Reflections on working with critical action learning

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Reflections on working with critical action learning

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Critical action learning engages participants in a process of drawing from critical perspectives to make connections between their learning and work experiences, to understand and change interpersonal and organisational practices. But what does this mean in practice? How can critical action learning be expedited? What outcomes can critical action learning have for participants, and can the hopes for critical action learning be fulfilled? The intentions of this paper are to contribute reflections of our empirical experience on working with critical action learning in management development.

Introduction

Critical action learning is of increasing importance to the area of business and management education and development, given its focus on how the comparatively abstract ideas of critical theory can be mobilized and applied in the process of understanding and changing interpersonal and institutional practices. Recent corporate events such as the collapse of Enron and the controversy over board room pay have focused attention on the ethics of managing and provided additional impetus for those who argue for management education and learning to integrate a critical perspective on business. The field of critical management studies is imbued with hopes of a transformational flow from individual learning to changes in managerial practice. Critical action learning has been central to definitions of critical management learning as epitomised, for example, by Reynold's (1997) distinction between content radical and process radical pedagogies. Content radicals disseminate radical material, in the sense of critical theories and concepts, as alternatives to technocratic management education. Process radicals attempt to address power asymmetries of the traditional teacher/learner relationship, for example, taking an experiential learning approach, using action research, critical reflection, the conception of tutors and participants

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as co-learners in a learning community or action learning set, and negotiated curricula. Willmott argued (1997, p. 169):

> The task of *critical action learning* is to present and command an alternative to the seeming neutrality and authority of orthodox management theory as a means of opening up and facilitating a transformation of management practice.

Interestingly, whilst action learning (Revans, 1982) seems currently to be enjoying a revitalisation in application to management and leadership development, there remains a paucity of recorded empirical experience on the subject of critical action learning. As such it remains under (if not un-) evaluated. Our intention is to contribute to this gap, drawing on our reflections on our experience as facilitators working with critical action learning for over 5 years.

Perspectives on critical action learning

If action learning (though broadly interpreted and open to contestation) is to do with collaborative enquiry, problem-solving and self-development, the potential for criticality in action learning derives from the tensions, contradictions, emotions and power dynamics that inevitably exist both within a group and in individual managers' lives. Critical action learning as a pedagogical approach emerges when these dynamics are treated centrally as a site of learning about managing and organising. We acknowledge that many who work with action learning see a critical perspective as intrinsic to the process. McLaughlin and Thorpe's seminal argument was that:

> At the level of their own expertise, managers undertaking Action Learning programmes can come to know themselves and their organization much better. In particular, they can become aware of the primacy of politics, both macro and micro, and the influence of power on decision making and non-decision making, not to mention the 'mobilization of bias. (McLaughlin and Thorpe, 1993, p. 25)

In Willmott's view:

> To the extent that action learning engages with the struggles of individual students and practitioners, it may also open up an appreciation of, and sensitivity towards, 'darker' aspects of organizational life ... (Willmott, 1997, p. 170)

However, our choice to use the terminology critical action learning is deliberate for two reasons. Firstly, as Vince has argued, critical action learning addresses the deficit in traditional action learning that offers little encouragement to or support in 'working with the emotional and power dynamics in learning processes' (Vince, 1996, p. 119). The second reason is to differentiate critical perspective from critique. Critical thinking as critique is central to action learning, in the sense of: 'the application of all the traditional scholarly criteria of rigour, challenge to taken-for-granted assumptions, debate, logical consistency and the setting of claims to valid generalisation and theories against the best evidence that can be mustered about what occurs in the world' (Watson, 1999, p. 4). Whilst there is no assumption of neutrality or pretence of objectivity here, it is the process of critical thinking that is emphasised, and implicitly there is a belief that the thinkers/researchers should attempt to be impartial as to the outcomes of their activity. The quality of 'good knowledge' or 'good theory' lies in its rigour.

This contrasts sharply with the use of the term 'critical thinking' by critical management writers, where it has a specific meaning, still partially referring to a process, but primarily concerned with outcomes, namely to achieve a society with social justice and free from oppression (howsoever defined). Critical thinking here is intertwined with the use of and generation of Critical Theory. For example, Guba and Lincoln suggest the aim of critical inquiry is 'the "critique and transformation" of the social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic and gender structures that constrain and exploit humankind' (1994, p. 113). Likewise, Carr and Kemmis exhibit a concern for the outcome of critical thinking, 'to articulate a view of theory that has the central task of emancipating people from the "positivist domination of thought"….' (1986, p. 130).

