



## Action learning and coaching as an integrated approach for supporting women's career progression: A reflective analysis

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### ABSTRACT

This paper offers a critically reflective evaluation of an online action learning initiative in one university which addressed gender inequality and support for women's career development. It was a pilot scheme, led jointly by the university's Women of Westminster network and Centre for Education and Teaching Innovation action learning community. The action learning group comprised four women working in academic roles, and four working in professional services roles. It was co-facilitated by the authors from a shared understanding as coaches working together as 'third space' practitioners; defined as those working in higher education who do not fit conventional binary descriptors/roles such as academic or professional services. Key features of the paper are: (i) the argument that holistic academic practice development applies to individuals working in professional services, technical/operational, and academic roles; and (ii) adoption of a 'practice first' approach. The paper illustrates action learning as a practice, and the important role of reflective supervision based on systems-psychodynamic thinking in co-facilitation of action learning as a group process. Nancy Kline's coaching-based Thinking Environment approach was also used in both the facilitation of action learning, and as a framework for critical reflection and supervision of our coaching practice. Theoretically, action learning was informed by the job demands-resources model, and concepts of job crafting and self-compassion, which enable individuals to shape their work environment by adjusting to prevailing demands and accessing resources. The paper includes outcomes of this action learning initiative, and offers new perspectives for personal, professional, and career development. However action learning and coaching alone cannot overcome organisational barriers to women's career progression. Nor can they address the wider and well documented damage caused by higher education policy and politics. The approach we advocate here calls for a collective process for inquiring into – and revealing – the institutional problems and practices that create barriers for women's career progression. This allows action learning and coaching to move beyond being seen as simply an individual/group process for problem-solving and career development.

**Keywords:** action learning, coaching, critical reflection, women's career development

### Introduction

Progress happens when enough people, in enough parts of an organisation, agree on what is and what is not okay. It happens when people start to have rigorous, provocative and ambitious conversations about the best ways of working together.

The above quote is from the title page of the report: *Women Count: Leaders in Higher Education* (Jarboe, 2018), which showed that although women make up 55% of the total staff population in UK universities, only 29% of vice chancellors and 37% of senior leadership teams were women. It sets the scene for the action learning initiative described, and reflectively analysed in this paper. The initiative arose from our

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work as co-chairs of the University of Westminster's equality and progression working group, whose aims were to: identify and address gender inequalities and barriers to women's career progression; and explore opportunities for personal, professional, and career development for all staff.

The assumption behind these aims was that while there is strong evidence of endemic gender inequalities in higher education (Hewitt, 2020; Jarboe, 2018; Mott, 2022; O'Connor, 2020; White & Burkinshaw, 2019, Yarrow, 2021; Yarrow & Johnson, 2022), opportunities for career progression need to extend beyond women in academic and/or senior leadership roles. This paper broadens the horizons of 'academic staff development'. Because defining what it means to be an academic, and/or being in an academic role can be problematic, and open to interpretation. Caddell and Wilder's (2018) exploration of how academics in Scottish universities experienced kindness and collegiality as they transition through their careers illustrates this dilemma very well:

As the work developed, *it became clear that categories such as 'academic' and indeed, mid and early career, were themselves opaque and open to varied interpretations and even self-critique within the context of the discussion of the individual's career trajectory.* (p. 18 emphasis added)

Our approach was informed by Sutherland's (2018) notion of holistic academic development, and a broad *institutional* focus that includes professional services and support staff working in technical/operational roles, not just academic staff. A holistic approach also pays attention to the *whole of the academic role* and considers other aspects of academic careers (e.g. research, service, administration, leadership). When the action learning group met (in 2021) one of the authors had an academic role as reader in work and organisational psychology and the other had a professional services role as education development partner. We approached the dilemma of what work means in an 'academic role' from a shared understanding of working together as 'third space' practitioners. That is, those working in higher education who do not fit conventional binary descriptors/roles such as academic *or* professional services (Whitchurch, 2012). Holistic academic development calls for more deliberate integration between academic and professional fields of practice, and this paper illustrates how co-facilitated action learning and coaching was one way of achieving this integration. It also adds to the arguments in Walker's (2023) recent paper in this journal which explored approaches to professional development that break the gender bias in academic practice and progression.

### Coaching in HE

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In addition to our academic and professional 'third space' practitioner roles we were (and still are) coaches in our university coaching network. The network is a community of accredited coaches who share a common purpose to further develop our professional skillset, enhance our coaching practice, and raise the profile of coaching across the university. Our approach to co-facilitation of action learning was based on shared principles and values of coaching in higher education (Cruz & Rosemond, 2017; Guccione & Hutchinson, 2021). Harding et al. (2018) note while universities may differ in their approaches to developing institutional coaching cultures, what connects them is: "the spirit of an individually focused and supportive activity with a view to enabling staff within their organisational contexts [to] support a variety of people and developmental situations and also for capacity building" (p. 21). It is, however, important to acknowledge from the outset that coaching alone cannot overcome systemic barriers and gender inequalities in higher education.

