



Developing Australia's VET workforce to  
implement the national training system

# Action Learning and the national training system

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core ideas

# Action learning is a popular and proven methodology for staff development in the Australian vocational education and training (VET) sector.

## Umbrella of workbased learning

Action learning is one of the approaches that fit under the umbrella of workbased learning. In the Australian VET context, workbased learning is an overarching term that refers to structured learning that is managed by the organisation. The focus of workbased learning is learning through work. Its participants are the staff employed by an organisation, including permanent, contract or casual staff or volunteers.

Workbased learning describes a range of different staff development methodologies and techniques, from mentoring and coaching to action learning and communities of practice.

## Location of action learning

Workbased learning takes into account a number of well-researched theories, particularly theories related to adult learning and learning organisations. The model in the diagram below connects these theories with the individual's organisational work and with organisational improvement.

Diagram 1: Action learning located within the workbased learning framework (Mitchell, Henry and Young 2001, p.34)

## Adult learning theories

Adult learning theories encompass action learning and action research and highlight the following components of adult learning programs:

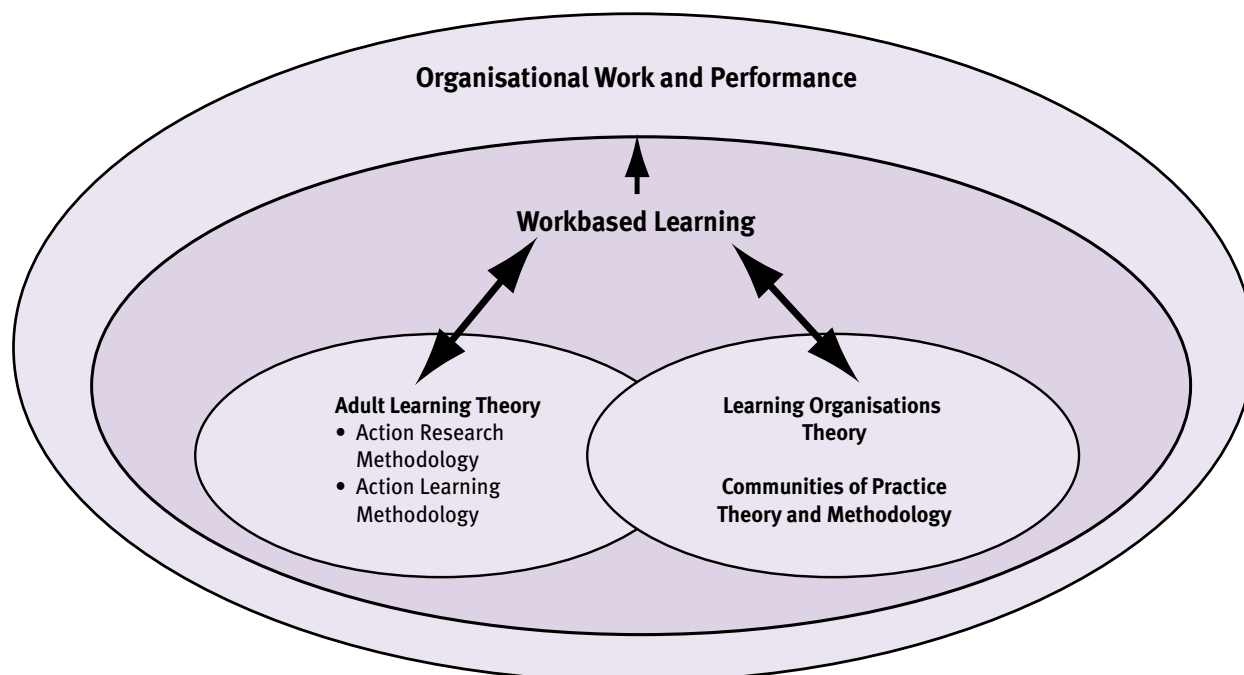
- the program is experience-based and experiential.
- the program facilitates learner-directedness, learner-centredness and learner self-determination.
- the program activities are relevant, have immediacy of application and are action oriented.

## Action research and action learning

Action learning is sometimes mentioned as if it is the same as action research. While the two share some features they are different, so it is useful to distinguish between them.

**Action research** is a research method that enables practitioners to develop new practice-related knowledge through cycles of:

- planning
- acting
- observing
- reviewing.

