
CMS 2005 Stream: Psychoanalytic Thought and the Critical Management Project

Russ Vince
Professor of Organizational Behaviour and HRM
The Business School, University of Hull,
Hull HU6 7RX, U.K.

Tel: +44(0)1842-465624
R.Vince@hull.ac.uk

Introduction

One reason for studying management and organization from a critical perspective is to gain an understanding of power, control and inequality rather than efficiency, effectiveness and profit (Fournier and Grey, 2000). Critical analysis of the ideas and norms that inform management and organization within any given context should uncover alternatives that can then be applied back into that context as critique. The ‘wisdom’ (Watson, 2001) of critique is that it broadens knowledge about the nature of normative orders, calls established assumptions into question, and creates further options for political action and inaction within otherwise constrained relations of power.

One reason for studying management and organization from a systems psychodynamic perspective is to uncover the complexity of relations that are mobilised by human emotions, to show how publicly displayed emotions reflect power relations, and how the interplay between emotion and power creates surprising, self-limiting, unexpected, liberating, uncomfortable, interesting, and unwanted structures for action. Systems psychodynamics (see, for example: Neumann, 1999; Gould, Stapley and Stein, 2001) is not concerned with understanding personal emotions (whether this involves being reintroduced to early experiences, developing ‘self-awareness’ or acquiring ‘emotional intelligence’), but with discovering what collective emotions might reveal about an organization as a system in context (Armstrong, 2004). Emotions, both conscious and unconscious, which are individually felt and collectively produced and performed, interweave with political problems (for example, that the management of consensus is likely to require control).
The connection between systems psychodynamic theory and critical management studies lies in the contribution both might make to understanding how the manipulation of individual and collective identity structures power within organizations, and makes individuals at all levels accomplices to the maintenance of this power (Kersten, 2001). There are inevitably tensions that will be part of any attempt to integrate psychoanalytic thought and critical management studies. However, my claim in this paper is that these disparate theoretical approaches compliment each other in ways that are helpful to understanding how emotions and politics collide in everyday processes of management, as well as recognising the organizational dynamics and power relations that are constructed from such collision. In summary, the analytical frame in this paper brings together systems psychodynamics (what collective emotions might reveal about a system in context) with a perspective that seeks to create options for political action in constrained relations of power. Such an approach invites the researcher to study ‘political relatedness’ (Sievers, 2001) within organizations (the interplay between collective emotions and organizational politics/dynamics).

The focus of my exploration of political relatedness is located generally within Senior Managers’ attempts to learn about leadership and organization, and specifically within the context of a leadership programme devised and run by the National Leadership and Innovation Agency for Healthcare (NLIAH)\(^1\) in Wales, U.K. I was invited to develop and to lead the Action Learning component of the ‘Leading Performance’ programme sponsored by NLIAH. The overall aim of this programme was: ‘to help participants to lead significant performance improvement both today and tomorrow by being a catalyst for reviewing and enhancing their leadership ability’ (CHLW, 2002). The programme was designed as a strategy to support the development of ‘aspiring Chief Executives’ in the Health Service in Wales. The structure of the action learning part of the programme was ten workshops (one day each) over a period of one year. My agreement with the NLIAH staff member leading the programme (as well as with the participants in the programme) was that my contribution would be to research action learning within this context as well as facilitating the ‘Action Learning Set’.

Senior Health Service Managers often have complicated and demanding roles that are characterized by bewildering job-descriptions, high expectations, self-imposed public and moral responsibilities, and long hours. Action learning was seen as one way of reflecting on the demands of senior managers’ jobs, as an environment of mutual support, shared learning and knowledge generation. Managers bring many ideas, emotions, relations and politics into an action learning set. Here I argue that the acknowledgement of this personal and institutional emotional complexity makes it possible to perceive and to engage with power relations that were previously ignored. My overall aim was to investigate the ways in which political relatedness is (re)created within and outside of action learning sets. This information contributes to our knowledge about the politics and emotions that are mobilised within action learning sets, as well as how this knowledge can be applied back into the method as

---

\(^1\) The NLIAH was formerly known as the Centre for Health Leadership, Wales (CHLW)
critique. Such critique is useful in supporting a shift of emphasis in the approach, from trying to justify the impact of action learning in an organization, towards understanding the impact of organization on action learning (Vince, 2004). This shift is important if we are to understand better the ways in which learning processes might be transformed ‘from a divisive technology of social control into a collective means of emancipation’ (Willmott, 1997: 175).