We viewed the combination and integration of coaching *and* action learning (Gillaspy, 2020; O'Neil & Marsick, 2014) as a potentially helpful approach for supporting women's career progression. Action learning

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is a method for solving critical and complex problems that recognises that only through questions can we build and gain an understanding of the problem, make sense of it, and develop breakthrough strategies and solutions (Marquardt et al., 2018). Adopting an integrated approach enabled us to have coaching conversations about actions that were necessary to identify, and begin to address, the problem of gender inequalities and barriers to career progression. A crucial aspect of our integrated approach was the concept of ‘action learning as a practice’ which is considered next.

**Action learning as a practice**

Action learning was pioneered by Reg Revans (1972; 2011). Its core philosophy is that the most effective learning takes place when people are faced with a real problem/s to solve. Marquardt et al. (2018) identifies six key components of action learning, summarised in Table 1.

**Table 1** Core components of action learning (adapted from Marquardt et al., 2018, pp. 3-6)

<b>Core components of action learning</b>
1) <i>A problem.</i> Action learning focusses on a problem, challenge, or issue, which is significant and/or urgent. It should provide opportunities for the group to learn individually and collectively, build knowledge, and develop individual, group/team, and organisational skills and change.
2) <i>An action learning group.</i> Ideally between four to eight members, who work on a shared organisational problem. Ideally the group have diversity of background and experience to promote fresh thinking and consideration of the problem from a variety of perspectives.
3) <i>A working process of insightful questioning and reflective listening.</i> Action learning emphasises questioning and listening over offering advice and opinion. Good questions build group cohesiveness and generate innovative thinking.
4) <i>Actions taken on the problem.</i> Members of the group must have the power/autonomy to make actions themselves or be assured that recommendations will be acted upon. Action enhances learning because it provides a basis for critical reflection.
5) <i>A commitment to learning.</i> Because unless the group learns it may not be able to creatively solve a complex problem. Longer term benefits lie in individual and group learning, and how this learning is applied in a wider systemic context.
6) <i>An action learning coach.</i> Coaching is important because it enables the group to focus on what is important (i.e. the learning) and what is urgent (i.e. the problem). A coach helps the group reflect on their listening and feedback skills, how a problem can be reframed, and assumptions that may be shaping beliefs and actions.

The terms action learning group and action learning set (ALS) are often used interchangeably in the literature (e.g. Vince, 2008; Wood, 2020). When the abbreviated term ALS is used, it more typically describes the skills and practice of action learning, while the term action learning group acknowledges the ‘bigger picture’ and wider systemic, organisational context. More specifically, this is about “the connections between emotions, politics and learning, and the implications of such connections for action learning” (Vince, 2016, p. 391). Waddington et al. (2021) conceptualise *action learning as a practice* as: a) development of *skills* of questioning, listening, feedback, respectful challenge, self-awareness, critical reflection; and b) attention to *group processes, dynamics, and underlying emotions*.

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This can also be seen through the lens of a 'practice first' approach (Haroun, 2021) which is about starting with the terrain of practice before moving to "*studying the map – theory*" (p.113, original emphasis). This influenced our integrated approach to action learning and coaching – and thus how the rest of the paper is structured – in three ways. Firstly, working from the position of action learning as a practice we used core coaching skills: for example questioning, active listening, and challenging, in order to have rigorous, provocative, and ambitious coaching conversations with the group. Secondly, the wider neoliberal higher education political and policy context of disruption and toxicity (e.g. Jones, 2022; Pedersen, 2021; Smyth, 2018) in which the group (including us as co-facilitators) was working necessitated regular supervision after each action learning meeting, facilitated by a supervisor trained in systems psychodynamics thinking (see Archer, 2021; Hawkins & Turner, 2020; Waddington & Kaplan, 2021). This was necessary as a way of managing potentially difficult/distressing issues and emotions presented during action learning; and also to support reflection and self-care in our coaching practice (Turner & Palmer, 2019). Thirdly, we integrated theoretical perspectives from the field of self-compassion (Bluth & Neff, 2018; Neff, 2023), and the job demands-resources (JD-R) model and associated concept of job crafting (Bakker et al., 2014) into the process of action learning. Therefore, the paper is structured as follows: first there is a snapshot of the practice, process, and outcomes of action learning, followed by discussion of the role of supervision and systems psychodynamic thinking. It then moves from practice to integration and application of insights from JD-R and self-compassion theories. The paper concludes with recommendations and reflections for further development of the role of action learning in staff and organisational development, and the creation of coaching cultures in higher education.