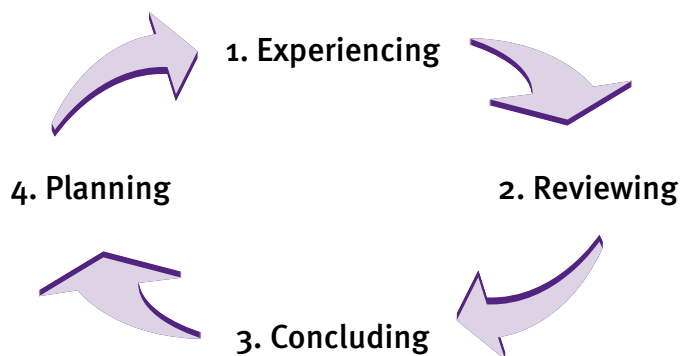


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**Action learning** is a staff development technique for learning from current activities, and involves the use of the cycle of:

- experiencing
- reviewing
- concluding
- planning.

*Diagram 2: The four steps in the action learning cycle*



Action learning and action research are methodologies supported by theory and are useful for structuring collaborative workbased learning.

## Definition

A definition of action learning which highlights the value of the methodology is provided by Skippington (2002):

Action learning is a systematic process through which individuals learn by doing. Through the process, people increase their self-awareness and develop new knowledge, attitudes and behaviours as well as skills for making changes and redefining their roles and responsibilities within new or changing workplace contexts. (p.25)

## Characteristics

The relevant characteristics of action learning and action research are that both:

- are workbased
- are iterative through experientially based cycles involving both practice and knowledge

- value critical self reflection and group reflection by practitioners attempting to resolve experiences in their workplace
- seek to change organisational circumstances by transforming participants' understandings of these circumstances (Mitchell, Henry and Young 2001, p.38).

Some common characteristics of action learning are:

- the use of a convenor to handle the administrative aspects of a group meeting regularly
- the use of a facilitator to manage group activities and to assist the group to move through the cycle of experiencing, reviewing, concluding and planning
- the use of action learning sets, that is groups of people who commit to meeting regularly to examine shared topics.

## Benefits

The transformative processes of action learning can assist organisations, teams and individuals to improve their performance and practice and to achieve higher goals.

Properly implemented, action learning raises the possibility of enhanced learning. Mumford (1997) notes its potential as follows:

... the Action Learning process is potentially extremely rich because it provides scope for consistently going around the Learning Cycle and discovering more about yourself, more about the process, more about how to transfer particular experiences to other situations (p. 12)

Mitchell, Henry and Young (2001, p.38) found that, through collaborative action-based reflection, action learning can liberate participants from routinised and habitual ways of thinking about themselves and their scope and capacity to act in and on their world. Action learning can be potentially self-transcendent and institutionally transforming.

Action learning empowers the questioning process and enables people to develop themselves through:

- working on a 'real life' problem
- being encouraged to question what is happening
- trying out suggested solutions (doing things differently)
- stepping back and reflecting on what is happening and why
- sharing the experience with those who are also learning by doing. (ALA 2007)

## When to use action learning

Action learning suits staff development programs where:

- a group is involved and the members of the group are interested in working together on a common interest, such as recognition services or employability skills or workplace delivery
- participants are comfortable with reflecting on their experiences and planning improvements
- a facilitator is available, and
- time can be set aside for the group to meet face to face on a regular basis.

Hawke and Martin (2000) investigated staff development within VET in Western Australia that used action learning and found that the important features of action learning were:

- the focus on real world problems
- the voluntary participation
- the focus on both the individual and the group
- the collaboration
- the assistance of the facilitator
- the combined expertise of the group
- the induction into the process
- the in-built change factor: the reflecting, reviewing, revising
- manageable group size
- management support
- the need for more time.

In *Learning@Work*, Skippington (2002) elaborates on five case studies which effectively implemented action learning in an Australian VET context. Further short examples can be found in the following recent Reframing the Future publications: *New Ways of Working in VET*; *New Capabilities in VET*; *Human Capital Enhanced by VET*.

Practitioners are advised to use action learning where it is relevant and suits the context, where the pre-conditions for success exist, where it can add value and it is superior to any other available methodology.

## For more information, contact

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## References and further reading

(items with an asterisk\* are available from <http://reframingthefuture.net>)

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