In this paper I highlight two organizational dynamics generated through action learning, which help to understand how emotions and politics interweave in everyday processes of management and leadership within the Health Service in Wales. First, action learning performed an expected function of mobilising individuals’ ‘learning-in-action’. Through membership of a learning group or ‘set’, individuals were able to develop strategic actions for both leadership and learning, which could be both tested and transformed in practice. This is consistent with and reflects traditional notions of action learning as the experience of ‘learning by discussion of real issues with colleagues, taking action and reflection on action’ (Revans, 1983). Methods from systems psychodynamic group work (group relations) were used to link reflections on experience and unconscious organizational dynamics. Participants learned how individual and collective emotions are projected into and influence the learning set, as well as how emotions provide opportunities, clues and interpretations that inform a critique of experience.

Second, the analysis of the data suggested that action learning could be constrained by an organizational dynamic that I am calling ‘learning inaction’. Learning inaction refers to participants’ unconscious knowledge or fantasies about when it is emotionally and politically expedient to refrain from action, when to avoid collective action, and the organizational dynamics that underpin a failure to act. Analysis of ‘learning inaction’ generated insights about the impact of organization on action learning, as well as revealing some of the emotions and politics that underpin managers’ actions within their roles. These two organizational dynamics form the basis of further discussion of critical action learning. The remaining sections of this paper are structured as follows. I discuss some of the existing knowledge and ways of thinking about systems psychodynamics and critical action learning, with a particular focus on three papers on critical action learning that have been published recently. I provide the reader with a description of my approach to collecting, managing and analysing the data from the NLIAH action learning sets. This is followed by two examples from the research and an analysis of three key categories. In the final section of the paper I discuss the interpretations I have made from the research and I outline my conclusions about the impact of systems psychodynamic thinking and critical management studies on action learning.

**Systems Psychodynamics and Critical Action Learning**

*Systems Psychodynamics*

Systems psychodynamics (SP) is a specific area of thinking in management and organization studies that is linked to the psychoanalytic study of groups
and organizations (Obholzer and Vega Roberts, 1994; Neumann and Hirschhorn, 1999; Gould et al, 2001). SP thinking highlights the links between three domains of experience - the rational, the political and the irrational, in order to provide one way of explaining organizational life (Hirschhorn and Barnett, 1993). Organizations are recognised as emotional places, where fantasies and desires generate unintended consequences even for the best laid plans. Emotion work is understood both as an external display of feelings used in an attempt to manage or control social situations, and as part of a continuous process of coping with the internal conflicts and contradictions that are integral to organizational roles. Such contradictions arise both from the everyday creativity and frustration of interaction with and through others, and also from an inner world, a world of primitive passion and ambivalence that is as repressed as it is communicated.

The primary assumption of SP theory is that there is something that can be called unconscious, which is to say mental activity of which we are not aware, a realm beyond the grasp of knowing. In addition, the unconscious can be understood as mental territory to which dangerous and/or painful ideas may be consigned through repression or other defensive mechanisms, and also as a source of resistances to certain ideas and emotions (Gabriel and Griffiths, 2002). Even where convincing reasons and explanations are given, unconscious factors may be at play, and psychoanalytic approaches tend to see rationalization as a prominent defensive mechanism used to avoid difficult emotions. It does not take a particularly in-depth analysis of organizational experience to come to the conclusion that there is much in organizational life that is ‘beyond the grasp of knowing’, or that the organizational dynamics produced within (human) networks of action constitute more than the sum of their individual parts. The idea that groups are more than the sum of the individuals that belong to them suggests that there are other ‘dynamics’ that will unknowingly impact on and influence behaviour within and outside of a group. SP is also concerned therefore with ways in which unconscious processes contribute to social irrationality, for example, how the idealisation of a group can lead to its destruction. Any system is prone to self-defeating activity, driven by unconscious and unacknowledged fantasies.

