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Action learning for neighbourhood improvement – from practice to theory

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ABSTRACT

What do people need to learn to engage actively in social action for neighbourhood improvement or development? How important is emergent learning relative to planned learning in this context? Where does first-person knowledge fit into the body of knowledge required for success in bringing about change for the better in neighbourhoods through community-based projects? These are some of the questions raised by the development of a programme of knowledge and skills for active participation in community-based neighbourhood renewal projects. The programme was christened ‘Action Learning Together’ but was quickly abbreviated to the *ALTogether* programme. It was a programme that blended action learning with self-managed learning, that capitalised on the different knowledge and skills of different participants and that recognised that the knowledge and skills needed for each project were likely to be significantly different from that needed to tackle the projects of other participants on the programme. This paper focuses on the philosophy or theory underpinning the programme and issues raised in a number of areas including the relative weight attached to emergent and planned learning, the blending of action learning with self-managed learning and the applicability of self-managed action learning for social change in contexts like this.

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Emergent learning; planned learning; first-hand knowledge; neighbourhood improvement; self-managed action learning

Introduction

The main objective of this paper is to provide an account of the philosophy or theory underpinning an action learning programme for social change. The programme was aimed at developing the knowledge and skills needed to tackle neighbourhood renewal projects.

The paper seeks to contribute to knowledge in this area in several ways. First, it was a successful programme of action learning for social action – what Revans would have called a ‘confirming case’ (Revans 1985) – and there are lessons that can be distilled from the experience. Second, it was a confirming case of an innovation in action learning called ‘self-managed action learning’ which also makes it worth recording. Third, it raised

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significant issues including the relative importance of emergent and planned learning, the blending of action learning and self-managed learning and the position of first-hand knowledge in the body of knowledge needed for success in bringing about change for the better in neighbourhoods and perhaps social action more generally (Pedler 2020).

The paper comprises three main parts. The first provides the background by summarising the development of the programme, what it contained and how it worked out in practice. The second part looks at the philosophy or theory underpinning the programme. The third asks some questions of the programme to distil lessons for future programmes of action learning for social action.

Background

In 2002 the government's Neighbourhood Renewal Unit published a report titled *The Learning Curve*. According to this report, 'top-down' approaches to neighbourhood renewal have been disappointing. Key features of the 'top-down' model are 'hierarchy', 'social engineering' and 'privileging the knowledge of professional experts over that of those with local/contextual knowledge and experience'. The report argued that improvements in neighbourhoods could be initiated at any level including that of front line workers (community workers, teachers, police officers, etc.) and by the residents themselves. It also argued that the key to the success of this approach is to ensure that all groups have the knowledge and skills needed for involvement in neighbourhood renewal. The report contained brief accounts of a number of case studies of successful projects to illustrate the range and diversity of local neighbourhood renewal projects (– see Appendix, below).

The Learning Curve report was well-received and led to the funding of programmes of skills and knowledge for neighbourhood renewal. Brighton University won a bid to develop a programme titled 'Action Learning Together' (ALTogether). The programme used a development in action learning termed 'self-managed action learning' (O'Hara, Bourner, and Webber 2004; Bourner 2011). It was a year-long programme drawing on participants from a range of organisations, including some charities and some organisations which were poorly funded. The impetus for participation mostly came from individuals rather than organisations, some of which were indifferent or even reluctant to release staff to attend. It was therefore a tough test of the concept of self-managed action learning.

The membership of the ALTogether programme sets was drawn from a wide range of organisations and from all levels: volunteer community leaders, local authority policy makers, service delivery workers (such as social workers and teachers) and residents of the disadvantaged neighbourhoods in question. The action learning sets were constructed to create maximum diversity so did not share the culture of a common organisation. There was no fee for participating in the programme and we believed that if, at any time, a participant judged the costs of their time to outweigh the perceived benefits they would leave.

