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# Learning in Action: Implementing a Facilitated Learning Programme for Tourism Micro-Firms

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# Learning in Action: Implementing a Facilitated Learning Programme for Tourism Micro-Firms

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## Abstract

This paper presents findings from research associated with a tourism micro-firm facilitated learning programme, carried out over a four-year period. Considering traditional educational interventions have had limited impact on micro-firm activities; the researchers propose an alternative approach to meeting the learning needs of micro-firms which encompass local and self-developed knowledge and the successful completion of learning cycles. Using a behavioural lens, the researchers' consider the experiential learning impact of facilitated learning programmes on observed micro-firm owner-managers. Adopting an action learning (AL) approach, the researchers explore the design, development, implementation and impact of this programme and contemplate the observed micro-firms' focus on and approach to learning in their business setting. Having analysed the micro-firms' learning-enhanced development strategies, the researchers propose a cohort-specific AL framework based on the findings and highlight the research implications prior to setting out avenues of further research.

**Key Words:** Tourism micro-firms, Facilitated Learning Programmes, Action learning.

## Introduction

Micro-firms are defined as those commercial entities with no more than 10 full-time employees (European Commission, 2011) for the purposes of this study.  They represent the vast majority of tourism providers in Ireland (Fáilte Ireland[1], 2010), and are cited as a key contributor to the nation's economy, accounting for total revenue of €6.3 billion and realising 128,400 jobs in the accommodation and food sector alone (Tourism Renewal Group, 2009).  As tourism micro-firms learn in unique ways both individually and collectively (Denicolai *et al.,* 2010; Morrison and Teixeira, 2004; Reinl and Kelliher, 2014), researchers appear unified in the belief that generic training solutions fail to address the specific learning needs of these firms (Devins *et al.,* 2005; Greenbank, 2000; Kelliher *et al.,* 2009; Raffo *et al.,* 2000). There have been numerous calls for training providers to take a wider approach to micro-firm education, to be delivered at a time and location more suitable to this cohort (Taylor and Thorpe, 2004; Raffo *et al.,* 2000; European Commission, 2006; Kelliher *et al.,* 2009).

As tourism micro-firm learning initiatives ought to focus on analytical and intuitive skill development through individualised learning programmes (Kelliher *et al.,* 2009; Morrison and Teixeira, 2004), this study considers the application of an action learning (AL) ethos (Trehan and Pedler, 2011) in tourism micro-firm development programmes. AL encourages learning enhancement through processes that can be mapped to the learning cycle (Schaper *et al.,* 2005; Simpson, 2001; Kelliher and Reinl, 2009), as it "puts the emphasis on people learning through close involvement with real managerial situations, using all the resources

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[1]  Fáilte Ireland is the National Tourism Development Authority of Ireland, whose role is to support the tourism industry and work to sustain Ireland as a high-quality and competitive tourism destination.

available to understand them, taking action in those situations and learning from interpreting the consequences", (Trehan and Pedler 2010, p. 2). The ultimate goal is for tourism micro-firm learners to think more strategically about their business needs (Devins *et al.,* 2005; Morrison and Teixeria, 2004), thus, the AL approach is far more likely to reap sustainable competitive returns by embedding the resource perspective in the design, development and implementation of the micro-firm's learning strategy (Perren, 1999; Kelliher and Reinl, 2009). It is also likely to move both educators and learners away from 'the narrow idea of classical education towards the modern idea of lifelong learning' (EC, 2006, p. 12) in pursuit of greater micro-firm engagement in learning and development. Thus, this paper presents findings from a tourism micro-firm AL programme, carried out over a four-year period. It contemplates the micro-firms' approach to learning in their business setting and the design and implementation of learning-enhanced development strategies. The researchers propose a cohort-specific AL framework based on the findings and highlight the research implications prior to setting out avenues of further research.

