

EMBRACING THE STUDENT COHORT COMMUNITY (SCC): FACILITATING SELF-DIRECTED AND PEER SUPPORT ON A DOCTOR OF HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE (DHSC) PROGRAMME

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ABSTRACT

This paper illustrates how our professional doctorate programme team has developed a creative supporting framework by harnessing the strengths from both the individual as well as the collective members of a student cohort. The Student Cohort Community (SCC) is a new term that we coined which aims to provide peer support to students at various stages of their professional doctorate programme. This is achieved through adopting the philosophy of "shared learning" that is founded on the principles of action learning. Action learning is a process of learning and reflection, supported by colleagues with an intention of getting things done (Driscoll and Yegdich, 2007).

We have found that action learning has proven to be ideal, because it focuses on bringing individuals together via the Student Cohort Community where students' ideas can be challenged in a supportive and non-threatening environment. The Student Cohort Community offers a balance of emotional and intellectual challenge "through comradeship and insightful questioning which enables each member to act and learn effectively on three levels" (Bird, 2002). Firstly, to present the challenge to be tackled, secondly to explore what is being learned about oneself and thirdly the process of learning itself. These principles of action learning complement the programme which is about presenting, exploring and responding to challenge and change.

From our experience we have found that action learning used effectively has the potential to provide emotional support and intellectual challenge, personal and professional growth and the creation of a mechanism for iterative exploration of alternative action in light of new insights and change.

Conference Theme: Self-directed and peer support in researchers' development

KEYWORDS

Professional Doctorate, Action Learning, Action Learning Sets, Student Support, Student Cohort Community, Teaching and Learning.

Introduction

The popularity of Professional Doctorate (PD) programmes according to The United Kingdom (UK) Council for Graduate Education UKGCE (2010, p9) has witnessed an:

"increase in the number on offer in the United Kingdom (UK), almost tripling between 1998 and 2009, going from 109 to 308 in 71 institutions. A total of 7882 students are listed as currently studying on these 308 professional doctorates".

The popularity of such programmes according to the UKGCE (2009, 2010), Fenge (2009) and Bourner et al, (2001) may be associated with the connectedness to professional practice. This is further illuminated in the continuous differentiating debate regarding the Professional Doctorate (PD) and the Doctor of Philosophy (PhD).

The European University Association (EUA) (2007, p14) states that "professional doctorates, or practice-related doctorates, are doctorates that focus on embedding research in a reflective manner into one's professional practice". The PhD is awarded to a candidate who is regarded as "an authority, in full command of the subject right up to the boundaries of current knowledge, and able to extend them" (Phillips and Pugh, 1992, p17). Whilst agreeing in principle with both these definitions we would argue that in today's diverse knowledge economy it is acceptable, to offer variation in the design and delivery of doctorates. This is important in order to accommodate the growing complexities of societies, diversity of different professional disciplines, specialities, variation in political contexts and situations, employment demands and opportunities (Murray, 2002). Like Nerad and Heggeland (2011) we argue the case for a global approach to acknowledging and recognising doctoral education in what is forcing the production and development as well as the forms in which they are designed and delivered to accommodate the demand. What is critically important is that irrespective of the type, design and purpose of the doctoral programme they should all have relevance to professional practice and ensure equality and equivalence for the student and the programme of research (McSherry and Bettany-Saltikov 2014, Neumann 2009, Fenge 2009).

In parallel to the differentiation debate is the growing concern that in order for students to successfully complete a doctorate, the development of robust supervisory, monitoring and progression frameworks, contracts for supervision, and creating an appropriate learning environment is paramount (Holligan 2005, Manathunga 2005, Pearson & Brew 2002, Hockey 1997 and 1996). Inherent within the works of Holligan (2005), Manathunga (2005), Pearson & Brew (2002) and Hockey (1997, 1996) is the importance of ensuring that the student is supported throughout their programme of study. Whether you are supervising a PD and/or PhD student we would argue that your supervisory knowledge, understanding, skills and approaches are equally applied to maximise the students learning, experience and outcomes irrespective of their mode and/or programme of research.

