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**To cite this article:** Chandana Sanyal, Mary Hartog & Julie Haddock-Millar (07 Oct 2024): Action learning in higher education: reflections on facilitating AL in leadership development programmes, Action Learning: Research and Practice, DOI: [10.1080/14767333.2024.2409574](https://doi.org/10.1080/14767333.2024.2409574)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767333.2024.2409574>



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Published online: 07 Oct 2024.



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# Action learning in higher education: reflections on facilitating AL in leadership development programmes

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## ABSTRACT

This account of practice offers reflections and insights on facilitating Action Learning (AL) in Leadership Programmes within the Higher Education context. The account shares our reflections and key observations as practitioner academics, facilitating AL Sets within three higher education leadership programmes. We draw on our knowledge and expertise as facilitators of learning and development in the AL and leadership space. Our reflections have highlighted two key themes in our facilitation experience. First, the autonomy of learning and the significance of AL participants' voice. Second, creating a shift from task-focus to people-focus through the use of metaphor and visualisation as a means of enquiry. This account will be of relevance to practitioner and academics engaged in leadership development and those involved in the facilitation of AL who may consider adopting AL as a part of a managerial leadership programme.


## KEYWORDS

Leadership development, action learning, facilitation, reflective learning

## Introduction

Action Learning (AL) is widely used and integrated with Higher Education (HE) programmes to support personal and professional development, enable reflective practice and harness participants' work experience in achieving their qualifications (Brook and Pedler 2020). Cho and Egan (2023) have identified AL in the context of higher education as an action-orientated approach to Human Resources Development and organisational impact. Due to the growth of practice-based education, HE Business Schools have adopted AL to enhance the pedagogy of postgraduate and post-experience level programmes (Csillag and Hidegh 2021; Milano, Lawless, and Eades 2015).

In this account of practice, we have reflected on our experience as AL facilitators across three leadership programmes delivered within a United Kingdom (UK) HE Institution between 2016 and 2024. The first is a nine-month postgraduate leadership development programme commissioned by an English National Mental Health Trust with the aim of improving the leadership capacity of mid-level managers. The programme consists of six dedicated study days incorporating content on managing and leading people and

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change, service improvement, performance management, team development and personal and leadership development, and a series of four facilitated AL sessions. The second is a Senior Leaders Apprenticeship Programme delivered in line with the UK Apprenticeship standards, aimed at developing reflective and evidence-based leaders of the future; this programme spans over two years and consists of six modules, and an identity reconstruction portfolio and a dissertation. The module topics are leadership identity, collaborating with customers, leading the entrepreneurial organisation, growing the organisation, creating value through innovation and a business transformation project; each of these topics is supported by two facilitated AL sessions, alongside the taught element of the modules. The third and the most recent programme is an Advanced Diploma in Management Practice for managers in the National Health Ambulance Service; this is a twelve-month programme with two AL sessions with a specific focus on developing and implementing a work-based Quality Improvement Project. The AL sessions have been integrated within these programmes as an approach specifically for developing managers (Revans, 1980). The AL sets are facilitated using AL principles and methodology, supporting learners, applying the core skills of questioning and reflection in a work-based context (Pedler 2011). Our role in the AL sessions is to facilitate small groups of six to eight AL participants to enable learning and change in individuals, teams and organisations. Our role is broader than an advisor and more encompassing than the role of a coach (Sanyal 2024; Sanyal et al. 2021).

With a view to contributing to this Special Issue to celebrate 20 years of the publication of the journal, we have explored our AL facilitation journey. Alongside our reflections, we also look back at developments in the thinking and practice of AL within higher education programmes. Two key themes have emerged from our practice: first, autonomy of learning and the significance of the AL participants' voice and, second, creating a shift from task-focus to people-focus through the use of metaphor and visualisation as a means of enquiry.

### **Theme 1 – autonomy of learning and the AL participant's voice**

The integration of AL in our leadership programmes has enabled participants to take responsibility for exploring their own understanding of key leadership concepts, relate the theory to their current work context and their roles as leaders and managers. Within the Mental Health Trust Programme, the AL participants addressed their 'messy' problem or a challenge in their workplace. These are typically complex issues and participants were frequently uncertain about the best way to find a solution. So, the emphasis was on practice-based learning in which AL was used to support participants to engage in supportive, challenging dialogue and thinking. We wanted to create a space where participants felt accepted, respected and supported. This is referred to by Knowles as the psychological climate (Knowles 1980). As facilitators, we offered a safe and confidential forum to enable participants to contribute fully, facilitating freedom of expression. We encouraged the use of open as well as Socratic styles of questioning to support the AL participants gain a deeper understanding and develop new insights into their management practices. We encouraged participants to take responsibility for their own learning and understand what it means to be ready for learning in the context of adult learning (Knowles 1980). The intention was to support participants' personal and professional development, in addition to enhancing organisational impact.

More recently, in facilitating AL sessions within the Senior Leaders Apprenticeship Programme, we have deployed AL to support the participants through their assessment tasks.