## Literature Review

Learning, that is the development of new capability, occurs over time in a continuous cycle of experiencing, reflecting, thinking and acting (Jung, 1931) that is responsive to the learning situation at hand. This learning cycle (Kolb, 1976) emphasises emergent learning wherein an active or concrete experience leads the learner to take some time to observe and reflect upon this experience either on an individual basis and/or in dialogue with others (Floren, 2003). The learner then tries to make connections between past, existing and new experiences that lead to a deeper understanding which can then be applied through active experimentation. Of note in this study is that tourism micro-firms do not normally have the resource slack necessary to facilitate emergent learning inherent in the learning cycle (Devins *et al.,* 2005; Perren, 1999; Simpson, 2001; Kelliher and Reinl, 2009). These resource limitations promote urgent operational needs over new learning (Perren, 1999) therefore developing new learning capabilities can be quite problematic for micro-firms (Pil and Holweg, 2003). This resource reality partly explains the emphasis placed on immediately applicable learning in micro-firms (Lawless *et al.,* 2000; Kelliher and Reinl, 2011), which can be detrimental to long-term business development (Perren, 1999; Sharper *et al.,* 2005).

Having accepted that tourism micro-firms are resource constrained, the impact of this culture on learning is worth further consideration. If we assume that learning is deeply rooted in our everyday activities and experience (Kolb, 1976; Trehan and Pedler, 2011) and most 'expertise' is acquired by acting and reflecting in our daily work and lives, then surely micro-firm learners are 'expert' in their world? Not necessarily. The owner-manager (OM)'s skills are developed largely by trial and error (Schaper *et al.,* 2005) and this crisis driven approach to learning (Lawless *et al.,* 2000) means that learning occurs as much by accident as by design. OMs "may not be aware that learning is taking place in the daily course of action, since it might be unconscious" (Olsson *et al.,* 2008, p. 431-2), thus training can act as a catalyst for conscious action among this cohort (Devins *et al.,* 2005; Kelliher *et al.,* 2009; Simpson, 2001). However, learner qualities such as the ability to be reflexive may be undervalued considering the multifaceted demands faced by micro-firm members (Simpson, 2001; Kelliher and Reinl, 2009; Perren, 1999), thereby curtailing the learning cycle and ultimately causing organisational learning difficulties (Sharper *et al.,* 2005). Therefore, awareness and understanding of

individual learning cycles (Kolb, 1976) can impart greater clarity and meaning to existing learning processes (Trehan and Pedler, 2011).  One means of creating these links is through AL (Marquardt and Waddill, 2004; Raelin, 1997; Trehan and Pedler, 2011), a key approach used in the observed learning programme.

From an AL perspective, the learning cycle pays homage to the ethos that we cannot say that we know something until we have tried to act in the light of any new knowledge (Revans, 1998; Marquardt and Waddill, 2004).  Therefore, the vision of 'what could be' needs to be based on accumulated knowledge and the evident experience of adopting that knowledge in a work setting within a facilitated learning programme.  Looking at the observed learning programme design from an AL perspective (Revans 1998; Trehan and Pedler, 2011) offers an approach that 'puts the emphasis on people learning through close involvement with real managerial situations' (Trehan and Pedler, 2011:2).  Thus, micro-firm learning is shaped by a focus on each firm's competence development (O'Dwyer and Ryan, 2000; Kelliher and Reinl, 2009) and the collective learning experience (Floren, 2003; Matlay, 1999; Reinl and Kelliher, 2010) and is facilitated through learning structures which in turn release information and resource exchange to be implemented in individual micro-firm settings (Kelliher and Reinl, 2009; O'Dwyer and Ryan, 2000).  Mapping these processes to the learning cycle provides for learning enhancement in the micro-firm setting (Schaper *et al.,* 2005), offering a catalyst for micro-firm engagement in future learning cycles.

As micro-firms are not always aware of what they learned (Devins *et al.,* 2005; Olsson *et al.,* 2008; Simpson, 2001), the AL cycle prompts them to make their learning explicit through the reflection process, which in turn creates the potential for conscious action (Jung, 1931; Kolb, 1976).  When applied in this manner, reflection serves as a means to unlock tacit learning, make sense of and leverage experience (Trehan and Pedler, 2011) and convert knowledge into action in 'real time'.  It also allows for the "constant questioning of one's values and theories" (Raelin, 1997, p. 369), which can ultimately lead to a transformation of perspective by carrying these ideas forward to future situations.