The ALTogether programme started with a four-day workshop to develop the skills to enable participants to get the most out of their participation in the action learning sets. The first two action learning set meetings were facilitated by experienced set advisors and after that the set meetings were self-managed and self-facilitated.¹

At the end of the year the programme was externally assessed and judged a success:

The ALTogether programme is an exciting training initiative that has been based on the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit's national strategic plan for neighbourhood renewal training, "The Learning Curve". The programme has developed as an exemplar of the model that "The Learning Curve" proposes. The mix of action learning and formal training are probably currently unique in the field of neighbourhood renewal. ALTogether is both innovative and valued and beneficial to the participants. (CAG Consultants, Evaluation Report 2004, 24)

The programme ran again in 2005 and 2006 but not thereafter due to the ill health of the main programme champion.

The theory behind the ALTogether programme

The last section provided a brief summary of the development of the programme and assessment of how well it worked out in practice. This section contains an introduction to the thinking behind the programme.

In developing the ALTogether programme we asked the question, 'What sort of knowledge and skills would support the broad range of projects that were encouraged by *The Learning Curve*?'

In seeking an answer to this question we adopted the following as premises:

1. Each neighbourhood renewal project is likely to require a range of skills and knowledge that differs from other projects that involve other people, other partnerships and other contexts.
2. Each person already has a range of skills and knowledge (much of it tacit) and that range is likely to be significantly different from that of each other person who might wish to be involved in the programme.
3. For the goal of neighbourhood renewal, providing people with knowledge and skills that does not lead to action would constitute failure. Conveying knowledge and skills for *understanding* alone is not enough.

These considerations led to the conclusion that it is very unlikely that a common syllabus of knowledge and skills would equip all these different people to take on these different projects in their different contexts. And this led to the decision not to attempt to provide a common syllabus of skills and knowledge for neighbourhood renewal for all the participants, which, however successfully delivered, we could not guarantee would be used in practice. Instead, we decided to start from the other end, i.e. with the action itself. To join the ALTogether programme each participant would need to have an idea for how they could help to change one or more of the designated neighbourhoods for the better. This would be the focus of their studies on the programme which would help them to learn whatever they needed to learn to achieve that outcome.

To summarise: instead of learning a pre-specified set of skills and knowledge the participants would learn whatever they needed to learn to help effect positive change in the designated neighbourhoods. In adopting this approach we recognised that:

- (i) some of the knowledge and skills they require might be different from that required by other participants;

- (ii) some of the knowledge and skills may be tacit, i.e. they may be unable to articulate explicitly the new knowledge and skills they have acquired;
- (iii) some of the knowledge may be self-knowledge. As agents of change for neighbourhood renewal the participants use themselves as the instruments of their agency to bring about the improvement they wish to see. The more they understood themselves as their own instruments of change the more effectively they could use those instruments.

Meaning of 'involvement in neighbourhood renewal'

The Learning Curve was about developing the skills and knowledge for involvement in neighbourhood renewal. 'Involvement' can take many forms ranging from passive interest to active participation in neighbourhood renewal. The ALTogether programme was aimed at those who wish to locate themselves in the active region of this scale. It interpreted 'involvement' as action to bring about change for the better in the designated neighbourhoods.

The programme was not intended for people who wanted to acquire skills and knowledge of neighbourhood renewal for its own sake or to prove themselves by passing an assessment in the 'subject' of neighbourhood renewal. Nor was it intended for people who wanted to learn the theory of neighbourhood renewal with a view to possible *subsequent* application in practice. The programme was aimed at those who wanted to actively contribute to neighbourhood renewal and wished to learn whatever they need to learn to do so. Such people were likely to fall into one of two categories:

1. They wanted to contribute to some existing project aimed at making a real difference.
2. They wanted to initiate and lead a new project.