The contribution of critical action learning to a critical management practice is epitomised by Willmott:

> Critical action learning explores how the comparatively abstract ideas of critical theory can be mobilized and applied in the process of understanding and changing interpersonal and institutional practices. By combining a pedagogy that focuses upon management as a lived experience with theory that debunks conventional wisdom, managers can be enabled to develop 'habits of critical thinking … that prepare them for responsible citizenship and personally and socially rewarding lives and careers. (Willmott, 1997, p. 173, citing Porter *et al.*, 1989, p. 71)

In this article we want to concentrate on the more immediate questions of

- How can critical action learning be expedited?
- What outcomes can critical action learning have for participants?
- Can the hopes for critical action learning be fulfilled?

Working with critical action learning

The programme discussed here is a three year part-time post-graduate/post-experience Management Development Programme comprising Post-Graduate Certificate, Post-Graduate Diploma in Management Studies and MSc in Organisation Development and Management Learning. The subject areas follow external management standards, particularly those of the UK Association of Business Schools. However, pedagogically the entire programme takes an action learning approach where, supported by a small number of lecture inputs, students spend two thirds of their time working collectively in a specific action learning set (ALS) of 6–9 people, facilitated by a tutor. The ALS fulfils a number of functions for the course: they undertake group tasks on subjects from finance to marketing to human resource management; they provide a community for individuals to exchange work experiences; they are a source of support for individual work and they are a site of experiential learning about group process. In this sense, students'; experiences, feelings and interactions are fundamental to the pedagogical approach.

Pre-written case studies are not used and examinations have a minor role (10% in the Diploma and none in the MSc). Reflective learning is promoted through assignments

that are almost entirely based on student selected live organisational issues. These are not organisational puzzles or problems with ready technical solutions, but are 'situations', in the sense that Donald Schon (1983) describes, characterised by uniqueness, uncertainty, instability, complexity and value conflict. Learning about managing and developing capacity to manage comes experientially from working on these 'situations'.

Many of the assignments require participants not only to demonstrate learning about content (for example, organisation behaviour, performance management models, etc.), but also to reflect on process issues they experienced in the course of undertaking the tasks, such as how they made decisions; what happened in their group, strategic exchanges that occurred in the course of doing their research, or how they felt. The action learning set itself is seen as a source of learning about organisation dynamics, what Reynolds and Trehan (2001) have termed 'classroom as real world'. Because of the population in Birmingham, UK, the ALS is typically a source of gender, ethnic, age and occupational diversity, where issues mirror some of the patterns in organisations and society. Students are encouraged to reflect upon, act on and learn from their feelings and experiences of the ensuing value and power dynamics.

Reflexivity is seen as integral to learning and self-development in several fields: adult learning (Jarvis, 1987), work-based reflective practice (Argyris & Schon, 1974) and qualitative research (Blaxter *et al.*, 2001). A key principle of the programme is that through the combination of action learning sets, process facilitation, and action research not only do participants learn about others and about organisational dynamics, but they also learn about themselves. This is taken further on the MSc where participants write a critical self-reflection paper, which is an autobiographical reflection on their development. They are encouraged to identify core assumptions and the contextual influences on them, as well as to understand some of their patterns. Depending on their particular focus, individuals may be introduced to critical concepts derived from such areas as feminism, post-colonial literature, marxism, social constructionism, or critical pedagogy.

The programme approach is informed by three key assumptions about learning. Firstly, of encouraging participants to become aware of their theories-in-use (Argyris & Schon, 1974); secondly, to think critically, as Carr and Kemmis say of action research: '. . . a deliberate process for emancipating practitioners from the often unseen constraints of assumption, habit, precedent, coercion and ideology.' (1986, p. 192). Thirdly, informed by Bateson's (1973) and Belenky *et al.*'s theories on levels of learning (1986), tutors also encourage participants to value their own experience and insights; to make their own models, in other words, to create theory from practice.

In summary, we argue this programme can be construed as critical action learning because of its foundation on principles of praxis, process, proactivity and reflexivity in the course of action learning.

Methodology—ethnography and dialogue

A case study approach was taken to gain an in-depth understanding of these issues. Case studies are appropriate research strategies when the focus is on contemporary

phenomena in their real life context and when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly defined (Yin, 1994). The selection of cases we have collated takes two forms, firstly, based on individual students and secondly, at the level of action learning sets. The cases selected for presentation here are purposeful, based on the criteria of whether they help elucidate the research questions. There is no intention to generalize from the conclusions of these particular cases to make claims about what will always happen. We are well aware that the purposeful sample might not represent others.

