



Using action learning to support mobile pedagogies: The role of facilitation.

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Abstract

The rate of change in the use of digital technologies in schools means that professional learning regarding technology-enhanced-learning (TEL) is constantly required for school teachers. The focus of this article is on how an action learning (AL) approach supported the professional learning of teachers regarding adoption of mobile technologies in their teaching. In particular, the article investigates the role of facilitation in the action learning process and explores an AL process implemented at two schools, one a primary school and the other a secondary school. Drawing on qualitative methodology, a multi-site case study using observations, field notes and interviews was implemented to investigate the effectiveness of the AL approach. It was found that different kinds of facilitation were central to the success of the process. The article concludes with recommendations for action learning projects.

Keywords: professional learning, action learning, mobile learning, facilitation, qualitative research, TEL, mobile pedagogies

Introduction

The use of digital technologies to support learning is growing in importance due to the increased presence of such technologies in daily life and in the workplace. Teachers have a responsibility to their students to prepare them for life after school and to exploit the connectivity and affordances of digital technologies for learning. In particular, the use of mobile technologies is becoming almost ubiquitous. Currently, many teachers do not have a clear idea of how to harness the power of mobile technologies for learning and it is becoming imperative that teachers are supported in their understandings of mobile pedagogies, or pedagogies that are enhanced by the use of mobile technologies, to ensure that the affordances of mobiles (their connectivity and mobility being amongst these) are appropriately leveraged in schools. This article discusses a professional learning project for teachers on how to effectively include mobile pedagogies in their teaching.

Action learning (AL) is a process that provides teachers with agency in their professional learning (Aubusson, Ewing & Hoban, 2009). Accordingly, an action learning model was adopted for this project. The article discusses the nature of action learning and investigates the process

1 that was undertaken with teachers across two schools to support the implementation of mobile
2 pedagogies.
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6 A secondary focus of the article is on facilitation in the action learning process. Three kinds of
7 facilitation are identified, comprising peer, internal and external facilitation. Peer facilitation was
8 enacted in a professional learning community (PLC) through dialogue and collaboration. The
9 executive teams of the schools provided internal facilitation. Finally, university partners were
10 invited to be external facilitators of the process. These different facilitation roles are explored.
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15 **Literature review**

16 ***Teacher professional learning and professional development.***

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18 Over the last two decades, the term describing the learning of teachers about teaching has
19 shifted from 'professional development' to 'professional learning'. The term professional
20 development is now commonly understood to describe top-down interventions that are imposed
21 on the teacher as a passive receiver of learning by school executive and by curriculum
22 documents that mandate the use of digital technologies (Louws, Meirink, van Veel & van Driel,
23 2018). Professional development is often critiqued for its lack of efficacy (Calvert, 2016; Louws,
24 et al., 2018). Another critique concerns the nature of the interventions, which are often one-off
25 or short term and do not lead to sustained practice (Louws, et al., 2018). These interventions
26 are often seen more as 'an empty exercise in compliance, one that falls short of its objectives
27 and rarely improves professional practice' (Calvert, 2016, p. 52).
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38 In contrast, professional learning is understood to position the teacher learner as agentic and
39 responsible for directing their learning to achieve their own professional goals (Louws et al.,
40 2018). It is considered to provide teachers with sustained opportunities to set their own learning
41 goals and choose their own pathways to develop their understandings about a given area.
42 Teacher agency is central to the success of such learning (Calvert, 2016).
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47 Literature on teacher learning suggests that action learning is a powerful means of professional
48 learning for teachers (Aubusson, et al., 2009; Perry, 2012). This article investigates how action
49 learning was used to support teacher learning about teaching with mobile devices and explores
50 the role of facilitation in the action learning process.
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55 ***Action learning for teacher professional learning***

