Action learning in virtual higher education: applying leadership theory

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ABSTRACT
This paper reports the historical foundation of Northeastern University’s course, LDR 6100: Developing Your Leadership Capability, a partial literature review of action learning (AL) and virtual action learning (VAL), a course methodology of LDR 6100 requiring students to apply leadership perspectives using VAL as instructed by the author, questionnaire and survey results of students who evaluated the effectiveness of their application of leadership theories using VAL and insights believed to have been gained by the author administering VAL. Findings indicate most students thought applying leadership perspectives using AL was better than considering leadership perspectives not using AL. In addition as implemented in LDR 6100, more students evaluated VAL positively than did those who assessed VAL negatively.

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Introduction
LDR 6100: Developing Your Leadership Capability, originally numbered LDR 3300, is a master’s-degree and graduate-certificate course in leadership theory, models, approaches and perspectives which has been offered by Northeastern University since December of 2004 in the traditional, on-ground (f2f) format. Later the course was offered in a combination-f2f-and-virtual ‘hybrid’ format and in a virtual-only, 12-week format in December 2005.

During the summers of 2006 and 2007, the virtual leadership-theory course was compressed into eight-week classes and beginning in the fall of 2007 into six-week classes. In all formats throughout the life of the course, the description of LDR 6100 marketed to prospective students promises course participants will consider and apply ‘alternative perspectives of leadership … using action learning (Northeastern University College of Professional Studies n.d.) …’.

This paper includes an overview of action learning (AL) as prescribed in its infancy by Reg Revans, the originator of the concept, his thoughts on AL’s relationship to education, and a review of the application of virtual action learning (VAL) as implemented and reported by Waddill (2006). The implementations of and reflections about AL and VAL as reported by Revans and Waddill are important because their processes and guidance provided the foundation for the development of my particular application of VAL in
LDR 6100. In addition, the paper provides a detailed description of LDR 6100 VAL as delivered October 2014 through June 2015, the effectiveness of VAL and some specific evaluations as reported by students in five LDR 6100 courses, and insights I believe I gained as a result of administering VAL which may be of benefit to others who teach or are considering teaching a higher-education theory-course using VAL.

**AL applied per Revans**

Reg Revans is credited with implementing the first program of AL ‘set up with the National Association of Colliery Managers in 1952’ (Revans 1978, 31) and implemented 1954–1956 (Revans 1982a, 39). The program consisted of 22 managers of different coal-mine operations in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland who met in ‘five sets’ for the purpose of solving four operational problems associated with machinery maintenance, inventory control, underground hauling and employee deployment within each of their operations (Revans 1980, 20). The sets of managers ‘met at each others’ places of work and discussed what they saw there …’ and made ‘practical suggestions that would be tried out …’ (Revans 1982b, 65).

Revans (1978) was very specific about which kinds of ‘real-life problems … participants are to work on … ’ (15). The problems Revans (1978) prescribed follow:

(a) familiar problem in a familiar setting … examine some aspect of his own job; (b) familiar problem in an unfamiliar setting … simplify the wages structure of another enterprise; (c) unfamiliar problem in a familiar setting … simplify the wages of structure of his own company; (d) unfamiliar problem in an unfamiliar setting … the director of a bank sets out to examine the problems of innovation in a shipyard … (15)

The AL procedure as prescribed by Revans (1982b) was specific as well. The AL procedure as reported by Revans (1982b) included each manager explaining to other managers in the set:

(1) What am I (or what is my firm) really trying to do … (2) What is stopping me (or my firm) from doing it? (3) What can I (or my firm) contrive to do about it? … he must then be able to get on and see that the goal is actually attained. It is not enough that he knows what to do and how to do it; he must actually then get it done. (67)

Revans (1982b) elaborated further in relation the nature of AL problems and the procedure of the inner workings of the set. Revans (1982b) prescribed the process as follows:

Nothing is proven in advance: all is found out as the manager gets on with his real task … matching him with three or four others, who then work together, explaining among themselves (with all experts kept out until the managers themselves ask for them) what they see their problems as, what they propose to do about them, what results they expect to follow and so forth. (66)

Within the set itself, managers contributed ‘mutual support, advice and criticism’ (Revans 1982a, 627). In summary then, the role of the participant was maximized and that of the teacher minimized. AL as facilitated in its infancy by Revans consisted of managers who possessed hierarchical power in their organizations and risked personal failure solving real work problems with no predetermined solutions while participating in small groups at their places of work whose members provided support, suggestions and constructive feedback to each other.
AL applied virtually (VAL) per Waddill

Prior to implementation and based on what I knew recently as a result of some of the most recent literature in relation to AL (Marquardt 2011; Marquardt et al. 2009) and VAL (Dickenson, Burgoyne, and Pedler 2010; Pedler, Hauser, and Caulat 2014), I was skeptical about the likelihood of students’ success applying alternative perspectives of leadership using VAL. However, I was encouraged by the account of Waddill (2006) who reported effective implementation of an education course which she labeled as ‘Action E-learning’ in the form of ‘Web-Based Instruction’ (159–160) with ‘twelve … senior managers in different government agencies of the USA who ‘worked in a variety of locations throughout the US’ and ‘were grouped into three groups or sets … of four or five individuals’ (161–162).

Like the course I teach, Waddill’s course was ‘asynchronous … (‘everyone did not have to be online at the same time’) which favors participation by those in different time zones, with complicated schedules or both’ and delivered via Blackboard’s online learning management software system (162). Waddill (2006) required participants to ‘keep a learning journal’ (163) and ‘make a commitment to action and take action to resolve the problem’ (167) as is required in LDR 6100. There was one other similarity in that Waddill (2006) directed her students to post their problems in threaded discussions and to ask and answer questions of and posed by their respective set members each week.

In relation to results, findings and conclusions, Waddill (2006) stated ‘All twelve participants said they learned something about the course, either about action learning or about the problem or both’ and all 10 who completed the course ‘indicated their learning goals were achieved’ (165). However, Waddill (2006) stated the course ‘was five weeks long at the client’s request. When a course is compressed into such a short time frame … , it is difficult to take action on or resolve complex problems … ’ (168).

LDR 6100 online compared to Revans and Waddill

LDR 6100 as taught virtually is significantly different from AL as implemented by Revans (1978, 1980, 1982a, 1982b) and VAL as implemented by Waddill (2006) because neither required participants to implement any academically prescriptive means of leading others while attempting to solve problems. As a matter of fact, Revans (1991) stated his views quite clearly as follows:

Action Learning … was intended, not as an educational instrument, but as an approach to the resolution of management difficulties; the principal motivation to Action Learning was not a desire to teach anybody, nor even the hope that somebody else might learn: it was to do something about the tasks the colliery managers were under contract to master. (10)

Secondly, some of the participants who complete LDR 6100 are not employed nor members of volunteer organizations. Even if course participants are current employees or volunteers, some are reluctant to risk attempting to solve real, critical urgent problems within their organizations because they fear they may suffer harmful consequences as a result of their problem-solving efforts. In Revans’ first implementation of AL, the participants were the highest-ranking managers of their operations which ranged in size from 150 to more than 1000 employees (Revans 1982a). In the course taught by Waddill (2006), the participants were senior managers in the Federal Government of the USA.
LDR 6100 VAL in practice

LDR 6100 is a six-week leadership-theory course in which students are required to write six weekly reflection journals and one analysis paper in addition to reading a course-required textbook (Northouse 2015). I instruct students to read all 16 chapters of the textbook in accordance with the syllabus of my current supervisor, read Rooney and Hopen (2006) in case some of them prefer a structured problem-solving process, complete tests and read and view lectures in addition to applying leadership theories using AL. More specifically in relation to AL, students are instructed to select and attempt to resolve an urgent, critical, real problem for which there is no predetermined solution, select and lead two other people applying the situational and path-goal-theory approaches to leadership and engage in VAL asynchronous text messages with other students per the categorization of Dickenson, Burgoyne, and Pedler (2010).

