities which are using action learning have also to adapt assessment techniques to the demands and potential offered through action learning. Since action learning is

complex, idiosyncratic and unpredictable it follows that valid and reliable measurement of learning is problematic. This article describes the practical use of action learning as a significant contribution to a blended learning approach which delivered a masters-level programme in Human Resources in Health in Bosnia-Herzegovina in 2007–2009 and also seeks to describe the learning from the experience.

3 Methodology

The research which is the subject of this paper emerged from the initial project risk analysis. The authors intended to introduce experiential, interactive and participatory pedagogy, in the form of action learning, into a setting that was ill-prepared for such contemporary approaches and was suggestive of a cohort of learners who might need intensive support and motivation to acquire the necessary skills for learning successfully in a remote cross-border context. There were special risks and uncertainties arising from this unique context – not just from the distance, the cross-border requirements and a population of learners at risk – but also a group of teachers inexperienced in the use of both action learning and a virtual learning environment.

The methodology adopted was therefore one of action research. Action research represents a juxtaposition and fusion of action and research. There are dual imperatives for action research – the creation of new knowledge and at the same time the solution to practical problems (Clark, 1972; Coghlan and Brannick, 2001). Similarly to action learning, action research uses a cycle of action and reflection with multiple iterations of the cycle. In this study action research was of the more practical type with a strong emphasis on collaborative participatory methods within a social context. There were six cycles of research with appropriate measures to ensure the authenticity and trustworthiness required of this type of research. Among the measures used were analysis of student diaries, short questionnaires targeted at students, an overall student satisfaction survey, ‘before’ and ‘after’ administration of the Honey and Mumford (2006) learning styles questionnaire, debriefing of the facilitating tutors and a survey of tutors using an open letter format.

4 The context

Following the break-up of former Yugoslavia the Yugoslav Wars of 1992–1996 led to the Dayton peace accord of 1995 and the eventual creation of the state of Bosnia-Herzegovina as a republic with a presidency composed of a member of each major ethnic group. The powers of the central government are highly limited and in everyday practice government is accomplished through two autonomous entities – the Bosnia-Herzegovina Federation and Republika Srpska. The former operates in a highly decentralised manner (based upon a system of local cantons), while the latter is a much more centralised government. Both entities inherited common healthcare problems – a combination of overspecialised healthcare and a poor distribution of health professionals concentrated in a few locations. The latter were poorly paid, poorly motivated, poorly managed, inadequately trained and often working to poor quality standards. Part of the challenge, therefore, was to introduce and run a fully EU-accredited management qualification into a fragile cross-border setting out with the EU, with the qualitatively

different risks and challenges compared to the delivery of 'normal' academic programmes within a single EU country.

In 2006, the Canadian Society for International Health (CSIH) and Queen's University (QU), Toronto signed a contract with the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) to work collaboratively on the design and implementation of the Balkans Primary Health Care Policy Project (BPHCPP). In Bosnia-Herzegovina, the BPHCPP focused on human resource planning and regulation and anticipated that this would enable an improved capacity for development of human resource planning; improved understanding of educational reforms required in the health sector to meet EU standards; increased institutional capacity to educate professionals in human resource planning and management for primary healthcare and improved capacity for regulation, accountability and quality.

The capacity-building objectives were deemed to be appropriate to an in-country and EU-recognised masters level programme in HRH. The Centre for Health Planning and Management (CHPM) at the University of Keele in the UK had been created in 1986 and had introduced the first health-only MBA programme in Europe the following year. Subsequently, CHPM developed an extensive suite of postgraduate programmes (at masters and Diploma levels) and activity, including the development of management capacity in the healthcare systems of developing countries, funded via the UK's Department for International Development, the World Health Organisation, the World Bank and a range of other international development consortia. In 1997, a specialist master's in HRH was introduced oriented towards the international health market. By 2007, therefore, Keele had a deserved international reputation as a centre of excellence for HRH capacity building with specialised academic and research staff. As an autonomous centre within Keele University CHPM had a significant degree of flexibility, could respond to external institutional requests for services and technical assistance and had extensive experience of international collaboration. It had been recognised by both CHPM and BPHCPP teams at the outset that it was desirable to partner with Bosnia-Herzegovina academic institutions for long-term sustainability. To this end, preliminary discussions were held with higher education institutions in Sarajevo (Bosnia-Herzegovina Federation) and Banja Luka (Republika Srpska). However, the interest by both potential partners was muted, and neither was ready to proceed quickly enough against the desirable timescale with a collaborative venture of this kind. The BPHCPP therefore instructed Keele to proceed without the institutional collaboration in the first instance.