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3 Action learning theory (Revans, 1982) emerged within an adult learning context within
4 workplaces and at its origin primarily was applied in management development and corporate
5 business (McGill & Brockband, 2004). The originator of this theory, Revan, suggested major
6 principles for action learning that focus on the action that will lead to learning, reflection on the
7 action, and working with peers (Bong & Cho, 2017). However, definitions of action learning are
8 diverse and often dependent on context (Bong & Cho, 2017). Currently, AL is growing in
9 popularity in educational settings, with only business exceeding education in its use (Park,
10 Kang, Valencic & Cho, 2013). Studies have shown its benefits in supporting enduring and
11 relevant change in teacher professional learning (Aubusson, et al., 2009; Perry, 2012).
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19 Action learning is, according to Dilworth and Willis (2003), 'a process of reflecting on one's work
20 and beliefs in a supportive/confrontational environment of one's peers for the purpose of gaining
21 new insights and resolving real business and community problems in real time' (p.11). Action
22 learning involves a community of learners working in groups, or 'sets'. These sets explore
23 issues, goals or practices and examine how these can be addressed in a sustainable manner
24 through 'cycles of planning, acting and reflecting' (Authors, 2016). A professional learning
25 community is created through the action learning process, which is embedded in a collaborative
26 school context, while also addressing personal and contextual needs of the individual teachers
27 (Aubusson, et al., 2009).
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35 In the study under discussion, a partnership between a university, and two schools led to the
36 formation of a community in which the university researchers were invited to facilitate the action
37 learning process (authors, 2017b) regarding ways of using mobile devices effectively for
38 teaching and learning. The different types of facilitation identified earlier were found to be critical
39 to the success of the action learning process. For this reason, we now explore the literature on
40 facilitation.
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46 **Facilitation**

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49 We distinguish three types of facilitation that can contribute to action learning interventions. The
50 first is peer facilitation, which concerns the support of peers in the action learning process. The
51 second is provided by the school leaders, which we shall name internal facilitation. This
52 facilitation is the guidance and support that the school leaders offer to the intervention and the
53 personnel involved in the intervention. The final type of facilitation is external facilitation and this
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1 facilitation is offered by external personnel such as university staff, who are regarded as
2 bringing expertise and distance to the process.
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6 **Peer facilitation:** The literature (Szabo, 2015) suggests that peer facilitation plays a major role
7 in action learning in allowing teams to share and in motivating them to participate fully in the
8 process. Most discussion about peer facilitation is linked to the formation of Professional
9 Learning Communities or PLCs. PLCs allow teachers to discuss their learning and put it into
10 practice. Membership of a PLC gives a shared meaning to an experience and promotes
11 collaboration and collegiality (von Gnechten, 2011). The action learning community can be seen
12 as a PLC and peer facilitation describes much of the interaction that occurs amongst members.
13 Peer facilitation provides participants with opportunities to share the challenges and benefits of
14 their learning interventions with other teachers who share similar goals in a similar context. The
15 type of support offered does not diminish the agency of the individual teachers, an important
16 criterion in action learning (Calvert, 2016; Patton, Parker, Neutzling, 2012). Peer facilitation was
17 very evident in the project under discussion.
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27 **Internal facilitation:** Internal facilitation is the facilitation provided by a leader in the school. It is
28 regarded as complex due to the leadership role of the facilitator (Patton et al., 2012). It is
29 generally agreed that professional learning interventions work best when the practitioners
30 choose their learning goals and are agentic in deciding how to achieve them. This agency
31 increases the teachers' ownership of the intervention and increases their motivation to see the
32 intervention through (Patton et al., 2012). Internal facilitators therefore "need to tread a careful
33 line, simultaneously being leaders (providing expert input, helping teachers to work together)
34 and followers" (Armour & Yelling, 2007, p. 95). The role of the internal facilitator is therefore not
35 clear cut. In this project, the role of the internal facilitator was of interest to the researchers for
36 this reason. In the primary school, a member of the school executive had the position of internal
37 facilitator whereas in the secondary school, one of the teachers in the action learning group, the
38 head of mathematics, took on this role in an unofficial capacity.
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47 **External facilitation:** University researchers were invited to be external facilitators of the AL
48 intervention in this project. They were invited as perceived experts in action learning and in
49 mobile learning. The role of universities in working with teachers in partnership to provide
50 professional learning is seen as significant in the literature (for example, see authors, 2017b;
51 Bain, Bruce, & Weir, 2017) and often underpins the AL processes used to guide the research
52 project.
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3 The role of the external facilitator is one of supporter and guide and the facilitator's contribution
4 to the AL process is to aid participants in clarifying and articulating the problem to be solved and
5 in supporting the process that will most likely lead to favourable outcomes (McGill & Brockband,
6 2004). The role of the facilitator is not to direct or lead, but to scaffold and guide the teachers
7 through the cycles of the AL process.
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12 One danger of an external facilitator coming from a university, as in this project, is that teachers
13 may feel that the facilitator does not have the contextual knowledge required and often the
14 facilitators are viewed as having 'talked down to teachers' and perceived as 'the people who
15 knew it all' (Patton, et al., 2012, p. 522). The facilitator needs to be sensitive to the needs of the
16 teachers and ensure that as facilitators, they are not seen as dictating the process but are
17 viewed as supporting the teachers in ways that are aligned to the teachers' needs. There are
18 three aspects of facilitation that appear to be central to the success or otherwise of the process:
19 the facilitator's personality and personal approach, their style of working and a clearly defined
20 role (Harvey et al., 2002).
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28 **Research Design:**