Since all course-participants are not current managers in organizations with position power capable of rewarding and penalizing subordinates or are reluctant to attempt to solve a problem within an organization, students are allowed to apply leadership perspectives with any two people of their choice who are 18 years of age or older which is facing the organization which employs the students and their team members, the three team members as a group within the organization, the three of them personally outside of an organizational context or the student–leader as an individual personally.

Students are instructed to post the results of their applications of leadership and AL in ‘Primary Responses’ in Blackboard’s Discussion Board by Wednesday of the first five weeks of the course. Each student is required to post a minimum of two ‘Secondary Responses’ to other participants’ Primary Responses by Saturday of each of the first five weeks. The deadlines for posting both primary and secondary responses are consistent with those of B. Mitchell (personal communication, June 29, 2015), the instructor who taught the first courses both f2f and virtually for Northeastern University. In accordance with the inquiry-and-reflection process of Revans (1978) and more recently Marquardt et al. (2009), students are instructed to ask other students a minimum of two questions related to the nature of the problems they are attempting to resolve and the progress they have made toward problem resolution. In addition since LDR 6100 is a leadership-theory course, students may ask questions related to other participants’ reports of their application of the assigned leadership approaches.

Other leadership-application course-requirements include participants’ obligation to complete leadership-questionnaires, to assign problem-resolving tasks to each of their action-learning team-members, and to administer leadership questionnaires to the team they are leading. Problem-solving team-members must agree to complete the questionnaires both about themselves and about their student-leaders. I created follower situational-theory and path-goal-theory follower-questionnaires based on the models as reported in Northouse (2013, 2015) for the purpose of generating feedback for the student-leaders. Hersey and Blanchard (1982) stated years ago:

feedback … the extent to which others in the organizational setting are willing to share with the leader on how he or she is coming across … ‘is the breakfast of champions.’ Without feedback from their people, managers will develop significant blind areas that will eventually damage their effectiveness’. (239–240)
In the Journal assignments Weeks 1–5, I instruct students to state: (1) the most-important benefit to them which they believe they realized as a result of completing the week’s assigned readings making reference to specific approaches/theories/models and (2) the most-important benefit which they believe they realized as a result of their weekly leadership-application and action-learning assignments which can include a benefit realized by them as a result of the Discussion-Board questions posed to them by other students as well any feedback and suggestions the participants deemed to be of benefit.

**LDR 6100 VAL data-collection method**

As part of the Week 6 Leadership Reflection Journal assignment in classes ending December 2014 through June 2015, I asked 63 students if they ‘think applying leadership perspectives using action learning is better, the same or worse than considering leadership perspectives not using action learning.’ Although the possibility of nonresponse bias arises (Rosenthal and Rosnow 1991, 216–219; Sreejesh, Mohapatra, and Anusree 2014, 76–77), 49 students responded at a rate of 78%. Of the students who responded, the possibility of ‘misrepresentation consciously or unconsciously’ existed due to ‘interviewer bias’ in which ‘the presence of the interviewer influences the respondent to give untrue or modified answers’ (Sreejesh, Mohapatra, and Anusree 2014, 78), ‘expectancy bias’ in which people try to ‘give the results that they thought were desired’ (Rosenthal and Rosnow 1991, 113) or bias as reported by Carr (1971) and Lenski and Leggett (1960) and summarized by Krosnick (1999) of ‘courtesy and respect’ in which ‘respondents may defer … yielding a tendency to endorse assertions apparently made by the researchers and/or interviewers’ who are ‘perceived as being of higher social status’ (553).

