The concept of action learning is certainly not a new one. It was developed by Professor Reg Revans in the 1940s when he was Director of Education for the National Coal Board. According to Johnson (1998:296), where he was Director of Education, Revans developed the idea, according to Johnson (1998:296), “that the colliery managers who were experiencing organisational problems might learn from one another by talking through their difficulties and personally taking action”.

Revans continued with his work on action learning throughout his entire life from 1907 – 2003. During this time, he inspired many others, including Mike Pedler, who was a (Revans professorial fellow at the University of Salford, Pedler) who has updated an original book by Revans entitled (The ABC of Action Learning, 1983) in particular, to take the bring more attention to the concept on board. The Revans Centre for Action Learning and Research is based was eventually established at the University of Salford.

This provides an illustration of how much progress action learning has made within academia since its inception in the 1940s. The concept of action learning was ridiculed by management schools throughout in the 1960s and 1970s. However, as Revans described action learning as “freedom from teachers, from any form of printed syllabus or regulations, from any fixed institution or even from any literature save the most occasional... not even a case study or business game”.

He also referred to the material what was being taught in business schools in 1976 as “an inexhaustible avalanche of lofty hocus pocus”. Given these statements, it is perhaps not surprising that many they were initially sceptical of action learning to say the least.

It is this concept of taking of action that distinguishes action learning from any other. Bourner et al (1996), state that action learning is a “process of reflection and action, aimed at improving effectiveness of action where learning is an important outcome”. However, the author notes that learning by doing is a long-standing concept. Koo (1999), provides two very early quotes; firstly, “What we have to learn to do, we learn by doing” (Aristotle, a 4th-century BCE Greek philosopher) and secondly, “I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, I do and I understand” (Confucius 500 BCE). The author’s prefers the followingence for a
- SAMPLE ONLY -

Quotation from Revans: e is "...one is forced to enquire into what one really believes, as distinct from what one may claim to believe while arguing in the seminar or at the case-study". (Revans).

In action learning, the learner should become the focal point of the learning process. The success of action learning relies on the learners being motivated to learn for themselves. (O’Hara 1997, cited by Koo 1999). There should be a collective approach to the problem solving of real problems with a cycle of inquiry that never varies. This cycle consists of a person completing the following:

- Presenting their problem without interruption
- B – being questioned by the other set members
- E – exploring the problem
- S – then the person summarising what they have heard
- Declaring what action they intend to take

- This continues for as many set members as time allows and there is a review of the set’s progress at the end. The review may focus on the progress of the set, the content or both. This cycle of inquiry will begin again at the next set meeting. However, except that the members who agreed to take actions need to report back at the beginning. The set needs to maintain being strict about timing and process boundaries each time and recognise that the conduct of the set mirrors its values. Pedler (1991) sums up action learning well by stating that it involves having three components: the people who take responsibility for taking action (this is key), the problems or tasks themselves and the set of colleagues who support and challenge each other to make progress on problems. Zuber-Skerrit (2002) identifies the latter as critical friends.

Revans (1998) makes the distinction between problems and puzzles. He argued that the difference is that a puzzle requires some knowledge and a solution to a puzzle, whereas there is no correct answer to a problem. Revans also formulated a learning equation for action learning:

\[ L = P + Q \]

Student Proofreading Plus + Services available at
Although there have been some variations to this formula have been suggested (Mumford 1995, Smith 1997), but Revan’s equation continues still seems to be the most widely used.

There would seem to be a plethora of articles have been written about action learning during the 1990s. More programmes for undergraduate and postgraduate degrees (both under and post-graduate) and management programmes within organisations incorporated action learning as one of the primary methods of learning. In fact, indeed, the author was the programme manager for Bury Metropolitan Borough Council for a Diploma in Management by Action Learning in 1992/93. This was carried out in collaboration with the Manchester College of Arts and Technology (MANCAT) and Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU).

In this programme, the author played a role as a Set Adviser to one of the three sets, project supervisor to some students on the programme, as well as a co-deliverer of the design. This project also involved recruitment to the programme and co-delivery of the residential induction part of the programme were also part of the role for this project and recruiting to the programme which was the first central in-house programme that incorporated action learning. The author’s set reflected the there were approximately 20 middle managers who came from a variety of departments and had a mixture of responsibilities regarding the programme and this was reflected within the author’s set.

Much of the published research focuses on managers from the same organisation who took part in action learning sets. This was the author’s first experience of action learning. Consequently, I have used it as a part of my reflections of action learning and the approach to it within the MSc programme. It will have affected the approach to the action learning for the MSc programme too. It is recognised that although this former experience occurred nearly some 14 years ago, the memory of it still remains clear. This experience was represented one of the most challenging and richest experiences of my entire life and therefore the memory of it is clear and it can be used to illustrate how it could be incorporated into the thinking and reflection of the more recent experiences.
There are reflections sheets for each of the sets attended between December 2005 and February 2007 included in appendices 1-6 using the format by Pedler (1996:85) which will be referred to briefly in the following paragraphs. However, the author has decided to use the perspective on action learning offered by Bourner & Frost (1996) when they investigated how action learning had been experienced by the reflections of...