#### A note on confidentiality

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Confidentiality is a crucial component of action learning and was one of the ground rules agreed with the group. McGill and Brockbank (2004) differentiate between confidentiality of content and process; content is defined as the material and issues that participants bring to action learning, while process refers to how an action learning set/group 'works': "So set members do not disclose any matters outside the set relating to other set members [but] are free to relate process issues outside the set" (p. 68). Therefore, minimal identifying information about the action learning group participants is included in the paper, and descriptions of the process and outcomes of action learning are used in accordance with American Psychological Association (APA, 2020, p. 22) guidance to: (i) alter specific characteristics; (ii) limit description of specific characteristics; (iii) disguise details by adding unrelated detail; and (iv) use composite descriptions. While critical reflection is also a crucial component of action learning, defined as "challenging assumptions and the prevailing discourse" (McGill & Brockbank, 2004, p. 122), the reflections included in this paper are our own, as co-facilitators of the action learning process.

With regard to ethical approval, we consulted with the chair of the university research ethics committee – and professor of pedagogy - who advised that evaluation of the action learning initiative did not require *formal* ethical approval as it fell within the remit and aims of the Centre for Education and Teaching Innovation (CETI). This is also in accord with good practice guidelines for action learning in higher education, which do not indicate the need for formal ethical approval of evaluation methods (see Ellis, n.d., p. 18).

#### A snapshot of the action learning process

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The term action learning group is used in the paper to reflect the above conceptualisation of action learning as a practice, and inclusion of attention to group processes, dynamics, and underlying emotions. An invitation to join an action learning initiative focusing on career progression was sent to all members of the Women of Westminster (WOW) network, indicating that it was open to academic and professional services staff. The basis for the offer was to provide a development opportunity for members of WOW who had identified, via informal feedback, that one of the perceived barriers/challenges to women's career progression was lack of professional development opportunities. The maximum number in the group was set at eight to promote optimum opportunities for action learning (Marquardt et al., 2018); recruitment was on a 'first come first served' basis. The limitations of this approach are acknowledged, and we appreciate that some women may have been excluded, nevertheless this was a pilot scheme which led to other initiatives. For example, group career coaching (Meldrum, 2021) was offered to (and taken up by) five women after action learning participants had been recruited. While the process and outcomes of group coaching are not reported here, that scheme was well received and is now part the university's Human Resources Organisational Development (HROD) coaching scheme, and open to all staff.

The action learning group was a mixed age group representing women working in academic and professional services roles at the start of their career, mid-career, and late career. The majority were full-time members of staff who had worked at the university from a couple of years, to over a decade. Five had prior experience of being in an action learning set, for example as part of the UK 'Aurora' women's leadership development initiative (Advance HE, n.d.), and appreciated the value of action learning. The timing of meetings coincided with Covid lockdown when UK Government and university recommendations were to work online/from home wherever possible, and all action learning meetings were held online via Microsoft Teams.

Care was taken to ensure the online environment was one in which good thinking, followed by appropriate action and reflection could take place. Principles of building a psychologically safe and inclusive learning environment, broadly defined as "a climate in which people are comfortable about expressing and being themselves ... confident that [they] won't be humiliated, ignored, or blamed" (Edmondson, 2019, p. xvi) were followed. In practice, this meant as co-facilitators we were comfortable sharing our own vulnerabilities and emotions to create a safe Thinking Environment.

#### Creating a Thinking Environment

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The Thinking Environment coaching model was used to facilitate action learning, based on the assumption that coaches and their clients work together as equal thinking partners (Kauffman & Tulpa, 2010; Kline, 2015). It was originally developed in response to Nancy Kline's question:

- If *action* is only as good as the thinking behind it, how do we create the conditions for the highest quality thinking?

The answer that emerged was ten constituent components of a Thinking Environment (Box 1).

### Box 1 Components of a Thinking Environment

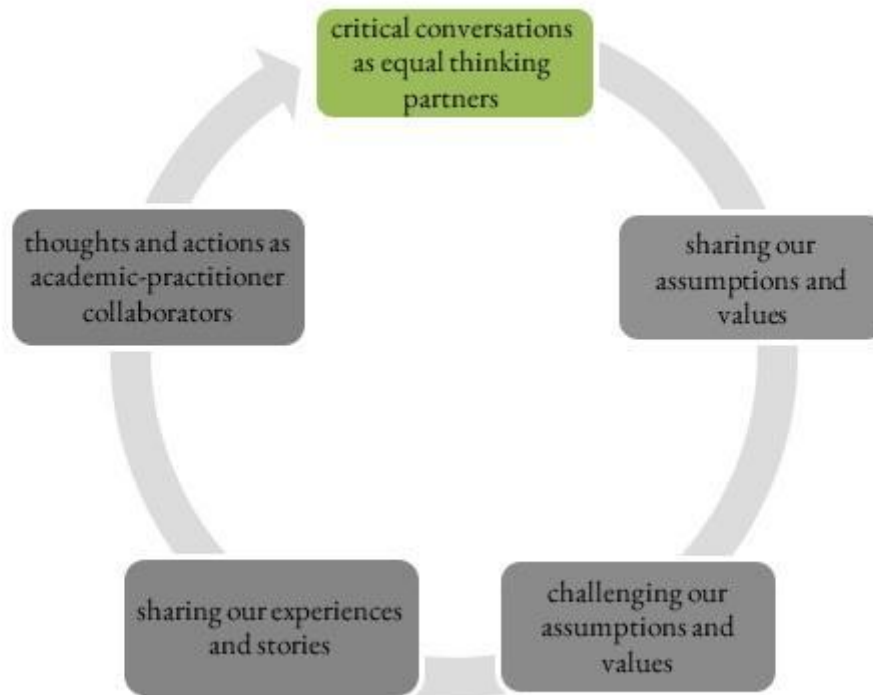
*Attention*: listening without interruption and with interest  
*Equality*: regarding each other as thinking peers, giving equal time to think  
*Ease*: discarding internal urgency  
*Appreciation*: noticing what is good and saying it  
*Encouragement*: giving courage to go to the unexplored edge of thinking  
*Feelings*: welcoming the release of emotion and unexpressed feelings  
*Information*: full and accurate information and relevant facts  
*Difference*: prioritising diversity of group identities and understanding their lived experience  
*Incisive questions<sup>TM</sup>*: uncovering untrue limiting assumptions  
*Place*: a physical environment that says 'you matter'