The very notion of unconscious mental activity continues to be contentious for many people, and ‘unconscious’ is not a common or necessarily welcome word in the vocabulary of either management academics or practitioners. (Other words that fall into this category include fantasy, repression, primitive and defensive mechanism). Attempts to bring a psychoanalytic perspective into thinking and teaching about organizational behaviour and into management education have not proved popular, despite some excellent examples (Gabriel, 1999). Although consultancy work from this perspective is more accepted (Neumann, Kellner and Dawson-Shepherd, 1997; Huffington et al, 2004) it does not provide the prescriptive quick-fix that is favoured by managers who are understandably eager to see immediate and manageable returns on their investments in learning and change.

One illustration of the unconscious at work is in managers’ relationship to learning within organizations. Most managers think that learn is ‘a good thing’
if it helps individuals to improve their practice and thereby assists organizational performance. When I refer to (e.g.) psychoanalytic defensive mechanisms (using concepts like repression, projection and regression) and link these to learning and organizing, I am raising the possibility that there are also unconscious processes that impact on learning. Managers, either as individuals or within groups, do not set out to stop learning in organizations but they do manage to limit and to undermine it, and especially to try to mobilise learning processes in the service of greater control:

‘It is not the case that cynical managers, acrimonious groups and defensive organizations discourage learning. Far from it. What they do is to encourage a kind of learning that promotes defensive attitudes, conservatism and destruction of all new ideas as potentially threatening and subversive’ (Gabriel and Griffiths, 2002: 215).

Learning is not only concerned with the conscious construction of processes for improvement, whether individual or strategic. An interest in unconscious processes that may be related to such construction raises the additional idea – that learning is connected to political processes and power relations, at an individual, group and organizational level.

Understood in this way, systems psychodynamics has much in common with perspectives that encourage continuous critique of the conventional and the habitual, and seek to create new versions of ‘the way we do things here’. SP is aligned to critical perspectives on organizational experience that underline the value of ‘practical reflexivity’ (Cunliffe and Easterby-Smith, 2004): tacit, practical forms of knowledge questioning and exploring about how identities and realities (I would also add fantasies) are constructed, as well as how such knowledge can be used to ‘unsettle conventional practices’ and provide opportunities for the organization of reflection and learning. There is emphasis both within critical management studies and within systems psychodynamics on collective, relational and social activity, as well as understanding the ways in which interpretations and actions are made and remade, taken and avoided, within the context of political opportunities, constraints and dynamics. SP and CMS both focus on reflecting and learning within and from lived experience, on the creation and the restriction of knowledge, action and inaction. One of the ways in which the lived experience of managers is given voice and translated into action has been through ‘action learning’.

*Action Learning*

Action Learning remains a popular and enduring approach within management education and development. The two key assumptions that inform the approach are first, that people in leadership/management roles learn best from reflecting on their own experiences (rather than being taught about management). Such reflection is active and persistent – what the inventor of Action Learning referred to as continuous ‘ordeal by practice’ (Revans, 1982). Second, that learning occurs in the company of others – ‘comrades in adversity’ and ‘by discussion of real issues with colleagues, taking action and reflection on action’ (Revans 1982: 720). Action Learning
can therefore be understood as ‘learning-in-action’, an attempt to link personal
and collective processes of reflection to individuals’ actions. The approach
aims to move beyond solving immediate problems to focus on real, complex
organizational issues, which are not amenable to expert solutions. Action
learning is based on the premise that learning cannot take place without
action (Marquardt, 2004).

