Action Learning in Postgraduate Research Training

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Abstract

This account of practice explores the benefits and challenges of using Action Learning (AL) with junior researchers. Findings are grounded in an AL set of six doctoral students, organised and convened by the author. The case study reveals the range of emotional and structural hurdles that PhD candidates typically face in completing their programme of study. AL's streamlined process made space for set members to present themselves as whole persons and to thereby grapple with, and better manage, a wide range of real-life issues that were having direct impact on their academic performance. Set members expressed how participation reduced feelings of isolation and offered a valued space to reflect on their situation. They explored root causes of stress, anxiety, or dips in productivity; strategized plausible actions for overcoming problems; and identified opportunities. The evidence presented in this account strongly supports the proposal that AL be made a core component of research training programmes. In the conclusion, the author reasons that institutional investment would pay back with dividends: AL cultivates peer-support groups that consequently reduce dependence on academic supervisors, student counselling, and other costly and overburdened support services. Perhaps most crucially, AL incites individuals to take responsibility for their own development and learning: a 'transferrable skill' for achieving success in any endeavour.

Introduction: Forming the Set

This account of practice discusses the implementation and results of using Action Learning (AL) with postgraduate research students at a London university. I am a social anthropologist, and to date I have acted as lead supervisor for numerous PhD students and as a supervisory committee member for many others. I also served 5 years as the research tutor for the School's department of anthropology, which involved overseeing the MPhil/PhD programme and progression of its students and convening the weekly research-training seminar for successive cohorts of MPhils.

Following my induction as an AL facilitator in 2013, I experimented in the anthropology research-training seminar with getting MPhils (numbering 16) to adopt basic AL principals during student presentation-and-question exercises. Before explaining the ground rules and objectives, I offered a potted history of AL, describing Reg Revans' early laboratory work alongside Nobel-prize winning scientists who mutually supported one another's theoretical inquiries by attentively listening rather than postulating solutions, and his later work as an

educator for the National Coal Board where he began developing his elegantly simple yet highly effective facilitation method. My aim in introducing a abridged version of AL in the seminar was to prompt these burgeoning scholars to more thoughtfully consider and appreciate the skill involved in both attentive listening and asking timely and relevant questions – core competencies that they would need for conducting successful social science fieldwork with human subjects and gathering insightful qualitative data.

In Spring 2014, I decided to form a conventional set with students who were at more advanced stages in their programme of study. I emailed six PhD students, inviting them to join an AL set that I would facilitate during the following academic year. Five were working under my supervision and the sixth was supervised by one of my colleagues who had given consent for her student to participate. All were studying social anthropology and had previously completed, or were completing, the compulsory year of fieldwork abroad. They were, however, from three different cohorts of the programme and at different stages in their data analysis and dissertation writing. This would bring a fuller spectrum of experiences to the set and potentially take collective learning to a higher level. Notably, none had prior knowledge of or practice in AL. My invitation therefore explained that the aim of an AL set is to create a safe and supportive space for participants to probe more deeply their individual work and to overcome hurdles by engaging in communal reflective learning. It also emphasised that the set is meant not to replace existing supervisory relations, but rather to supplement them and enrich the PhD experience.

Furthermore, the invitation stated that AL could offer students:
• an occasion to consider their relationship with their research;
• an environment conducive to exploring and progressing opportunities and new ways of thinking and doing;
• constructive support and challenge from peers;
• insight into how others achieve different strategies or solutions;
• and, perhaps most importantly, structured time away from the intensity of research and writing to reflect upon what one is doing.

It was made clear that by joining the set, they were contracting to meet a minimum of four times at spaced intervals over the academic year, and that each meeting would typically last a full day. At the first meeting, participants would negotiate and agree together the future dates, and full commitment to them was vital to the success of the set experience.

The PhD Experience: an overview
All six students accepted my invitation with enthusiasm and a measure of curiosity. They embraced the opportunity to (re)connect with fellow doctoral candidates and thereby escape the solitude and isolation they were experiencing in the struggle to complete their dissertations. By its nature, a PhD is a solitary, and often lonely, endeavour. A doctoral degree is awarded for producing a

unique body of knowledge that makes a significant contribution to one's particular discipline. Identifying a topic, defining the research question, developing a methodology, carrying out the research, and writing up the dissertation are carried out by the individual alone, with varying levels of guidance, feedback, and presumably encouragement from their academic supervisor(s). The community of scholars with shared interest and expertise in one's specialisation is typically small, and sometimes extends to only a few individuals worldwide. This means that opportunities for students to engage in exchanges focussed on their topic are indeed rare. Even scarcer are occasions to discuss with peers one's personal experiences as a researcher and the challenges of balancing academic pursuits with life's other activities and responsibilities. The key purpose of the AL set was to cultivate a dedicated space for addressing the latter set of concerns.