More specifically, Lenski and Leggett (1960) stated the answers which respondents give to interviewer’s questions ‘reflect more than the mere facts of the matter: they reflect his perceptions of the interviewer, his interpretation of the nature of the relationship created, his judgment of what social norms are relevant, and also his peculiar personality traits’ (467). Even though students were asked in written form as opposed to in-person interviews, their written responses may have been modified before submission because they were asked to non-anonymously evaluate a process implemented by the same instructor who had asked the question.

Data from Week 6 Journals were coded in accordance with methodology in relation to attitude ordinal scales as described by Simon and Burstein (1985, 208–209) (see Tables 1

| Response categories | Category definition |
|---------------------|---------------------|
| **Positive**        | Coded as ‘Positive’ if respondent stated applying leadership theory using AL was better than considering leadership perspectives without using AL (25) or words which stated that process was invaluable (3); the best (2), very helpful (2), most helpful (2), phenomenal, great, very beneficial, valuable, helpful, eye-opening, useful, easier to apply course material, impacted me significantly on becoming an effective better leader, sharpened the practical skills to be an effective leader, definitely owe this new understanding to the AL, appreciated combination of learning and implementation, certainly prepared me to be a better leader in the real world (47 total). |
| **Negative**        | Coded as ‘Negative’ if respondent stated he or she would prefer using another model or did not get as much out of the AL exercise as much as others may have (2 total). |

$N = 49$. 

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**Table 1.** Applying leadership perspectives using AL is better, the same or worse than considering leadership perspectives without using AL.
An individual response from a student was considered the unit of analysis and could range from one word to multiple words and full sentences for both tables.

Content of each response in Table 1 was coded for the following: (1) if the response reflected the respondent thought applying leadership using AL was better than, the same as or worse than considering leadership without using AL and (2) if the response did not state clearly the respondent thought applying leadership using AL was ‘better, the same or worse than’ considering leadership without using AL, whether or not the response was interpreted as indicating a positive or negative attitude in relation to the process of applying leadership perspectives using AL.

In addition to the Week 6 Journal question I administer in LDR 6100, Northeastern University’s College of Professional Studies (CPSs) encourages students to evaluate the course anonymously. Items and questions in the online survey do not address AL specifically. However, for the classes ending December 2014 through June 2015 for which I served as instructor, 65 students were allowed to submit their views anonymously in response to two items in the questionnaire: (1) ‘What improvements could have been made to enhance the course design and/or delivery?’ and (2) ‘Please comment on the strengths of this course and/or ways to improve this course.’

Although the possibility of nonresponse bias is greater in relation to the response rate achieved for the Week 6 Journal questions, 11 responses about AL were recorded out of a total of 130 possible responses resulting in a response rate of 8%. Content of each response in Table 2 was coded for the following: (1) if the response reflected the respondent thought AL was a strength of the course, good, beneficial or positive and (2) if the response reflected the respondent thought AL became a headache, was not real or was unnecessary, stressful and tedious.

**LDR 6100 VAL results**

Positive responses from the nonanonymous Week 6 Journals in relation to applying leadership theory using AL achieved a rate of 96%. Positive responses from the anonymous CPS evaluations in relation to using AL achieved a rate of 64%.

Students’ positive reactions to applying leadership theory using AL in virtual higher education (VHE) outweighed the negative reactions. A few of my favorite responses follow:

| Response categories | Category definition |
|---------------------|---------------------|
| Positive            | Coded as ‘Positive’ if respondent stated applying the concept via AL was a strength, good examples in our team project that allowed us to relate the material to real-life situations, the AL was the most beneficial thing in this course, AL was a strength, solving a real problem was very good, AL assignments were a strength, positive because we were able to utilize the lessons in real AL situations (7 total). |
| Negative            | Coded as ‘Negative’ if respondent stated AL was interesting but unnecessary for five week project, stressful and tedious and the timeline does not work out for students with demanding careers in this online format, AL became a headache as the class went on, there was not real feedback from classmates and during the last three weeks none of my classmates gave me feedback (4 total). |

