

Toward mindful development of action learning in business education

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Abstract

This article addresses questions raised at a recent academic discussion of action learning for business education: What are the pitfalls of existing action learning practices? How do educators mindfully and effectively develop action learning in business education? To examine these issues, we provide an overview of, and analyze, the evolution of ongoing action learning programs established by a leading Chinese business school with its partner schools in the US from 2007 to 2019. Based on this qualitative case study, we reveal implicit pitfalls of existing practices, propose an experiential learning-based conceptual framework for an in-depth understanding of curriculum design, and provide instructional guidelines for better implementation. All the findings help educators mindfully embed action learning essentials into an educational curriculum and innovate the educational policy of teaching pedagogies.

Keywords: action learning, business education, curriculum development, China, case study

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Action learning has been gaining widespread momentum in business education over the past decade (Lizzio & Wilsona, 2004). Many business schools have embraced action learning as an important complement to existing pedagogies in educational programs. Yet, not all of the endeavours have been wholly successful and there are cases of failures leading to a loss of huge resources. Compared with other commonly used teaching pedagogies, little research addresses how to consciously integrate action learning into the business curriculum (Latham et al., 2004).

As an approach leveraging on real-world problem solving, action learning is complicated and demanding. It involves both internal and external stakeholders (Kelliher & Byrne, 2018) beyond professors and students, and its success requires joint commitment. Moreover, it entails a great deal of uncertainty and ambiguity, and may create anxiety and confusion (Lesner & Zanuttini, 2011). Faculty members have embraced this new approach because it complements the traditional focus on content teaching, but they are uncertain of the learning outcomes. Students enthusiastically embrace this approach because of its emphasis on learning by doing, however they may feel frustrated because it is less structured. At the host companies, senior executives may anticipate new perspectives from students on their business challenges, but they may not be sure of the extent of their involvement and the nature of their managers' roles in action learning.

As more business schools bring action learning into their educational programs, the following two questions have arisen: What are the pitfalls in implementing action learning in business education? How do educators consciously develop the action learning approach, and effectively integrate it into the business curriculum? The situation becomes complicated because action learning is typically cross-cultural, cross-organizational and multidisciplinary (Marsick & O'Neil, 1999).

This paper provides a comprehensive understanding for business schools to mindfully integrate action learning into a business curriculum and avoid bandwagon behaviours (Fiol & O'Connor, 2003). We first review management studies of action learning and specify its distinctive features, compared with two other frequently used teaching approaches. After that, we detail the research design and methods. We then provide an overview of, and analyze, the evolution of action learning practices of a leading Chinese business school. Based on this in-depth case study along with interviews with stakeholders, we reveal implicit pitfalls of existing practices, propose an experiential learning-based conceptual framework for a better understanding of curriculum design, and provide instructional guidelines for better implementation. All these findings help explicitly embed the action learning essentials into a business curriculum, rather than burying them as a hidden curriculum. Finally, we discuss the strategic and managerial implications.

Literature review

Action learning: Beyond traditional lecture and case-based learning

Since the emergence of action learning pedagogy (Revens, 1980), large corporations have widely adopted the concept to address their strategic leadership and organization development issues (Dilworth & Boshyk, 2010). Action learning involves small groups working on real problems and taking action for effective learning and performance outcomes (Marquardt, 2004, Chapter 1). This pedagogy is based on the notion that students learn most effectively when working on real-time problems that occur in business settings (Bradfield et al., 2015). Business educators regard it as a complement to, and considerable improvement over, the traditional lecture- and case-based learning. The effectiveness of action learning has been reported in many organizational education programs and examined by academic studies, for example, Leonard and Marquardt (2010). In Table 1, we summarize the differences among the three pedagogies and identify distinctive features of action learning (e.g., real-world problem solving, multidisciplinary orientation, high complexity, learning by doing) (Ungaretti et al., 2015).

Table 1. Comparison of three learning approaches in business education

	Lecture-Based Learning	Case-Based Learning	Action-Based Learning
Goal	Enrich students' knowledge and concepts	Apply knowledge to address real-world problem in a lecture-hall setting	Apply knowledge and develop capabilities in real-world problem solving
Discipline	Separate disciplines focusing on functional management knowledge	Separate disciplines focusing on functional management knowledge	Multidisciplinary integration, learn in a cross-functional fashion
Process	Lecturing, guest speaking, content acquisition and conceptual understanding	Understand the case; apply theoretical knowledge to discuss and work out solutions	Complexity. Set learning objectives; group discussions, give learners feedback and guidance; questioning and reflection; take action in real-world problem solving
Student's role	Learning by listening: Students capture content and benefit from organized presentations of information	Learning by discussion: Students apply the knowledge to discuss and share solutions to given problems in a controlled environment	Learning by doing: Students work in groups and address problems in live business environments with no previously established solution
Faculty member's role	Serve as instructor: Select learning materials and deliver information and knowledge to a large number of students	Serve as consultant: Provide case contents to students; guide students in analysis of prepared case; and stimulate meaningful group discussions	Serve as facilitator: Guide the questioning and reflection process

Although action learning demonstrates similarities to project-based and problem-based learning, these three approaches have distinctly different emphases. Problem-based learning was established as a curriculum innovation in medical education (Barrows, 1996) and has been a mainstay of inquiry-based learning. Project-based learning emphasizes an in-depth exploration of projects. Students learn from major project activities (e.g., meeting a deadline for project completion, continually checking on project status, presenting a final output to stakeholders, and reflecting on the whole project process) (Smith & Dodds, 1997). In contrast, action learning concentrates more on questioning inquiry and learning from reflection (Yeung, 2009). It allows learner autonomy, where learners select their own learning materials and methods as needed. It also enables professional learning through critical reflection (De Fazio, 2016). This study is less concerned with differences among the three terms and more on embedding the essence of action learning into a business curriculum. It differs from papers about creating a curriculum or providing professional development using an action learning approach, (e.g., Bath et al., 2004), as well.