Source: Kline (n.d.)

While all components are important for learning and coaching, some featured less – and some featured more – strongly than others. For example, online facilitation presented barriers to creation of a physical space that says: 'you matter'; however, we were able to demonstrate this in different ways. We were mindful that all participants were investing time and emotion in the process of action learning; for participants in academic roles the problem of finding time to write came up several times. At the end of the action learning initiative we secured university funding to support an off-site writing retreat, which we argued was another way of providing a physical environment that says: 'you matter'. This was facilitated by the university's wider and ongoing support for writing retreats as a valuable means of promoting wellbeing for staff and doctoral students (see Eardley et al., 2021; Stevenson, 2021). Participants in professional services roles were offered a one-to-one coaching session instead of the writing retreat. The component of 'Ease' was particularly pertinent for all participants – and still is for all staff working in today's universities – because of the day-to-day experience of working in the current pressurised and stressful HE context. Ease, more extensively defined, is:

An internal state free from rush or urgency, [that] creates the best conditions for thinking. But Ease, particularly in organisations and through the 'push' aspect of social networking, is being systematically bred out of our lives. If we want *people to think well under impossible deadlines and inside the injunctions of 'faster, better, cheaper, more,' we must cultivate internal ease.* (Kline, n.d., p.4, emphasis added)

In practice, components of a Thinking Environment were embedded into the action learning process through careful, uninterrupted and non-judgmental listening, appreciation, challenging our own assumptions, and encouraging respectful challenge as part of the group process. The Thinking Environment was also integrated into a framework for critical reflection (see Figure 1), to guide our questions and conversations with the group, and subsequent supervision conversations.



**Figure 1** Framework for critical reflection (adapted from Waddington et al., 2021, p. 8)

### The action learning process

The aims of the action learning initiative were for participants to come away with a set of realistic actions to help them address and/or better understand issues experienced in regard to their personal, professional, and career development. The group met seven times between January to September 2021. At the introductory session participants brought an object, image, piece of music, or any other artefact to share with the rest of the group that illustrated where they were in their career journey. As facilitators we also shared our own artefacts that illustrated our approach to action learning, and which we reflect upon at the end of the paper. As Caddell and Wilder (2018) note, artefacts – and associated narratives/explanations – provide a good starting point for participant-led conversations, which then continued during action learning sessions. Examples included a small sliding tile puzzle which represented the challenging and puzzling nature of career progression and an item from a previous career outside of academia, which represented being a ‘career shifter’. The artefacts chosen by participants reflected both shared *and* different experiences between academic and professional services colleagues. For example, shared frustrations around high workloads and work-life balance contrasted with a perception that career development opportunities and pathways to promotion were less apparent and less well understood for staff working in professional services roles.

The group then discussed, and agreed, boundaries and ways of working: confidentiality, commitment to participation, respect, listening, and enabling a safe space were important factors. As co-facilitators we role played questioning and active listening skills, and also explained that we would be receiving professional supervision as part of the process. This was necessary to ensure that the group stayed focused on its primary task – which was to enable individual and collective learning, whilst simultaneously implementing and putting actions and theory into practice. While action learning is more usually facilitated by one (rather than two) action learning coaches (Marquardt et al., 2018), co-facilitation enabled us to notice and act on process cues whilst concurrently working on the task.

*Programme design and structure*

The programme was designed to allow two hours/meeting with an expectation that this would allow each participant to have at least one opportunity to present an issue/problem. Two hours was challenging but given the time pressures and organisational demands on staff it was felt to be a reasonable model. It also enabled the commitment and participation of a necessary minimum group membership. Participants were demonstrably highly committed to the action learning process, for instance attending during their annual leave. The need for nurturing and relaxation (McGill & Brockbank, 2004) was addressed by including at least one short break as well as a ‘check-in’ session at the start of the session. Table 2 illustrates the overall structure of each session, which was used flexibly as necessary, for example if a participant needed to negotiate more time to present and think about their problem/issue.

