MOVING ACTION LEARNING SETS ONLINE: REFLECTING ON PRIVACY, INTERSECTIONALITY AND GROUP FAILURE

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Abstract

This paper provides an account of my experience and insights gained while navigating the transition of Action Learning Sets (ALS), initially conducted face-to-face, into an online format during the COVID 19 lockdowns. Employing autoethnography as the methodological approach, this account allows for a critical reflection of my professional practice and the lessons I learnt from this process in relation to the wider social landscape that influenced these experiences during this particular period. Reflecting on 6 Action Learning Sets that moved online, I explore the online space as the context in which professional, student and family identities intersect. Within this context, issues of privacy, trust, intersectionality and group failure surface, calling for the need to redesign ALS for online contexts in ways that provide inclusive, safe and effective learning.

1.0 Introduction and conceptual framework

The change we thought might take years to materialize happened overnight when all university classes, workshops and meetings moved online in 2019. There is no scope here to discuss the specifics of why and how it happened or go into long discussions about COVID 19, as the focus of this paper lies in an autoethnographic exploration of conducting Action Learning Sets online. Evaluating what worked, what didn’t work and what perhaps could have worked better, this study aims to shed light on the challenges and potential of collaborative problem solving online.

According to Pedler (2008) Action Learning is an approach to individual and organisational development. Working in small groups known as ‘sets’, people tackle important organisational issues or problems and learn from their attempts to change things. Developed by physicist Reg Revans in the 1950’s as a way to educate managers, Action Learning challenged traditional, prescriptive methods of learning and repositioned learning and development into a social context. Action Learning occurs mainly in Action Learning Sets (ALS) providing a space for productive dialogue, problem solving and testing hypotheses (Kehdr et al. 2022). Revans (1998) designed this methodology to integrate: Research into what is unclear, Learning about what is unknown and Action to resolve a problem. Involving complex interpersonal
relationships and processes (Yeadon-Lee 2013) ALSs can be sensitive to changes and power dynamics. Vince (2004) acknowledges the political dimension within ALS which can potentially be revealed, discussed and transformed.

Aiming to start a discussion on redesigning ALS for online spaces, in this autoethnographic account, I connect my experience of interactions and processes in online ALS to uncover wider issues of privacy, intersectionality and the challenges inherent in group learning. This is important in the context of current educational practices and the paradigm shift towards co-creation in learning (Bovill 2020, Elg et al. 2012) which emphasizes active participation in learning with the potential of creating inclusive and innovative learning environments. The theoretical framework guiding this paper follows process relational perspectives exploring mainly the ways in which intersecting identities (Crenshaw 1991) are constituted within online interactions and learning experiences.

From this perspective, the online space is approached as a context within which different identities intersect in complex ways, challenging the ways in which traditionally collaborative learning modalities work. Shotter’s (2011) ‘withness thinking’ provides a valuable framework for dialogic interaction, exploring how learning unfolds within an action learning set. Proximity is not necessarily a prerequisite for embodying learning or for our ‘expressive responsive understanding’ (Shotter 2005). Instead, it is the quality of presence, of listening and being aware of the ‘spontaneous responsiveness of our living bodies’ (Shotter 2004) that shapes the dialogic relationship. The conditions within which this can happen can offer insights for designing or rather redesigning Action Learning Sets for online contexts in ways that maintain privacy and allow for safe enactment and exploration of identity intersections.

I have intentionally omitted Vygotsky in my analysis to concentrate on the dynamics and complexity of interactions instead of the process of constructing meaning. To explore ALS resilience during change, I draw upon Haslam and Reicher’s (Haslam and Reicher 2006, 2007 and Reicher and Haslam 2006) ideas on social identity and group failure.

2.0 Writing Autoethnography

Reflection is often used in qualitative research in the form of reflexivity (Alvesson and Skoldberg 2000, Taylor and White 2000) or reflective practice (Schon 1983). Critical reflection
as a methodological approach, is part of ethnographic research, where the researcher becomes deeply immersed in the research, engaging in observations while reflecting on both the research process and personal experiences. This process demands a deliberate and systematic introspection by the researcher, constituting a critical aspect of qualitative research. Critical reflection is particularly prevalent within phenomenological and hermeneutic approaches, where the researcher’s subjectivity and experience play a pivotal role in understanding their positionality.

Autoethnography (Ellis and Bochner 2000) as a qualitative research method, involves reflective writing that delves into the researcher’s lived experience to uncover and address social and cultural challenges. While sharing some commonalities with other reflective methods like autobiography or storytelling, what sets autoethnography apart is its utilization of personal experiences to critically evaluate broader cultural contexts. Sparkes (2013) suggests it is a mode of being and a mode of knowing, involving cultural interpretation and connecting self and others. What the autoethnographic researcher needs to pay attention to is to not indulge in self-ruminations (Sparkes 2002) but to mostly use this method to live an ‘examined life’ so as to increase caring for others and contribution to the common good (Holman Jones, Adams and Ellis 2013). In this way, autoethnography serves as a tool for self-transformation and for reshaping both our thinking and research practices.

Autoethnography involves navigating multiple layers of consciousness and facilitates the connection of personal experiences to broader cultural contexts. The process involves going back and forth several times between introspection and the exploration of sociocultural aspects of personal experience until they meld into an intertwined whole. In my exploration, I found it to be a process that requires vulnerability, where I often came to examine, question and challenge aspects of my identity, role, memory and my own writing. While this paper draws upon a) my notes for six ALS b) my personal journal/diary and c) my recollections of that period of time, it is important to clarify that the perspective presented in this work does not represent the viewpoints of the ALS participants but rather my individual perspectives and interpretations of the context of the COVID 19 lockdowns and the transition of face-to-face ALS to an online format.