From a performance perspective, micro-firm employees display a preference for activity-based learning and peer interaction (Kelliher *et al.,* 2013; Morrison and Teixeira, 2004), while there may also be restricted scope for formal training due to resource constraints (Kelliher and Reinl, 2009).  Thus, the micro-firm's learning culture lends itself to informal narrative modes of communication (Penn *et al.,* 1998; Matley, 1999), where the creation of individual and collective micro-firm learning competencies is built on the "telling of 'stories' of successful implementation and integration of learning in the workplace" (Reinl and Kelliher, 2010, p. 146-7).  This approach also adopts a pluralist learning ethos based on multiple perspectives (Kolb, 1984), where trained facilitators contribute to the learning experience, nurturing interactive engagement and learning cycle completion among the trainee cohort in 'learning sets' within and outside of the facilitated learning space (Denicolai *et al.,* 2010).  Marsick and Watkins (2001) argue that as a consequence of opportunistic and incidental learning provoked by taking action and reflecting systematically within the learning set; participants develop meta-skills such as self-insight, wider organisation-political understanding and influencing abilities, as well as skills for learning how to learn. Over time, sustained communal learning activity offers individual learners strategic benefits (Denicolai *et al.,* 2010; Kelliher *et al.,* 2009; Wing Yan Man, 2007), which can result in learning development, detectable through visibly

enhanced skills, attributes and behaviours (Wing Yan Man, 2007; Reinl and Kelliher, 2014). When considered together, these guidelines offered a basis for developing a customised facilitated AL programme for tourism micro-firms.

## Methodology

The researchers observed a facilitated tourism micro-firm learning programme at 6-month intervals over a four-year period. This programme applied the AL ethos of interacting with real people, resolving and taking action on real problems in real time and learning through questioning and reflection while doing so (Marsick and Watkins, 2001; Marquardt and Waddill, 2004). Following a baseline exercise to establish individual learning needs, micro-firm OMs were placed in practical problem solving teams to learn about everything they could that was connected to the proposed problem and that could help solve it (Marquardt and Waddill, 2004). These activities were founded in Rigg's (2008) view that the quality of the conversation and the interaction that it creates among the AL cohort is paramount in creating knowledge. This approach also provides interconnectivity between knowledge and action (Dixon, 1999), leveraging prior learning in iterative team activities (Floren, 2003) and acknowledging the fact that not only is individual learning 'dependent on the collective' but the collective is 'dependent on the individual' (Dixon 1999, p. 41).

As this study is about learning in action, the researchers were less concerned with the training per se, than with the resultant learning. Therefore, using a behavioural lens, the authors' sought to identify the impact of the AL programme on micro-firms' subsequent approach to learning in their business setting (Taylor and Thorpe, 2004). As such, the researchers observed training events and team interactions, held interim focus groups with the programme participants and pursued individual conversations with the trainees to elicit their learning experience and attempt to establish whether the learning cycle commenced, progressed or was completed during this study.

The study cohort is a collection of tourism micro-firm owner-managers brought together in action and interaction with each other within a facilitated learning programme. The programme commences with an individual learning needs analysis exercise involving a pre-scripted survey document, followed by the splitting of the cohort into monitored learning sets focused on team-based applied business projects supported by an academic mentor. This approach echoes the value of informal learning (Marsick and Watkins, 2001), mentor support (Denicolai *et al.,* 2010; Raffo *et al.,* 2000) and network engagement in the promotion of tourism micro-firm learning (Reinl and Kelliher, 2014). Momentum is pursued through the creation of relevant expert seminars motivated through learning needs identified within individual learning sets, mentored group events and an annual residential learning programme. These interactions with outside experts offers an outside-in perspective for the tourism provider (Denicolai *et al.,* 2010), which in turn provides an evolutionary path to learning enhancement via learning cycle completion (Scharper *et al.,* 2005). This iterative approach to micro-firm learning is founded on informal collaborative learning activities (Matley, 1999; Marsick and Watkins, 2001; Morrison and Teixeira, 2004; Raffo *et al.,* 2000) so that learning set members collectively take action and develop new ways of thinking (Floren, 2003; Kelliher *et al.,* 2009); through social interaction with other set members, much like the micro-firm environment described by Penn et al. (1998). The purpose of this set-led learning autonomy is to restrict the potential for

'learned helplessness' to build up due to the facilitated nature of the programme (Kelliher *et al.,* 2009).