From our experience over the past 10 years in designing, delivering, supervising and evaluating PD programmes is the fact that PD and/or PhD students can all learn and share from each other. The importance of embracing the strengths and opportunities of the Student Cohort Community is often a neglected area within doctoral programmes (Bista and Cox, 2014). The evolving meaning and membership associated with cohort identify, community, progression and outcomes are still emerging in the literature (Maher, 2005, Choy et al, 2015). We have found that capitalising on the Student Cohort Community fosters a truly remarkable framework for enhancing the students learning through sharing, questioning, listening and responding with each other. Our rationale for this recommendation is founded on years of engaging with and facilitating students to support each other on a regular basis. We have found that irrespective of the students professional background, speciality and employment status, the learning and sharing gleaned from coming together to discuss, debate, critique and resolve issues and challenges akin to their doctoral journey is a significant one. This we believe may also be a contributing factor to the successful completion of the programme based on our observations.

The Student Cohort Community builds upon and enhances Interprofessional Learning defined as "occasions when two or more professions learn together with the object of cultivating collaborative practice" (Centre for the Advancement of Interprofessional Education 1987, p1). Interprofessional Education on the other hand takes place when "two or more professions [associated with health or social care] engage in learning with, from and about each other" (Freeth et al, 2002, p. 17). From our experiences the Student Cohort Community exemplifies these two fundamentally important components of shared learning and working on several fronts.

The value of action learning within the context of professional doctorates is the fact that action learning encourages individuals to explore how various roles and responsibilities may impact on team-working, dynamics, functions, learning and outcomes (Hean, 2010). This is achieved by highlighting the importance of professionals who share, learn and work effectively together. The learning and sharing culminating from this type of action learning can be transferred to the student's area of professional practice where patients may be able to access seamless services tailored to their needs. The above demonstrates how these key skills can be transferred and used to support individual education, research and practice aspirations and goals (Karstad, 2014).

We would like to argue that the student community of practice and the development of collective student centred peer support can be achieved by creating and optimizing appropriate learning and supportive environments for students through embracing the SCC and by using a facilitated framework of action

learning. Action learning is described as “a continuous process of learning and reflection, supported by colleagues, with the intention of getting things done” (McGill and Beaty, 1995). Action learning is ideal for supporting the SCC because the values and principles underpinning the approach include “being open and honest with oneself and others, respecting others’ points of view, and taking responsibility for your own action(s)” (Wilson and Keachie, 2003). Essentially action learning facilitates student cohort identify, cohesion and networking by offering a structured but informal student support network that helps the sharing and learning from cohort members (Yeadon and Worsdale, 2012).

The UKCGE (2002) state that, at doctoral level, ‘teaching has to become more a matter of guidance and mentoring than a didactic transfer process’. The Doctor of Health and Social Care (DHSC) programme at Teesside University, Middlesbrough, England, United Kingdom (UK) addresses such recommendations. This is achieved by providing a challenging route of study for professionals working within complex, dynamic and evolving health and social care environments where they are provided with the tools and techniques, associated with action learning to help facilitate self-directed and peer support as part of their student cohort community.

The article aims to;

- a) Define the Student Cohort Community and action learning for? supporting students on professional doctorate programmes
- b) Articulate the processes and practicalities of establishing and running the student cohort community using action learning within a professional doctorate programme
- c) Identifying the relative merits and demerits of the Student Cohort Community for doctoral programmes
- d) Highlight the implications of the Student Cohort Community for professional doctorates in the future

These four aims will now be discussed in turn below.

a) Defining the student cohort community and action learning in supporting students on professional doctorate programmes

Having reviewed the works of Simons-Rudolph, (2014), Bista and Cox (2014) and Choy et al, (2015) we would describe a cohort as a discrete co-dependent assembly of individuals who come together with a specific goal and intention and who have the ability to establish a shared vision, values and beliefs system centred on achieving a common goal or purpose. In this regard the specific goal and intention of the student cohort community within any professional doctorate programme must be about the students completing a professional doctorate.