Philosophy of learning

The programme aimed to help participants learn whatever they need to learn to undertake a project that contributes to neighbourhood renewal. For one participant the most important learning might be about the concept of neighbourhood renewal, for another it might be about current conditions in their own neighbourhood and for another it might be about learning how they come across when they are responding to resistance to their plans. In other words, it was difficult to specify in advance what would be the most significant learning for any individual participant or in which domain of learning it would be located. We acknowledged that we did not know which domain would turn out to be most significant to a particular participant in enabling them to undertake their particular neighbourhood renewal project

For this reason, the programme adopted a philosophy of learning that did not seek to limit learning to specific areas or even to place a definition around the term 'learning'. Instead, we *partitioned* learning into planned learning and unplanned learning and that distinction was crucial to the programme's philosophy of learning.

Planned learning is goal-directed learning. Learning outcomes are specified in advance, actions are taken to achieve those outcomes and success or otherwise could be assessed at the end of the programme against the learning outcomes specified at the outset.

By contrast, *unplanned* learning is all that learning which is not planned and includes emergent learning, reflective learning and experiential learning. The knowledge and skills acquired by unplanned learning are often tacit and often goes unrecognised until it is needed in practice. Such knowledge is a significant ingredient in knowing-how; it is part of the 'know-how' of an effective practitioner (Raelin 2007).

The programme emphasised the distinction between planned learning and unplanned learning because each involves different processes and has a different relationship with practice. Planned learning in this context starts with learning outcomes and ends with application of the knowledge and skills to practice. Unplanned learning starts with practice and is the process in which knowledge and skills are distilled from the practice.

In order to realise both kinds of learning each participant had an action-based project as the basis for their unplanned learning and also a learning agreement, for which they identified some specific learning outcomes, as a basis for their planned learning.

Philosophy of teaching

The programme interpreted the term 'teaching' to mean 'helping people to learn'. Its philosophy of teaching followed from its philosophy of learning. It sought to help participants learn whatever they need to learn for their involvement in neighbourhood renewal. It recognised that some of their learning would be unplanned learning and some would be planned learning.

How could the programme help participants with their unplanned learning? It could create a context that would nurture it and it could provide the participants with tools to *capture* unplanned learning. Much of the ALTogether programme was about creating an environment to support the emergence of unplanned learning. For example, the requirement that each participant should work on a neighbourhood renewal project was intended to do just that. As another example, the ALTogether programme created conditions for the participants to receive abundant feedback in a supported environment as research (Tamkin 2000) had indicated this to be conducive to success in practitioner learning.

An example of the sort of tools that enable participants to capture the unplanned learning is the skill of 'active reflection'. Reflection was not viewed by most of the participants as either 'active' or a 'skill'. The programme taught a question-based approach to reflective thinking as a transferable skill. Examples of questions that prompt reflective thinking can be found here: <https://newvocationalism.org/questions-that-prompt-strategic-reflective-thinking/>. Developing the skill of active reflection enabled the participant to take charge of the reflection process and do so in ways that increased reflective learning. It developed their capacity to become effective reflective practitioners through-out their involvement with neighbourhood renewal.

How could the ALTogether programme help participants with their *planned* learning? It helped them set learning outcomes, it helped them identify activities to achieve those learning outcomes and it helped them assess their success in meeting their learning outcomes. That was what it did at 'ground level'. In addition, the programme also worked at two 'meta-levels'. First, it taught the *process* of planned learning as a content-free practice by presenting the participants with the elements and structure of a 'learning agreement' which they could re-use after the end of the ALTogether programme. Second, the kind of

thinking required for achieving planned learning is the same sort of thinking as that required for achieving any other sort of plans. It is 'goal-directed' thinking or, in other words, 'strategic thinking' (Cunningham 1999). The programme taught a question-based approach to strategic thinking as a transferable skill that could be applied to the achievement of the goals of a neighbourhood renewal project, to broader work-based goals and to life goals more generally. Examples of questions that prompt strategic thinking can be found here: <https://newvocationalism.org/questions-that-prompt-strategic-reflective-thinking/>.

In addition to helping participants directly with their planned learning and their unplanned learning the programme also offered a range of skills to help participants learn how to learn. This includes skills such as listening skills, questioning skills and feedback skills (... getting feedback as well as giving it).