A major aspect of the critique of traditional formal management education programmes is that they risk failing their clients by offerings which are either irrelevant or ineffective (Edmonstone, 2011c) and which fail to develop competence and capability. The use of experiential, interactive and participatory learning methods is seen as an antidote to this tendency and action learning has deep roots within experiential learning, where the cycle of action learning proximates closely with the stages of the Kolb learning cycle (Kolb, 1984) based on two polarities of learning and covering four different learning styles. The first polarity relates to 'concrete experience' versus 'abstract conceptualisation'. Concrete experience involves experience *with* something – an experience that is unique and cannot be transferred in any other way other than telling someone where to go and what to do to undergo the same experience. Abstract conceptualisation involves having knowledge *about* something – knowledge which can

be expressed in language and so easily transferred. The second polarity relates to 'reflective observation' versus 'active experimentation'. Reflective observation involves the internal processing or generation of knowledge by the processes of observing, focusing and reflecting. Active experimentation involves the external processing or generation of knowledge by means of experimenting and acting. According to Kolb, these two polarities allow four different learning styles – divergent, assimilative, convergent and accomodative. Kolb reports that most managers and professionals learn and work primarily in the assimilative, convergent and accomodative styles and that divergent learning seems to be relatively absent in most professional education – and does not become manifest in most jobs either. A recent evaluation study of action learning (De Haan and De Ridder, 2006) concluded that action learning addressed the divergent learning style more than any other and that divergent learning was particularly conducive to periods and places of uncertainty, ambiguity and change, when the 'normal' ways of learning do not always apply.

Learning which provides learners with generalised knowledge and skills generally leaves the problem of transferring that learning from the education programme to the workplace almost entirely to the learner themselves. Learners typically experience difficulty in applying learning in their local work situations where there are few rewards (and perhaps even some penalties) for trying-out something new or different. The result is that action in the workplace tends to come to a halt – this is often described as the learning transfer problem.

In the case of action learning the learning is typically focused on improving personal or organisational effectiveness, with the result that the learner and the organisation see it as much more relevant and therefore easier to apply. It gives them in particular the pay-offs they seek and this success, in turn, increases their enthusiasm for learning in this manner. Action learning was therefore to be a major part of the blended learning approach adopted for this programme. Action learning has become one of healthcare management education's most powerful tools in recent times (Edmonstone, 2011a).

5 The programme

It was agreed that the eight participants (four each from the Bosnia-Herzegovina Federation and Republika Srpska) who were mature adult students would remain in full-time employment but be registered as Keele University part-time postgraduate students. The teaching would use a blended learning approach with taught modules delivered by Keele staff and associates, Keele e-learning support and access to Keele learning resources. The programme aimed to provide participants with the specialist knowledge and skills in the areas of human resource policy-making, planning and management which were in demand through the CIDA-funded BPHCPP. The content was adapted largely from the existing Keele masters programme in HRH for international students being offered on a full-time basis on the Keele campus. The content conformed to the specialist business and management standards as required by the UK's academic Quality Assurance Agency, but also conformed to the specialist content for management of the Commission on the Accreditation of Healthcare Management Education (CAHME) and the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) both of which accredit international management programmes. The programme was modular in design in order to make progression simpler and more manageable, and was

delivered over a two-year period from September, 2007 to September, 2009 in the format of a series of six taught modules (workforce policy and strategy, workforce planning, leading change, workforce management, workforce mobilisation and project management) each of 20M level credits (120 academic credits) and a research project in the field of human resources (60 academic credits).

6 Action learning within the programme

As previously identified, the key components of action learning include a real problem or issue; a small set of designated learners with whom to share and collaborate; opportunities to review and reflect together constructively, and a facilitator to help the action learning set gain and maintain traction and independent learning. Different contexts or purposes for using action learning have created variations in the application of this common process and in this particular setting we used ‘Revans’ classical principles’ (RCP) (Pedler et al., 2005) as the agreed variant. Module assignments posed real concrete tasks that required the learner to experiment, collaborate with other learners, reflect critically on experience, draw conclusions and report their learning. Learners were expected to draw on the programmed (specialist subject) knowledge from the blended learning environment and in particular the virtual learning platform of WebCT.