In each module there are three related work-based assignments in the form of mini-projects; the project being the vehicle for learning and development. What is different about this programme for us as facilitators is that we do not necessarily teach on the programme and thus have not designed or delivered the modules themselves. The reason this split came about was because not all tutors on the programme had experience of AL facilitation and thus a dedicated team of experienced facilitators were called upon to facilitate this aspect of the programme. Hence, as AL facilitators, we do not have responsibility for the module assessment. This has changed the dynamic within the AL space; we have experienced a real sense of freedom to explore with the AL participants their questions and the challenges they are facing without having detailed knowledge of the module content and assessment criteria. Some of the modules were completely out of our immediate field of expertise, such as entrepreneurship in organisations. Thus, we found ourselves in a place of not knowing, and therefore on a more equal footing with the AL participants.

Similarly, on the NHS Ambulance Programme, we had a limited understanding of the organisation's Quality Improvement principles and project aims which was the focus of the AL sessions. By setting out our expectations and acknowledging that we were learners too, this further helped to create a safe space for the group to work in, enabling us as facilitators to start at a similar point to the participants. Of course, at times, we have experienced frustrations with this level of not-knowing, particularly when tutors provide less than adequate guidance to the participants about what is required, and in such cases, it can feel like the responsibility for the assessment task has been left to the facilitator to navigate. This can disrupt the learning process as we wasted important time checking facts and dispelling rumours about what was required. These occasions also created anxiety in the participants, which impeded their learning, putting pressure on the facilitator to contain it. This enabled us to be both '*comrades in adversity*' (Revans 1982) and '*comrades in opportunity*' (Weinstein 2012) alongside the AL members. In this context, our facilitation focused on engaging the participants to find answers or solutions for themselves rather than from us. This provided the ground for the participants to become autonomous learners, taking responsibility for their learning.

Another key aspect of our facilitation is the dedicated 'air space' for each AL member to enable them to find their 'voice' and then have their voice heard through the space we were holding. The need for members within the AL sets to be seen, heard and recognised is such an important aspect of the individual and group learning experience. Being seen, heard and recognised is integral to 'voice'. We see this as our key role as academics, using our experience as AL facilitators to support the participants' journey to independence and deepen their learning through self-enquiry and reflection. In our experience with the Senior Leader Apprenticeship Programme, as well as the National Health Ambulance Service Management Practice programme, many participants come to the AL sets lacking in confidence, self-esteem and often suffer from imposter syndrome. The consequence of imposter syndrome can often lead to mild, or severe anxiety, and the belief that they are not worthy, therefore they are not able to contribute to the discussion fully. Some AL participants might have unspoken questions such as '*Who am I to share?*'; '*What can I contribute?*'; '*What will they think of me if I ask a question?*'; '*I don't feel like I belong*'.

The presence of imposter syndrome in the room can hold AL participants back from contributing and engaging fully in the learning process. The feeling of not belonging,

often compounded by the anxiety in hearing colleagues' roles, duties and projects with high levels of leadership and responsibility, all contributed to the imposter feelings. Our role was to try to alleviate some of those anxieties and worries, helping individuals and the group to consider how everyone might contribute to the discussion and ensure everyone had their space and time. All AL participants are encouraged to participate and are provided with a dedicated space to be heard. Fostering the shared understanding amongst the AL participants that everybody's voice is important to the learning space has been our overarching approach. Feedback from some AL members describe the experience of engaging within the AL sets as transformational in finding their own voice. We have seen, first hand, AL participants develop the confidence to share and challenge. Some have developed the knowledge and skill to ask probing and problem-solving questions. In some instances, AL participants have been able to make relevant and helpful suggestions to colleagues who appear to be stuck, creating energy and momentum. Participants have taken responsibility for their own learning, and in the spirit of AL, supported the learning of others in their AL set.

## Theme 2: people focused rather than task-focused

Within the Mental Health Trust programme, the AL participants identified 'a real-life, work-based problem which they were grappling with' (Revans 1998) and were able to use the AL process to reflect, learn and take action. The purpose of AL within this programme was to provide for the participants a safe and confidential forum to gain deeper and new insights of their management practices. Hence, our overall approach as AL facilitators was to encourage each AL participant to be the focal point of their own learning process. We also supported them to fully engage in the process, to ask questions, reframe and consider options, putting themselves at the centre of the issues that were raised. We noted sense-making is an ongoing process at both individual and group level with these managers.

In our experience as facilitators on the Senior Leaders Apprenticeship programme and the NHS Ambulance Service programme, although the focus of the AL sessions is linked to projects and assessment outcomes, our approach has been to create a shift from the project (task) to what this means for the AL participant as an individual. Often our learners at the beginning of a new programme are focused on task and what they need to do and by when. This pragmatic approach is commonplace at the beginning of many programmes, as learners navigate what is expected of them in their role as a work-based learners in an HE environment. Our role as AL facilitators is to support the AL participants to view the task through the lens of their practice, focusing on their journey to developing themselves as leaders and managers. This involves a shift in the narrative from '*tell me how to navigate this journey*' to '*let's explore our journey together*'.