## Findings

Applying the principles of experiencing, reflecting, thinking and acting (Jung, 1931; Kolb, 1976) to this cohort and in consideration of the AL approach, the findings are structured to emulate the learning cycle for ease of reference.

**Experiencing:** When solicited, participants could *"see the need to be responsible for* [their] *own learning"* and associate learning with knowledge, new ideas, improving, experience and expanding skills and knowledge that are already [in the business]. Although the contents of the learning needs exercise do not form part of the findings, it is noteworthy that very few filled the survey document out in full, while others *"just ticked the boxes"*. This catalyst triggered the researchers' own reflective cycle, and the learning needs exercise was included as an aspect of the focus group held at the end of the programme. While participants found the exercise was *"a good way of making the group focus on our business needs"* and proved *"...very beneficial in terms of clarifying my thought process"* participants believed the terminology in the document was *"not in our everyday language"*, requiring *"a dictionary beside me"* suggesting a language barrier between educators and participants.

As anticipated in the literature, the learners have a preference for action over reflection (Kelliher *et al.,* 2009; Marsick and Watkins, 2001), with many stating that they *"attend the university of life"* by running their own business. There was some disappointment that this life experience had not been acknowledged by programme facilitators, a finding that has since been incorporated into 'prior learning' certification (Marsick and Watkins, 2001) at the researchers' institute. Asked if the training was of value, participant responses varied from *"very positive"* about receiving *"best practice in advice"* to a sense of being *"drowned out"* and "talking shop with no finality". When participants considered the training programme itself, they believed they learned *"from the facilitator"* and from *"what we share with each other"* as well as from one-on-one sessions, presentations and network events. Respondents highlighted that learning should be *"relevant to small business"* for *"training to take hold"*, reinforcing the preference for immediately applicable learning among this cohort (Lawless *et al.,* 2000; Kelliher and Reinl, 2011). Participants found *"it was lovely to meet other small business people"*, and that these interactions *"brought me back to thinking"* and *"clarified the mind"*, suggesting a collective learning experience (Morrison and Teixeira, 2004; Reinl and Kelliher, 2010) which resulted in reflective practice.

**Reflecting:** During event evaluation sessions, the cohort found discussing the learning impact makes it *"stick more than writing it down"*. When asked if the group felt that reflection was an important part of learning on the training programme, participants asked for clarification, which was provided. Others described thinking about what had been learned on the journey home and over the coming days, sharing experiences with family and friends, suggesting learning cycle progress. However, more responded that *"you find that when you're busy, you run the risk of losing information and learning"* and that they often "don't have the time" to take part in reflective sessions, suggesting a resource-based disconnection between the action/ reflection steps in the micro-firm learning cycle (Devins *et al.,* 2005; Kelliher and Reinl,

2009; Simpson, 2001). Based on learner feedback, two further questions were added to the programme's evaluation exercise: 'what did I learn today?' and 'how did I apply this in my business?' and these were deemed to *"keep people on their toes"* and were *"good to see where* [micro-firm] *is going"*.

**Thinking:** In terms of thinking (Jung, 1931) the development of analytical competency was monitored through the interim meetings with the cohort and through researcher observations. Some found that the training environment was *"a fantastic opportunity... to learn from mistakes that we've all made over the years"*, while others struggled with whether they could quantify the return on their effort. When contemplating changes made to their business (Marsick and Watkins, 2001; Marquardt and Waddill, 2004), participants believed *"it made me focus... [it] made me realise that you need to be learning all of the time"*; another added that *"before you just get stuck in a rut and forget about improving"*, and a third nodded in agreement *"now I think about everything I do from my customers' perspective"*. The value of the training programme was deemed to be *"the learning and ideas generated at the* [training] *events"* and the fact that you can be *"a busy fool, we'll never forget that phrase"*.