Theoretical models of action learning

Systematic and proven models and guidelines are necessary to make action learning work (Chenhall & Chermack, 2010). Action learning is fundamental for facilitating and enabling participants to learn through a practical experiential process, which aligns with Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory (Lee et al., 2010). This theory presents a cyclical model of learning, in which effective learning occurs.

Researchers have proposed four major models based on Kolb's (1984) basic theoretical framework: the action learning group process model (Gregory, 1994), the systemic action learning cycle (Paton, 2001), the systemic action learning spiral (Paton, 2001) and the continuous learning model (Watkins & Marsick, 1993). Gregory's (1994) model posits that scientific inquiry is the best investigation approach for a postgraduate curriculum, because it encourages human resource professionals "to learn by bearing responsibility for action" (p.43). Paton's (2001) models cite soft systems methodology in relation to action learning, representing a valuable and logical process of systemic intervention, which leads to appropriate action in response to a problem. Watkins and Marsick's (1993) continuous learning model is based on a practical, useable approach to problem solving in real day-to-day situations. It uses critical reflection as its basis for action and inquiry into problems.

Research gap and research questions

The existing models mentioned above concentrate more on the learning-based processes, which primarily elaborate on essences, components and principles in general. However, few of them are aware of the pitfalls in the existing action learning practices in business education. There exists a disconnection between the general conceptual development and the real-life educational practices, and thus the bandwagon behaviours of action learning implementation are often observed. The lack of understanding of the intricacies inherent in the business educational context prevents educators from mindfully adopting action learning pedagogy. More efforts are needed to explore action learning from the perspective of curriculum development as an integral part of business education. This paper thus addresses the following research questions:

(Quest for knowing why.) Why does action learning delivered in business education often fail to achieve the learning objectives of educational programs? What are the underlying causes?

(Quest for knowing what.) What needs to be known for educators to mindfully embed action learning into their business educational curriculum? How can we methodically highlight and articulate action learning essences within a business educational context?

(Quest for knowing how.) How do educators consciously run action learning projects to achieve the desired learning outcomes? Are there any instructional guidelines to overcome the pitfalls of existing practices?

Research design and methods

Research approach and setting

Qualitative case study is the appropriate method for exploratory investigations of complex phenomena within certain contexts (e.g., real-life action learning practices in the business education context) (Baxter & Jack, 2008). We methodologically adopted this case study following the academic conventional rules and recommendations of Eisenhardt (1989) and Yin (2003), and engaged in in-depth data collection. We believed that the educational program stakeholders, who experience excitement, enthusiasm, confusion, discouragement and depression during action learning projects, owned valuable “data” that helped this study. The case-study approach offered an opportunity for participants (students, senior managers, faculty members and program directors) to retrospectively re-tell and reflect action learning practices.

It allowed us to explore our research questions through a variety of lenses to reveal the multiple facets of complex practices. Thus, we carefully chose the case and employed a multi-stage different-sort data collection method in order to unfold the underlying knowledge of this rich case.

The case study focused on the evolution of Lingnan College in embedding action learning into its MBA education in the period 2007 to 2019. As a leading business school from China, Lingnan College was a pioneer in adopting the action learning teaching pedagogy. It developed its own action learning courses, in addition to a parallel set of action learning programs with its international partner schools, i.e. the Sloan School of Management at Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the Carlson School of Management at the University of Minnesota (Table 2). This case study depicts and analyzes the school's evolution toward mindful development of action learning.

Table 2. Three action learning programs

Programs	Partner Schools	Time	Number of Host Companies	Number of Participating Students
Action learning labs	The Sloan School & Lingnan College	2007-2019	40	160
Global business practicum	The Carlson School & Lingnan College	2008-2019	10	280
Project-based learning	Lingnan College	2010-2019	79	336

Case overview

Taking the method of chronological report (Baxter & Jack, 2008), we overviewed Lingnan College's progression from its initial attempt of mindless adoption to its current mindful integration of action learning into its curriculum.

Bandwagon stage: 2007–2009

Lingnan College's initial adoption was typical of bandwagon behaviours (Fiol & O'Connor, 2003). Thanks to its collaboration with the Sloan school, the college was one of the few Chinese business schools to start action learning in 2007. In the early stage, the Sloan school provided general guidelines for project operations, and

Lingnan College was responsible for recommending host companies and, Chinese students, and for managing local logistical issues.

Early in 2008, the Carlson school approached Lingnan College about launching an action learning program. In the program, the Carlson school identified a U.S.-based global company operating in China and chose a business issue to explore. Lingnan College's students formed cross-cultural virtual teams with the Carlson school's students. The teams were required to provide solutions or recommendations.

Lingnan College embraced this new initiative with great enthusiasm but had limited experience. The school primarily followed the course framework of its partner schools and learned this new practice by doing. At this stage, few faculty thought about how this action-based learning was aligned with the overall MBA curriculum. The school adopted this new practice as part of its new endeavours in business education reform.

Construction stage: 2010–2011

Lingnan College found that action-based projects were more time consuming and required more administrative and academic support, compared with traditional pedagogies. A professional manager was then assigned to handle operational issues such as finding new projects, monitoring project quality and managing relationships with host companies.

Lingnan College learned quickly that success was largely determined by the participating students' commitment and engagement. However, motivating students to put in effort remained a challenge. Unlike full-time employees, the College's students worked for host companies and had limited access to various resources, which increased frustration and decreased motivation. Students tended to show more commitment to projects in which they were interested, and there were often students whose efforts were not commensurate with that of their peers.