29 ***Theoretical framework***

30 A socio-cultural framework underpinned this study. This framework understands teachers as
31 having agency over their learning, and emphasises the role of the social in the learning process
32 (Putnam & Borko, 2000). Teachers learn through their interactions with others and are active
33 constructors of their own knowledge and learning. Accordingly, an action learning community,
34 promoting the agency of individual participants, was considered fundamental to the learning that
35 took place. It was also essential that teachers chose their own learning goals and worked with
36 the learning community to reflect on the success or otherwise of their actions in implementing
37 their learning goals. Accordingly, rather than proposing activities to underpin teacher
38 development as defined in the discussion above, that is the provision of top-down directions and
39 goals to be imposed on teachers for their learning, all stakeholders considered how action
40 learning would work to support teacher understandings of mobile technology use in their
41 teaching and learning.
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52 Given this underlying framework, the researchers were interested in investigating teachers'
53 views as it was felt that these would provide the insights into their perspectives about action
54 learning and its ability to deliver sustainable and worthwhile learning about teaching with mobile
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1 technologies. We were also interested in how the different facilitation roles would be enacted
2 and what outcomes would be achieved through the facilitation.
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6 **Methodology**

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8 The methodology for the larger study has been discussed in detail in authors (2017b, 2018). To
9 reprise, in this qualitative study, a multi-site case study approach was adopted (Audet &
10 d'Amboise, 2001). The focus of qualitative research is on understanding and interpreting other
11 people's social world through accessing their lived experiences (Mason, 2002). Case studies
12 allow for a detailed study of a particular bounded phenomenon. In this study, a multi-site case
13 study took place at two sites, a primary school and a high school. It retained a common focus
14 across these sites (Wiersma & Jurs, 2005).
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20 The case under investigation was a community consisting of school teachers, university
21 researchers and software company personnel. The case study was exploratory, that is, it was
22 used to explore a situation in which the intervention being evaluated had no clear, single set of
23 outcomes (Yin, 2003). The software company had supplied each teacher with a two-in-one
24 mobile device (that is, one that could behave either as a computer or a tablet, depending on
25 purpose). The researchers were interested in what might happen when teachers were given this
26 mobile device and supported in their learning to develop mobile pedagogies.
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33 Research questions for this aspect of the study were:

- 34 1. What were teacher perceptions of the efficacy of the action learning process occurring in
35 the study?
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- 37 2. How were the different types of facilitation enacted?
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- 39 3. How did the different types of facilitation influence the success of the action learning
40 process?
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44 The project commenced in the middle of term one and concluded early term three that year. The
45 research team facilitated the professional learning through the implementation of an action
46 learning process. Throughout the project there were regular meetings held at each of the
47 primary and secondary schools to facilitate the action learning process.
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52 **Participants**

53 Teachers from one secondary school and one primary school, both from Sydney, New South
54 Wales (NSW) participated in the project. There were four teachers from the secondary school
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1 involved in the project, of whom three teachers were from the Mathematics Faculty and one
2 teacher was from the History Faculty. The latter was the staff member who initiated this project
3 as she was on the school leadership team. The internal facilitator of the AL process was the
4 Head Teacher, Mathematics, who was one of the three mathematics teachers. Five teachers
5 from the primary school were involved plus a Deputy Principal who was an English as a second
6 language (ESL) support teacher. Three of the participating teachers taught year three, one
7 taught kindergarten and one teacher taught year six. A second Deputy Principal, with a
8 background in digital education, served as internal facilitator of the project within the school.
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16 The university team consisted of three members. Two members attended all action learning
17 meetings and participated online with the teachers. They both facilitated the action learning and
18 collected data on the process. The third member of the university team coordinated the project
19 with the partners and participated in some of the sessions, including industry workshop
20 sessions, and worked with the other two members of the team regarding the collection and
21 analysis of data.
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27 ***Data collection and analysis***