The notion of working with *comrades in adversity* is a key emotional and
political prescription in action learning. The phrase captures what is positive in
togetherness; it suggests connection with trusted others who can help
individuals to free themselves from the trouble that is part of the experience
and enactment of an organizational role. Of course, they often do. However,
organizations are complicated places and managers, even trusted friends,
sometimes have to compete for resources, apply for the same senior
positions, or represent the survival or progress of this part of the organization
over that one. The emotions and politics mobilised by attempts to learn and to
organize can be complex, difficult to understand, and at times overwhelming.
Such attempts are complicated by political decisions, alliances and strategic
choices; by fantasies and interpretations of the behaviour and motives of
others; by fears and anxieties; and by individuals’ desire to control or to avoid
the situations they face.

Broadly speaking, there are three distinct approaches to action learning. The
*Traditional* approach is individually focused. Action learning helps the
individual to find ways to learn ‘about oneself by resolving a work-focused
project, and reflecting on that action – and on oneself – in the company of
others similarly engaged’ (Weinstein, 2002: 6). The *Business Driven* approach
is aligned to notions of performance and productivity. Action Learning is seen
to make a contribution to business success by ensuring that ‘organizational
and individual learning is always greater than the rate of change’ (Boshyk,
2002: 39). On the surface, the emphasis of this approach is a shift in the
individual orientation of Action Learning towards its strategic contribution.
However, the business-driven approach retains an individual focus, since it is
linked to the actions of Human Resource professionals, and to the political
support of other key players, especially the Chief Executive. The focal point of
action learning has been on: individual development within a role (traditional),
or the development initiatives of individuals with an HR role (traditional and
business driven), or the senior individuals who legitimise learning initiatives
(business driven). In both of these approaches learning is concerned with the
knowledge and behaviour of significant individuals, and the links between
changes in knowledge/behaviour and changes in practice.

*Critical Action Learning*

The term ‘critical action learning’ was coined by Hugh Willmott (1994 and
1997) in order to conceptualise and to illustrate how critical thinking could be
applied to learning. In general terms, reflection and learning (from a critical
perspective) are both organizing processes that might transform control into
emancipation. *Critical* action learning emphasises a process of reflection on
the adequacy and value of conventional wisdom, linked to learning as a
relational activity through which identity and autonomy are constructed (Willmott, 1997). It is noticeable that there has been a surge in interest recently in the further exploration and explanation of critical action learning (Pedler, 2002; Anderson and Thorpe, 2004; Rigg and Trehan, 2004; Nicolini et al. 2004). This interest may come from a growing disquiet among some commentators and practitioners of action learning that the increased popularity and use of this approach over the past few years means that action learning may itself be a part of the ‘technology of social control’ that underpins learning and development policy and strategy within many organizations. I discuss three papers published in 2004 to reveal some of the current issues and recent thinking about critical action learning, and to provide a specific conceptual context for my own study of critical action learning from a systems psychodynamic perspective.

In the first of these papers, the focus is less on developing critical action learning and more on what the authors see as the benefits to individuals of ‘critical reflection on practice and how their underlying assumptions are formed and changed’ (Anderson and Thorpe, 2004). The emphasis in this paper is on how individuals’ development links to organizing processes. The authors argue that action learning should place an equal emphasis on personal learning and development and on the solution of an important organizational problem. Their specific interpretation of a critical element to action learning involves both theoretical and practical developments. Their approach is informed by three ‘critical epistemologies’: critical social theory, postmodernism and critical realism. In practice, the introduction of learning set members to these theories ‘prepares’ them for ‘insightful questioning’, and clarifies that lived experience within a learning set involves using language as a metaphorical device to shape conceptions of organizational life. The authors claim that their approach is a critical shift in traditional approaches to action learning because the ‘problem’ is not seen as belonging to the individual within an organization, but rather concerns the ways in which individuals organize and how this might restrict as well as offer individuals opportunities for learning, both in terms of the language and action that is available. The outcome of action learning that is implied in this paper has a relational (and therefore collective) focus, that the ‘long term result… may be a change in the way that managers engage with the various communities in which they practice’ (Anderson and Thorpe, 2004).