In the context of Higher Education Institutions and with particular reference to doctoral research through PD and/or PhD programmes, we, like Smith et al, (2011) have found significant benefits from harnessing the collective strengths of the student cohort. These can be categorised around the student, academic supervisors and the organisation. For example, for the student, enhanced shared and/or cooperative learning environments, student identity and group cohesion, sharing common interests, aspirations, goals, increasing confidence to challenge and be challenged, together with improvements in reflective practice and experiential learning and finally living the professional doctorate journey.

For the supervisor(s) the Student Cohort Community enables the student(s) to debate ideas and seek clarity with the support of the cohort with regards to their research. They in turn present a much more focused and rounded idea to their supervisors for further scholarly debate. This type of approach fosters enhanced clarity surrounding the research, improvements in the critical and scholarly debates within the supervisory meetings, gives the students confidence to challenge the supervisory team and facilitates the building of trusting relationships between the supervisory team. For the organisation, the Student Cohort Community decreases the potential of student attrition by offering a peer support and network running alongside the supervisory team. This ultimately improves completion rates.

Taking into account the above we would argue that all Higher Education Institutions and postgraduate research degree programmes should devise ways of harnessing the strengths of the Student Cohort Community. The potential of embracing what the Student Cohort Community can offer can be used to enhance the student learning environment, experience, support and satisfaction. The Student Cohort Community is an ideal framework for providing peer support to students throughout the various stages of their doctoral programme. We would like to offer the Student Cohort Community as a new term, with the aim of

providing peer support to the students through adopting the philosophy of shared learning founded on the principles of action learning (McSherry and Bettany-Saltikov, 2014).

Action learning is a process of learning and reflection, supported by colleagues with an intention of getting things done (Driscoll and Yegdich 2004). Action learning applied in this way encourages individuals to both learn with and from each other, by working on real problems/issues and reflecting on these in a structured way with the support of peers. The popularity and usefulness of action learning as a method for learning originates from its definition:

“A means of development, intellectual, emotional or physical, that requires its subjects, through responsible involvement in some real, complex and stressful problems, to achieve intended change sufficient to improve his/her observable behaviours henceforth in the problem field” (Revens, 1979, pg 4).

We would argue that Revans' (1979) original definition of action learning is about producing collective or individual actions on any number of challenges or 'problems' that 'change' or 'improvement' presents. More specifically (Driscoll and Yegdich, 2007) argues that action learning is about encouraging individual and/or collective actions to bring students formally together to reflect on their practice with the intentions of improving and enhancing deeper learning through the process of action learning. In this context action learning is ideally suited to support students on professional doctorate programmes because inherent within its principles and practices it recognises and values cohort identity and dynamics, facilitates group and team-working and focuses on resolving problems through individual action (Booth et al, 2003).

Action learning is perfectly suited as a framework to enrich student learning and support and is well positioned to enable the manageability of the Student Cohort Community as a framework for several reasons. Firstly, for action learning to be operationalised, this requires the establishment of a learning set. An action learning set in this context is a group of six to eight students who meet regularly with an action learning facilitator who leads the running of the set. Secondly, most action learning sets are made up of peers who work at similar levels of responsibility and/or who have a shared interest and or goal. In this context it is about completing their professional doctorate. Thirdly, they contract to meet – usually for five times over 12 to 15 months. In relation to the Doctor of Health and Social Care (DHSC) programme the Student Cohort Community is timetabled for two hours once every two weeks (Teesside University, 2015).

The real importance of action learning within the DHSC programme is as Bennet and Bennet (2008, p378) state “with learning comes knowledge, with knowledge comes action and with action comes change”. Therefore if used effectively action learning has the potential to provide change on several fronts; emotional support and intellectual challenge through: shared learning, personal and professional growth, the creation of a mechanism for iterative exploration of alternative action in light of new insights, and change in personal, professional and academic growth. Action learning in this context is ideal for any professional doctorate programme because it focuses on bringing individuals together via the SCC where students ideas can be challenged in a supportive non-threatening environment with the support and guidance of peers and academic colleagues.