Another challenge was how to define the scope of the business challenges. Host companies were commonly inclined to investigate broad business issues and expected students to provide more deliverables. In contrast, the school was more concerned with how to ensure that students could complete the project within a certain time frame (three to four months) and thus preferred to take projects that came with specific objectives.

Interpretation stage: 2012-2015

In 2012, Lingnan College witnessed a rapid increase of action learning projects,

from three per year to 15–20 projects. Two administrative staff were deployed, and more faculty members became involved as mentors. In September 2012, the school decided to deliver a new action-based two-credit course as an integral part of MBA curriculum. Faculty members teamed up to teach the course sessions and collaborated in designing the course syllabus.

Since then, faculty meetings and external action learning consultants have reviewed the course every term and made changes to the syllabus where appropriate. Faculty members in these discussions often centered on such issues as how to make questioning inquiry and reflection an integral part of action learning projects, how to facilitate stakeholders to reach consensus on learning outcomes, and how to ensure the engagement of different stakeholders.

Mindful improvement stage: 2016-2019

To further develop action learning, Lingnan College reviewed the feedback from students, host companies and faculty members, and decided to invite a domain expert outside the school to strengthen the essence of action learning. The school invited an international faculty member from Australia, who used to work in industry and had developed similar programs. In the 2017-2019 academic years, the faculty member served as a key teaching faculty member and worked as the master coach for each team. Lingnan College's faculty members continued to serve their respective teams as team coaches and concentrate on problem solving.

Questioning inquiry and reflection were then better embedded into the project processes across all the teams. With one core faculty member as the key coordinator, students received consistent instructions and followed the same schedule. Challenges still remained due to the complexity and multi-stakeholder involvement. Because new problems and issues arose every year, Lingnan College established a regular review mechanism and consciously modified the curriculum, the teaching team, and the business partners, as well as the strategic importance of action-based programs to ensure a beneficial learning experience for students.

Data collection

To enhance data credibility, we used multiple data sources, as suggested by Yin (2003). We surveyed three groups of stakeholders, including 18 students, 8 senior managers from four host companies, and 10 faculty and staff (i.e., 8 faculties serving as action learning coaches and 2 program directors). The selected stakeholders described their views of reality and individual perceptions, enabling us to better

understand the participants' thoughts, feelings, and actions within the context.

We employed three data collection approaches: ethnographic observations, semi-structured interviews, and archival materials. We mostly employed observations with students. We conducted long-time observations of students' learning behaviors and took notes, which laid the foundation for further analysis. We interviewed all the stakeholders. We adopted Riach's (2009) 'sticky moments' in interviews as a site for reflexivity and Cunliffe's (2002) "striking moments" to explore the processes, challenges and recommendations for action learning in business education. Multi-typed archival materials were included as well, including students' reflection reports, and records from semi- and end-of-term feedback meetings (Table 3).

Table 3. Summary of data collection methods and interviewees' basic information

Stakeholders	Data collection	Interviewees	Positions
Students	Ethnographic observations, archival materials, interviews (32 interviews, 1-1.5 hours each)	12 students	MBA students
		4 students from the Carlson School	MBA students
		2 students from the Sloan School	MBA students
Senior Managers	Semi-structured interviews (14 interviews, 1.5-3 hours each)	2 managers from Benbo company	Chief executive officer and marketing manger
		2 managers from UX168 company	General manager and marketing manager
		2 managers from Cowork company	Chief executive officer and chief operation manger
		2 managers from Plateno information Tech Co.	Director and marketing manager
Faculty and staff	Interviews, archival materials	4 faculty members from Lingnan College	
		2 faculty members from the Sloan and Carlson schools	Professors and associate professors
		2 external experts in action learning and consulting	
		2 administrative staff	Program directors

Data collection from students. As the primary participants in action learning programs, students were randomly selected for data collection. Besides observations and semi-structured interviews, we collected students' inputs using written reports with self-reflection questions in midterms and end of term examinations. First, students were led to recapture scenarios when they found something most helpful or confusing. Then, they were asked to think as advisors and required to provide recommendations to improve the curriculum for a better experience along the action learning journeys. The reflection helped us to explore a set of "why" questions, such as why some action learning projects fail to achieve the desired learning objectives.

Data collection from host companies. We conducted semi-structured interviews with senior managers from host companies in different industries. The interviewees held positions such as chief executive officers and general managers. Interviews were conducted at the beginning, middle and end of projects. The interview questions mainly consisted of a set of "what" questions, such as their expectations of action learning, and a set of "how" problems, such as how to formulate project problems, and how to evaluate participants' engagement and performance.

Data collection from faculty and staff. The data from faculty were primarily collected from the minutes of meetings and documents from semi-term and end-of-term reflection meetings. The team coaches focused on various questions specific to the scope of the business problems, team composition, student engagement and consultation quality. These discussions were helpful in continuously recognizing challenges and improving action learning practices.

Analysis

Our data analysis was conducted in three phases. In phase 1, we integrated and sorted out all the data. In phase 2, based on systematic interpretation of data, we used open coding to form aggregate dimensions of action learning. This required a constant dialogue between our data and existing literature. We eventually settled on five aggregate dimensions: learning outcomes, project scoping, team composition, questioning and reflection, stakeholders' engagement and commitment. Third, using the five dimensions as a foundation, we developed a conceptual framework (Figure 2) that connected our aggregate dimensions and illuminated instructional guidelines within the dimensions. Following the guidelines of Strauss and Corbin (1998), our inductive analysis process went through iterations, back and forth among the underlying causes, the conceptual framework, the guidelines and the data, making refinements along the way. Finally, we identified five major challenges, proposed a conceptual process framework and provided effective instructional guidelines, which we further elaborate in the following section.