Overall, the philosophy of teaching on the programme was one of eclecticism in response to the implications of its learning philosophy. It was a blended approach where the ingredients in the blend depended on the particular learning outcome. There were didactic elements (e.g. in developing specific skills), there were facilitative elements (e.g. in the approach used for most of the workshop activities) and there were self-managed elements (e.g. in the approach used with the action learning sets).

However, whilst the programme was eclectic in terms of learning and teaching, at its heart were action learning and self-managed learning. Action learning is a proven approach to experiential learning and self-managed learning is an approach to planned learning which gives as much control as possible to the learners themselves.

Why the emphasis on action learning and self-managed learning?

Action learning is an approach whereby participants try to bring about change and learn from their attempts to do so. An action learning programme establishes structures and processes to facilitate such learning including, and especially, action learning sets where participants can learn from their progress and the problems they encounter. The three main reasons we placed action learning at the centre of the ALTogether programme were:

1. It does not limit the areas in which learning can take place i.e. it is domain-free in terms of the *content* of the learning. The learning can be about the participants' current projects, neighbourhood renewal in general, about a participant's own strengths and weaknesses as a change agent or as a learner. This is appropriate if we wish participants to learn *whatever* they need to learn for their involvement in neighbourhood renewal.
2. It is a *proven* approach to capturing emergent learning. It is an approach with a history of successful usage (some of which has been recorded by the *International Foundation for Action Learning*). It is an evidence-based approach that has been tested by research (some of which has been published in the journal, *Action Learning Research and Practice*). It has certainly been at least as closely researched as the 'lecture', the 'seminar' or the 'tutorial' of traditional higher education, which are often uncritically adopted by education programmes. Also, it is an approach that was suggested by *The Learning*

Curve report itself following a study of what had and hadn't worked in neighbourhood renewal in the past.

3. Action learning expresses some core values of the ALTogether programme and *The Learning Curve*, including the following:

- (i) *Equality*. All the people in an action learning set have an equal entitlement to the time and attention of the group regardless of rank or position. Action learning is a questioning approach where the ideas and actions of all the members of an action learning set are equally open to enquiry. In these ways action learning is non-hierarchical and democratic. In constructing the action learning sets, the ALTogether programme tried to ensure that each set had members from all hierarchical levels. This was referred to as the 'vertical slice' concept. The action learning sets were made up of a mix of people at different 'levels' of involvement in neighbourhood renewal from senior management in the council to those, such as concerned residents, without any formal position in any organisation.
- (ii) *Responsibility*. Each action learning participant takes on responsibility for a project and within the action learning set retains personal responsibility for the outcomes (... or absence of outcomes) of the project. The link between responsibility, action and outcomes is exposed in the action learning process. Those who may be inclined to stand back, blame and judge, find themselves responsible for actually bringing about change. They usually discover that a more constructive and proactive approach produces more positive outcomes.
- (iii) *Initiative*. Making progress with a project can be viewed as identifying obstacles to progress and dealing with them. Much of the time of an action learning set meeting is taken up looking *at* obstacles and looking *for* obstacles – often triggered by questions such as 'What's getting in the way?' or 'What might go wrong?'. Action learning gives people practice in trying to spot problems and opportunities and then taking the best action they can find to address them. In that sense it helps people to develop initiative.

On the ALTogether programme the action learning was complemented by self-managed learning. This is an approach to planned learning whereby participants decide on their intended learning outcomes, the steps they will take to achieve those outcomes and what constitutes evidence of a successful outcome. In adopting this approach we were influenced by Rogers (1969), Knowles (1975) and Cunningham (1999, 2019). The three main reasons for using self-managed learning in this programme were:

1. Self-managed learning recognises that for involvement in neighbourhood renewal different people would need to learn different things because different projects require different knowledge and skills and because people differ in the knowledge and skills they already possess and in their strengths and weaknesses as change agents and as learners. The use of self-managed learning allowed us to offer the development of 'bespoke' knowledge and skills rather than the 'one-size-fits-all' curriculum of a common syllabus for all participants.