The essence of action learning (how it works)

We believe that the Student Cohort Community provides a balance of emotional and intellectual challenge “through comradeship and insightful questioning which enables each member or [student] to act and learn effectively on three levels” (Bird, 2002). Similarly, Eskerod (2010) suggests that action learning is a useful educational approach to enhance and nurture workplace and practice -based learning. This according to Pedler and Abbott (2008) is because it is a fantastic way of involving participants to work on and resolve issues and/or challenges through action. Action learning within the context of the Student Cohort Community is ideal in supporting shared learning through reflection, action and change. More importantly this is because of its simple but highly effective staged approach to learning (figure 1).

Figure 1 Action Learning in Action

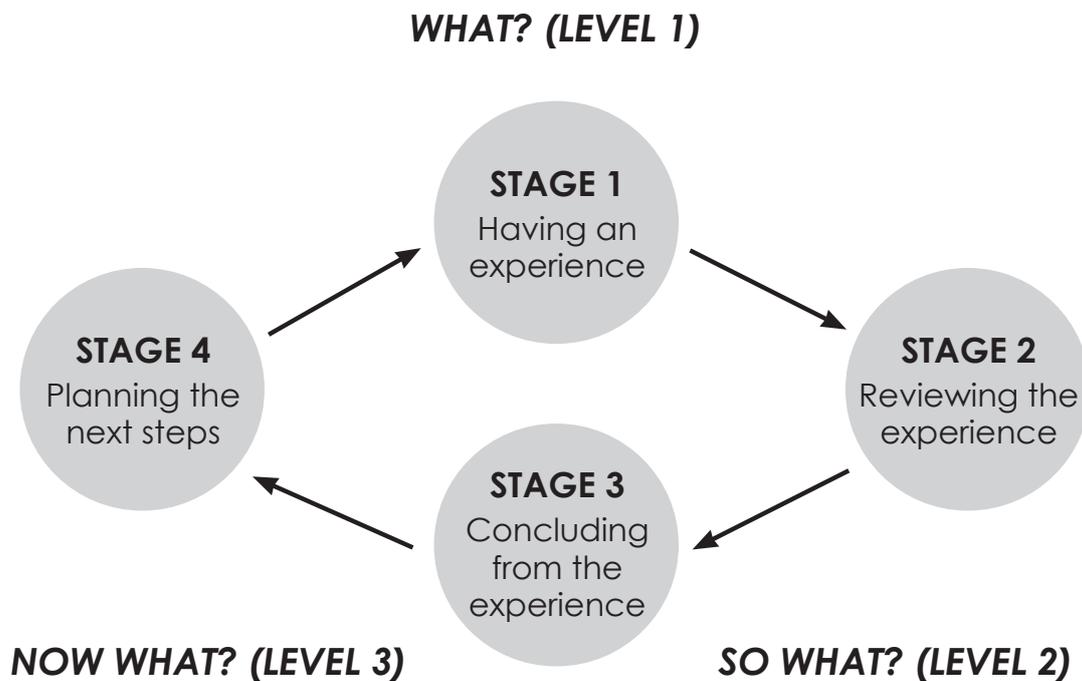


Figure 1 illustrates the simple, staged approach to sharing and learning through action learning. This is achieved by the following four stage processes of action learning and three levels of questioning.

Firstly, **what** (Level 1) is the issue/challenge to be presented and/or the problem to be tackled? , secondly, to explore the **so what** (Level 2) surrounding the learning about oneself and/or the experience, thirdly to unpick the process of learning itself and the **now what** action (Level 3) or to know what is required next. These principles of action learning complement the professional doctoral programme because the programmes are primarily about presenting, exploring and responding to challenge and change. As with any type of learning the outcome depends on the investment and preparation to undertake the role in order to engage in the processes associated with how action learning works.

By comparing and contrasting traditional learning with action learning (Figure 2) it is easy to see why this type of approach enriches student learning and support within the Student Cohort Community.