**Table 2** Structure of a 2-hour action learning session

<b>Structure of a 2-hour action learning session</b>
1) Check-in
2) Feedback and update on actions and/or outcomes from the previous session’s presenters
3) Bids for airtime
4) First presenter’s problem/issue; clarifying and open questions; actions; group feedback
5) Short break
6) Second presenter’s problem/issue; clarifying and open questions; actions; group feedback
7) Group reflection on process; e.g. group dynamics and emotions experienced in the session

In advance, participants were sent a briefing note, based on principles used by *South East Action Learning* (SEAL, n.d.):

To ensure you get the most out of the opportunity to discuss and reflect on career progression with colleagues, we recommend that you spend some time thinking ahead to identify a problem/issue to bring to this action learning initiative. This can be something that might be an ongoing priority, and



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complex in nature, which you may want to explore and progress over a series of meetings. Or it might be a challenge that you are hoping to resolve more quickly.

As this was online action learning, initially members of the group asked their clarifying and open questions to the presenter of a problem/issue verbally, using the 'raise your hand' function of Teams. However, after the third 'halfway session' we adopted the 'post-it' method of action learning (SEAL, n.d.). In face-to-face action learning this involves writing questions down on 'post-its', which are given to the issue-owner for further reflection. Online, this method was adapted by using the 'chat' function to post questions for the presenter. The benefits of moving to an online 'post-it' method allowed presenters to choose which questions to respond to and in which order, and also provided a record of the questions that could be used for further reflection and action. The online programme design and structure was therefore a hybrid approach that adapted and integrated guidance and approaches from face-to-face methods.

Taking a Thinking Environment approach allowed us to introduce the concept of 'uninterrupted thinking space' to enable presenters to really think through actions and reflections from their problem/issue. Components of attention, equality, ease, and appreciation (see Table 2 above) were particularly helpful in helping participants reflect on their issue, and action/s to feedback to the group at the next meeting. A range of actions were taken (see below), which could be applied/used equally by academic and professional services colleagues, although the context, purpose and outcome of the actions may differ.

#### *Examples of actions taken*

Composite, anonymised examples include:

- finding a mentor/ally, getting back in touch with a previous mentor
- using self-compassion resources from Kristen Neff's (n.d.) website
- looking/applying for jobs internally and externally to be 'new job-ready'
- doing one thing at a time, saying no and setting boundaries
- reflecting on the questions asked by the group
- joining a research group/staff network.

Over six sessions all participants had an opportunity to present an issue, and there were no individual issue presentations in the final meeting. Instead, all were asked to bring an artefact that represented their thinking about career progression as a result of action learning. There were some new items, such as a 'gold medal' that one participant had received in an online event, which was 'awarded' to the group in celebration of our achievements. Others brought the same artefact, or an updated version, but with new narratives that reflected clearer goals and increased confidence in and/or control over future career opportunities and options.

#### **Themes and outcomes of action learning**

We were able to integrate material from the action learning group content (i.e. themes arising in issues/problems brought to 'airtime') with wider feedback we had received as co-chairs of the equality and progression working group about perceived barriers to career progression. This became known as our

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'broken record' (Box 2), which was regularly 'played' for example in formal reporting to senior university committees, and at Women of Westminster (WOW) networking events.

**Box 2 Barriers to women's career progression: A broken record**

*Track 1:* Lack of transparency regarding career progression decisions

*Track 2:* Inconsistent staff development practices

*Track 3:* Inadequate career progression opportunities for researchers and professional services staff

*Track 4:* Perception that academic career progression beyond senior lecturer grade is a 'dead end'

*Track 5:* Limited leadership/management development opportunities

Note: These 'tracks' are not unique to our university, and reflect sector-wide barriers to women's career progression (e.g. Caddell & Wilder, 2018; Jarboe, 2018; O'Connor, 2020; Yarrow, 2021; Walker, 2023; Yarrow & Johnson, 2021)

Evaluation of our integrated approach to action learning and coaching demonstrated its value and role in breaking down barriers to women's career progression. We had been able to successfully create a psychologically safe environment, and a sense of belonging and community where participants felt heard. Positive outcomes for academic staff included completion of a research project, publication of a paper, securing an internal research grant, and consultancy work. For professional services colleagues these included working towards a professional qualification that had been 'on hold' for a long time, and an internal promotion. Another participant was promoted to a position in a different organisation, while another made a positive decision not to retire because she was now enjoying her work and had a personal development plan in place. There was a strong sense of a shared accountability to each other, which had motivated participants to take action. The professional services/academic staff mix and the connections it created was valued, as was the space to think and reflect.