28 Data were collected through a variety of methods which included field notes, observations and
29 interviews with teachers during face-to-face action learning sessions and discussion amongst
30 the university researchers. Additionally material from shared online spaces was gathered,
31 including teacher reflections and researcher reflections. There were 17 face-to-face sessions
32 total in which observations and recordings were gathered. Seven action learning sessions were
33 with the secondary school teachers and seven sessions were with the primary school teachers,
34 each session being one hour long. There was one combined action learning session lasting one
35 hour. In the final week of the project a forty minute interview was conducted by the university
36 researchers with each school participant. Data from two workshop sessions at the industry
37 partner site made up the final set of data from sessions.
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46 Within the online site was a public section where all participants could share ideas. Another
47 section of the site allowed the teachers to record their reflections. These reflections were only
48 visible to the individual authors of the material and to the university researchers. This section
49 also contained the researchers' reflections.
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1 In addition to these data, external facilitator reflection data were also drawn upon as a way of
2 understanding the action learning process from the facilitator's point of view. These data were in
3 the form of personal notes from each of the two university facilitators.
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8 Once the data were collected, they were transcribed and prepared for analysis. Analysis
9 followed the process suggested by Creswell (2009). Data were read through independently by
10 all three members of the research team, and coded according to the aspects and topics of the
11 project to which they related. The individual coding was then shared in the team and any
12 variations were discussed to reach agreement on the coding. There were few discrepancies
13 across the individual team members' coding, indicating strong inter-researcher reliability. The
14 agreed-upon codes were then applied to the data. After this data reduction had occurred, codes
15 were considered in terms of how they cohered and themes were developed from these codes.
16 The analysis was also sent back to the teachers for their member checking.
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24 ***The application of the Action Learning Process***

25 The action learning process applied within the project followed a similar process in the two
26 participating schools, but saw individual nuances emerge at each school. These differences
27 were most noticeable at the team planning stage where the internal facilitator from the school
28 leadership in the primary school drove the broader context in which the team members planned
29 their integration of mobile pedagogies. In the secondary context, teachers had greater control
30 over what they individually strove to achieve. In both instances, the two external facilitators
31 from the university worked with the teams providing guidance and support as relevant to the
32 emerging needs in each context.
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40 The process commenced at each school with a university professor leading a workshop
41 outlining key features of action learning, guidelines for participation, as well as more broadly
42 outlining what is involved in being part of such a process. A series of facilitated team meetings
43 then took place in each school allowing the external facilitators to draw out context-specific
44 issues that recognised and responded to the individual needs and journeys of the participating
45 teachers. At the mid-way point of the project, the two school teams came together for a shared
46 meeting, allowing for discussion of the experiences of integrating the use of the mobile device in
47 primary and secondary school contexts.
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54 To bound the journey for the teachers, a 'sharing with colleagues' celebration, or 'making the
55 knowledge public' (Altrichter, Posch, & Somekh, 1993) was implemented in early Term 3 in
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1 each school.
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5 **Findings**

6 The findings for this article are grouped broadly in sections reflecting the research question
7 topics. These sections consider teacher perceptions concerning the AL process and their
8 participation in this project; and the role of the facilitation.
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12 **Teacher perceptions of the action learning process**

13 Teachers noted that the structure of the whole project, which included working with external
14 facilitators and ensuring that there were planned meeting times at regular periods, were very
15 useful in ensuring a valuable AL process. The planned meeting times were provided through the
16 facilitated action learning process and were considered extremely beneficial as ways to 'bounce
17 ideas', reinforce positive changes and progress, and allow for future planning.
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23 When asked what aspects of the process, teachers liked, responses included having regular
24 meetings and getting an opportunity to learn together. As stated by the primary school leader:
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28 *The action learning process has been good. I like getting together and bouncing off ideas. I*
29 *think that's been really important and valuable in respect of where we were to where we are*
30 *now and it has reiterated that we're on the right track. We've got a lot further to go but it's an*
31 *approach and I think it also has to be taken on in some ways in a slow methodical way with a*
32 *number of people because they're not used to moving at a rapid pace and change for some on*
33 *staff is really interesting but it's also nice for them to be swept up in the current and actually*
34 *seeing that it's quite easy and it's not as difficult as they think it could be and they've also got to*
35 *rely on not only staff and colleagues but rely on the kids. They know so much and I think we*
36 *underestimate what the children do know and how we can use them to also guide and direct the*
37 *learning process. Their enthusiasm is quite contagious so it's really good. I've really liked that*
38 *part of the action learning process.*
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47 An important aspect of action learning is that teachers have opportunities to reflect on ideas
48 raised during the sessions. They were given the opportunity to trial practices in the classroom,
49 reflect on these, and then come to the sessions ready to contribute. They were particularly
50 grateful for structured time to reflect with peers as a way to improve practice.
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1 One of the questions posted in the online community area was: What would you consider to be
2 a success for you during the project? One response was: *reflection on practice, survey results:*
3 *88% satisfaction.* It was clear that the opportunity to reflect on their practice was a valued part
4 of the process.
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9 Others saw the time and opportunity to reflect as a way to make meaning, step out of silos and
10 remove themselves from the 'hectic' surroundings to "...*think about what you've achieved*
11 *currently and what you then need to go to go forward and work collaboratively with*
12 *colleagues...*" (Secondary Teacher: Interview)
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17 Another teacher summed up the general views about the AL process by saying:

18 *It has been really great to work with you guys and I don't know, just to vocalise.... I've been*
19 *working on a bit of a reflection actually to put up onto the space but yes being a bit more of a*
20 *reflective practitioner has really helped, I think, in my second year as well. I've been very lucky*
21 *to be part of something like this (primary school teacher).*
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27 The benefits of the process could be seen as the opportunity to share with each other in the
28 learning community, to reflect on what they had tried and to consider future ways of improving
29 their practice using mobile devices for teaching.
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33 Another factor was the flexibility offered by the AL process, which was both constraining and
34 facilitating. Teachers in the secondary school, particularly, noted the flexibility that they had and
35 were sometimes ambivalent about its benefits.
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39 For example, one secondary school teacher noted:

40 *I think the process itself was good and I think probably there were a couple of times there was*
41 *meetings early on and we didn't actually have enough equipment time, so that was a little*
42 *frustrating and I think that the project itself had a very broad scope which in some ways is really*
43 *good because you can do just about do anything and on the other way it's sort of I think, I know*
44 *I was scratching my head at the start going, well what exactly would you like me to do within*
45 *that scope. Once I realised and started thinking about what I can do for myself then it was okay.*
46 *At the first I was worried that I wasn't going to deliver what you guys wanted because I wasn't*
47 *exactly sure what the scope was, you see what I mean. You're giving the Department a nice*
48 *device to use so I wanted to make sure we came up with something, yeah.*
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1 This teacher felt the responsibility of meeting expectations weighed on him, although the aim of
2 the AL process was to identify a learning goal and enact it and then reflect on how it went.
3 Initially this autonomy was uncomfortable for him given that the process was part of a larger
4 project and he was concerned he would not meet the project expectations. It indicates a
5 perception that perhaps the autonomy inherent in action learning is merely rhetorical and does
6 not actually fit with the process.
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12 The above quotation indicates that the agency provided in the process was both challenging
13 and beneficial to teachers. Primary teachers who were provided with much more scaffolding in
14 the process did not comment on this aspect of the process.
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18 **Facilitation**

19 ***Peer facilitation***

20 As was observed by the external facilitators and highlighted by the teachers, teacher
21 engagement and collaboration with each other was an important part of the AL process.
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26 The teachers clearly valued the opportunities for collaboration with each other as was discussed
27 in one interview:
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30 *R: so what would you consider to be a success for you during this project?*

31 *T: I think the collaboration not only of the teachers, but also of the students*

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33 The opportunities during the face-to-face meetings to bounce ideas off each other and to ask
34 each other questions was noted by one of the participants:
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37 *That's right and Rose was questioning me, "Am I doing everything?" and we went back to that*
38 *and said, "Yes, you are". I mean, there are times focusing on collaboration.*

39
40 The notion of reflection was raised in the discussion on peer facilitation. The opportunity for
41 collaboration in face-to-face meetings provided time for teachers discuss their ideas as
42 discussed with one teacher in an interview:
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45 *Sometimes you don't get enough chance to reflect, I think... it's so nice to have someone else in*
46 *the room to talk through your process; 'actually I could have done that better'... (Stage 3 Primary*
47 *Teacher: Interview).*
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51 One constraint was that some of the teachers did not engage fully with the process during the
52 meetings. This was noted by a primary school teacher who was very involved in the AL: *It's hard*
53 *in the discussion time I think as well sometimes because you might get the same people that*
54 *are willing to discuss things but that's going to happen with any group of people, but it was a*
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1 *shame that some people didn't engage. I could give you an idea of who I really got some things*
2 *and ideas from and some people didn't really engage.*

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6 This lack of engagement was also observed in one of the secondary school maths teachers. He
7 also spoke of his concerns during an interview: *Okay, I don't get action learning as a thing. I*
8 *don't understand how it's any different to the conversations that happen anyway between staff.*
9 *If I go back to the staff room and say, "phew I don't know, this is terrible, I tried to do this and it*
10 *didn't work" and someone will say, "oh I do it this way" and I'm like "okay I'll try that, I'll change it*
11 *a little bit but I'll do that." I'll go away and do it, I'll come back and say, "hey that was a great*
12 *idea." It seems to me that's all action learning is.*

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19 In fact, he was displaying some understanding of AL. Perhaps the aspect missing from his
20 description was an understanding of the underlying theoretical framework, the longer term
21 nature of the process and the articulation of the learning goals that the teacher is striving to
22 achieve. It does indicate a need for the process and the rationale for the process to be clearly
23 explicated to teachers before they engage in the process.
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27 28 **Internal facilitation**