Students were allocated to an action learning set according to their geographical location (Banja Luka or Sarajevo), and stayed with this set for the entire two-year period of the programme. Work-based assignments were set as action learning tasks for each module, and the set were expected to meet as needed over the following six to eight weeks in order to prepare their assignment using action learning principles. Each set had a locally-appointed facilitator whose job was to help the set gain the necessary initial traction and maintain momentum. Neither set members nor facilitators had previous experience of action learning. Set members sometimes collaborated on one shared task or selected their own preferred task from a ‘menu’. Sets met for approximately 10–15 hours per module but this represented only a small proportion of the learning effort by each set member as the sets tended to work on the basis of distributed tasks per individual. One inevitable source of tension within the group was this distribution of tasks and the difficulty of some set members in meeting deadlines consistently.

The absence of prior experience and the difficulties of meaningfully modelling action learning ensured that sets encountered problems with the process fairly early on, despite having set their own ground-rules. The initial ground-rules were not particularly helpful for establishing a learner-centred and, experiential approach, but when invoked later certainly helped learners to resume traction in the set. The setting (and revisiting) of ground-rules was one of the first opportunities for these learners to assume some control over their own learning. This tension between ‘letting go’ by the teachers, and the assumption of more control by the learners in this context became a constant renegotiation between the participants. This is an example of unintended role conflict (Toms et al., 2011) and exemplifies Black et al.’s (2004) assertion that the newer the innovation, the more ‘political’ the role boundary and then the more difficult the sharing of practice. There is not an ideal status for which to aim, but the facilitators and the teaching team sought to foster sensitively the capability to learn independently. In this programme, the support available to facilitators and set members alike had to be

increased imaginatively for a safe and comfortable environment in which to learn. This was done by creating opportunities for communication and responding quickly to queries within and outwith set meetings. Eventually, discussion boards on WebCT were created to encourage dialogue.

Action learning requires the facilitator to assume new and unfamiliar roles. Both set facilitators had different styles of teaching which although largely facilitative were not overtly experiential. Experiential learning requires skill in promoting reflectivity through 'questioning insight' based on the action phase in the cycle. This skill is not easy to acquire, and required continual support to the facilitators, plus formative exercises with the students to engage with the process of reflection. In the early stages of action learning, students expected their set facilitator to be the source of the 'right' answer, and both facilitators experienced difficulty in appreciating their new role. Much time had to be spent developing participants' ability to ask questions and to challenge constructively. While some action learning practitioners may suggest that it is not necessary to teach reflective practices, in this case it was imperative to create a reflective environment but also to develop specific reflective habits.

Using standard qualitative evaluation techniques, the study attempted to characterise the participant experience and perceptions of action learning in terms of both process and outcomes. The use of action learning was evaluated in a variety of ways, including short questionnaires, analysis of student diaries, and from an overall satisfaction survey. More significantly, the tutors engaged the participants in frequent discourse/conversations as part of the action research process. The facilitators were also surveyed in an open letter format for their perceptions and reactions. Standardised pre/post intervention measures were not used, with the exception of the Honey and Mumford (2006) learning styles questionnaire which indicated a shift of participants' learning styles towards more reflective and active learning [i.e., towards a more divergent style, as predicated by De Haan and De Ridder (2006)].

Ensuring rigour and validity is always problematic in qualitative research and participant checks and peer debriefing were used consistently to authenticate responses and to establish confidence in the results. Student-teacher experience and the opinions of the utility and effectiveness of action learning in this setting varied only slightly within and between sets, although the small size of the sets prevented meaningful statistical analysis. There was a pervasive and positive conclusion that action learning had made a major contribution to learning by providing a safe and supportive learning environment and by encouraging independent and empowered learners. There was also evidence that action learning practices subsequently embedded into some local healthcare organisations as a result of participants' enthusiasm for their further use.

Distance presented immediate and continuing challenges to the delivery of the programme and in the provision of ongoing support to students and facilitators. From the start the availability of a virtual learning platform afforded effective and efficient means of communication, support and information retrieval for students and staff, but the technology remained underused relative to its potential. Both teachers and learners maintained a preference for face-to-face communication throughout. The introduction of classic action learning (RCP) coincided with an observable reduction in technology use. It was clear that teacher competences and style mediated and constrained the use of technology-supported learning. Teaching style was the sole source of dissatisfaction for the students. The preferred learning style of some students may have negatively influenced their readiness to use online learning and all preferred practically-focused

learning. Overall the students showed a distinct preference for social and verbal learning and readily accepted action learning from the start.