Figure 2 Comparing and contrasting traditional learning with action learning

Traditional Learning	Action Learning
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Historic case studies • Individual orientation • Learning about others • Study other organisations • Programmed knowledge (P) • Planning • Arms length • Input based • Past orientated • Low risk • Passive 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Current real cases • Group based learning • Learning about self and others • Study own organisation • Questions plus (P) • Planning and doing • Arm in arm with client • Output/result based • Present and future orientated • Higher risks • Active

Figure 2 highlights how action learning is a reversal of much training and education or consulting. This is because action learning focuses on the individual's current, not past, experience and situation which requires active involvement in resolving real, not historic, case studies (Eslerod, 2010). The action learning set facilitator

encourages individuals to work uninterruptedly on their own current real world situation. Designated time is given to work with other cohort members on their evolving research problem and/or question where scholarly debate and/or critiques occur. These situations are always the starting point and the heart of the work within the learning set. A cohort member works to an agreed format and structure where other cohort members support them in advancing and evaluating their own practice. By working on questioning techniques the aim is to encourage cohort members to devise a question(s) that leads the other person to question themselves, their situation, their context and progress.

The emphasis is not about probing and/or interrogating to find solutions to situations and problems. The emphasis is on focusing on areas that require change(s), embracing opportunities and sharing and celebrating success. By paying attention to the process of learning as well as the product (implementing action learning in practice) and checking out how the learning set is doing as a group, shared learning and support becomes normalised to the cohort. The cohort takes an active responsibility for the quality of its work; it is not a passive role. From our experiences the outcomes of action learning is dependent on the types of action learning sets applied and in what context. Please see below.

Types of action learning and the relative advantages and challenges to student support and learning within a professional doctorate programme

According to McGill & Beaty (2002) there are several types of action learning. The main types are detailed in table 1, these are as follows; organisation initiated, independent, self-facilitated and facilitated.

Table 1 Types and approaches to action learning and there relevance to student support within a professional doctorate

Types of action learning	Description	Application	Relevance to professional doctorates
Organisation Initiated	Use of action learning to enable and support staff to champion a project and/or those wishing to be members of a set within the organisation for their own development.	For those individuals with responsibility for development and individuals wishing to improve their knowledge and understanding of the approach.	Can be used as a secondary source of support out with the students doctoral programme.
Independent	The organisation is not involved in the creation of, or setting the parameters of the action learning set.	Formed for the personal needs of the individuals members.	May be established in addition to existing action learning set to work on a specific opportunity and/or situation that arises within the doctoral programme.
Facilitated	Facilitator initially assumes the role of action learning set adviser.	As the set becomes more confident facilitator power is shared with the group and interventions are lessened, before allowing the set to become more autonomous and find their own way to support and create the conditions to determine their direction.	Encourages the members of the action learning set to become more autonomous and find their own way to support and create the conditions to determine their direction in the future.
Self Facilitated	An action learning set formed and operated without a facilitator.	All set members take and shares responsibility for facilitation and the process except when presenting individually.	Instigated once the action learning et members are the students learning and sharing by taking on the various roles and responsibilities with the action learning set.

Table 1 details several types, descriptions, applications and relevance of action learning within a professional doctorate programme. What is distinct about table 1 is the fact that with the exception of organisational initiated learning sets the remaining three types and approaches can all be applied to enhance student support, sharing and learning. From our experience we have found that an incremental approach to

encouraging student autonomy and independent learning is best practice. For example, our professional doctorate programme commences with facilitated support, through to student self-facilitation and independent learning sets when required. We have found the advantages of action learning to health and social care and those professionals with or without a remit for advancing and evaluating practice can be categorised into several benefits.