The research material is derived from an ethnographic approach whereby the authors, as participant observers, recorded their accounts of events and verbatim quotes, and collected documents in the form of student reflective papers. The sense-making took the form of pair dialogue whereby the two authors shared their experiences and material, explored and questioned each others' interpretations and co-generated this account. As tutors and facilitators spending an average of 4–6 hours per week with 3 or 4 action learning sets each, and over a time period of 9 months a year, we were well placed to adopt an ethnographic approach to studying the question. As part of our own reflective practice, it is common amongst the staff team to exchange our experiences within action learning sets, particularly to expose our assumptions and proposed actions to critique. Our context lends itself to ethnography because of the possibilities to collect accounts, to observe actions and processes and to explore the feelings, thoughts and meanings people attribute to situations, as they happen. As Hammersley and Atkinson say of ethnography:

> . . . it involves the ethnographer participating, overtly or covertly, in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions—in fact, collecting whatever data are available to shed light on the issues that are the focus of the research. (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995, p. 1)

Tony Watson suggests ethnography is an extension of the processes we use in everyday life: 'Ethnographic research involves feeling one's way in confusing circumstances, struggling to make sense of ambiguous messages, reading signals, looking around, listening all the time, coping with conflicts and struggling to achieve tasks through establishing and maintaining a network of relationships. But that is what we do all the time as human beings.' (Watson, 1994, p. 8).

Wolcott (1995) makes a valuable, clarifying distinction between ethnography as method and as outcome: 'The term refers both to the *processes* for accomplishing it—ordinarily involving original fieldwork and always requiring the reorganization and editing of material for presentation—and to the presentation itself, the *product* of that research, which ordinarily takes its form in prose' (pp. 82–83). He says '. . . a genuinely ethnographic approach provides both a sense of structure for conducting fieldwork and a commitment to cultural interpretation.' (Wolcott, 1995, p. 108).

Four cases are presented here, three of course participants, who we have given the pseudonyms Kath, Jane and Rav, and the fourth an action learning set encounter as recounted by the set facilitator.[1] The material for the action learning set was the set

facilitator's account noted down immediately following the set meeting. The research material used for the three individuals comprised critical reflection papers they wrote during the course as an assessed assignment. This has been with their consent, although a 'yes' is not as ethically unproblematic as it might sound. There are asymmetrical power relations between tutors and students (Oakley, 1981), which could have placed an obligation on the student to consent. Although in this instance these were professional adults, and fee-paying customers of this programme, we nevertheless had influence over their course award and consent could have been seen as an exchange for the quality of that award. For this reason we did not broach the question of using these students' work as research material until after they had completed their course and received their award. We tried to mitigate the power asymmetry so that there would be no implications of non-consent. However, what did the students believe they were consenting to? The power relationship is also asymmetrical in terms of unequal knowledge about the writing/publishing process between academics and students. In negotiating consent, we explained why, how and where their words might get used, but we are aware that their relative lack of familiarity with academic knowledge production rituals may well have meant their perspective on the process differs significantly from the actuality. This is a key reason why we chose to change names so as to protect anonymity.

We could have made this a jointly owned production, with the students' stories presented in their own names, and this is an approach to writing we have sometimes used. However, such apparent equity is also not without contradictions. Our belief is that a common, erroneous assumption in ethnographic texts is that the data will reveal its patterns, rather than that the author imposes an order (Denzin, 1989, Marshall, 1995). In this paper our intention is to present extracts of course participants' own voices, but we do not pretend that the story speaks for itself. As Marshall has argued: 'there is no one true story; there are many possible tellings' (1995, p. 30), and this is the story we have constructed.

In compiling the extracts presented we decided we wanted to tell each story in some fullness, and we also wanted to incorporate some general commentary on the themes and issues raised. We wanted to ensure that the stories presented were told in some detail and from the perspective of the person concerned. As such the extracts are their own unedited words. However, it is important to note that, anxious as we were to represent the perspectives of those being researched, the illustrations presented are our construction. We make no claim to be neutral reporters, but we attempt a degree of plausibility and authenticity by allowing the reader to judge for him/herself something of the way we influenced events. This approach 'enables researchers to place themselves at the interface between persons, stories and organisations, and to place the person in emotional and organisational context' (Van Maanen *et al.*, quoted in Czarniawska, 1998, p. v). Validity will be judged in terms of its use-value to the reader and its reasonableness to the original participants.