* N = 11.
By applying the leadership perspectives with my group members, I was able to put what I had read to use. There were several times that I read a theory or approach and did not fully understand its purpose. However, through applying the perspective to my group, I was able to better comprehend its function. This is particularly true of the path-goal theory, which I had a hard time conceptualizing while reading … I was not able to completely grasp this concept until I implemented the approach … ;

I can sense that my approach to leadership has changed greatly … I believe much of this change has come not from reading … , but from being made to apply these leadership perspectives through action learning … Action learning forced me to reevaluate my own approach to leadership and to grasp many of the approaches to leadership related in the reading … ;

‘Utilizing action learning took these (leadership) concepts from the theoretical and gave them a real-life application. It helped them make sense’;

‘One of the things I really liked was being able to see other students’ real problem and problem-solving processes. I think we learned not just from the feedback others gave us, but from looking at how others approached their problem and the feedback we gave them. For each person we gave feedback to, we had to analyze his or her situation and think: what would I do? What questions would I ask? I found that very helpful’.

Discussion

I believe applying leadership theory using AL is better for students than considering leadership theory without using AL in VHE. At first, I was skeptical; now, I am not. Just as Waddill (2006) observed and CPS evaluations reported, some students appeared to experience difficulty taking action on or resolving urgent, critical, real problems within a few weeks. In addition, one student expressed being ‘forced to use leadership methods that I knew were not going to work, which impeded my ability to solve the problem I was supposed to solve with action learning.’ This is to be expected in some cases, but I believe the baby should not be thrown out with the bathwater. Five weeks of applying leadership theory using VAL is better than no weeks of theory application and VAL.

In addition, I believe the course-requirement that students apply leadership theory should take precedence over strict adherence to all principles of AL (e.g. ‘Nothing is proven in advance’ (Revans 1982b, 66); ‘The problem should … have no easily identifiable solution’ (Marquardt et al. 2009, 22); ‘The problem should be a true problem, one that has no existing solution’ (Marquardt 2011, 29)). Rokeach (1973) defined a human value as ‘an enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct or end-state of existence is personally or socially preferable to an opposite or converse mode of conduct or end-state of existence’ (5). Also, Rokeach (1968) suggested values serve ‘as standards that guide ongoing activities … employed to resolve conflicts and to make decisions’ (12).

After engaging in virtual discussions for half of the course with a student who was determined to make a purchase for a business as a predetermined solution to the problem of stalled-business growth, I ceased all effort attempting to communicate to the student that AL does not prescribe predetermined-solution problem-solving attempts. I believed that the proposed purchase was a predetermined solution and proper
implementation of AL necessitated solving the problem of stalled-business growth by considering a number of other possibilities which were not predetermined solutions. However, in relation to applying leadership theory using AL the student wrote:

Action learning is good to use because instead of simply learning the theory, you are actually applying what you are learning to a real problem that you are trying to solve … Applying the theories to a real world problem has helped me to better understand each leadership approach that I have learned in the course, and I am able to better internalize the model to my own situation/problem that I am trying to resolve.

As a result of experiences similar to the equipment-purchase-as-predetermined-solution example cited previously using Rokeach’s framework to guide my role as instructor, resolve conflicts and make decisions, I have learned the value of students’ assimilation of leadership theory through learning by doing is more important than the value of exactly correct implementation of all components of AL. If students believe that they have learned something useful which meets their expectations using whichever form of bastardized AL they have carried out, I believe that the course has succeeded.

Conclusion

This account of practice has provided an overview of AL as prescribed by Revans, a review of the application of VAL as administered and reported by Waddill, the history and administration of VAL in a leadership-theory graduate-level higher-education course, and results of the effectiveness of VAL implemented in the course. In addition, this paper has reported insights gained as a result of administering VAL which may be of benefit to others who teach or are considering teaching a higher-education theory-course using VAL.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Joseph Curtin is a lecturer in the College of Professional Studies at Northeastern University and a management/leadership-development consultant who has provides services for over 100 businesses in the USA and Canada since 1984.

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