**Acting:** Findings highlight that focusing on how to apply the learning in the micro-firm was perceived to be *"a good thing"* and that *"top tips to take back to my business"* was particularly useful exercise, leaving participants with the sense that *"I can't wait to go back and apply it"*. This suggests that a level of learning ownership had been achieved among this cohort (Taylor and Thorpe, 2004; Kelliher and Henderson, 2006). In terms of business application, some participants felt that *"while people have the best intentions* [to use elements of learning in the business], *whether it will be followed through down the road, only history will tell"*. Others acknowledged that *"I know that I was supposed to make changes but I haven't as yet"*, pointing to an application gap in the AL process, amplified by a lack of time (Simpson, 2001; Kelliher and Reinl, 2009). Despite these challenges, there were several examples where changes were introduced in the micro-firms (based on training triggers) with immediate results. As one participant remarked: '...food for thought, even though my product was not priced right, I had no means to make changes. I now have tools to implement in the business that allow me to work out where my time is best spent- and more profitable', demonstrating the value of formal learning-enhanced business tools among this cohort. 'Stories' of successful implementation of learning also appeared to motivate others (Penn *et al.,* 1998; Reinl and Kelliher, 2010), who were keen to hear the stories: *"we have a lot more knowledge to share than we realise"*.

When contemplating the AL process as a whole, many found it to be a *"very positive"* experience where *"you give and you get twice as much in return"*, reinforcing the positive impact of peer learning in this environment (Kelliher *et al.,* 2013; Morrison and Teixeira, 2004). Others felt *"that I will now pick other things to learn"* pointing to both cycle completion and a willingness to engage with future cycles (Schaper *et al.,* 2005). Suggestions made by participants to incorporate a buddy system as *"someone that you could ring up and speak to and encourage"*, and work-in-action learning groups who could *"use each other to motivate and keep up the good work"* in future AL cycles give further credence to the value placed on collective learning among this cohort (Morrison and Teixeira, 2004). Finally, the group thought *"it would be a good idea if we could get together in six months' time and see what everyone is up to"* suggesting the learning ethos has the potential to live beyond the facilitated AL programme.

## Proposing A Micro-Firm Action Learning Framework

The researchers reflected on the key learning criteria evidenced in the study using the overarching learning cycle (Kolb, 1976) as a basis of analysis. The value of an initial learning catalyst and the subsequent application of a peer-led 'learning set' is acknowledged, while criteria relating to owner-manager engagement in pursuit of learning cycle completion include learning competency development via individual and collective activity and narrative modes of communication and knowledge exchange. A mapping of these criteria resulted in the proposed micro-firm action-learning framework (Figure 1).
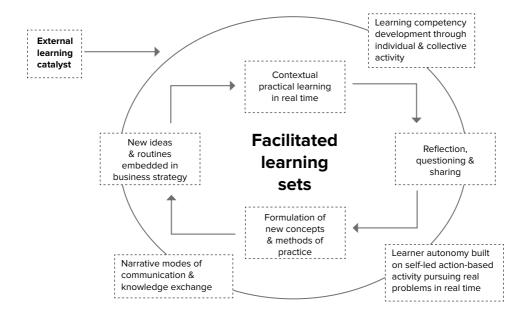


**Figure 1:** A micro-firm action learning framework

The proposed AL framework is based on Kolb's learning process (1976) and the principles of action learning (Marquardt and Waddill, 2004; Raelin, 1997; Trehan and Pedler, 2011). As training can act as a catalyst for conscious action within tourism micro-firms (Devins *et al.,* 2005; Kelliher *et al.,* 2009) and was found to provide learning momentum in the observed programme, the starting point in the framework is an 'external learning catalyst', which in this case is the identification of individual micro-firm learning needs within a facilitated environment. As the learning cycle emphasises facilitated collaborative micro-firm learning development (Floren, 2003; Matley, 1999; Morrison and Teixeira, 2004), facilitator value is key in terms of instigating engagement in a comprehensive AL cycle (Trehan and Pedler, 2011). Specifically, in prompting experience sharing and questioning among trainees (Morrison and Teixeira, 2004; Raffo *et al.,* 2000), while honing owner-manager evaluation skills with regard to the quality and appropriateness of knowledge exchanges, the framework promotes the release of resource constraints among this cohort (Devins *et al.,* 2005; Kelliher and Reinl, 2009; Simpson, 2001).