Findings

Underlying causes of unsuccessful action learning projects

We summarise Lingnan College's experience in Figure 1 and identify five major underlying causes that prevent the action learning process from achieving the desired learning outcomes.

Lack of consensus on learning outcomes

Stakeholders differ in the desired project outcomes. Faculty members typically concentrate on developing students' capabilities and skills. For example, the Carlson school focuses on equipping students with consulting tools and nurturing students' team and communication skills (see Appendix 1). In contrast, host companies are keen to obtain "new thinking" and "insightful recommendations" to solve their own problems. Students' desired learning outcomes can range from establishing high-level problem-solving skills to developing specific skills such as communication and presentation techniques. We saw that stakeholders lack consensus on the preferred learning outcomes.

Ill-defined problems

Identifying the right problems and defining the appropriate project scope are critical to project success. When the problem owner and the problem solver are different entities, it takes time and effort to communicate and share understanding. Sometimes, the originally presented problem is not ultimately the critical problem that a team needs to address. Moreover, it is not easy to delineate project boundaries properly. Some projects are poorly scoped: too narrow and unambitious, or too broad and ambitious, or vague and unclear. Students often commented on issues of scope.

"The host company had very high expectation on us. They assigned us an over-broad topic that included strategic management, customer relationship management and human resource management. We knew that these three problems were correlated but solving all of them in just three months made us very frustrated. We negotiated with them, trying to limit and delineate the project boundaries, but we failed. They just wanted to solve as many problems as possible. It ended up with each of us working on one piece of problem, trying to finish before the deadline. Now I get the lesson of The Law of Raspberry Jam, 'the wider you spread it, the thinner it gets'." (MBA student)

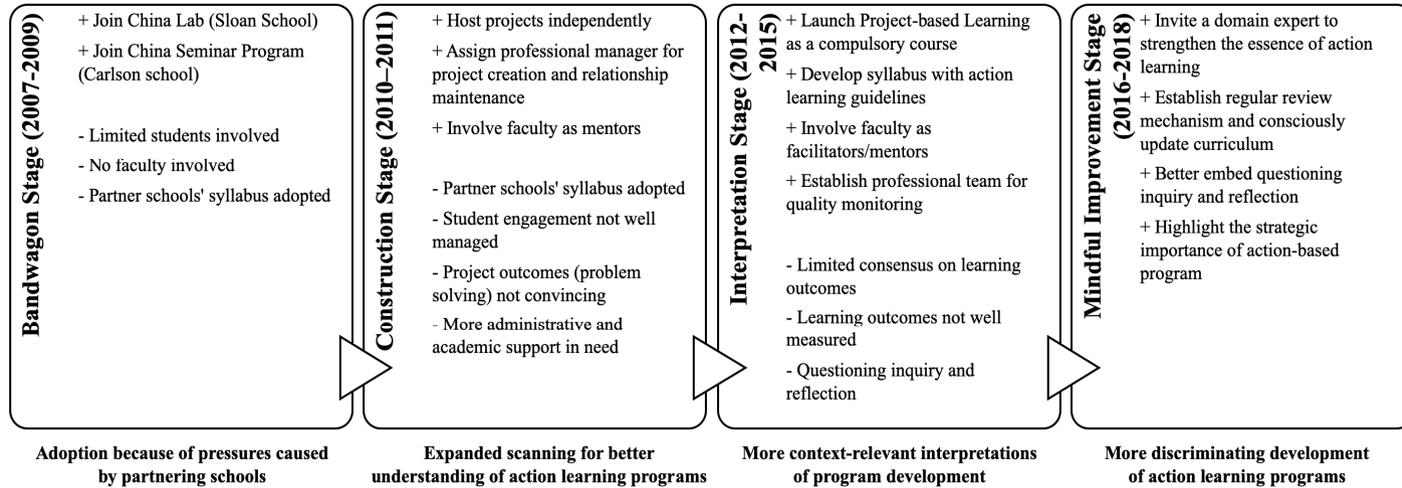


Figure 1. Lingnan college's evolution from mindless adoption to mindful development of action learning curriculum

Non-learning-oriented team building

Commonly, a syllabus specifies the required number of team members. Students often report that when allowed to pick up their group members they usually form a team with friends. The team is then built without considering professional areas and background diversity, and learning objectives. A team of familiar members limits demographic diversity and therefore reduces the opportunities of learning from peers and learning from conflicts.

Neglect of questioning and reflection

Questioning and reflection are two core elements of action learning, but existing action learning practices have not placed sufficient emphasis on them, and the field still lacks understanding of questioning inquiry and reflection in curriculum development. Moreover, it is still not clear about how to shift students' investigation paradigm to questioning inquiry, as a student noted at a reflection session after he completed the action-based course:

"It is beneficial to practice questioning skills in a group discussion with a coach. However, it is difficult to embed questioning inquiry in thinking process as an intuitive part where there is no coach around. It is not that hard to learn questioning skills, but it is really hard to make a change in my way of thinking." (MBA student)

Participants' engagement not well managed

Action learning pedagogy requires concerted efforts and collective engagement from all stakeholders.

Students' engagement and commitment. In the action learning context, students do not take the full role of employees and are not directly responsible for implementation. When facing time conflicts and other commitments, they are likely to exhibit less engagement, which prevents them from making extra effort and striving to deliver excellent results. We often observed such engagement problems in the teamwork and as a lack of interest in the project, labelling students exhibiting these behaviours "free riders".

