

# Action Learning: A “New” Teaching Tool For Undergraduate Business Education

Alvin Rosenstein, (E-mail: rosenste@adelphi.edu), Adelphi University  
Rakesh Gupta, (E-mail: gupta@adelphi.edu), Adelphi University  
Allan Ashley, (E-mail: ashley@adelphi.edu), Adelphi University

## Abstract

*Action Learning can be a powerful tool to build understanding of theoretical principles. Unlike classroom teaching, it can also enhance integration and synthesis of the functional disciplines by presenting students with actual, real-world problems.*

## 1. Introduction

As its name implies, “Action Learning” employs educational techniques through which students learn by doing. As such it is grounded in the pragmatic functional philosophy of John Dewey, arguably the most influential educator of the past century, who stressed that the school must provide opportunity for the interplay of thinking and doing in the classroom experience (Dewey, 1915). Moreover, it may be of interest in this regard, that belief in the efficacy of learning by doing can be traced back even further to both Aristotle, who said, “What we have to learn to do, we learn by doing,” and to Confucius, who observed, “I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, I do and I understand” (Koo, 1999).

Action Learning can be implemented in many different ways and is reflected in the curricula of universities (most typically in the Student Teaching programs found in Schools of Education and in Executive MBA programs), in the professions (medicine, law), and in the business community (corporate training programs), where it is extensively used (Dotlich & Noel, 1998 and Vicere & Fulmer, 1998).

Despite many published references to its use within the business community and although it also would seem to be a highly useful tool for schools of business, surprisingly a literature search has yielded scant mention of its actual use in the business curriculum. To the contrary, the literature contains significant critiques of the separation of theory and practice in management education and proposes approaches that are more dedicated to integrating “the formal knowledge derived through theory and the informal knowledge experienced in practice. (Raelin & Schemerhorn, 1994, and Leitch and Harrison 1999). This presentation was spurred by the desire to facilitate such integration.

## 2. Purpose Of This Presentation

The purpose of this is to encourage business educators to explore the potential of Action Learning within their own curricula.

Consistent with the pragmatic spirit of Action Learning, the authors will provide principles – drawn from the Adelphi experience – for conducting such Action Learning programs.

### **3. A Definition Of Action Learning**

Simply put, Action Learning is learning by doing. In Action Learning, the students pragmatically apply academic theory and principles – presented via text and class-room discussion – to actual “real life” problems, as encountered in the real world. This process is intended to facilitate mastery of such material.

As implemented at Adelphi University’s School of Business, Action Learning differs in several significant ways from more traditional learning aids, such as case study and business games, in which students analyze and react to prepared material presented within the context of a course. The most important differences are summarized below.

#### **3.1 Most obviously, the learning takes place within the context of an ongoing business-process.**

Typically, the class is brought in as “consultant,” at the invitation of individuals associated with a business or non-profit institution, seeking competent professional guidance at a minimal cost. The problem is real and there is no guarantee of a pat answer or success; the instructor screens and structures the problem so that it is appropriate to the capabilities of the class working under the instructor’s guidance.

The students therefore learn the discipline, as it is practiced “in vitro”, with all the attendant haphazard circumstances and difficulties that arise within this context. This generally enhances their understanding of both the “rules” of the discipline and the need for these rules.

#### **3.2 The learning involves a range of complex skills, which often have to be applied simultaneously.**

Hence Action Learning typically will involve either a whole course or several successive modules within a course. For example, a marketing research course might include, in sequential order, the following five modules: problem definition, research design, questionnaire construction, data analysis and report preparation. In each module, text and lecture precedes the “Action Learning,” in which the students apply the lessons learned to the problem at hand.

#### **3.3 Clients’ needs have to be satisfied in a competent manner.**

At Adelphi, clients have been recruited within the University for problems involving residence halls, the Student Union, and diverse sports, academic and administrative programs. Clients also have come from the Long Island Business and non-profit community, such as Jamaica Hospital and the Long Island Blood Drive. Also, projects have emanated from the students themselves, involving projects initiated on behalf of employers, family businesses or the students’ own interests.

#### **3.4 These real life responsibilities place a special burden on both faculty and students that extend beyond the responsibility of finishing a case, game or term paper.**

The quality has to be there! There should ample demonstration that the lessons have been learned and that a certain level of competence has been achieved. It has been our experience that the pressure of this added responsibility and the awareness of a real deadline, facilitates both student learning and student/faculty performance.

### **4. Six Principles For Conducting Action Learning Programs Within A School Of Business**

The following principles reflect the Adelphi experience with Action Learning and will be illustrated, where feasible, with examples taken from the classroom.

**4.1 Action Learning is best suited for advanced courses in a discipline, where there is an emphasis on procedures methodology and/or techniques that can be applied in the real world.**

Introductory courses and courses that focus on discipline theory and content do not lend themselves to Action Learning as well as applications-oriented courses. Courses with subject matter that involves the development of empirical data are particularly well-suited to Action Learning. This is why the Action Learning experience at Adelphi School of Business has largely focused on Marketing courses, including Marketing Research, New Product Development and Strategic Marketing. All of these courses involve the use of empirical data and are applications oriented.