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30 The role of the internal facilitator was another factor that impacted on the AL process that was
31 both observed by the research team members and discussed by one of the school leaders. One
32 aspect that was raised by the Anna, Deputy Principal (DP) who was internal facilitator at the
33 primary school, was the notion of leading the staff:
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36 *I spent a fair bit of time trying to lead them towards where I felt that having had a lot of*
37 *experience in this area, I knew what some of the pitfalls were and I knew they were not focused*
38 *enough on how they would do it differently.*

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41 The rationale for guidance was so that the teachers would change practice as explained by the
42 Anna:

43 *They were just focusing on delivering the same thing that they would normally deliver and they*
44 *didn't have a perspective and that's to be understood so my learning was to help to just drive*
45 *that.*

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48 This guidance was controlled, as evident in Anna's statement, which meant that the teachers
49 were expected to think and behave differently. Anna recognised that for some teachers this was
50 not something that they found to be a comfortable process:
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53 *In the end I just took a little bit of control there over the end of last term and into the beginning of*
54 *this term and challenged them a little bit to think differently by forcing them to think about what*
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1 *they know about the science that they're supposed to be teaching and it really was confronting*
2 *for some of them.*
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5 One of the research team members made the following observation in the field notes regarding
6 the role of the internal facilitators in relation to providing opportunities for all teachers of the set
7 to share their ideas equally in meetings:
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10 *I am seeing that 'leaders' such as Anna and George with respected and clear roles in their*
11 *schools tend to speak up more. As a facilitator it is tricky to allow them their voice and have*
12 *processes in place to encourage the other teachers to speak up.*
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15 Some of the reasons for tensions that potentially existed were reflected on by the researcher:
16 "Are there underlying issues of 'power' in place or is it a lack of confidence and clarity?"
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19 Interestingly, the teachers in the primary school, who were the recipients of the internal
20 facilitation that guided and scaffolded the process strongly for them, were largely silent about its
21 impact on their learning. While they mentioned the value of the peer facilitation and the external
22 facilitation they did not tend to comment on the internal facilitation. This silence may have been
23 due to the concern about confidentiality and the fact that the internal facilitator was their line
24 manager. However, from the researcher viewpoint, it was clear that the process of learning was
25 more focused, sustained and effective in the primary school due to the internal facilitation. In the
26 secondary school, where the internal facilitation was much gentler, and the agency of the
27 teachers was strongly encouraged, it appeared that one teacher, at least, was floundering a
28 little, as indicated above. These results, which fly in the face of the literature on agency in
29 professional learning are taken up in the Discussion.
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33 ***External facilitation***

34 In this section, we discuss the teachers' views about the role of the external facilitator, as well
35 as the facilitators' thoughts and observations. Most of the discussion centred on the fact that the
36 facilitators were external to the school and also were seen as experts in the area.
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41 The process of facilitation from an outside source was seen as valuable to the teachers. As one
42 teacher noted in relation to action learning and the role of an external facilitator:
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44 *It helps teachers to engage and focus and to have that outside support is fantastic....*
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46 The primary school leader, Anna, spoke of how the external facilitation helped her staff to
47 remain focused.
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49 *Great. Helped to manage staff to stay focused, outside authority is always very good strategy*
50 *for this.*
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54 Another teacher summed up the general views about the AL process by saying:
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2 *It has been really great to work with you guys and I don't know, just to vocalise.... I've been*
3 *very lucky to be part of something like this* (primary school teacher).
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6 The scheduling of meetings for discussion and review of the AL process was an important
7 aspect of the role of the external facilitator. As one secondary school teacher discussed:
8 *...you're accountable because you know that you're going to meet every so often and you're*
9 *seeing it happening everywhere else...That's what is good about action learning. It drives you*
10 *along. There is a beginning point and you know there are certain meetings and certain things to*
11 *achieve by the end.*
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17 Being outsiders allowed the facilitators to take a more neutral role in regards to relationships
18 with other participants which meant they were able to guide the sessions ensuring that most
19 teachers were able to contribute in a meaningful way whilst ensuring that the focus of each one
20 was followed.
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25 From the point of view of the facilitators, a number of questions were raised about their roles in
26 their reflections. For example, notes in their personal memos indicated that they sometimes
27 struggled to answer the following questions: *What is the role of the facilitator - how much do we*
28 *guide the session, how much we do allow it to flow from the teachers' comments and*
29 *interactions? We have a loose guide for the sessions, but what is more important? Keeping to*
30 *the agenda or again going with the flow of conversation?*
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36 The findings highlighted the value of an external facilitator in scaffolding the process and
37 providing teachers with more accountability, as deadlines and meeting dates were set to
38 achieve the project outcomes. It is interesting that this external source of commitment was so
39 important given the underlying reasons for using action learning which state that teachers'
40 agency is central to the success of the process and it is imperative that they choose their own
41 goals and directions for learning, While teachers in this project certainly did choose their own
42 goals for their actions, the external facilitators provided additional motivation to actually
43 implement their actions and reflect on them afterwards.
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50 **Discussion**