The emphasis of the second paper is to try to answer a specific question concerning how the comparatively abstract ideas of critical theory can be mobilised in the process of understanding and changing interpersonal and institutional practices (Rigg and Trehan, 2004). The authors identify what they see as the ‘core facets’ of critical action learning, which are a focus on ‘emotion, power and diversity’. The intent in this paper is to show how action learning sets are environments within which the emotions, politics and social power relations that are integral to organizing can be raised and (potentially) transformed. The authors claim a ‘performatve benefit’ from critical action learning for individuals as well as for the learning set (as a sub-system of an organization or group of organizations). Learning sets are seen as diverse and specific identity groups, where identity is shaped and defined both through
social power relations (e.g. race and gender dynamics) and by organizing processes (e.g. engagement and/or avoidance of difference and diversity). However, they also point out that ‘there is no inevitable flow between individual transformatory learning and critical practice at an organizational or societal level’ (Rigg and Trehan, 2004).

A particular focus in this paper is on the emotions that are mobilised in action learning sets, and how critical reflection on individual and collective emotion may help individuals in their struggle to make sense of the contradictions of experience and understanding that are integral to managerial roles:

‘The dynamics of learning sets – their processes of organizing, often provoke emotions. Attending to and making sense of these is a rich source of experiential learning about organizational behaviour... The process of critical reflection provides language and concepts which help people acknowledge and make sense of feelings they may have long carried, but ignored, for example over tensions or contradictions they experience’ (Rigg and Trehan, 2004: 162).

Acknowledging the emotional experience of attempts to learn within a learning set encourages members of the set to question not only their own behaviour and practice, but also to analyse collective emotional dynamics as a way of accessing and understanding characteristic power relations, as well as how these might promote and/or limit learning.

Another recent attempt to integrate action learning and critical reflection provides an example of how action learning, as an organizing process, can reveal, engage with and reproduce the various power relations that surround attempts to learn (Nicolini et al, 2004). The authors’ intervention linked action learning sets and whole-system change conferences. It was designed in order to explore how reflection can be a stable and self-sustaining feature of organizing. They focused on the problem of addressing ‘the power conditions that would allow the result of reflection to be implemented to produce organizational effects’. Their project, with middle managers in a UK Health Authority, emphasised two levels on which reflection and learning can be organized and addressed. First, in addition to creating Reflection Action Learning Sets (RALS) for individual managers to work together on ongoing changes in their organization, they also built in the ability to mobilise dialogue between sets. They call this interaction between sets ‘a structure that reflects’, since it was aimed at helping changes to take root in the organization by encouraging RALS to focus collectively on making a difference within and to the organization. Second, this organizing structure of reflection provided the basis from which to engage with key decision makers within three ‘whole-system change conferences’. They refer to this as ‘a structure that connects’, a space where the outputs of reflective practices could be communicated and aired in the presence of senior managers, and thereby linked to power conditions that might support the implementation of the results of reflection.

The authors’ thoughts on this experience highlight important dynamics and conclusions for ‘critical’ action-based approaches. They utilised action
learning as it is often employed, in order to emphasise learning from authentic work-based issues. However, the authors also tried to situate action learning overtly in the context of authentic work-based power relations, by making sure that there was a dialogue between sets as well as within them, and by acknowledging that there is an impact on organizational dynamics when action learning sets are brought together into ‘a structure that reflects’. The importance of this structure in terms of the relationship between learning and politics (power relations) within the organization was emphasised when most of the key decision makers in the organization did not turn up to the second large change conference. The authors realised that their intervention was itself a mirror of the organizational dynamics that they were attempting to challenge. It was built on an assumption that other organizational members, not directly involved in RALS were also part of a learning experience. They conclude: ‘herein, lies a powerful practical lesson. Designing organizational reflection activities and promoting them in such a way that exempts the sponsors from being part of the reflective practices, deprives them of the experience of learning, and exposes a paradox of reflection being promoted at one level and denied at another. Inevitably, this will have practical repercussions and will be played out by the participants as they pick up and enact this inner contradiction’ (Nicolini et al, 2004). The paper shows how an intervention to create collective reflection and learning colluded with organizational assumptions about learning that inhibited organizational reflective practices. As with the previous paper (Rigg and Trehan, 2004), the paper by Nicolini et al raises questions about organizational and managerial power conditions and relations. However, it also connects these to the power relations that management educators themselves either bring or mobilise within their attempts to connect learning and organizing.