2. In addition to the participant-specified learning outcomes we also wanted participants to be able to plan and manage their own learning. This follows from our belief that any new neighbourhood projects that participants would take on after completing the ALTogether programme would be likely to require additional learning because much learning for neighbourhood renewal is necessarily project-specific. An enhanced ability to plan and manage their own learning would prepare participants to acquire the knowledge and skills needed for subsequent projects.
3. Some of the core values of self-managed learning are similar to those of action learning:
 - (i) *Equality*. In traditional education the teachers control the syllabus, the methods of teaching and learning and the assessment. Self-managed learning erodes the hierarchy implied in that control by supporting the participants in choosing their own learning outcomes, methods and evidence for self-assessment.
 - (ii) *Responsibility*. The other side of the 'control' coin is responsibility. In self-managed learning the participants have more responsibility for their own learning – they become responsible for their intended learning outcomes, the steps they will take to reach those outcomes and the deciding what constitutes evidence of success.
 - (iii) *Initiative*. Self-managed learning is an approach that encourages participants to take charge of their own learning. If participants are to turn their learning choices into reality they have to take the initiative in deciding what actions they will take and then taking those actions. Developing a positive attitude towards using initiative can also serve the participants well in tackling neighbourhood renewal projects.

A contribution to 'professional' practice

The ALTogether programme was an innovation in 'professional' practice. To be more precise, it embodied three innovations in practitioner development:

- It integrated emergent learning and planned learning within a single process, by blending action learning and self-managed learning.
- Prior to the first action learning set meeting it developed skills for effective participation in an action learning set, i.e. for getting the most out of action learning.
- It developed the participants' capacities to manage their own set meetings.

At first sight, it would appear that self-managed learning and action learning inhabit different domains of learning; self-managed learning focuses on 'planned learning' whereas action learning focuses on 'emergent learning'. What they have in common, however, is the use of learning sets (Cunningham 1999; Revans 2011). The ALTogether programme made the most of this commonality by using the same learning sets to support participants in making progress with their learning agreements and also to capture the lessons of their experience with their neighbourhood renewal projects. In this way it integrated action learning and self-managed learning.

Second, the programme started with a 'foundation' workshop which underpinned the whole of the rest of the programme. Most importantly, it underpinned the action learning sets. It had long been apparent that some people are 'naturals' with action learning whereas some others struggle with it. We had studied this issue in a range of cases and concluded that the difference that makes the difference is the incidence of skills for effective set participation (see, for example, O'Hara et al. 1997; Bourner, Frost, and Beaty 1997; Shurville and Rospigliosi 2009). These skills include listening skills, questioning skills, skills for active reflection and feedback skills. Participants who are most well-endowed with these skills tend to get much more out of action learning and they tend to contribute more to what others get from their experience of action learning set meetings. Happily, it is possible to develop these skills, which was one of the main aims of the foundation workshop.

Third, most of the set meetings on the ALTogether programme were managed and facilitated by the set members themselves. The first two set meetings were fully facilitated by external set advisors and the same external set advisors attended the last part of the next two set meetings to conduct set process reviews. After that, the set members themselves were fully responsible for ensuring that the set meetings took place and achieved the objectives of a set meeting.

We believe that it was within the spirit of *The Learning Curve* for participants to manage their own set meetings. We also believe it was important for the programme to support them in so doing. For this reason we included a range of devices for supporting the self-managed action learning sets.