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54 There have been numerous action learning projects completed in schools. The AL conducted in
55 this project is distinctive in a number of ways: It was conducted with a common goal of learning
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1 to use a particular digital technology, the two-in-one-device; the action learning, while conducted
2 primarily within two school sites, also was conducted across the school sites covering both
3 secondary and primary levels; and finally, there was a focus on the different facilitation roles in
4 the AL process, which included external, internal and peer facilitation.
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9 There are several interesting points that arise in the findings and are worthy of further
10 discussion. The role of the facilitators is noteworthy, the role of agency in the learning arises
11 and questions about knowing when the AL project has succeeded are raised. While in general,
12 it could be said that this AL process was successful, based on the comments of teachers and
13 school leaders, there is a need to drill down further into factors that contributed to the success
14 or inhibited it. These factors are discussed in this section.
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19 20 21 **The value of peer facilitation**

22 Much has been written about the value of PLCs and the support of teachers in each other's
23 professional learning (Szabo, 2015). This project confirmed these findings. Teachers found it
24 helpful to share their thoughts and reflections with each other and thought it was important for
25 all teachers to engage in the process of the learning.
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30 At odds with some of the literature on AL and agentic learning, are the findings concerning the
31 internal facilitation and to a lesser degree the external facilitation. We discuss the external
32 facilitation first.
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36 37 **The value of external facilitators**

38 The two external facilitators were from the partner university. They scaffolded and supported the
39 action learning process. The leaders at the two schools both indicated the value of the external
40 facilitator in providing expertise, ensuring teachers kept to the timelines they had created for the
41 AL process, and in offering some external form of accountability. Teachers noted the value of
42 the external facilitation in their comments about the structure of the process and the need to be
43 accountable to an external partner. They were uniformly positive about the external facilitators'
44 contributions. However, given that the facilitators were also collecting data on the efficacy of the
45 AL process, it is likely that any concerns that teachers might have had regarding these
46 facilitators would not have been voiced to the researchers. This is a limitation of the research.
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54 It is also of note that the main value attributed to having external facilitators was not their ability
55 to guide the AL process but more to keep the teachers on track and accountable for their
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1 actions. Given the importance of teacher autonomy and agency as characteristics of AL
2 (Calvert, 2016), this finding would seem to be at odds with the theory underlying action learning.
3 However, it must be remembered that the comments about accountability came mainly from the
4 school leaders who had a different agenda operating for the AL process, which they were
5 overseeing from a managerial point of view.
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11 Finally, it is interesting to see the diffidence expressed by the two facilitators about how best to
12 support the AL process. They were very aware of the need to be supportive and to allow the
13 teachers to follow their own agenda. They were eager not to be seen as the external experts
14 who knew what was good for the teachers (Patton et al., 2012). They knew what their roles
15 should be but were concerned as to how to confine them to scaffolding rather than directing.
16 The elements of facilitation that ensure the process runs smoothly were all attended to (Harvey
17 et al., 2002) but at times ambivalence about the role occurred. This questioning does raise a
18 subsidiary question - who supports the facilitators?
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25 We now examine the roles of the Deputy Principal in the Primary School and the Mathematics
26 Head Teacher in the Secondary School who acted as internal facilitators.
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30 **The value of the internal facilitator**