However, while action learning can be both powerful and positive, it can also be powerful and frightening, which necessitates the crafting of a trusted and safe space where vulnerabilities can be revealed and explored (Corlett et al., 2021). This required challenge, openness, honesty, and confidentiality in order to engage in relational processes of learning in a psychologically safe environment. Therefore in order to create and maintain a safe environment we had professional supervision, informed by systems-psychodynamic thinking.

**The role of supervision in action learning**

As coaches we appreciate the importance, relevance, and crucial role of supervision in our practice, as a means of providing fresh perspectives, supporting critical reflection upon the quality of what we do, and ensuring safe practice. It was therefore an essential element of our integrated approach to action learning and coaching. We argue here that supervision is (or should be) also an essential component of all action learning as: (i) a means of ensuring and safeguarding good practice; and (ii) paying attention to interconnected relationships, which involves systemic work. Supervision is essential to ensure action learning groups/sets stay focused on their primary task and aim – which is to enable individual and

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collective learning, whilst simultaneously implementing and putting actions and theory into practice. This requires 'double awareness', which "emphasises noticing and acting on process cues while working on the task" (Svalgaard, 2017, p. 29). Without supervision, action learning coaches/facilitators may not notice when a group slips from a position of 'learning in action' to 'learning inaction' (Vince, 2008; 2016); and be reluctant to confront 'anti-task' behaviours such as avoidance of conflict, or failure to adapt to a changing environment (Waddington & Kaplan, 2021).

We had online supervision sessions lasting 60-90 minutes as soon as practicable after every action learning meeting (next day if possible, and not longer than a week later) to ensure issues and emotions were 'fresh in our mind'. We worked with a colleague in the university who is a trained supervisor with the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations, which applies social science to contemporary issues and problems, and is guided by systems-psychodynamic thinking (Obholzer & Roberts, 2019). This approach provides a space where supervisees (i.e. those receiving supervision) "feel safe and confident enough to explore the thoughts and feelings about the work they are undertaking; some of which might be difficult or painful" (Archer, 2021, p.77).

### Systems-psychodynamic thinking and supervision

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The value of a 'Tavistock approach' and systems-psychodynamic thinking in supervision lies in their ability to 'lift the lid' on organisational life. This helped us as co-facilitators to explore what might lie 'beneath the surface' of issues/problems brought to the action learning group. It also helped us gain a better understanding of – and new ways of thinking about – power and vulnerability. Systems-psychodynamic thinking also highlights individual and collective unconscious defences (e.g. avoiding conflict, denial) against shared anxieties, and offers fresh insights/understanding of group dynamics and organisational culture (Armstrong & Rustin, 2015). It also offers insights into the containment of *organisational* anxieties that are manifest in universities as 'anxiety machines' (Morrish, 2019). For example, Loveday's (2018) research with UK academics on fixed-term contracts suggests "the contemporary academy appears to be suffused with anxiety" (p.154). Supervision enabled us to explore challenging and difficult questions, both of ourselves as co-facilitators, and with the action learning group. For example: *Are there any unconscious processes/motives that may serve to maintain stagnant/toxic cultures in higher education? What is being avoided and why?*

Importantly, Sadler (2011) argues that it is a myth that only those trained in psychoanalysis, psychotherapy, and counselling can make appropriate use of systems-psychodynamic ideas and thinking. She argues psychodynamic concepts can also be applied in coaching and consultancy, for instance to help create conditions that change the dynamics of a work system in a more effective and sustainable way. Although coaching and/or action learning alone cannot overcome systemic barriers and gender inequality in higher education, we argue that supervision is crucial in the pursuit of holistic academic development. It draws attention to the wider environment and complex system/s within which personal, professional, and career development takes place. Supervision can be informed by systems-psychodynamic thinking – as described and discussed here – or other approaches such as group and peer supervision. What is important is that the essence or 'heart' of supervision is that it is less of an intellectual/theoretical process or activity, and more of a way of *being, and being with*, that promotes critical reflection, self-care, and self-compassion (Turner &

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Palmer, 2019). Theoretical threads were therefore lightly woven into the process of supervision, then integrated and applied in action learning.

## Integration and application of theory

Action learning works because it interweaves principles and best practices from many theories, including adult learning, change management, leadership, psychology, and neuroscience (Marquardt et al., 2018). In this action learning initiative, theoretical threads and practices of self-care and self-compassion (from neuroscience) were integrated into action learning using JD-R theory and the associated concept of job crafting (from work and organisational psychology).