The illustrations are the heart of this paper and exemplify the focus of each theme. Each illustration is transcribed exactly as it was written or told and the ensuing

discussion illuminates a particular issue or issues, interspersing our commentary, reflection and theoretical insights and questions to portray our sense-making of the issues raised. In the light of our research questions, this process focused particularly on the following themes:

- What participants said about their learning?
- How this corresponds with the theoretical hopes for critical action learning

Illustrations of critical learning

Introduction

These illustrations show some of the ways programme participants talk about their experiences of critical action learning. The first three illustrations are direct extracts from students' own writing. The fourth is a facilitator's account including direct quotations of students' speech. The illustrations are presented as indicative of three themes: challenged perspectives on managing, transformed perspectives on self and adjustments to social relations.

Illustration one: Jane—challenged perspectives on managing

This illustration provides an example of a participant being provoked by her course experiences to reflect on how she managed and to draw parallels between social dynamics of action learning group and work organisation.

> The action learning sets of the DMS/MSc courses represented a move towards the critical approach to management education, where the frustrations, power differentials, indifferences and conflicts which occur within groups can be focused upon and treated as topics for the exploration of management issues that are sensitive to our everyday experience. By focusing on our experiences as students in the action learning set context, a basis was provided for critical reflection on that experience as a means of countering our conventional knowledge about the world . . . I had not considered management in these terms before, particularly in relation to its significance in terms of the structural inequalities of society. However, during the DMS course my perceptions of management were changing. . . .
>
> By being encouraged to look at issues about my power base and my influence over others within the context of the culture of my organisation and my profession, I was moving towards a critically reflective position which began to question some of my underlying assumptions about management as a discipline, as well as about me as an individual. However, whilst considering issues in relation to both the personal power and position power I am able to wield, I began to reflect on how inequalities and power differences within society can be mirrored in organizations, obvious examples being in relation to equality of opportunity for staff; and the need for managers to address their personal role in perpetuating these inequalities.
>
> I hope it will make me a better manager, but in a strange way that seems less important now. The main thing is that I have given myself permission to be a real live fallible person and I like myself much better for it."

Illustration two: Kath—challenged perspectives on managing

This illustration is an example of questioning management, where ideas from critical management helped the student to develop new perspectives on ways of being, both in relation to her sense of self and in relation to others as a manager.

> Throughout the DMS course I was continually questioning, both in my personal and in my working life. I began to challenge ideas which I had previously accepted. An example of this was when I realised I was uncomfortable with the style of my immediate line manager. His whole ethical and moral standpoint on some issues led me into conflict situations. I recall a time when I had taken a serious staff issue to him to discuss. When I discussed it with him, I informed him that the staff would like him to be present at a meeting to discuss the issue he said "You keep them quiet, it will blow over. They are just looking for extra money." He told me that if I had any trouble, I should remind them that they were lucky to have jobs. We had what could only be described as an argument over this issue. He exploded and told me to stop being "an emotional woman" and basically implied that my hormones were amiss. . . . The situation was exacerbated when one day he told me that I was "taking the touchy feely stuff I was learning too far." I decided that if I was going to work with this individual I would have to "toughen up". I therefore used my manager as a role model.

> On reflection I did exactly what Steinberg and Shapiro (1982, pp. 306–310)[2] describe in their research. They argue that female managers may exaggerate the masculine facets of their personality to help them compete more effectively in managerial roles.. . . For a while it seemed to work well. I was promoted by the organisation and my working life was very successful. I did have doubts about some of the ethical issues. We seemed to be ignoring staff morale and well-being in order to look efficient and therefore produced an extremely task-led environment, which appeared very successful. On reflection what we were doing according to Wilmott (1994, p. 107) was "Representing management as a predominantly technical activity [that] creates an illusion of neutrality. Management theory is sanitised and management practice is seemingly distanced from the structures of power and interest that inescapably are a condition and consequence of its emergence and development".

> Alvesson and Wilmott (1996) argue that even when women and ethnic minorities join the ranks of management, a condition of entry and promotion is adherence to established values of white middle class males. This is exactly what happened to me. I had been moulded by my manager and organisation. I was being managed, I was being controlled.