31 As noted above, the action learning process in the primary school was actively supported by
32 Anna, the primary school leader acting as internal facilitator. She ensured teachers had time
33 given to them for this process and she participated actively in the AL process. In the secondary
34 school, the mathematics team leader, George, was also a member of the AL team and was
35 similarly encouraging of participation by the other teachers, but did so in a far less active
36 manner than Anna did. The differing forms of participation of these internal facilitators had a
37 definite impact on teacher participation.
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44 Generally, the literature suggests that for change to be implemented, the situation needs both
45 strong leadership within the school and high facilitation, which can be either external or internal
46 (Harvey et al., 2002). However, Calvert (2016) indicates the importance of teacher autonomy for
47 their professional learning. Fundamental to the success of AL is that the teachers set their own
48 learning goals and then decide how to achieve these (Aubusson et al., 2009; Calvert, 2016;
49 Patton et al., 2012). In this project, the strong leadership of the primary school internal facilitator
50 while appearing at odds with this notion of agency, resulted in clear learning outcomes for the
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1 teachers, outcomes acknowledged by the teachers themselves and observed by the
2 researchers.
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6 By way of contrast, in the secondary school, George's internal facilitation respected the agency
7 of the other teachers and was not as directive as Anna's facilitation had been. It could be said
8 that George was following the suggestions of Armour and Yelling (2007) concerning being a
9 leader at some times and a follower at others. However, the learning outcomes in the secondary
10 school were not as obvious across the whole team and indeed, one teacher seemed confused
11 by the lack of clear external goals.
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17 It is clear, therefore, that there is a need to investigate how important external setting of goals
18 by the school leadership is, as opposed to teachers setting their own goals and enjoying agency
19 in their choices and actions. In this research study, the activities of the primary school leader
20 seemed essential for ensuring that the teachers embarked on the action learning process,
21 participated in it for a sustained period and saw it through to a conclusion. While the presence of
22 the external facilitators most definitely assisted in having teachers embark on and continue with
23 the process, it is clear that the input of the primary school leader contributed to the success of
24 the process in the primary school. In the secondary school, where the internal leadership of the
25 project was not quite as forceful, the project was more dependent on individual efforts and
26 interest in participating, with one participant less involved than the others.
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35 This suggests that while teacher agency is essential for their learning, the presence of an
36 internal facilitator in the form of a school leader is very important for ensuring that the
37 opportunity, time and encouragement to participate occurs and that participants are encouraged
38 to consider new directions that might be uncomfortable to achieve.
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43 **Efficacy of the process.**

44 In this study, it became clear that the success of the process was the use of the two-in-one
45 devices in effective and pedagogically sound ways. This would appear to agree with the
46 definitions suggested by the Korean action learning experts in the study by Bong and Cho
47 (2017). As there was no plan made to assess the impact of the learning on the entire school or
48 on the sustainability of the process it is not clear if it was successful according to the definitions
49 of success of the non-Korean experts in Bong and Cho's study, who suggested these criteria for
50 success. It would be of great interest to return to both schools to see if the actions developed
51 during this project were still in play at a later stage, and whether they had become widespread
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1 within the school. Certainly at the conclusion of this study, participating teachers were very
2 eager to share their learning with others at the primary school and hoped that there would be a
3 broadening of the results. The primary school leader was active in trying to include more
4 teachers in the process. However, this teacher left the school soon after the project concluded,
5 and it is not clear whether there was an enduring impact on the learning of the teachers.
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11 By way of contrast, in the secondary school, there was not much interest in sharing the results
12 of the intervention with others outside the maths faculty apart from the teacher who had initiated
13 the process, and taught history. This narrowing of impact to only those who had been involved
14 in the project might have been a result of a lack of leadership interest in the project at executive
15 levels across the school.
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20 **Recommendations for future AL programs**

21 The findings suggest that a number of enablers can ensure the success of AL in schools. These
22 include:
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- 24 ● The provision of release time for teachers to participate in the AL meetings and to
25 reflect on their work.
- 26 ● Having a supportive and engaged school leader as this also helps to maintain the
27 impetus of the AL process.
- 28 ● This strong internal leadership is complemented by external facilitation, which needs to
29 align with the interests, goals and attitudes of the teachers. External facilitators need to
30 be guides and mentors but not directors of learning.
- 31 ● Clear understandings of what AL entails are also essential.
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40 **Conclusions**

41 Results of the study indicate that overall, the teachers in the schools viewed the action learning
42 model as successful as it supported their professional learning. Such support included access
43 to: expertise, evidence-based research (action learning and model/framework), advice, the time
44 to reflect on the actions and the sharing of ideas to support the process.
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49 The place of facilitation was an important part of the action learning process and was an enabler
50 in ensuring a successful outcome of the project. This facilitation was realised both through the
51 support of internal and external facilitators. The external facilitators provided expertise, ensured
52 teachers kept to the timelines and offered some external form of accountability. The internal
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1 facilitators provided time and encouragement to teachers. The communication between the
2 external and internal facilitators was important to ensure a successful outcome of the project.
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6 The varying levels of facilitation are of interest in this article. While most of the literature
7 indicates the value of agency in professional learning, this study found that strong internal
8 leadership resulted in better outcomes for the learning process than internal facilitation which
9 left the teachers to set their own goals and direct the AL process. A key finding is that internal
10 facilitation is important to ensure that not only are resources are provided for the AL process; it
11 ensures that goals are set that are relevant for the school and that the process continues till the
12 goals are reached.
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