Corporate engagement and support. Action learning requires full engagement and support from host companies. Usually, at least one senior executive is appointed to provide guidance to students. However, the senior executive appointed often has a tight schedule to meet with students and, on many occasions, is reluctant to provide key materials and data.

Faculty engagement. Faculty members often act as facilitators and are appointed to help students solve problems. However, compared with well-structured classroom teaching, the appropriate time and approach to provide guidance and support are unclear. Faculty members usually have different perceptions and practices. A reflection review with students shows that faculty engagement varied extensively.

Conceptual framework for curriculum mindful development

The aforementioned obstacles present critical needs to develop and manage action learning mindfully and effectively. In the following, we propose a comprehensive framework and provide instructional guidelines for action learning curriculum development.

Leveraging Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory and previous models of action learning, we propose an input-process-outcome framework, capitalizing on action learning essentials to achieve effective action learning. The goal of this framework is to help faculty members and program directors consciously develop action learning syllabi in which learning outcomes, teaching and learning activities and learning outcome measures are well articulated within the business curriculum.

The framework is outcome-based, aligning with Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business International standards (AACSB International Accreditation Coordinating Committee, 2013). Unlike lecture-based courses emphasizing knowledge capture, the value of action learning lies in the capability development opportunities provided to students. Capability development can be reflected by continuous cognitive and behavioural improvements (Kraiger et al., 1993) that students can achieve during the learning process. It can be assessed through students' self-reflection reports or peer assessments. Learning outcomes can also be shown via students' business proposals or recommendations to the business challenges. It is often assessed using host companies' feedback and evaluations. Thereby, we suggest a balanced learning outcome, blending subjective capability development with objective project problem solving.

To achieve the desired outcomes, dedicated action learning processes are needed. In line with Leonard and Marquardt (2010), we suggest that these processes include both learning- and project-based views. The learning-based process is grounded in Paton's (2001) systemic action learning cycle, in which questioning inquiry and reflection are core. The project-based process contains the major stages of conducting a project: Project scoping, problem analysis, solution development and striving toward a resolution by taking actions (Smith & Dodds, 1997). The action learning process is both an iterative examination of organizational problems and an individual learning process in which learning is reinforced by promoting questioning insight and reflection.

Inputs, including team characteristics, business problems and collective engagement, also affect the action learning process and then further influence action learning outcomes. The team characteristics, which consist of team composition diversity and learning-oriented team building, influence the learning process. The characteristics of business challenges influence the effectiveness of the action learning process. Collective engagement and commitment from multiple stakeholders also have a strong impact on the learning process. Figure 2 presents an illustration of the framework.

Instructional guidelines for mindful implementation

In line with the proposed framework, we specify instructional guidelines to deal with the identified pitfalls of existing practices. We start from desired action learning outcomes and follow with guidelines on managing appropriate inputs. We then propose guidelines that ensure action learning activities are implemented in the right way, and guidelines that aim to achieve collective engagement, commitment and support.

Outcome driven: A shared understanding of learning objectives

In business education, the desired outcome of action learning projects involves solving a real problem. Stakeholders have different perceptions of problem solving. Most companies concentrate on solution effectiveness, while faculty members and students focus more on enhancing the students' problem-solving capabilities. It would be beneficial for the stakeholders to establish consensus on learning objectives.

Moreover, learning assessment methods are different from those in a company context. Students may achieve learning at three different levels: understanding something intellectually; applying newly acquired skills; and experiencing and thereby undergoing inner development that touches on beliefs and attitudes and leads to personal and professional development. A variety of instruments can be used, such as direct or indirect assessments, as suggested by AACSB (2013). A Sloan school student demonstrates the thoughtful learning outcomes as follows:

"During the two-week time, I think the main learning was not just limited to the consulting work we did for the client but to understand the whole thought process of my teammates and how different people approach problems differently. The best thing about the team I was working with was that we listened and respected each other's perspectives." (MBA student)