Integrating action learning into the academic context presented challenges. The blended learning environment allowed the institution to change how the programme was resourced. Senior academic time could be substituted by mid-level and technical staff time, although the switch to more learner-centred instruction meant that total staff full-time equivalent (FTE) increased. Assessment strategies and formats carried over from conventional academic programmes were not suitable for incorporating learning through action learning. Changes to assessment included factoring-in collaborative working, group marks and reflective activity. The switch to learner-centred experiential instruction requires re-validation of courses and a re-evaluation of university teachers' roles and development. At the institutional level it could be demonstrated that this blended approach was cost-effective and appears to be a sustainable model for programme delivery.

7 Programme outcomes

Student satisfaction has typically been linked to the strengths of academic programmes, in terms of good student retention and low attrition. Student satisfaction with the individual modules was high, and on a Likert scale of 0 (highly negative) to 5 (highly positive) was well above the 3.5 level which indicates a need for remedial action regarding the teaching of the modules. A standardised student satisfaction survey developed for post-graduate use was used to measure student satisfaction with the entire blended programme, and the satisfaction levels were exceptionally high. The scores show that student performance was good throughout the entire programme. The progression rate was 100% and no student had to repeat any module. No students withdrew from the two-year programme, giving a 0% attrition rate, and a 100% completion rate. The completion rate measures the proportion of students completing within the anticipated time frame from the start of the programme.

Academic performance is, however, only one conventional way of measuring learning. Evaluators also need to see if learning transfers back to the workplace in the form of changed behaviours and new practices. Interviews were therefore held with the current employers of programme students to establish if they had observed these new practices and behaviours being applied. Most employers affirmed that they had seen some transfer of skills, but the degree of transfer remained impossible to verify. Employers were generally satisfied with their employees' performance, and some had high expectations of application of new skills after programme completion. Excellent feedback also came from the project sponsors who also agreed that there was evidence that programme graduates were using their new skills and knowledge. However, this was a partial picture. Since other more objective data on work performance were not available, the students themselves were asked for empirical examples of the skills and knowledge that they had been able to apply themselves. The student response rate was only 60%, and 40% of those responding students self-reported that they had not yet been able to use any of the skills and knowledge in their current jobs. There was therefore clearly a difference in perception between the students and their employers on this

matter. However, there is no comparative data from similar programmes to give any significant comparison (Robson, 2009).

8 Conclusions

The blended learning approach, which included action learning, was a design which appeared to work well in this context. Despite the innovative nature (or perhaps because of the innovative approaches) students engaged well and actively with the programme. There was no attrition, and progression was excellent and better than predicted. Student grades were higher than expected, and this was maintained throughout the taught modules. In comparison with the campus-based and full-time CHPM programmes run at Keele, the performance indicators were much better for the Bosnia-Herzegovina programme. Feedback to students on their performance was treated as a high priority, and feedback was timely, detailed and personal. The small number of students obviously facilitated this. Student satisfaction with all aspects of the programme was high.

8.1 Programme design

There was also significant learning derived from the experience of designing, developing and delivering the programme. It was found to be quite possible to integrate action learning into an academic programme, using a blended learning design, and as such it sat successfully alongside traditional face-to-face classroom and online virtual learning. The action learning set facilitators were higher education academics drawn from a more traditional and didactic teaching mode and found some difficulty in adapting to the more supportive and influencing role which being a set facilitator demanded. Adequate preparation and continuing support is clearly required for individuals making this transition and this takes time and resourcing. The concrete experience and supported experimentation of facilitating sets certainly helped the facilitators to become much more learner-centred, but while prior experience of action learning is not necessarily a precondition for set facilitation, an understanding of experiential learning principles, an awareness of personal learning and teaching styles and practice in reflection and questioning all make the transition to the facilitator role much easier. At the heart of the set meetings are the twin activities of support and challenge. Support (or emotional warmth) cannot simply be 'engineered' and takes time to build, although the facilitator and set members can accelerate the process. An appropriate degree of support is often needed before any real challenge can be acceptable. Too much challenge, especially too early in the set's life, can be experienced by set members as stressful and counter-productive. Balancing support and challenge is crucial and helps the learning process. The role of facilitator in a blended learning environment has been described as a combination of enabler of learning and trusted inquisitor (Thornton and Yoong, 2011) and this study certainly lends credence to that analysis.