From a practical perspective, in my process, I encountered challenges with my diaries, which, while extensive, presented issues due to unclear handwriting, a mix of Greek and English text
and the use of nicknames for individuals whose identities I can no longer remember. Thankfully, my notes from the ALS were more organised and legible, though they primarily consisted of factual information and lacked evaluative comments.

Critiques of autoethnography often revolve around the potential for self-indulgence in the process and around questions regarding its validity, as this methodology is considered to be too subjective to ensure rigorous research outcomes. To address these concerns, I adopt a continuous questioning approach drawing on Winkler’s (2018) emphasis on regularly evaluating to what extend does my story enable me and the readers to understand culture as well as on Gorichanaz’ (2021) suggestion to keep asking: ‘How does this move us forward?’ as a valuable tool to improve the methodological rigour of this research.

3.0 Action Learning Sets as learning spaces.
During the transition to online, the ALS setting changed. Working at the university provided a professional space designed specifically to facilitate group processes whereas for the online ALS, we were sitting at sofas at home, in bedrooms or dining tables. This also allowed for individual ‘spacing out’ looking at others’ backgrounds, colours and to add more distraction, family members were moving about at the back of screens, often turning to look at the screen. Due to this being a lockdown, the whole family was at home, there was not enough professional space for everyone in the household and the allocation of space seemed to prioritise work over studies and from this managerialist way of thinking the person with the greater financial contribution would be allocated more resources and not the student. It was different for everyone, but I wondered if it was always the husband/father who was allocated ‘the office’ the most suitable space at home for work or even the person with the most important or highest paid job. We were all from different backgrounds, genders and ethnicities which calls for further research into the sociocultural dimensions that influence the allocation of space and by extension the experience of learning.

4.0 Online ALSs as contexts for identity experimentation
Within this context, participants were bringing their professional, student and personal/family selves into the set, holding interesting polarities between intersecting identities. The boundaries that once kept our professional, academic and personal identities fragmented started dissolving, inviting a confluence of identities within and between us, further increasing the complexity of
the learning space. Here the focus of the discussion shifts towards an exploration of identity intersections that lie in the context of interaction as shaped by the online ALS environment as well as on the complexity of identities.

Participants were also enacting their relational identities, introducing their significant others, children, spouses and pets to the set. The introduction of elements from our personal lives into the academic setting intensified identity work.

5.0 Online ALS as spaces of self-regulation and control

Within the online setting there can be a ‘Panopticon’ (Foucault 1977) effect where individuals do not know when they are being observed so they are in a state of constant self-regulating during the action learning set. This invisible surveillance was felt as being in a constant state of self-monitoring demanding a continuous performance of attentiveness. This creates the effect of allowing the mind, as the part that is not being observed, to rebel or to seek the freedom to wander.

What mostly concerned me was the issue of privacy, also mentioned by several facilitators and students. When family members were seen to be walking back and forth at the background, it was not possible for facilitators to safeguard a safe space, resulting in discussions not being as open as they could be. This intrusion, however unintentional, restricted my ability as facilitator to create a safe space for participants and reduced the depth and openness of our discussions. I sensed clear hesitancy by ALS participants to share as openly, possible being self-conscious about being overheard by their and others’ family or just to avoid family scrutiny.

The change left us disconcerted, in a fragmented state, thinking the set can continue from where we were left working in person together. From this I learnt that a new norming stage should have been actioned where the ALS would discuss how their ground rules would work in the online setting and what new ground rules and values should be set. This would have allowed the set to start anew and develop in the same way any new group develops.

To me, the compromise of the privacy and safety of the ALS space undermines its purpose and reduces its effectiveness as a method for learning. This calls for rethinking the evolving online ALS modalities to secure their privacy, safety and authenticity.
6.0 Online ALS as contexts for enacting group dynamics

Apart from the issue of privacy mentioned above, the online environment tends to allow for disengagement. This does not necessarily reflect the individual or the team. Haslam and Reicher (2006) suggest that, although the context as well as individual characteristics are important for the development of group, it is group failure that can lead to chaos. This resonates with my experience as I observed ALS groups dissociating, dismantling or misfunctioning when moving online. The question then shifts towards the underlying causes of disengagement. Was it the change in setting that unsettled the groups, or were there other, more intricate dynamics at play? Why did one of the ALS maintain its structure and effectiveness? These questions have taught me there are multiple ways of navigating the complexities of group interaction. In this section I will be exploring the question How do we analyse the complex interrelation of resilience factors within individual lives and across shared experiences?

7.0 Conclusions

Through this autoethnographic journey, the challenges encountered do not suggest that ALS cannot take place online but, rather they emphasise the need for innovation, calling for reimagining and redesigning ALS for the particularities of the digital space, ensuring privacy, inclusivity and safety in learning. The scope of autoethnography is not to generalize but to reveal nuanced, personal experiences that can inform broader understandings of intersectionality, online ALS interactions and innovation in learning practices. In its entirety, this working paper will seek to explore the connections between deep personal experiences and wider sociocultural challenges. Further, systematic research is needed to help provide insights on designing Action Learning Sets for online contexts which can facilitate inclusive, effective and safe learning.
References