- Training was given at the foundation workshop in the skills of effective set participation and effective set management.
- The first two set meetings were managed and facilitated by experienced set advisors. This ensured that sets started well and modelled good practice.
- A set advisor attended the last hour of the next two self-managed set meetings to hold a review of the day – this process monitored the health of the Action Learning process and helped the participants discover how to distil the learning from the set meetings themselves.
- An innovative structure for the day-long set meeting formalised the process of reflecting and then identifying actions. There were two rounds in each set meeting, one before lunch and one after lunch. During the first round the participants focused on their actions from the previous set meeting, their outcomes and what they could learn from those outcomes. During the second round (after lunch) they focused on plans and actions to help them make progress with their projects. So the first half of the set meeting emphasised reflective thinking and the second half emphasised strategic (and creative) thinking. This prevented sets becoming either 'talking-shops' with no action, or so 'task-focused' that there is no learning.
- The set meetings were managed by set members, on a rotating basis. This means that at every set meeting a different set member had responsibility for ensuring the set meeting 'worked', that is, it took place and achieved its purpose.
- A session of intervention by an external set advisor was available on request by a set if it encountered process problems that it was unable to resolve without help. This was included as a safety net for the action learning sets but, in fact, no set ever requested such assistance.

- A workshop was held about half-way through the programme and part of this workshop, 'Taking Stock', focused on the participants experience of action learning on the programme to date (and in particular their experience of the set meetings). It aimed to review set development and hone the skills of set participation and set self-management. It also provided a vehicle for sets to learn from the experience of other sets.

Discussion and conclusions

Writing this account of the philosophy of the ALTogether programme has raised some significant questions. How important is planned learning relative to emergent learning in developing the knowledge and skills for neighbourhood renewal projects? Where does first-hand knowledge fit into the body of knowledge required for success in bringing about change for the better in neighbourhoods? This section starts by offering answers to these questions.

How important is planned learning relative to emergent learning in developing the knowledge and skills for neighbourhood renewal projects?

When a person sets out to tackle a neighbourhood renewal project they are often aware that there are things they don't know and/or skills they don't have, which would be helpful to them. The acquisition of such knowledge and skills is the stuff of planned learning. And it usually makes sense to acquire such knowledge and skills before tackling the neighbourhood renewal project. This is the argument for planned learning in the context of neighbourhood renewal.

However, in tackling most neighbourhood renewal projects, which usually involves other people whose behaviour can be unpredictable, there is usually much that isn't known and some things that can't be known, in advance. Moreover, there are things that the champions of such projects don't know they don't know. In such situations, there is considerable value in taking action anyway because action itself generates knowledge through the outcomes of such action. This is the argument for emergent learning in the context of neighbourhood renewal.

Earlier in this paper we wrote: *unplanned learning is all that learning which is not planned and includes emergent learning, reflective learning and experiential learning. The knowledge and skills acquired by unplanned learning is often tacit and goes unrecognised until it is needed in practice. Such knowledge is a significant ingredient in knowing-how; it is part of the 'know-how' of an effective practitioner* (3).

So does it make more sense to base a programme for developing knowledge and skills for neighbourhood renewal on planned learning or to base it on emergent learning? This question is misconceived because it dichotomises planned learning and emergent learning as alternatives whereas in practice they *both* contribute to knowledge. It makes more sense to *partition* learning into planned learning and unplanned (i.e. emergent) learning.² When we developed the ALTogether programme we did not know whether planned learning or unplanned learning would be more important for the participants and the projects they would bring, which is why we provided for both planned learning from the self-managed learning agreements and emergent learning from the action learning projects.

Where does first-hand knowledge fit into the body of knowledge required for success in bringing about change for the better in neighbourhoods?

First-hand knowledge is knowledge acquired by individuals through their own experience rather than from some other sources. First-hand knowledge tends to be local/situational, tacit and practical (i.e. knowledge how rather than knowledge that).

It is therefore not knowledge acquired from other people through instruction. Most projects aimed at neighbourhood renewal are likely to have unique elements. This is true even for a project that appears to replicate projects in other localities. It would involve different people, different contexts in space and time and the project champion would be different. There is probably a great deal of value that can be learned from conversations with, even instruction from, a previous project champion but there is much that must be learned *ab initio*. Revans offered three questions as tools for action learning: 'Who knows?', 'Who cares?' and 'Who can?' (Revans 2011, 40–41). Much of the learning from the first question may be second-hand, but most of the learning from the second and third questions are necessarily first-hand knowledge.