**4.2 Identification Of Clients Should Be Based On Ready Access To Client And To Empirical Data Relevant To The Potential Project.**

The parameters of the course structure apply to the Action Learning projects, which proceed on a tight schedule dictated by the syllabus. Therefore ready access to and good coordination with the client is necessary in order that the projects can be completed on schedule, within the time restrictions imposed by the course. Since this is the *real world*, people are not always available (e.g., for commenting on questionnaires that have been developed, etc.) and do not return phone calls immediately. This imposes a burden on the instructor, who has to plan and coordinate with clients. Clients should be made aware of the necessity for close coordination prior to the project and one client contact should be identified, who can coordinate and, if necessary, come to class on a scheduled basis.

It has been our experience that most clients recognize and accept these obligations and are willing to do this as a service to the students, but also importantly because they are getting free professional services under a faculty member's guidance.

It also has been the Adelphi experience that non-profit organizations have been the most forthcoming in cooperating with the students, even to the extent of sending representatives to class, whenever requested.

In addition to the necessity for close coordination, the clients either should have available data necessary to proceed with the project or (more frequently the case) the data required to address their problems can be secured (i.e., secondary data) or developed (i.e., primary data) within the parameters of the course. Usually this is more easily done if the client is local.

Finally, in this regard, it has been our experience that once made aware of the benefits of the availability of no-cost professional services, appropriate clients can be developed without much effort, both inside and outside the institution. This has been the typical mode for the undergraduate classes. [In graduate classes, typically the clients have come from the students, who most frequently do projects related to their firms' businesses. This is because most of the Adelphi School of Business graduate students are employed while they attend evening classes and generally wish to demonstrate the utility of their graduate studies to their employer.]

**4.3 Action Learning should proceed in small self-contained units of study, followed by extensive feedback, until mastery is attained.**

The Marketing Research modules (i.e., problem definition through report preparation) serve here to illustrate the principle. Early in the course, the instructor discusses the critical importance of problem definition in Marketing Research, assigns readings related to problem definition and then has the class conduct exercises in problem definition. After appropriate understanding of the concept has been achieved, the students submit papers for the first module in the course, in which they define the problem related to their project. The instructor reacts to this definition, which is discussed in class, critiqued and then, if necessary, modified by the student, who then proceeds on the basis of the problem as defined.

Then the students proceed to subsequent modules, each of which is handled in a similar manner. The process is designed to prevent mistakes from being transmitted from one module to the next. Thus, the process is essentially self-correcting as the project progresses.

If all proceeds as intended (as usually is the case, as discussed in “4” below), at semester’s end the students have “learned” (i.e., developed some working competency in) the subject matter and have their own completed project, as a model for future reference.

#### **4.4 Sufficient structure should be provided by the instructor, so that the possibilities of project failure are minimized.**

Having secured the cooperation of a client, there is the obligation to reciprocate with a useful project that has been completed in a competent manner. This is consistent with the objective of Action Learning which is to develop a working competency among the students in the modules that have been developed. Indeed, as has been suggested above, this facilitates their motivation to develop the competencies required to complete the project. That is to say, if a real world obligation has been incurred, there is an increased pressure to complete the related academic obligation. The self-correcting” process, provides the necessary structure as the project proceeds. Additionally, in projects where teams are employed (typically the undergraduate classes), each student prepares his or her own module assignment. In these instances, the instructor takes the best paper as the “template” for the team for that module, which enhances its quality.

However, in the final analysis, the responsibility for quality is the instructor’s and where necessary, the instructor should be prepared to edit the final completed project prior to submitting it to the client.

#### **4.5 Action Learning Projects Should be Structured to Maximize the Participation of all Students.**

Employed students are encouraged to develop individual projects, which they generally do. This is primarily because these students are motivated to do work related to their employers’ interests. Also, importantly, they have an experiential background, which permits them to tailor their Action Learning project to real problems and/or opportunities within their firm or field of employment. Hence they personally conduct all aspects of their projects.

In contrast, full-time students generally do not possess similar motivations or experiential backgrounds, which necessitates finding clients for them and a more active instructor’s role in motivating and providing structure. The Adelphi experience has been that while some 30 odd graduate projects can be supervised, no more than five or six undergraduate projects can be handled in a single class and successfully meet “client” responsibilities. Hence the need for teams.

A perennial team problem is that all members of the team do not do equal work. Some “leaders” typically carry the main load and there are always shirkers trying to get away with doing as little as possible. While this is a problem for any team project, it is especially critical in Action Learning, where the primary learning lies in the doing.

The Adelphi solution has been to have each team member independently complete each project module and then select the best paper for each module as the team’s “template” for that module, prior to proceeding to the next module. In this regard, sometimes two papers are combined by the instructor and/or papers are edited by the instructor prior to serving as a team template. In this manner, all students participate and learn.

#### **4.6 Within a class, each project becomes a “case” for fellow students and is critically responded to as a case study, which facilitates learning.**

Action Learning classes also benefit from “case study.” This is because each project becomes a “case” for the whole class and is presented at least once (often more frequently), as the semester progresses. In this manner, the students not only participate in their own project, but observe and participate in the development of other projects, which facilitates their understanding of the discipline and modules studied.

## 5. Summary And Conclusions

Action Learning is another tool in the arsenal of instructional methods that provides added value to undergraduate education. At Adelphi, Action Learning has been implemented successfully and the feedback from both the students and the firms, where the projects were conducted, has been uniformly positive. 📖

## References

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## Notes

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