Working on 'real managerial situations' (Trehan and Pedler, 2010, p. 2) provides contextual practical learning while the 'learning set' provides space for making sense of prior experience.

Thus, the AL process has the potential to transform perspectives in a non-threatening communal learning environment (Denicolai *et al.,* 2010) and in turn boost the confidence of participants. Furthermore, applied learning tools, such as the evaluation triggers and prior-learning acknolwedgement provide valuable narrative frameworks which have the potential to ovecome 'ticking the box' responses to learning needs evaluation, thereby promoting competency development (Raffo *et al.,* 2000; Reinl and Kelliher, 2014).

In contemplating independent learning cycle engagement, the findings demonstrate learner autonomy and a willingness to engage in collaborative learning sets (Floren, 2003). Notably, the concept of reflection proved difficult for participants, and while tools to aid reflection are helpful, time restrictions must be kept in mind when engaging with this cohort. While individual owner-managers appear willing to take ownership of their learning, carefully considered AL structures were required to facilitate this, so that the owner-managers could take action on real problems in real time, and learn through questioning and reflection while doing so (Marsick and Watkins, 2001; Marquardt and Waddill, 2004). It is also evident that some of the existing training structures encourage 'learned helplessness', and it is the responsibility of both the facilitator and the learner to ensure learning autonomy.

When considering the formulation of new concepts and methods of practice, the proposed learning framework mirrors the micro-firm culture to an extent in that it seeks to leverage individual and collective learning development (Matley, 1999; Morrison and Teixeira, 2004; Floren, 2003) through narrative modes of communication and knowledge exchange preferred by these owner-managers, while counterbalancing this activity with learning competency development, thereby balancing both action and reflection. The supporting learning tools (mentor-enabled discussion, relevant expert interventions) demonstrate promise in terms of underpinning furture independent learning, arming participants with new ideas and routines and enabling the owner-manager to embed learning within their business strategy (Wing Yan Man, 2007). Thus, as highlighted in figure 1, the AL framework promotes analytical and intuitive skills development through continuous reflection, questioning and knowledge sharing in the pursuit of micro-firm business strategies that are learning-enhanced and overcome development by 'trial and error' (Schaper *et al.,* 2005).

## Conclusion

Tourism micro-firms unique characteristics demand an approach to learning that encompasses flexibility from supply side interventions (Raffo *et al.,* 2000). Training is not viewed as a continuous process of development in the micro-firm setting, thus where training does occur it needs to be both immediately applicable and directly relevant to the business owner. This research, which builds on Kolb's (1976) learning model underpinned by an action learning ethos (Trehan and Pedler, 2010) encompasses the characteristics of a tourism owner-manager as learner and acknowledges the micro-firm's unique learning environment.

The research found that while motivation is an essential pre-condition for effective learning to occur, learner involvement at each stage of the learning process is also necessary to ensure sustained behavioural change on the part of the owner-manager. Where participants viewed themselves as learners as opposed to receivers of training; responsibility for their own learning increased, as did the depth of their learning as they pursued a more reflective approach to practice post training. Participants' experimental interactions provided new ways

of communicating, reflecting and learning, which in turn brought new ways of organising into being (Rigg 2008); thereby creating a work environment within which learning could flourish.  Furthermore, the findings point to the value of self-led learning in order to alleviate the potential for learned helplessness among this business cohort.  This process is ongoing and will need to be nurtured using different learning mechanisms depending on the observed impediment. Finally, the cycle of amended learning tools and facilitated practice based on team insights, developed the researchers' own theories regarding both training quality and performance standards (Revans, 1998). As these procedures were amended 'in action' (Rigg, 2008) and the data to inform this practice was collected by the researchers in tandem with the data collection process, the researchers acknowledge the limitations associated with this insider approach.

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