In other words, a substantial portion of the knowledge and skills required for tackling projects to bring about positive change in neighbourhoods is likely to be first-hand knowledge. That means a substantial part of the knowledge (broadly interpreted) of a neighbourhood renewal project champion is likely to be knowledge that is experiential, first-hand and local (Raelin 2007; Watkins and Marsick 2021). One of the strengths of action learning is that it offers a vehicle for accelerating learning from experience as participants in an action learning set are often asked questions that they do not ask themselves. For the ALTogether participants these were 'fresh' questions. And such fresh questions are the catalysts for further learning.

Conclusions

In designing the ALTogether programme we tried to be true to the vision of *The Learning Curve*: a vision where those involved in neighbourhood renewal acquire the knowledge and skills they need to engage productively in neighbourhood renewal projects.

There is a strong chain of reasoning from the vision expressed in *The Learning Curve* to the structure and processes employed in the ALTogether programme. That logic can be summarised in a sequence of questions and responses:

Question: What was the ALTogether programme's philosophy of neighbourhood renewal?

Response: It was the philosophy of *The Learning Curve*: neighbourhood renewal through change in the designated neighbourhoods initiated at any level ... including front line workers and residents.

Question: What was the main aim of the ALTogether programme?

Response: To help participants acquire whatever knowledge and skills they need for involvement in neighbourhood renewal.

Question: What sort of 'involvement' in neighbourhood renewal did the programme envisage?

Response: Active involvement, i.e. involvement that helps to bring about change for the better in the designated neighbourhood, particularly by planning, managing and/or leading projects to bring about such change.

Question: What knowledge and skills are needed by people who are actively involved in neighbourhood renewal?

Response: Any learning that helps them to contribute to positive change in the designated neighbourhoods.

Question: How could people involved in neighbourhood renewal acquire the knowledge and skills they need?

Response: Through planned and unplanned learning; so the programme needed to be flexible enough to provide for both forms of learning.

Question: How could the programme provide for the teaching of such a wide range of possible learning outcomes?

Response: The programme's interpretation of the term 'teaching' is 'helping people to learn'. It did this by adopting an eclectic approach to blending different methods but with action learning as the major ingredient in the blend.

According to Brook and Pedler (2020) action learning 'can be practiced by only those who understand and embrace its values as consistent with their own. It cannot easily be created by those who do not know, share or understand these values.' (8). The ALTogether programme was an innovation in professional practice which we hoped might be transferable to other programmes of action learning for social change. Transfer of practice, however, is not the same as transfer of knowledge. Intellectual assent is not enough. The transfer of complex practice requires not only intellectual assent but also assent to the underpinning values and beliefs (see Bourner, France, and O'Hara 2000). An innovation in professional practice is only likely to be transferable to other practitioners who share similar values and beliefs within that area of professional practice. The reason for this conclusion is that the transfer of practice almost invariably involves teething problems associated with the transition and it is impossible to foresee all possible contingencies. Consequently, it is necessary for the new practitioners to find their own solutions to the problems. Unless new practitioners share the values and beliefs that underpin the innovation in the practice they are likely to take decisions that can undermine the essence of the innovation itself. If the new practitioners do share the key values and beliefs as those that underpin the innovation they are likely to come up with solutions that are congruent with the innovation (Bourner, France, and O'Hara 2000).

It follows that in order to assist with transfer of this practice, it was important to be explicit about the values and beliefs that underpin the ALTogether programme. Since there were many such values and beliefs with varying degrees of influence on the programme it is probably most helpful to identify what seem to us to be the five most important values and the five most important beliefs supporting the programme.