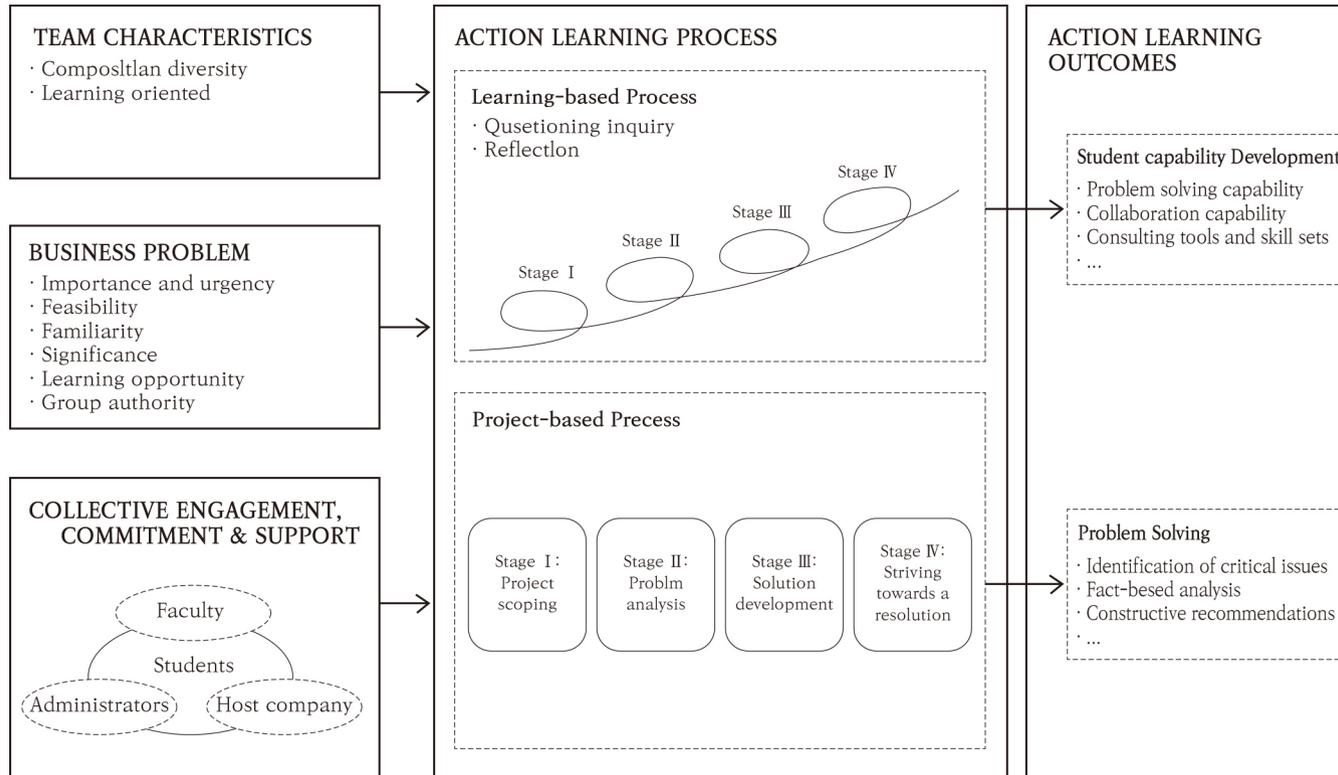


Figure 2. Conceptual framework for action learning curriculum development

Guideline 1: Start with a shared understanding of learning outcomes among all the stakeholders.

Guideline 2: Manage written learning outcomes while encouraging learner autonomy on content.

Input: Define proper business challenges

Students are expected to learn by identifying, analyzing and handling real-world challenges. However, students involved are seldom the problem presenter and lack a basis on which to select an appropriate problem. They tend to choose a problem they are capable of managing, which limits the learning opportunity. Course directors should carefully design the curriculum by considering the trade-offs, for instance, learning opportunities versus familiarity and feasibility, and the “value transfer,” for example, transferring organizational importance and urgency to students’ importance and urgency.

Guideline 3: Involve students in scoping, defining, and reframing business challenges.

Guideline 4: Balance problem feasibility and student familiarity, and articulate organizational importance and urgency with that of students.

Input: Incorporate team composition diversity

Action learning team members inherently vary in terms of gender, working experience, functional expertise, and education level (Bantel & Jackson, 1989). We observed that a team with appropriate demographic diversity often obtains better opportunities to learn from peers. Team members will ask more diverse questions and propose more novel ideas in constructing solutions. One respondent worked with a partner school’s students at a China Lab project for three months. He appreciated the learning experience and shared it with a younger student:

“Team members from the Sloan school are not American citizens. They come from Canada, Mexico, Chile, Australia and Israel. The cultural difference enriches our conversations. The diverse background enables them to provide a new look at the Chinese market and the Chinese company. The team building with Chinese and foreign students inspires a lot of interesting conversations, innovative ideas and thinking conflicts.” (China Lab student)

However, high team diversity does not always result in positive experiences. It may cause communication problems, which can limit learning opportunities, such as enhancing problem solving skills. We found that at reflection sessions, students often complained about team communication, although developing communication skills was not the learning objective for the course:

“Due to cultural differences, the thinking process and the working behaviour among our team members were extensively different. Many conflicts ... then [arose]. It was almost impossible to avoid encountering the conflicts. It took us a lot of effort to make everyone calm down. It took more effort to alleviate the negative effects of the conflicts.” (MBA student)

Therefore, program directors must balance communication effectiveness and team diversity in designing a team structure, considering the alignment of team diversity and desired course outcomes. They may include specific team building instructions in syllabi and provide a team building tutorial if in need. It would be good to facilitate students to identify team members’ strengths and allow them to share their strengths with each other.

Guideline 5: Strive for optimal team composition diversity to allow students to learn from peers.

Guideline 6: Align team composition diversity with process effectiveness and desired outcomes.

Process: Learn to learn through questioning, reflection and taking actions

Waddock and Lozano (2013) specify the influence of reflective practice on awareness, the will to lead and manage “soul” and “heart.” They also point out that the emphasis on analysis, tools and techniques in most management educational programs limits attention to these “soft” aspects. Moreover, collectively reflecting on goals and strategies (i.e., team reflexivity) has been shown to be valuable for team functioning (Pieterse et al., 2011). While some business schools’ syllabi have attempted to ensure that reflection is implemented, few of them have demonstrated a systematic approach to stimulate learner autonomy and self-reflection.

To make the change, program directors or faculty members should encourage reflection by explicitly requiring students to engage in tangible reflection activities. For example, directors can require participants to fill in a reflection form individually (e.g., the Carlson school’s Global Business Practicum), or attend a reflection lecture or join a reflection session as a team (e.g., the Sloan school’s China Lab). Directors

should consider shifting from passive to proactive reflection (Briner & Walshe, 2014). Reflection is not a one-shot activity; it should be an intuitive or integral part of a student. Course directors and faculty members should help students make the change by equipping them with reflective methods and providing tangible group reflection activities.

We observed that business schools seldom mention questioning inquiry in their curriculum. Faculty members often narrowly regard questioning inquiry as a technique within the group discussion. Thus, it is common for an action learning syllabus to have no systematic approach to shift students' investigation paradigm to questioning inquiry. Appendix 2 shows an example of embedding questioning inquiry into a course syllabus.

Guideline 7: Start with engaging students in tangible reflection activities.

Guideline 8: Equip students with questioning techniques and embed questioning inquiry into a course syllabus.