### Job demands-resources theory and job crafting

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Briefly, JD-R theory and job crafting are defined as proactive behaviours that employees undertake in order to modify the level of demands and resources made upon them, adapting them to their needs and skills (Bakker et al., 2014). Job crafting is positively associated with employee engagement, well-being and job satisfaction (Lesener et al., 2019). Tims and Parker (2020) note specific aspects of job crafting that relate to: (i) increasing structural job resources such as *enhancing opportunities for personal/professional development*; (ii) increasing social job resources such as *asking for feedback from colleagues*; (iii) increasing challenging job demands such as taking on additional tasks to learn new skills; and (iv) decreasing intolerable job demands such as reducing – where possible – the emotional pressures of work. These aspects of job crafting are all action-orientated, and therefore highly relevant and applicable to action learning. Furthermore, research by Akkermans and Tims (2017) showed that individuals who are able to craft their jobs develop their career competencies and enhance their perceptions of internal and external employability. In summary, the benefits of the JD-R model and job crafting are that they enable individuals to achieve work that better fits their own characteristics. *Resources* relating to self-care and self-compassion were introduced into action learning as a way of helping to decrease intolerable job demands and emotional pressures of work. Self-compassion is also central to the argument that care, and compassion are (or should be) at the heart of contemporary higher education practice (Caddell & Wilder, 2018; Gibbs, 2017; Waddington et al., 2021).

### Integrating self-care and self-compassion

These are related, but different, concepts. In essence, self-care is about treating yourself kindly, while self-compassion is more of a mindset. Self-care can be broadly defined as activities/actions that promote holistic well-being (Jiang et al., 2021) while self-compassion is based on: (i) 'self-kindness versus self-judgement' – where individuals show understanding towards themselves rather than self-criticism; (ii) 'common/shared humanity versus isolation' – accepting that to be human means acknowledging everyone faces life challenges and struggles; and (iii) 'mindfulness versus over-identification' – a balanced awareness that neither avoids/denies, nor exaggerates the discomforts of present-moment experiences (Neff, n.d.). Self-compassion is not the same as self-indulgence/selfishness, and nor should it be viewed as a sign of weakness. Empirical research strongly supports the link between self-compassion and well-being; for example "[it] is associated with health-promoting behaviors [sic] such as reduced smoking, healthy diet and exercise" (Neff, 2023, p. 7.10). These theoretical/conceptual distinctions were acknowledged but held

Action learning and coaching as an integrated approach for supporting women's career progression: A reflective analysis 'lightly', balancing the need for a theoretically sound evidence-base with a practice first approach (Haroun, 2021).

However, individual lifestyle/behavioural changes can only go so far; action learning and coaching must move beyond being seen as simply an individual/group process for problem-solving and career development. Coaching women is about overcoming systemic challenges and understanding the interplay of women's personal journeys and experiences with complex career structures. The paper concludes with some final reflections on how the process and outcomes of action learning and coaching described here can be scaled up and applied across the wider higher education sector.

## Conclusion

We hope that the paper has illustrated the value of an integrated approach to action learning and coaching as a means of supporting women's career development. To recap, the aims of the initiative were for participants to come away with a set of realistic actions to help them address and/or better understand issues experienced in regard to their personal, professional, and career development. This resulted in reappraisal of career plans and options, with resultant success in terms of promotion, personal development, academic publications, research funding, and improved work-life balance.

Because of the Covid-19 pandemic we necessarily adopted a hybrid online approach that integrated guidance and approaches from face-to-face methods, and arguably this could be developed further in the post-pandemic world. In online/virtual action learning it is crucial to pay attention to issues of power and power imbalances (Caulat, 2022), and creation of a psychologically safe space for learning was essential, as was critical reflection. These factors apply equally in face-to-face meetings, and we argue that good action learning should be based on trust, relationships and coaching conversations, *not* physical infrastructures, and *not* a 'one-size-fits-all' and rigid 'either/or' approach. The guiding principle in the post-pandemic world should be to design spaces and approaches that reduce power imbalances in action learning groups and coaching communities, both in person *and* virtually.

The paper has also offered some insights into how coaching cultures in higher education can be nurtured and sustained; they must be evidence-based, responsive and well resourced, including support for coaching academic and professional writing to promote wellbeing and career progression.

Whether residential or campus-based, providing academics with a structured institutionally-validated space to write *enhances wellbeing in a stressed and overworked environment*. Writing retreats result in positive affect, they create collegiate support networks, and for some academics, enable them to nurture and *fulfil a key aspect of their academic identity, through which they can flourish*. (Eardley et al., 2021, p. 193, emphasis added)

In the field of career development, Meldrum (2021) argues that collective group based coaching approaches, underpinned by a critical pedagogical theoretical base offer an effective way of challenging inequality. Kolontari et al. (2023) have recently reflected upon how developmental coaching and mentoring can be used to address feelings of imposter syndrome, and support academic and professional development related to inclusive learning and teaching. These are promising and important areas for future research, particularly for studies adopting collaborative participatory action research (CPAR) methods (Fine

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& Torre, 2021; Wood, 2020). The approach we advocate here calls for a collective process for inquiring into – and revealing – the institutional cultures, problems and practices that create barriers for women's career progression. This approach also has wider application for supporting holistic academic development, and a broad *institutional* focus that includes professional services and support staff working in technical/operational roles.