The process empowers the participants by encouraging them to take charge of their own problems/issues through improving their problem solving and critical thinking skills. Action learning also accommodates a wide variety of situations because of its flexibility in design together with the ability to transfer learning both across a whole group and between individual members of the student cohort community. Moreover, the whole process of action learning is engaging, encouraging, empowering and most importantly evolving. This is arguably the essence of effective sharing and learning. The challenge facing many programme leaders and teams is in articulating the processes and practicalities of establishing action learning in practice. This is detailed in section b).

b) Articulating the processes and practicalities of establishing and running the student cohort community using action learning within a professional doctorate programme

The systems, processes and practicalities of establishing and running action learning sets within higher education (Yeadon-Lee and Worsdale, 2012), health and social care (Christiansen et al, 2014) and engineering (Eskerod, 2010) are well documented. Within our professional doctorate programme the students are introduced to the Student Cohort Community as part of the induction to the programme. The Student Cohort Community is also an approved component of the programme curriculum and integrated within the timetable as previously mentioned. An allocated time of two hours every two weeks is devoted to the Student Cohort Community. The Student Cohort Community is initially led by the Programme Leader and then eventually the students themselves take charge once they become confident and competent with the principals and techniques of action learning identified in section a) above. This usually occurs within the first six months of programme.

Also during the first six months the students are introduced to using a variety of teaching and learning materials. These include for example, provision of a detailed Student Cohort Community Handbook covering the primary aims and intentions of why the Student Cohort Community is important to the philosophy of the programme, enhancing student support and experience and shared learning. The students are provided with a series of interactive workshops designed to prepare them to facilitate action learning as part of the programme and in the workplace. The workshops cover the following topics.

Workshop 1, through dialogue and debate within the cohort the aims and intentions of action learning are negotiated and agreed. The workshop focuses on encouraging the students to explore the potential value and practicalities of action learning within the context of their own learning and professional doctorate programme. An example is detailed in box 1.

Box 1 Aims and intention of action learning

Aims	Intentions
a. To develop a sense of shared well - being and peer support for participants	a. To give participants an opportunity to discuss any fears or anxieties they may have embarking on action learning for the first time
b. considering or actively facilitating action learning	b. For participants to identify any transferable skills already in use in everyday group activities that could also be used in the action learning situation
c. To equip participants with a workable framework to gain agreement and form the basis on which to operate the process of action learning	c. For participants to practice and obtain feedback on performance with reference to peers during observed action learning practice
d. For participants to become more aware of the different roles and responsibilities when participating in action learning	d. For participants to more realistically consider the pragmatics of 'doing' action learning in the educational setting including some of the common challenges posed by the context of individual learning styles

Workshop 2 identifies the variety of uses of the action learning approaches and techniques along with offering practical experience of the triad; presenter, enabler, observer (box 2).

Box 2 The triad experiences of action learning

Presenter: You think of a task/issue/problem that you are faced with on the programme. Discuss it with the group. Be brief and specific. What am I trying to do?; what is stopping me?; what can I do about it?; who knows what I'm trying to do etc....

Enablers: You are to help the presenter with his/her issue. The objective is to help him/her define or redefine the problem and their relationship in it so that she /he can take steps towards solving it. Use of open questions is important to obtain a full and clear picture of the problem.

Facilitator(s): play a key role in providing advice/guidance, organising, monitoring and ensuring the quality and atmosphere of the set. You may need a facilitator, or it may be possible to wean the group away from dependence to working alone after a few sessions.

Workshop 2 focuses on implementing the actions described in figure 1 section a) regarding the four stage processes of action learning at three levels; about the issues which are being tackled, about what is being learned about oneself and others as well as the process of learning itself i.e. learning to learn.

Action learning works by the utilisation of three roles within the action learning set. These roles are collectively referred to as 'triads' (Wilson and Keachie 2003, Revans, 1979). We have found that experiencing the various roles and responsibilities and by debating the experience helps the students to gain confidence with the various roles and practicalities of arranging and running an action learning set. From our collective experience the key issues to achieving successful action learning throughout the stages identified in figure 1 within the learning sets is *trust*. Through meticulous planning and delivery we have found it takes time to develop relationships within a cohort of students where establishing the context and frameworks for action learning can at the start often be frightening and threatening. Building a trusting cohort is the key role of the facilitator and all group members. A safe cohort is not a cautious group, but a student cohort who are pleased to see one another where individuals want to present their feelings in a non-judgemental way. A trusting cohort provides high challenge and support by being able to take risks and provide opportunities.