Guideline 9: Inject questioning inquiry and reflection into students' minds and help them establish this as an intuitive and integral part of student practice.

Enabler: Motivate students' engagement and commitment

The success of action learning projects is largely determined by students' engagement and commitment. How can educators fully motivate students and avoid "free riders"? How can they enhance students' satisfaction and project quality? Here, we provide recommendations in a variety of aspects.

When program directors approach companies for projects, clear guidance should be provided on how to select relevant projects. When students form a team and select a project, appropriate information should be available for them to form a clear understanding of the importance and urgency of the projects. Company reputation, senior managers' support and business challenges all influence students' interest in the program and, in turn, their commitment to the projects.

"Free riders" are demotivating. Making the progress of each participant visible to all other participants can decrease the incidence of this behaviour. Some effective methods to ensure equitable participation of all team members include team reflection, progress reports, peer review evaluation and interim reports. If some teams are performing inefficiently, program directors and faculty members may intervene. For example, a recent reflection session among team members required students to report what they had done well and what they had failed to achieve. Doing so exposed students who had not contributed equitably, and they were under great pressure to become more engaged.

Guideline 10: Motivate students by aligning their career development with the host company and the project domain.

Guideline 11: Leverage team members to make individual contributions visible to increase the motivation of all students to participate equitably.

Booster: Win the host company's support

The power of action learning teams is derived from senior executives' endorsement, support and recognition. Before launching the project, program directors should ensure that senior executives fully understand the value of action learning. Although students are not professional consultants, they add value by providing an outsider's perspective, which can prevent a company from becoming too insular in its thinking. Moreover, senior executives need to set realistic expectations. Relatively high senior executive expectations imply a psychological contract between the executives and students, and increase the participants' desire to meet them. Energy, creativity and synergy are directly correlated with the expectation that the team's project will result in organizational actions. Students will then have the full potential to help the business to be and to do better.

During the project process, supporting the team with resources and involvement is important. Senior executives can show the team that they are fully committed to the project by being available for feedback and discussion, and respecting different perspectives. Sound action learning design provides a stage on which behavioural performance dynamics can be observed and critiqued, and a springboard from which new choices and behavioural improvements can emerge. Through regular reviewing and monitoring, both will have healthy and balanced interactions throughout the process.

Guideline 12: Win the support of the host company's senior executives.

Discussion and implications

The findings of this paper suggest both strategic and managerial implications not only to business education, but to educational policy in general. Strategically, action learning provides a successful complement to existing teaching pedagogies. Although it presents some challenges, this innovative approach contributes to nurturing students' practical skills in connecting the real world and the future. Educational authorities are recommended to promote learning by doing when

innovating educational policy related to teaching pedagogies. Recently, Chinese educational authorities, such as the Teaching Advisory Committee of the Ministry of Education, have held a series of large-scale forums on how to build collaboration between educational institutions and industrial corporations to develop action learning further in higher education.

To strengthen the action learning pedagogy, educational institutions are encouraged to integrate explicitly action learning into their current curriculum. By offering practical courses, including action-based and inquiry-based training, educators can help students mitigate the knowing-doing gap (Sohn et al., 2017) that exists in many educational contexts of developing countries. The core of the teaching reform is to promote the transformation from a conventional curriculum system centered on knowledge transfer to a system centered on growing students' problem-solving capabilities.

Moving toward mindful curriculum development of action learning, we offer the following practical and theoretical aspects of managerial implications.

Consensus of learning outcomes. In line with existing empirical studies (e.g., Bradley et al., 2005), our study confirms that a lack of clarity about learning objectives has decreased the impact of action learning. In practice, it is not easy to establish consensus on what to achieve (either explicitly or implicitly) and how to achieve it (e.g., how to lead the less structured learning activities). This paper promotes the sharing of learning outcomes among all involved stakeholders. We also encourage the practice of written learning outcomes, which has been shown to have a considerable impact in lessening misunderstanding among stakeholders.

Project scoping. Our observations conform to scholars' existing views in scoping and reframing business challenges (Bradfield et al., 2015). Scoping is an important learning process and an integral part of an action learning course. We find that a number of projects are poorly scoped. Contrary to existing views that often focus on the role of problem owners in a general context, we insist on student involvement in scoping business challenges in the business educational context. Our study also suggests that to delineate project boundaries properly, it is wise to articulate and connect organizational importance and urgency with students' learning needs.

Team composition. Many empirical studies extensively investigate the effect of team diversity on team performance in business contexts (e.g., Bantel & Jackson, 1989) and find that demographic diversity is particularly related to firm performance (Miller & Triana, 2009). However, our study finds that action learning teams are seldom built with learning objectives in mind, nor do they consider demographic diversity. To better manage the team composition diversity, we highlight the balance between process effectiveness and project outcomes. We thus offer a considerable supplement to the literature on team diversity.

Questioning and reflection. Early in the 1980s, Revans (1980), the originator of action learning, described a well-known formula: $L = P + Q$, where L is learning, P refers to programming and Q refers to questioning to create insight into what people see, hear, or feel. Marquardt et al. (2009) propose extending the formula by incorporating R, reflection. We concur with their views on the essences of action learning, but the know-how quest has not yet been answered in business education. Systematic approaches are needed to stimulate learner autonomy and self-reflection. Based on our case study, this paper suggests different ways to inject questioning inquiry and reflection into different stages of action learning process.

Participants' engagement. In the business context, employee engagement largely determines both individual- and firm-level performance outcomes. In the business educational context, the question is how to motivate all stakeholders to be fully engaged in projects to increase the chance of success. Based on our interviews with stakeholders, this paper provides a better understanding of different stakeholders. We suggest multiple ways to deal with students who fail to participate equitably and to win the support of host companies.