> . . . I tried to find another role model for my career as a manager, one that was closer to what I believed in and I found it very difficult. Deep in thought whilst writing this paper, my Mother came to mind. She needed all the skills of management and used them to produce the challenging task of bringing up a family of six. She was a member of a large Irish family, she came to England when she was seventeen, having left school at fourteen. She taught us the values of sharing, considering other people's feelings, listening and above all, honesty. These are qualities which are still fundamental to my struggle to become a successful manager and qualities which I feel are paramount in any individual, so why should they be compromised as a manager? I have therefore decided that my mother may be one of the most successful managers I know.

> . . . In conclusion . . . I now feel confident to trust my instinct and manage in the style which compliments my ethical and moral beliefs".

Illustration three: Rav—transformed perspectives on self

This illustration gives an example of questioning self as student reflects on his strong feelings using Habermas theory of perspective transformation to make connections between his ways of being at work, at home and on the course.

> I found the first day of the (MSc) programme to be a very frustrating, confusing and stressful occasion . . . Groups were already beginning to form, some by arbitrary interaction and some by previous recognition. I found myself waiting for acceptance by somebody, anybody so that I would feel involved. Instead I observed a natural grouping and 'herding' process driven by the other white students. I was beginning to feel very lonely, isolated and devalued. Was I not good enough to join 'their' groups? I remember feeling an intense rage of anger, and annoyance was setting in, until I was suddenly approached by a student. I immediately calmed down and soon realised that my new organisation was to comprise of two other Asian students (the only other ones on the course).
>
> By the second week of the programme (we) were hoping that we may have been able to attract any late starters to the course so that our number and composition could 'improve'. However, this was not the case and we discovered that a couple of 'white' new starters had already joined other groups. At this stage we were introduced to our group facilitator, who also happened to be an Asian individual. It was at this first 'group' meeting that a different and somewhat worrying side to me emerged. I recall leading a discussion with the other two, and the group facilitator, regarding how a group of three Asian students would be perceived by the other predominately white groups and also external organisations, in our pursuit of consultancy work. I was very uncomfortable with the whole situation and felt almost rejected and unwanted despite reassurances from the other two group members and our facilitator. In fact at one point during this meeting I was so emotional that I suggested that the group be dissolved and that we each attach ourselves to one of the other larger white groups. This was not appreciated by the others and so in a fit of paranoia I stormed out of the room and approached two other groups to ascertain whether I could become a 'member'. . . . On my return to the group meeting it was clear that the others were disgusted by my actions and felt very disappointed. The facilitator asked me why I felt it necessary to go 'cap in hand' in the manner that I did. My return home that night was even more stressful and emotionally charged.
>
> At our third group meeting I was notified by the other two groups . . . that they were still considering my request (for entry). At this point I felt angry and humiliated, but to my surprise I decided to change my strategy. My other two group members were quick to point out that I had in fact experienced a covert act of rejection, which they had previously experienced in their own organisations. Suddenly, the bonding was back and we reaffirmed our commitment to complete the MSc and 'show them how good we were'. How dare they reject us, we were three experienced and talented Asian professionals who were capable and now willing to take on the world! . . . To this end I didn't engage in any social interaction with the other groups, and our group very soon became detached and isolated from the 'new organisation'. . . .
>
> Formulating this paper has forced me to conceptualise and analyse my actions and learning—Why did I behave in this manner? Do I have a fear of white domination? Am I unable to accept rejection? Why did I feel the need to 'overcompensate'? This experience does also force me to ask the question 'How good am I at managing my emotion?'

By the end of his paper, having explored these questions, he concluded:

> Habermas' work has certainly helped me to analyse and question my experiences and underlying beliefs and values, and thereby exposed my true development needs.

Illustration 4: an action learning set exchange

This group dialogue, recounted by the group's facilitator, illustrates how action learning can be a source of learning about and transformation of social relations. During the dialogue there are challenges to some people's understandings, whilst support and validation are offered to others.

A group of six were a newly formed action learning set. The members were Nirmal, a Sikh man, Wolé, from Nigeria, Dave, a white man, Sally, a white woman, Geoff, a white man and Mohamoud, a Somali refugee. The group's facilitator was a white woman. After 4 weeks of meeting and just prior to going on a one week residential Mohamoud told the other group members he was likely to have to withdraw from the course because he could not finance the course fees, so he wouldn't be attending the residential.

On the residential Sally, joined the group, transferring from a different set. As they all sat talking one afternoon, Geoff told Sally of the group's history and Mohamoud's probable departure.