8.2 Student experience

The students themselves experienced some difficulty in learning to listen, reflect and review and this may reflect a common problem for healthcare leaders and managers, where:

“Our learnt instinct is to troubleshoot and fix things – in essence to break down the ambiguity, resolve any paradox, achieve more certainty and agreement and move into the simple system zone” [Plsek and Greenhalgh, (2004), p.627].

Explaining a problem to other set members in sufficient depth as to be helpful, allowing questioning and reflection and the exploration of new ideas – all of these take time and involve set members slowing-down. This can be a liberating experience for set members but can be such a contrast to the world of work that there is a danger of trying to change the tempo of the set to match that of the work environment, and this has to be resisted. For some set members, the ability to reflect may be undeveloped, so that when they attempt it they may feel extremely awkward – like a right-handed person trying to sign their name with their left hand. It clearly takes time and practice to unlock the ability to reflect. However, the students response to working with action learning was extremely positive and suggests that there were no major cross-border or cross-cultural barriers at work. As Revans (1998, p.144), the progenitor of action learning said:

“The concept of action learning teaches participants to act themselves into a new way of thinking, rather than think themselves into a new way of acting.”

Working in action learning sets with a facilitator offered just-in-time advice and coaching and mentoring support and thus reduced reliance on asynchronous feedback mechanisms and contributed to the creation of a learning support network. While this was not discretely quantifiable, it was recognisable as the bonding mechanism seen in descriptions of social capital in both sets and larger communities (Pedler and Attwood, 2011).

8.3 Employer engagement

While much of the success of action learning relates to the immediacy of the problems being addressed to the individual set member or the set as a whole, in this example employer engagement with the programme was weak and this may have adversely impacted upon the quality and amount of learning transfer and personal growth. It adds weight to the importance of early work with employers to ensure an adequate conducive context or ‘structure of welcome’ (Edmonstone, 2011b) which typically involves the local system taking a strategic approach to the setting-up of the sets and linking them to other relevant activities and networks; sets being made fully aware of the wider context within which they are working, including how their organisations work, who and what they need to influence and how best to do this; influential people (champions or stakeholders) within the wider system who take a close and supportive interest (either by design or adoption) in what sets are doing and help them, where appropriate, to grapple with issues, and proper account being taken of national policies and issues. Likewise, Olsson et al. (2010) have highlighted the importance of early time and effort being devoted to trust-building across individuals and organisations and emphasise the significance of such factors as support from senior management, the modelling of openness and the need to agree, at the outset, codes of conduct or rules of engagement. However, even without this early engagement, the tutors could see that action learning gained traction and enabled learning. The question remains – to what extent did this failure to engage early with employers reduce the impact on individual learning and on the transfer of learning to the workplace?

8.4 Problem focus

The use of action learning added value to the learning process by creating a safe and trusting 'holding framework' (Attwood et al., 2003) which provides an ongoing and self-perpetuating source of strength and support (O'Hara et al., 1996). The minimal structure provided by the set (chiefly through the establishment of agreed ground-rules) provides a powerful means of containing set member's anxiety (Linklater and Kellner, 2008). By the end of the programme a strong learning support network based on the sets (by this time self-managing) had emerged and some participants had also set up their own sets within their own organisations in order to address local management problems. However unfamiliar the process might have been, the focus on real and relevant work problems through action learning contributed to the cross-border translocation of the approach and gave learning relevance and reality that it might not otherwise have had.

8.5 Validation

Many of the previous difficulties of relating action learning to higher education have centred on validation, largely around the assessed outcomes of a programme (Frank, 1996a, 1996b). Validation criteria for conventional postgraduate programmes typically experience difficulty in accommodating student-controlled outcomes and where assessment often involves peer assessment and collaborative work – all of which are features of action learning. The programme embodied a shared responsibility for assessing outcomes between the faculty and the students – all drawn from pre-set module specifications and on the basis of short projects of six to eight weeks duration and with assessed reports submitted as assignments. Thus, by integrating action learning processes and the work of the sets into a more conventional assessment framework it became feasible to assess academic performance using more conventional assessment criteria, and at regular intervals to indicate or ensure satisfactory progression.