Conclusion

This study starts with a qualitative case study of Lingnan College's journey of integrating action learning into its business education. The case demonstrates an evolution from mindless adoption toward mindful development. Using the collective experience of the Sloan, Carlson and Lingnan colleges, we have identified current challenges that have not been addressed yet. We propose a conceptual framework and provide instructional guidelines with the aim of achieving better learning outcomes and better real-world solutions.

Future research could verify the proposed conceptual framework with further empirical evidence. It also would be beneficial to examine the proposed instructional guidelines in other business schools. Furthermore, a cross-case study would be valuable to develop a better understanding of the evolution of mindful development of action learning in education.

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Appendix 1. Learning objectives and outcome assessment of action-based courses

Table A1. Learning objectives and outcome assessment of action-based courses at the sloan school, the carlson school and lingnan college

School	Course	Learning goals/objectives	Learning outcomes	Measures
Sloan school	Action Learning labs	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> To provide students with <i>insights regarding the issues and challenges businesses face</i> in China and India. To structure for students an <i>intensive experiential learning opportunity working collaboratively with senior leadership</i> in a dynamic local organization. To help students <i>develop their skills of integrated problem framing</i> in order to assist organizations in complex situations move to action. 	N/A	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Class participation (25%) Mentor assessment (70%) (student project updates, workplan, remote research report, poster, final host company report) Host company feedback (5%)
Carlson school	Global Business Practicum	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Develop and apply effective <i>consulting tools and skill sets</i> in an international setting; Deepen students' knowledge base around <i>team-based skills and tools</i>; <i>Communicate effective frameworks</i> for successfully completing consulting projects; Deepen students' <i>global decision making & collaboration capabilities</i>, Heighten students' <i>awareness and appreciation</i> toward the culture and business strategies Develop an increased ability to work in diverse cultural and interdisciplinary teams. 	<p>Upon completion of this course, students should be able to</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> explain key frameworks and concepts in market assessments, consulting projects, and teamwork apply marketing and other cross functional concepts to solve a consulting problem connect this learning to other learning gained from the CSOM PTMBA program and know where to go to further their knowledge of course topics 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Final presentation (50%) Class participation (15% USA +15% China) After-action reviews (20%)
L school	Project-based Learning	<p>The purpose of this course is to enhance students' capability of <i>solving real business problems</i> through project-based learning. There are three specific goals:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Within a real-world business environment, students could work with a host company, which will result in positive impacts on the business of the 	<p>On completion of this course, students should be able to</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Identify business problems, specify critical issues, and establish an analytical framework for the problems. Conduct fact-based analysis and figure out the root cause of the 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Class participation (10%) Project assessment (by instructor) 55% Feedback from host company (20%) Reflection session (10%) Peer evaluation (5%)

School	Course	Learning goals/objectives	Learning outcomes	Measures
		company. 2. With real business problems, students could select and apply the right tools to identify critical issues and solve the problems. 3. With a collaborative learning environment, students could learn for themselves, with and from peers and instructors.	problems. 3. Propose constructive recommendations. 4. Have better skills in managing a business project and in communication, negotiation, and presentation.	

Appendix 2. An example of course roadmap

Figure A1 demonstrates an overview of Lingnan College’s action learning course. Here, program directors and faculty members made great effort to break down the questioning inquiry process. They attempted to facilitate and lead a series of project-based group discussions to meet the learning outcomes on questioning inquiry. Faculty members delivered introductory lectures on the methodology at the beginning of the course. They also provided tutorials in problem-solving skills/techniques tailored to students’ education background.

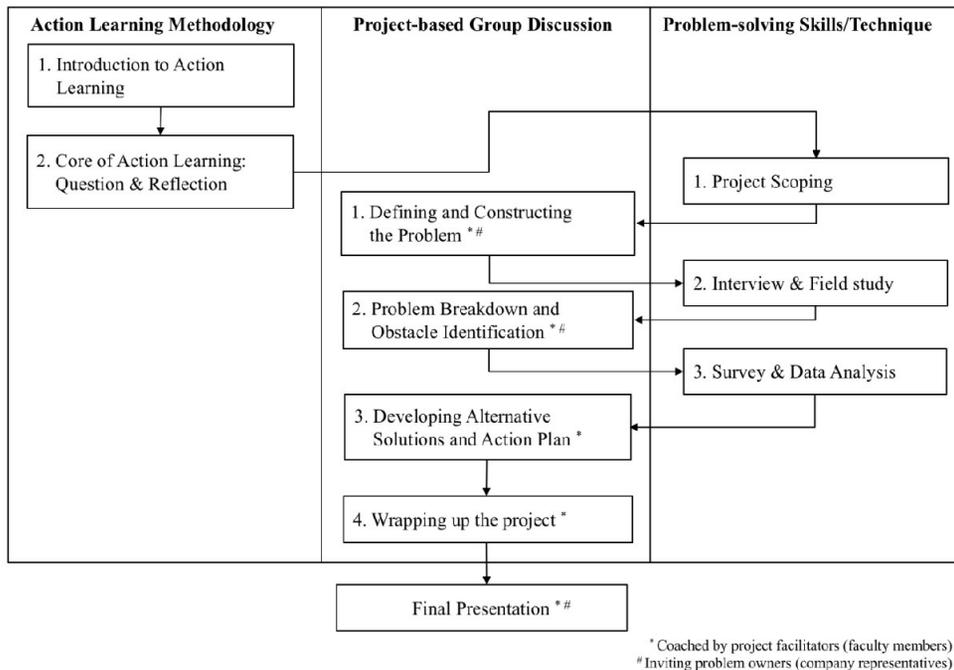


Figure A1. A course roadmap