> Geoff: So that's why Mohamoud's not here. But it's probably just as well because he wasn't a very good communicator. We couldn't understand him very well.
>
> Facilitator: Did the group consider cultural differences?
>
> [There was no answer.]
>
> Sally: Look it's almost tea-time, shall we stop for a break now?
>
> [There was an awkwardness in the room and this suggestion appeared welcomed by most with relief. Despite the attempted avoidance of an uncomfortable issue, after the tea-break, the subject was revisited.]
>
> Wolé: If I don't say something now I'm not going to be able to work with this group. It's been said that Mohamoud is a poor communicator. You should consider that he speaks six languages and he does not have a communication problem. If people find it difficult to understand him it's because they're not being patient. I'd say it's them who have the communication problem. If something like this was said at work I would almost feel obliged to report it to authority because the behaviour displayed was racist.
>
> I've been observing over the weeks the body language people show to Mohamoud, how people cut him out when he talks, the ways people look impatient when he starts talking just because he has a way of expressing something that is different from those who speak English as their first language. I've been thinking how the way people behave towards him would destroy his confidence. You have no understanding of the structure of Mohamoud's first language which will influence how he speaks English. And I feel you would have been patient if the person was French or German. So I think the behaviour displayed by the listeners was racist.
>
> [The other group members looked taken aback]
>
> Geoff sat back defensively: 'I'm not a racist'
>
> Facilitator: Wolé didn't say you were a racist as a person, he said that what you said about Mohamoud's communication can be perceived as racist.
>
> Wolé: Many small everyday actions and statements can feel racist even though the person might not mean them to be. Take my name for example, you've been finding it hard to say Wolé, so you've juts anglicised it to Wally. But my name is very precious to

> me. I was given it by my parents at birth and it has a real meaning for me. To have a name given is like naming a dog and it's not what I'd want.'
>
> Dave to Nirmal: I know I've kept calling you the wrong name and you ended up saying just call me Norman, because that's what they do at your work.
>
> Nirmal: Yeh, I would rather you called me my proper name. But it's like there's so many little ways that you get put down, you just give up battling on some things.'
>
> Sally: Do you mean like last night in the bar when you had to wait ages to get served. And then Matt from that other group just walked up and got served straight off?

Two weeks after the residential the group have met twice more. Mohamoud has continued on the course. The facilitator described Geoff and Dave as visibly trying hard not to repeat their earlier behaviour towards Mohamoud. She recounted one incident as illustrative:

> [The group were planning a presentation based on what they 'd learnt about team building from the residential. Nirmal had written a skit modelling the group on Black Adder, complete with medieval English.]
>
> Geoff: This is great, but we must remember that not everyone in the group has English in their first language so maybe we shouldn't use the Shakespearean English.
>
> Wolé: Yes, although you can't make the assumption that we won't understand. I've read quite a lot of Shakespeare myself.

And on it goes . . .

Discussion: hopes and concerns

This article set out to draw from our experience of working with critical action learning and to present purposively selected illustrations to raise questions of what outcomes critical action learning can have for participants, and to explore what critical action learning can offer management development and business education?

One of the most striking observations is the unusual degree of space for learning from and about emotion, power and diversity. We argue that this is not only fundamental to a transformatory potential from engagement in critical action learning, but also that, even in the normative terms of business education and management development it has a performative benefit in helping managers prepare for operating in contexts of diversity, complexity and everyday politics of organisation. However, we will also discuss how, simultaneously, these same issues also provide cause for caution and self-reflection by course tutors in the use of critical action learning.

Learning about and learning to be—power, emotion and diversity

The challenge of working with a diverse community on a management development programme is that issues emerge which might not be obvious for more homogeneous student groups. One of the hopes of a learning community is that it is egalitarian, democratic and empowering of the learners (McGill & Beaty, 1995; Pedler, 1988). The illustrations of Rav and the action learning set exchange, in particular

demonstrate how action learning groups tend to mirror the socio-dynamics of wider society, so they can easily recreate oppressive environments that silence and disempower some participants. This highlights how the concept of learning 'community' can be problematic, and cannot be intepreted naively to imply that action learning creates a non-hierarchical environment. Assumptions such as openness and honesty, are called into question by the imbalances of power, status and social/cultural capital that exist within groups that are mixed in race, gender and class terms. However, herein lies the potential of 'classroom as realworld' (as Reynolds & Trehan (2001) have demonstrated). Within the diversity and the power imbalances lies great potential for learning, not only about power and inequity, but also about how to be. All four of the illustrations above convey examples of how participants say they have adjusted their self-perceptions or perceptions of others and have consequently made changes to how they inter-relate to others.