These examples of ‘critical action learning’ are all welcome additions to the literature on action learning, extending it beyond the usual confines of a reflective group and into collective and critical reflection, as well as linking collective reflection with emotion and power and the organizational dynamics they create.

To summarise these papers: critical thinking informs insightful questioning on the links between individuals development and organizing processes (Anderson and Thorpe, 2004). A critical perspective, through a focus on emotion, power and identity, generates the understanding that action learning sets are identity groups as well as learning groups. Critical reflection from this perspective provides the language from which people can make sense of emotions, both individual and collective (Rigg and Trehan, 2004). Critical reflection and action is an attempt to reveal the power conditions that would allow the results of reflection to be implemented to produce organizational effects. Action learning is inevitably part of producing power conditions (Nicolini et al, 2004). In this paper I am seeking to add a different but connected discussion of critical action learning. My focus is on the way in which political relatedness is generated in Action Learning Sets: how emotions and politics combine to construct the group experience, how this reflects and reconstructs power relations, and the (largely unconscious) contradictions of learning and not-learning that are generated.
Research Approach and Results

My approach in this research was interpretive, based on the assumption that knowledge is created and understood from the point of view of individuals’ feelings and thoughts within a social and political context. Such knowledge is both conscious and unconscious, representing both individuals’ experience and organizational dynamics. The research design was therefore concerned with capturing the *particularity of knowledge in context*. All the managers involved were participants on the ‘Leading Performance’ programme sponsored by NLIAH. ‘Leading Performance’ is a management education intervention intended to improve managers’ performance and to enhance their leadership perceptions and abilities. Managers’ experiences of action learning over time were collected from two Learning Sets from the first and second ‘Leading Performance’ groups (eighteen managers in total). The programme was selective, and based on the identification of individuals who were seen as potential future health service chief executives. The Action Learning Set was the final part of a twenty-four month programme of activities. My role was as a facilitator to both of the Action Learning Sets and I recorded the issues, problems and actions relating to each individual manager from both Sets within a research journal. In addition, the journal also contains my notes of the reflections on group and organizational dynamics that were voiced during the set meeting days.

Each Action Learning Set day was structured in four parts (reflecting four ongoing research questions):

- *Crossing the boundary* (how can each individual make the transition from being in a ‘work’ mentality to being in a learning group mentality?)
- *The group dynamics* (what group issues, processes and dynamics are having an impact on the group today and why?)
- *Review of actions* (what has each individual done since the last set meeting to further develop the individual/ organizational issues being addressed?)
- *The Action Learning Set* (How do individuals want to focus on their ongoing work issues/ problems within the group today?)

The data from the journal was transformed into sixteen ‘vignettes’ that represented ‘rich descriptions’ of managers learning over time and through action, as well as the group and organizational dynamics that were part of managers’ experience of learning. The internal validity of this research is based on building a clear and adequate representation of managers’ experience within two Action Learning Sets over a two year period. The external validity of the study is not based on the idea that the results apply beyond the specific situation investigated. However, the emotional experience of learning within an Action Learning Set and the knowledge within and about the organization that is generated from this learning process is seen as providing a significant and convincing example of organizational behaviour and action within the Health Service in Wales (UK).
Discussion

For the purposes of this paper, I worked with the data in two ways. First, I undertook an analysis of all sixteen vignettes to identify categories that I could then reapply back into the data. My specific interest in this data was in the extent to which it could illustrate the impact of organization on action learning. This process gathered examples that were common to many of the managers involved. I found that these reflected two general categories, which I call ‘learning-in-action’ and ‘learning inaction’. Second, I have chosen two examples from the vignettes, which capture and communicate the aspects of managers’ experience of action learning that I particularly want to illustrate.