This approach is facilitated through our action learning practice of invariably starting each AL session with a 'check-in' (Hartog 2004), which involves a round-robin moment to facilitate introductions and settle the group down, and noting any emotional baggage that participants may bring with them. We have noted from our practice that this ritual of 'checking in' enables the participants to give themselves the permission to turn the focus on themselves – their practice, their feelings and emotions and how they want to use the AL space.

More recently, in our AL facilitation, we have encouraged participants to shift the focus from the task (project) to their role and practice in the process; we share two examples of facilitation in this context – use of metaphor and visualisation as a means of enquiry. In this particular example, the AL session was related to the module on Leading Entrepreneurial Organisations within the Senior Leaders Apprenticeship Programme. The task being to develop a piece of work where the participant could employ improvisation. Before attending the AL session, participants had attended webinars on the topic and had access to relevant reading materials. The example of ensemble jazz music making was introduced by one of the AL participants who had discovered the theme of musical improvisation in the literature on this topic. The AL facilitator chose to use jazz music making as a metaphor in exploring entrepreneurial improvisation in the group; the AL participants were facilitated to explore how a jazz quartet works; each player knows their instrument and through a process of improvisation is able to create music. This reflection helps to unleash connections relevant to their own situation and context, helping them to identify examples of improvisation in leading the entrepreneurial organisations.

Another example is use of visualisation to encourage the AL participants to explore their current context as a first step to planning their work-based project. In one specific example, the visual metaphor consisted of two visuals side-by-side. The first visual is a picture of a straight road, what lies ahead can be clearly seen, far in the distance. At the beginning of the straight, clear road is a race car, shiny and sleek, appropriate to speed along the road. The second visual is a picture of rocky terrain, with limited visibility, perhaps only a few yards in front. Amongst the terrain is a 4-wheel land rover, a vehicle fit for purpose and in position to navigate the unknown rocky territory ahead. We have noted that as AL participants start to explore their project, it is easier and safer to stay with task – ‘*what*’ project. Our role as AL facilitators is to elevate the space beyond ‘*what*’ to ‘*for what purpose*’, ‘*what does this mean*’, ‘*what else*’ creating a space for time to think (Kline 1999) about themselves, their experience, their role within and beyond their situational context. To think beyond the straight road ahead (here and now), but to instead, navigate the unknown, the territory that might be tougher, harder, more challenging and have more risks.

This experience of facilitation highlighted our ability to provide a safe space to share emotions as well as some of the challenges raised by the AL participants in an honest and open way, creating trust and psychological safety, enabling members to open up. The facilitator’s confidence to encourage this experimentation, bringing in an element of playfulness, also enabled the AL participants to let go of the ‘task’ and explore their practice in a wider context. We would recommend such practice as a way to being in tune with the group individually and collectively, allowing us as facilitator to stay with the process, building and scaffolding experiential learning in AL session.

## Discussion and conclusion

We have drawn on our collective knowledge and expertise as facilitators of learning and development in the action learning and leadership development to share key themes in our practice as AL facilitators. In exploring the two key themes of the AL participant’s autonomy to learning and the shift from task-focus to people-focus, we have highlighted

the role of insightful questioning, the facilitator as learner, the importance of being comfortable and being able to work with not-knowing. We also emphasised the need to focus on the AL participants, their knowledge, supporting them to recognise what they know and how they know and their readiness to learn as opposed to simply foregrounding the task. This facilitates learning in the service of the participants both individually and collectively, within the time available. It lays the ground to enable them to reflect on their practice, their prior know-how, (knowledge and experience) and, utilising tools such as metaphor and visualisation, to create a safe space for reflection and reflexivity, helping to enrich the learning experience for the AL participants. In contrast to the didactic approach used to share theoretical models and literature in the lecture sessions, we have supported the AL participants to consider their work experience and practices in this specific context, encouraged and prompted through open as well as Socratic style of questioning to take ownership of their own their learning and understanding of their role and work practices in the context of their module topics and assignment. We see this as our key role as practitioner academics, using our experience as AL facilitators to support the participants' journey to independent and deeper learning. Another recognition for us as AL facilitators is being comfortable with not knowing; we have noted that this has come with experience and with a skill set that has been informed by our coaching practice, shared by all three authors, grounded in listening, enquiry, questioning and a belief in the participants that at least in the context of their work, they know best. Thus, enabling the AL participants to find their voice and have their voice heard and support this journey through the AL space has been a key aspect of our AL facilitation in the leadership programmes.

Continuous developments in AL facilitation occur over time because facilitators reflect on their practice and learn to articulate and share their learning from their experience. We hope our accounts of practice contribute to the ongoing development of knowledge and practice in this field.

## Notes on contributors

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## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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