Workshop 3 is associated with providing detailed information and examples of how to establish ground rules, the importance of documentation and recording action learning, engaging with facilitation and how to respond to challenge and conflict. Establishing and agreeing well-defined ground rules for the action learning set can enhance the trust of the group. An example of the ground rules are detailed as follows.

The general ground rules for an action learning set should aim to protect the cohort members and cohort identity allowing structure and process to shape the action learning as identified in figure 1. Ground rules should ensure and maintain the confidentiality of the individual cohort members and community at all times. If confidentiality is to be breached the cohort should have offered the reasons for this prior to engaging with the action learning. The process of action learning should embrace honesty without fear of comeback in both style and approach. This is imperative in order to encourage active participation. The time element should be one which is agreed and acceptable to the whole cohort and affords sufficient time for the individual to present their issue/problem. The person presenting the problem should always have the option to stop the discussion at any time regardless of the reasons. The emphasis of the discussion must be constructive, problem solving and not a moaning session. We have found that having a brief catch up prior to commencing the action learning set is a great way of avoiding this within the action learning set.

To ensure the best outcomes for both the presenter and the action learning set we would suggest that all members must try to attend every 'set' unless there are mitigating circumstances. This is important because from our experience if the learning set has less than four people attending each set, the purposes, scope, debates and discussions become limited this making it difficult to sustain the action and continue the set..

Alongside the ground rules it is important to develop a series of statements that help to create the appropriate learning set activity and environment. During the action learning set the individual members and cohort agree to maintain confidentiality and to ensure that they keep all information within the action learning set.

It is also important that participants agree, that each set member has permission to stop discussions within the set, at any time; in particular where it becomes uncomfortable or when individuals may have knowledge of a situation. For example, when the discussion begins to affect the individually personally and/or when other members in the cohort may be familiar with their reasons and/or circumstances. The cohort members should always respect and encourage openness and honesty as well as value the opinions and views of others in a constructive and proactive way. Additionally the cohort should encourage equal contributions and have a commitment to participate and conform to time scales.

With regards to offering advice within the learning set we strongly encourage our students to focus on identifying the key differences between criticisms and giving constructive feedback box 3.

Box 3 Differences between criticism and giving feedback

Criticism	Giving Feedback
Emphasizes the negative	Emphasizes the positive
Generalized	Specific
Focus on the person	Focus on the behaviour
Descriptive	Evaluative
Tough on the person	Tough on the issues
Can be confused	Is much clearer
Deals in the past	Deals with the future
Seeks to blame	Seeks a solution

We have found the following to be very useful and helpful when giving feedback within the action learning set. Firstly, each member is responsible and accountable for the way they provide and deliver their feedback to other cohort members. They have to remember that this may have a consequence and outcome in the future. Secondly, offering specific feedback and pinpointing the specific behavior attitude or skills that requires improvement and/or action should always be priority. Thirdly, putting the ball in the other persons court for example, asking questions like “why do you think your performance is...”, shifts the emphasis of learning and action to the individual. Fourthly, delivering feedback as close in time to the event and focusing on the behaviour and not the personality is an effective way to communicate within an action learning set. From our experience first-hand feedback is better than second hand feedback and being open and honest about what you are hearing and responding to is the best approach. We encourage our students to avoid pussy footing around and to ask specific and appropriate questions which encourage and engage sharing and learning. Most importantly it is not about destroying the person.

Similar to de Bruin’s (2013) work on sustained servant leadership we would suggest the application of the acronym AID (**actions, impact and desired outcomes**) to the action learning set. This is where the presenter giving feedback considers their own **actions**, the **impact** their own behaviour has on themselves and others together with the **desired** outcomes they may need to reconsider during and following the action learning set. To ensure an efficient and effective learning set we have found it important for the students to capture and document their feedback. This can be achieved by encouraging cohort members to document their personal feelings, recommendations of the set members and the action to be undertaken to be fed back at the next meeting. For example, prior to the set you could make notes on highlighting the following. The task/problem; what you are trying to achieve; why it is important and what you would consider to be progress on the problem.