The sixteen vignettes, in addition to being representations of individuals’ experience and group dynamics, are parts of a systemic jigsaw. In terms of the impact of organization on action learning, there are three categories of organizational dynamics that were integral to managerial experience as Health Service Directors/ Senior Managers. These were: comparison and contrast (individual and organizational); ‘defining position’ (lack of role clarity until faced with authority relations); and, management as a compromise in the face of an inability to change.

Comparison and Contrast

A persistent method employed by this group of managers was to make comparisons and contrasts – to emphasize otherness. Other individuals were better managers than me; or I did not match an ideal of ‘manager’ that I applied within my everyday work; or other parts of the organization are bad/good whereas our part of the organization is not; or the problem is in other organizations, not mine. For example:

(Illustrative quotes to be added here)

Defining Position

Lack of clarity within managerial roles was a common experience for this group of Health Service managers. This was associated with the frenzied and overwhelming nature of their experience within a role, as well as difficulties in understanding and defining their position in relation to others, especially the Chief Executive. It was difficult at times to see whether their choices in terms of problems and issues to bring into the action learning process were about the desire for action or the desire for inaction. For example:

(Illustrative quotes to be added here)

Management and change

This group of managers was beset by feelings of frustration and disappointment. Things can’t be changed, no matter how hard I try; I am on
trial, in the spotlight, being judged; I feel like an idiot. It was as if management was experienced as a compromise in the face of an inability to change, a process that keeps things going rather than changes them. For example:

(Illustrative quotes to be added here)

These three categories provide insights into political relatedness within health services – the specific character of individual’s emotions in the face of experience; the collective emotions that are produced by relations; and the organizational politics and dynamics that link relations to structures. Within this environment, which was designed to create/contain learning, two organizational dynamics were created: ‘learning-in-action’ and ‘learning inaction’. I provide two examples from the vignettes to illustrate further these ideas.

Example One:

Stephen is Director of Nursing. The theme of Stephen’s learning in the Set is the development of his authority in his role and his ability to engage openly in organizational issues and conflicts. In an early Set meeting he asks: ‘how do I manage to do a good job?’ He knows that there are difficult issues that involve him in challenging the views of his line manager (the Chief Executive) but he fears raising these issues. He says: ‘I don’t mind challenging people on my own footing’. He says that he finds it difficult to challenge people who he perceives have ‘more intellectual ability’ than him. Stephen knows that he willingly gives up on his own authority and defers to her authority. He decides that he will take this issue back to the CE. At the next Set meeting he says that he was pleased to have spoken with his CE and his perception has changed. His CE told him that ‘he shouldn’t interpret her position as a defining position’. At a later meeting of the Learning Set, Stephen tells the Set members that he is disappointed because he did not get a promotion that he applied for and ‘really wanted’. The feedback he received from his CE was that he needed to develop ‘a sense of presence’ in his current role, to ‘improve my personal impact and in getting my message across’.

Stephen responds well to action learning, both at a practical and an emotional level. Working within the Set has allowed Stephen to transform gradually the way he experiences and is experienced at work. Both within the Learning Set and at work, he has moved away from ‘fear of being seen to be incapable’ and he has grown in authority within the Set and within his work role. His energy and commitment to the Learning Set provides continuity, a desire to learn, and leadership in the group. Stephen’s experience is typical of a successful encounter with action learning. His experience is learning-in-action; the result of struggle with the emotions and politics that are part of his working life, and reflected on these with his peers and over time. However, Stephen and all the other members of his Set are part of a process that is ‘beyond the grasp of knowing’.
Example Two:

Sue is General Manager, Child and Family Services. Sue is having a hard time. She is going through an ‘impossible to manage’ divorce and she knows that this is having an impact on her work role. She says: ‘I have to avoid emotions that undermine me and my role... I have to shut myself off’. Sue is detached within the Learning Set. She does not want to talk about her work issues and the other Set members have agreed that she does not have to bring work problems or issues to the Set until she is ready to. In one of the sessions she does bring an issue that she would like to talk through. The problem concerns her responsibility for a group of ‘community paediatricians’ who are ‘impossible to manage’. She talked about this issue in such a way as to get all the other set members to ask her questions and to make suggestions, which she would then counter by saying (e.g.) ‘oh... I have tried that one, it didn’t work’. The other Set members try even harder to find the right question to ask or suggestion to make, and they take in the chaotic feelings that are calmly being given to them.

There are times in a Learning Set where questioning (however insightful it might be) serves to reinforce a problem or issue. Sue was unconsciously encouraging the other Set members both to interview her and to go round in circles with/for her. When Set members were asked to say what were their emotions listening to and engaging with Sue, they said that they felt: ‘confusion’, ‘irritation’, ‘anger’ and ‘frustration’. They felt ‘worked up’ and ‘churned up’ inside themselves from their attempts to be supportive, to find a practical step forward in a situation that was ‘impossible to manage’. Sue and the group are caught up in a dance, one where it is difficult to tell who is leading who. Is it Sue who is manipulating the group in her distress, or is the group manipulating Sue with their kind and thoughtful concern for her ‘problem’? The answer to this question is both, and it is this contradictory dynamic that characterises ‘learning inaction’.

Throughout the Set meetings, feelings arose that all group members knew about but were reluctant to voice out loud. (For example, emotions relating to differences of attendance and commitment to ‘being here’; emotions mobilized by differences between ‘core’ and peripheral membership; anger and frustration about having to learn; fear and anxiety about the possible loss of the Set, etc.). The more that these emotions remained unacknowledged, the bigger the impact they had on the Set. They became more intense and therefore more necessary to avoid. At times, particular emotions would become associated with the behaviour of an individual or a sub-section of the group, who would be encouraged by the group to be the representative for those emotions. As such inter-personal processes were repeated they started to organize the group, and thereby to organize the limitations on learning and action.
Conclusion

(Dear Reader: The deadline for the submission of this paper has arrived and this concluding section remains unfinished. I have therefore only provided you with a sketch of my concluding section. For a later version of this paper please email me after the conference.)

The idea mobilized in the term action learning is that taking ‘action’ is the key to learning (learning by doing). However, individuals also refrain from action…

Psychoanalytically informed, ‘critical’ action learning is concerned with BOTH learning-in-action and learning inaction. The first implies an interest in moving beyond insightful ‘questioning’ by set members and towards the notion of the ‘organization-in-the-mind’. The emotions that connect to political relations within an organization can be included in individual and group awareness of learning-in-action. The second is that all such groups whose aim is to combine learning and the strategic development of a managerial role are likely to mobilize as much inaction as they do action. To separate ‘action learning’ from ‘learning inaction’ is to deny an aspect of the power relations that are built into the ideas and policies that have given rise to AL. Calling it ‘action learning’ unconsciously excludes refraining from action, failing to act and ignoring other possible actions. Analysis of learning inaction involves reflection on the relationship between emotion and power, on political relatedness.

Pinpoint and summarize the unconscious (group) dynamics that contribute to political relatedness within this context.

Discuss some of the questions of power that can be applied here to show how an analysis of political relatedness can surface power relations in learning processes – thereby making them available for interpretation. For example:

1. What do actors do/ refrain from doing; achieve/ fail to achieve; what might they have done/ but didn’t?
2. How is power connected to constraint/ enablement in specific social interaction?
3. How do people routinely construct, maintain, change and transform their relations of power?

This perspective reinforces the need to consider the impact of organization on action learning as well as the more traditional approach that looks for the impact of action learning on the organization.
References