8.6 Post-conflict issues

Barriers between the political entities in this deeply-divided and fragile environment were eroded. Deep divisions, distrust and lingering post-trauma stress still existed within and between both the Bosnia-Herzegovina Federation and Republika Srpska but the action learning process itself fostered trust and reciprocity across the student group as a direct (although unintended) consequence of using action learning over the extended two-year period of the programme.

Although the student numbers involved in this programme were small, it offers a valuable example of the use of action learning in the context of a masters programme in HRH which provided a range of foreseen and unforeseen benefits to students, facilitators and (perhaps less successfully) to employers. It indicates that, despite the obvious tension between action learning and conventional higher education, it is possible to bring the two together successfully in a blended fashion.

8.7 Building capacity through blended action learning

The overarching goal for the international development efforts in Bosnia-Herzegovina has been to build the capacity of the governments to delivery seriously-improved health,

education and social services in their populations. This required the development of individual managers' competences and capabilities (Fraser and Greenhalgh, 2001), but also a widespread reform of government institutions and sector reform. There has been a strong push within Europe to make sure that formal management education becomes more relevant to the needs of its clientele through the introduction of experiential, learner-centred and participatory methods. Moreover, there is a growing realisation that while more conventional management education excels at developing individual competence – what leaders and managers are able to do, in terms of their knowledge, skills and attitudes – it does not help to develop personal capacity or the continuing ability to perform appropriate leadership and management actions – the extent to which individual learners are able to cope with changing future circumstances and are capable of further development in adapting to such changes, generating new knowledge and continuing to improve their performance (Edmonstone, 2011c, Fraser and Greenhalgh, 2001). Action learning has been described as both ethos and method and this has been confirmed through this project, although in practice action learning has evolved in no small part as a reaction to the perceived ineffectiveness of conventional academic management education. The limited but growing literature available on action learning in the higher education setting indicates that there is still a high degree of resistance to action learning in higher education institutions, based on issues of resource, cost and validation. The unique setting for this programme, including as it did cross-border higher education complexities, the transfer of educational innovation into new cultures and the pedagogical risks attached to distance learning for mature adults makes it unlikely that this experiment could be closely replicated by other management educators. Moreover, the research methodology adopted in the study has meant that wider generalisations are neither possible nor would be considered valid by the majority of researchers. However, the authors can justifiably conclude that this blended action learning approach to Human Resource management education is effective in delivering a wide range of learning outcomes transcending academic qualifications and professional competences; is inclusive of personal growth and development; is socially empowering; is efficient in terms of resource mobilisation and offers a sustainable and replicable model for development partners and training institutions involved in cross-border education at postgraduate level.

8.8 Implications for human resource development

Although there may be some scepticism over whether providing a single definition of human resource development (HRD) is either feasible or practical (Abdullah, 2009), two such definitions almost a decade apart do indeed exemplify significant parallels. Chalofsky (1992, p.176) describes HRD as “The study and practice of increasing the learning capacity of individuals, groups and organisations through the development and application of learning-based interventions for the purpose of optimising human and organisational growth and effectiveness.”

On the other hand, Kelly (2001, p.54) suggests HRD is “A framework for the expansion of human capital within an organisation through the development of both the organisation and the individual to achieve performance improvement.”

Both definitions emphasise HRD as the integrated use of education and training, career and organisation development efforts to improve individual, group and organisational effectiveness.

The implications for HRD from this study would seem to be that action learning can indeed work effectively as part of a blended learning design in a management qualification programme and that neither academics nor consultants have anything to fear by exploring such common ground in this way. In particular, more peer-based and collaborative assessment of learning outcomes can feature as part of more conventional assessment frameworks. While academic staff may experience some initial difficulty in operating in such a non-didactic mode, this can be overcome through adequate preparation and the provision of support to those making this transition. It is also clear that action learning fosters significant bonding between set members and is therefore very powerful in developing social capital. This has particular relevance in fractured societies and in post-conflict situations. Action learning appears to be especially relevant to the development not just of competence, but also of personal capacity. Finally, prior work in employing organisations to create a 'structure of welcome' may often be necessary and this will need to be factored into investment of resources, in addition to time spent on set facilitation.

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