After the action learning you could reflect on the following questions. “Three things I learned about the task/problem/issues in the group/set today were.....” “the most important thing I learned today was..... .., the key things I need to achieve by the next set are....., what was good in the group today....., the group could be more effective by..... and what I learnt as a facilitator today were the following.....”.

From our experiences the challenges of action learning are not often associated with how to engage with and apply the various stages but lies in spelling out the relative merits and demerits.

c) Identifying the relative merits and demerits of the student cohort community for doctoral programmes

The merits of action learning to the student cohort community and students with a remit for advancing and evaluating both research and practice as part of a professional doctorate programme has huge benefits.

Firstly, the action learning process empowers the participants by encouraging them to take charge of their own problems, issues, and opportunities by devising ways of resolving these as part of their professional doctorate programme (Driscoll and Yedich 2007). Secondly, action learning from our experience accommodates a wide variety of situations because of its flexibility in design and transferability of learning through sharing. Thirdly, this type of approach maximises the student's potential and opportunity to challenge practice in a non-threatening environment (Wilson and Keachie, 2003). Fourthly, exploring and testing out of assumptions, new ideas and potential contribution of their work to peers is achieved on a regular and ongoing basis throughout all aspects of their doctoral programme.

Some of the demerits associated with the challenges to action learning are in demonstrating its actual value to individuals, teams or organisational performances. This is because of the following; Firstly, the flexibility in action learning methods and diversity make it difficult to capture the uniqueness of each learning set and its participants. Secondly, whilst it remains difficult to measure and quantify action learning in action, from our experiences of using it within health and social care practice and education, the impact on individual personal learning and development is vast. Thirdly, the difficulty for some students and health and social care professionals and/or organizations that have used action learning is in sharing and disseminating their experiences at a local, regional or international level. Fourthly, the impact and outcome of action learning for an individual and student cohort community is difficult to establish because of potential breaches associated with both the confidentiality as well as the anonymity of cohort.

d) Highlighting the implications of the student cohort community for professional doctorates in the future

What better way is there to respond to the challenges of the National Health Service (NHS) transformation and Higher Education agendas than, to share, and work with individuals in a similar plight? Similarly what better way is there to challenge the issues associated your professional doctorate journey than to share and learn from members of your student cohort. We have found that the Student Cohort Community is a fantastic way of encouraging the sharing of experience, greater awareness of values, expertise of professional groups, and in highlighting areas in which a multidisciplinary approach can contribute to excellence in health and social care.

To date the Student Cohort Community has provided a genuine framework for supporting our students on their doctoral programme and we hope that it can potentially support numerous other students on other academic programmes of study. The Student Cohort Community is non-threatening and supportive and enables the student to enhance their learning and practice with the support of colleagues and peers. The Student Cohort Community requires long-term commitment and involvement from all students on the programme and is resource intensive and costly because of the time required. Unfortunately like other researchers (Lamont et al, 2010) we have found it is very difficult to evaluate because of the human interactive nature of action learning. However we have found from our experience that the Student Cohort Community is both fun and enjoyable but more fundamentally helps the students to enhance their experience through shared learning.

CONCLUSION

The article has explored how and why it is imperative to harness both the individual and collective strengths of a student cohort through the development of the Student Cohort Community. Within our professional doctorate programme we achieved this by incorporating the use of action learning within the Student Cohort Community. We have found this approach to student peer support to have a profound and important impact in several ways. The students have successfully progressed throughout the various stages of the programme with ongoing peer support alongside traditional mechanisms of support. Action learning has proven to be crucial to our students learning through the application inherent in its principles and processes. This is because the sharing and spreading of ideas and initiatives has occurred in a non-threatening supportive environment for students. Introducing the action learning framework within the Student Cohort Community offers a fantastic reflective process which has benefitted our students in supporting and enhancing their debates and arguments within a supportive learning environment. We believe the value of the Student Cohort Community is in the fact that to date attrition remains exceptionally low and completions high.

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