### Recommendations

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Our key recommendations are for:

- *university leaders* – be alert to what is 'really going on' in your institutions to better understand where systemic challenges and barriers collide with individual career aspirations;
- *human resources (HR) and organisational development practitioners* – appreciate the value and synergies that arise from integrating action learning *and* coaching in your people and organisational development strategies, policies, and practices;
- *academic developers and learning technologists* – think beyond narrow professional parameters and boundaries to seek out and explore new personal, professional and academic career development opportunities, and learn with, from and about other colleagues working in 'third spaces'.

In regard to the latter, Celia Whitchurch – who coined the term 'third space professionals' in 2012 – argues it is erroneous to think about '*the third space*' as a single entity; it is more likely to be plural, and comprised of multiple spaces that may continually reconfigure. Whitchurch (2022) provides valuable practical recommendations, particularly for the professional development, performance review and mentoring of individuals working in third space roles, as follows:

- recognition of the individual nature of some roles;
- flexibility in the way contractual arrangements are interpreted;
- creation of an 'open' career pathway for individuals who may wish to move in and out of third space roles;
- opportunities for individuals to identify their own benchmarks and career milestones via annual performance reviews.

(Adapted from the blog website: <https://www.thirdspaceperspectives.com/> )

The above recommendations are particularly relevant in the post-pandemic world; a world which we contend should resist 'one-size-fits-all' approaches. Instead, we argue that the pandemic should be used as an opportunity to critically reflect upon roles, systems, practices and processes that are no longer fit for purpose; and also to ask what can usefully be retained and integrated.

### Food for thought and final reflections

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The paper has highlighted the benefits of Kline's (2015) Thinking Environment approach, which when combined with principles of self-compassion and job crafting can offer powerful ways of breaking down 'internal' barriers to career progression. The component of 'Ease' also gave 'pause for thought', which (paradoxically perhaps) was also a significant action to 'stop and think more deeply'. The paper has

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illustrated how action learning that is informed by systems-psychodynamic thinking can provide a lens with which to look 'below the surface' of the university to explore what is 'really going on' not only for individual participants, *but also in the institution*. This can be scary – not only for participants and facilitators – but potentially also for their colleagues, managers, and leaders. It requires courage, vulnerability, and honesty at every level of the institution. Psychologically safe environments and supportive 'speak up' cultures (Reitz & Higgins, 2019) are also necessary. Revans, as founder of action learning, asserts that those best able, develop themselves to learn together as "comrades in adversity" (1972, p. 36). Adversity means 'a very difficult or unfavourable situation' (Collins English Dictionary, n.d.), and Revans' thinking is still highly relevant in 21<sup>st</sup> century universities. We now conclude with some final reflections.

Kathryn: I have previously experienced co-facilitation and supervision of action learning in work with senior leaders in the UK National Health Service, as well as in higher education. I appreciate the value that this double awareness of attending to both task and process brings; and how mindful attention and reflection on my own emotions, anxieties and vulnerability enables me to become a more effective action learning facilitator and coach. To end my reflections, I return to the artefact of a group of women that I brought to the very first meeting. Figure 2 shows a piece of pottery called *The Chismosas*, made in Peru, and which in translation means 'gossips'. *Then* – at the start of action learning – it was a representation and reflection of female solidarity and sisterhood.



**Figure 2** *The Chismosas* (Photo credit: Kathryn Waddington)

*Now* – as I reflect further on the image at the end of the action learning initiative – I see it as a representation of a group of women looking outwards together with fresh thinking about future career progression pathways; and the support, strength, and containment of organisational anxiety which was achieved through co-facilitation and supervision.

Saire: Although I am an experienced action learning facilitator, co-facilitating and co-participating in supervision was new to me. Co-facilitation added an extra dimension to the experience of facilitating an action learning group, a kind of 3-dimensional (3D) impact. For example, an enhancement of my psychological safety and security in the group through being able to share my reflections and any concerns with a colleague who had been present, then by listening to her feedback and reflections being able to construct a more holistic view of the group, its dynamics, and the issues being discussed. The relative immediacy of the co-reflection and co-supervision ensured that my thoughts, reflections, and queries were

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very fresh in my mind, which added to the feeling of it enabling a more intense 3D reflection, (*in comparison to the experience of sole facilitation*). I've chosen to illustrate this in the image of a much-loved family paperweight in the shape of a seahorse shown in Figure 3.



**Figure 3** *The seahorse* (Photo credit: Saire Jones)

The 3D seahorse paperweight was a gift, bought decades ago and is a familiar presence, but easily overlooked. Yet sometimes – when it gets caught in a shaft of natural light, or in the reflection of a desk lamp – this draws the attention of a ‘fresh pair of eyes’, and it loses its invisibility. Its colours vibrate and its ‘3D-ness’ is enhanced and refreshed, which is an apt metaphor with which to conclude the paper and highlight the purpose and power of reflection in action learning and coaching.

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### Biographies

*Kathryn Waddington* is an emerita fellow in psychology at the University of Westminster, PFHEA, and chartered coaching psychologist. Her interests include compassionate pedagogy, organisational culture, and communication. Following retirement from full-time academic employment she now works as an independent scholar, coach, and consultant.



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