Politicisation of insight into their role as a manager are most clearly displayed in the illustrations of Jane and Kath, as they drew conclusions from the critical action learning process about power and powerlessness. Such politicisation was evident in an awareness of the wider social or political implications of their work, their making connections between an awareness of their own power in relation to others at work, and their accounts of an emergent sense of responsibility over how to be in their roles as they talk of carrying new understandings of the dynamics of their organisations as well as acquiring a more critical view of the function and practice of managing.

Emotions were often provoked by experiences of power and powerlessness, though this was not the exclusive provocation. However, a key aspect evident in the illustrations above is the space within the programme for emotion and its validity as a source of learning. In one sense action learning is inevitably going to be emotionally charged since, as Vince has argued:

> Approaches to learning that break free of dependency on the teacher, and place emphasis on the responsibilities of the learner, always create anxiety. (Vince, 1996, p. 121)

However, going beyond this, emotions are evident as a source of significant learning in two additional ways. Firstly, the dynamics of action learning sets—their processes of organising, often provoke emotions. Attending to and making sense of these is a rich source of experiential learning about organisational behaviour. Secondly, the process of critical reflection provides language and concepts which help people acknowledge and make sense of feelings they may have long carried, but ignored, for example, over tensions and contradictions they experience. We argue that the result has a performative benefit in that the learning is transferable to management (Fineman, 1999). As Vince (2002, p. 73) has more recently argued:

> The importance of psychodynamic theory to the study of organizational learning is that it provides one way of thinking about the inseparability of emotion and politics, and acknowledges that this relationship is at the heart of what it means both to learn and to organise.

Transformational hopes?

Can we be optimistic that critical action learning might lead to more critical management practice? Whilst the study is small it demonstrates the possibilities for critical action learning to contribute to a management and business education that develops a critical management practice. The illustrations suggest critical action learning has potential to be transformational, although not inevitably so. Experiences of politicisation would seem to fulfil the hopes for a more critical management learning expressed by writers such as Fay, (1987) and Alvesson and Willmott, (1992). However, this is by no means inevitable and it is also important to differentiate between the transformatory potential of critical management learning at individual, organizational and societal levels.

At the first level, that of the individual, the claims of critical management learning have perhaps most potential to be realised. The illustrations above provide some evidence of personal transformation, or perspective transformation (Habermas, 1972), in that participants talk of the course triggering far-reaching changes and rethinking about how they interact at work or enact their management roles. The course appeared to act as a catalyst, bringing into focus existing tensions and contradictions, and provoking new learning about themselves and other people, and about being a manager. In each of the three individual illustrations above people made new connections between disparate elements of their lives, particularly through gaining insight into their own inner tensions. In Weil and McGill's terms, they ceased to fragment their experience (1989). At a societal level many claims for critical management learning seem very optimistic, in that there is no inherent link between an individual's critical learning which they might find personally transformatory, and how they might use that socially, regardless of the constraints they might face on their actions. At an organization level individual transformation may have wider transformatory potential. For example, critical ideas may 'empower' an individual to deploy critical management practices at work because it has provided an alternative to technicist management and perhaps legitimised pre-existing values. However, it could well be that a critical management awareness, in heightening the manager's awareness of power, merely enhances their ability to influence more effectively. The consequence may or may not be emancipatory for anyone.

Even the notion of personal transformation is not necessarily without its problems. Lather, for example, criticises the fashion for exalting empowerment as 'individual self-assertion, upward mobility and the psychological experience of feeling powerful' (1991:3). Beyond this, however, are concerns over the disruptive potential of critical self-reflection.

Discomfort, dissonance, disruption or damage?

Critical reflection has been recognised as having potential to disturb or to provoke dissonance amongst participants (Brookfield, 1994; Reynolds, 1999). Drawing on Vince's (1996) argument of the inevitability of change and anxiety in management

learning, such provocation or dissonance—even if uncomfortable at times—can be seen as potentially productive, and not something to shy away from.

Jane, Kath and Rav's illustrations can all be interpreted as experiences of dissonance which produced perspective transformation, where it can be said that they formed new understandings of their lives and experiences, making new connections between disparate parts of their lives. Each, to some degree, experienced disruption to previously held views of self, management, their organisation, or society. Herein lies a potential echo of Brookfield's (1994) concerns about the disruptive potential of critical reflection. For example, it could be said of the action learning set exchange illustration, that the group dynamics had only just begun to unfold and the questions group members might be asking themselves have not and might not reach resolutions.