The issue of underpinning values has been partly addressed above, where three values were highlighted: *equality* (rather than hierarchy), *responsibility* (rather than unresponsiveness and unaccountability) and *initiative* (rather than passivity). Two other underpinning values are:

Reflection. Action learning values reflection as a key process for turning experience into learning. Therefore, it is not well-suited to those who are reluctant to reflect on their own experience.

Inclusiveness. The programme was not well-suited to people who see leadership and strategy-formation in hierarchical terms, as properties of those who occupy elevated positions. The

action learning sets on the ALTogether programme were made up of a mix of people at different 'levels' of involvement in neighbourhood renewal from senior management in the council to those, such as concerned residents, without any formal position in any organisation. Clearly the value of 'inclusiveness' resonates with the 'equality' value addressed above.

Underpinning beliefs include:

4. *Action is a key source of learning.* There is much that can be learned from action that cannot be learned from textbooks (... and vice versa). In the end, all significant knowledge and skills for neighbourhood renewal had to be tested in action.
5. *Improvement in professional practice can depend on the acquisition of self-knowledge.* For example, an element of some professional practice that many people find difficult is 'cold-calling' – this obstacle is unlikely to be successfully tackled by reference to a manual or textbook.
6. *Mistakes are a valuable source of learning.* The role of the ALTogether course, as a programme of learning, was not to stop people making (non-fatal) mistakes but to support them in handling the consequences and to help them distil the learning from mistakes.
7. *Developing the ability to talk knowledgeably about achieving something does not imply development of the ability to actually do that something.* In the words of the founder of action learning (and Olympic athlete), Reg Revans: "... there is an observable difference between consulting past reports of the Olympic Games to decide that one may need to clear two metres forty to win the next high jump, on the one hand, and, on the other, actually sailing over that height before the crowd in the stadium" (Revans 2011, 7). At a more prosaic level, one can acquire a lot of knowledge about education without becoming an effective teacher.
8. *Those who are unable to change themselves are unlikely to be able to bring about significant change in the world around them.* This is known as the 'principle of insufficient mandate'. Again in Revans's words: "Those who are to change significantly that which they freshly encounter must be changed by the changing of it." (Revans 2011, 86).

According to the external evaluators the ALTogether programme worked. This raised the question, 'who can work the ALTogether programme?' Our answer is people who share those values and beliefs.

Notes

1. More details of the logistics of the programme can be found at Bourner (2011, 2012).
2. This also follows from Revans' learning equation: $L = P + Q$, where L is learning, P is planned learning and Q is questioning insight (Revans 2011, 4).

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Appendix

Illustrative case studies from The Learning Curve report

- Case 1:* Establishing a dedicated childcare centre on an estate in a disadvantaged neighbourhood.
- Case 2:* Setting up a residents' consultancy where residents offer advice and consultancy services to organisations.
- Case 3:* Developing a scheme to deter youngsters from stealing cars and joy-riding, the *Banger Racing Scheme*.
The project lets youngsters work on vehicles and race them in competitions.
- Case 4:* Helping a local school extend its involvement in community projects outside school teaching hours.
- Case 5:* Setting up a youth club in a local community hall.
- Case 6:* Developing a support facility for community representatives.
- Case 7:* Producing and distributing a directory of all the agencies involved in community safety and crime prevention in a disadvantaged neighbourhood, highlighting each agency's interest in community safety and what each can contribute.
- Case 8:* Setting up a local Fire Services Young Persons Development Programme focused on the disadvantaged neighbourhoods of a City, as part of the National Fire Services Youth Training Programme.
- Case 9:* Developing a scheme to accredit knowledge and skills gained by work aimed at contributing to neighbourhood renewal, so that it counts towards a formal qualification.
- Case 10:* Piloting a local version of a national Neighbourhood Apprenticeship Scheme to improve crime reduction and drug education
- Case 11:* Setting up a centre to train social housing tenants so that they are equipped to take greater control of their housing – whether it be owning it, managing it or in some other way(s).
- Case 12:* Initiating a mentoring scheme whereby community mentors can work with people to help set up, run and manage regeneration projects.
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