Potential disruption is also raised by the illustration of Kath. Her confidence in changing her management style, which she conveys in a positive tone, also carries potential for discord at work, between her approach to her role with transformed perspective and an employer who wants conformity to cultural norms. Employers do not intend that the outcome of management development is disillusioned, unsettled or demanding managers, and there could be adverse consequences for a manager who begins to challenge inappropriately, and perhaps naively.

The four illustrations above do not show evidence of damage to participants, but there is potential in the sense that the direction and end-point of critical self-reflection once begun is not readily predictable. For example, how does a newly radicalised manager sustain their critical reflectivity if they remain in an unsupportive organisation? There can be concern over the impact on an individual who, through their critical reflections, becomes unsettled at work and yet is powerless to make changes, either to the organisation or to their individual situation. This resonates with a general criticism of the personal growth and development movement: that it emphasises individual action, but creates no basis for social change or collective empowerment. (McGill & Weil, 1989).

Concluding thoughts

In this paper we have presented illustrations from course participants drawn from our experience of working with critical action learning in management development. We have identified some of the ways in which core facets of critical action learning, such as emotion, power and diversity can simultaneously be the source of critical learning whilst also carrying potential to be disempowering. Whilst the study is small it demonstrates the possibilities that critical action learning can contribute to a management and business education that develops a more critical management practice. We also conclude that critical action learning has a performative benefit in that experiences of power, politics and emotion offer potential for significant learning both about management and about being a manager. The illustrations presented here suggest that the hope that critical action learning might be transformational is not misplaced, in that course participants talked of personal transformations, as well as new social and political perspectives. However, there is no inevitable flow between individual

transformatory learning and critical practice at an organizational or societal level. A final and important conclusion is that critical action learning is not without some risk for participants, in that dissonance provoked could be excessively disruptive. This highlights that there are implications for working with critical action learning, in terms of our own skills, awareness and critical self-reflection.

Implications for tutors

Unresolved dissonance most starkly raises the question of tutors' responsibility for provoking disruption in the process of critical action learning. Does the fact that the experience for some participants might be difficult suggest we should disengage from critical action learning? This is not an argument we would support: learning and change are frequently uncomfortable. However, it does highlight a need for facilitators to be reflexive about their own awareness and practice around race and gender issues. In the three students' illustrations a key factor was the literature we were able to introduce which helped them make sense of their experiences. It was also fundamental to have individual knowledge of each student in order to gauge what might be appropriate for them. Yet how extensive is our knowledge of the literature, which could be drawn from sociology, literature, management, black studies, women's studies, psychology or beyond? This illustrates both our power to influence, and our limitations, particularly as individual tutors.

Tutors and emotion

It is quite common for tutors to be on the receiving end of course participants' anger as well as to observe within the action learning sets a range of emotional behaviour such as withdrawal, silence, aggression and scape-goating. A psychodynamic perspective can both help participants make sense of such behaviour as well as inform facilitation. Tutors have to develop a resilience in the face of participants' emotions as well as the insights to interpret them and the skills to facilitate groups and individuals.

We have found Vince's work on emotions in learning to be very helpful in conceptualising how we as tutors engage with course participants' anxiety about new situations. He maintains that individuals can respond to their anxiety, either by entering a cycle that promotes learning, or a cycle that discourages learning. The first cycle moves from anxiety, through uncertainty, to taking risks, struggle, and reaching insight or authority, and a sense of empowerment. However, if the fear of uncertainty is too great, an individual will resist, responding with fight or flight, denial, avoidance, defensiveness, and ultimately maintaining 'willing ignorance' (Vince, 1996, pp. 122–123).

Our experience reminds us of the power that lecturers can have to influence students' lives, which clearly places a responsibility on us to question our own intents, motives and practices. Tutors have to be prepared for emotionality and conflict, and be aware of our own needs and impetuses. It is also incumbent on us to be humble about the superiority of our perspectives, to query the roots of our

own assumptions and to be reflexive about our own awareness and practice around race and gender issues. Diversity in a staff group is therefore essential, to straddle the literature that can be offered, to be present as varying individuals that different students can approach, and also to challenge and stretch each other. We need to be constantly developing ourselves, in a sense mirroring the risk-taking we ask course participants to engage in. As we ask of our students, we also need to be engaged in reflexive practice.

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Notes

1.   Names and other identifying details have been changed to protect anonymity.
2.   This is the reference as presented in the original student paper, but full bibliographic detail was not given there and the authors of this article have not been able to trace the original source.

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