Before proceeding to a discussion of the AL set and its results, I offer an overview of the PhD structure and of the workload, pressures, and expectations that it entails.

In the UK, the typical fulltime research programme in social anthropology begins with an MPhil year during which students standardly receive a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods training. At my institution, this is supplemented with a weekly seminar that addresses, among other things, challenges in fieldwork, managing data, health and safety, and research ethics. Depending on where a student intends to carry out fieldwork, they may also undertake intensive language training and regional studies. The combination of coursework, individual reading, archival research, and a schedule of regular meetings with their supervisor(s) serves to progress the writing of the MPhil upgrade report. The report is normally examined at the end of year one by *viva voce*. Successful students are upgraded to PhD status, after which they proceed to fieldwork (usually overseas). It is at this point when the social cohesion of an MPhil cohort starts to dissolve and individual study trajectories grow further apart.

Today, anthropology students at UK institutions customarily spend one year in the field to gather data, usually by means of participant observation and interviewing. In the past, before 2007 when the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) implemented restrictions that effectively made submission within 4 years a requirement (rather than an expectation), lengthier periods of fieldwork were possible and writing-up in some cases continued indefinitely. Thus, the risk of experiencing isolation from one's academic community of peers and mentors ran high, and a sizable proportion of candidates disappeared from the university's radar and never finished their degree.

HEFCE's objective to improve completion rates has been generally successful. The imposition of a rigid timeframe across all academic subjects, however, has impacted different disciplines differently. Research results in the social sciences and humanities, for example, tend to demand longer gestation periods than in some STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) subjects, and

four years is tight for producing a 'unique body of knowledge' that makes a 'significant contribution' to one's discipline.

Anthropology PhD students in particular wrestle with the four-year rule. A year of coursework and language training followed by a year in the field leaves just two years, maximum, to transcribe, collate, and analyse data, and to ultimately author 100,000 words of coherent argument and original scholarship. The pace of the programme demands full focus and dedication, often to the detriment of other life projects, interests, and concerns. For many, this generates feelings of stress and anxiety, exacerbated by financial worries and uncertain futures. By signing onto a fulltime doctoral programme, students elect to forego four years (or more) of salaried employment, while paying ever-rising tuition fees and meeting escalating living costs.[i] Job prospects in academia are few, and competition for them is fierce. Relatedly, young scholars – especially those who have been streamed from school directly into the university with little or no life experience outside the classroom – struggle to imagine (potentially fulfilling) employment alternatives to a lectureship. Problematically, the belief that success and happiness are contingent upon securing an academic post is pervasive.

Finally, place of residence also factors in the PhD experience. Though the School technically requires registered students to reside in London (or within easy commuting distance), in practice many post-fieldwork students live elsewhere, sometimes with parents or partners, to reduce living costs during their final two years of analysis and writing. Of the six set members, only two were residing locally, while two others lived in Germany, one in Italy, and another in Oxford. Returning home or living abroad can serve to alleviate financial cares, but it regularly introduces other kinds of pressures: home-life matters and social obligations tend to loom larger and thereby distract focus from writing; isolation from the academic community can generate the feeling of 'working in a bubble'; and erratic contact with peers can produce angst and uncertainty about one's own rate of progress or quality of output.

The dispersion of set members across Europe also contributed to the challenge of forming an AL set. In response to my initial invitation, one participant wrote, 'My only worry is that I may not be able to commit to all four sessions, because I am not sure how often I will be in London during the coming year.' With hindsight, it might have been more appropriate to use virtual action learning methods, thereby eliminating travel time, costs, and carbon footprint (see Heywood, 2016). My later mention of that option, however, elicited strong response from another participant who felt that it was 'important to have face-to-face meetings,' which in addition to 'sharing lunch and short coffee breaks' contributed to 'soothing feelings of isolation.' But, as John Heywood argues, popular belief that the virtual experience will be second-rate in comparison with a face-to-face set is quickly overturned when participants engage virtually, and many discover that using audio technology exclusively elevates the quality of listening (ibid.). In any case, we overcame the logistical hurdles of physically convening in one place and

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scheduled our first meeting for early November.

Set Meetings and Collective Learning

Our first meeting coincided with the university's reading week, making it possible to book a small, quiet seminar room at the School for the full day. We met there at 9:45 for a 10 o'clock start, and finished at 5:00 p.m. I modified the classroom space by moving desks and tables against the walls and arranging chairs into a comfortable circular formation. The morning agenda included personal introductions and my outline of the AL process that we would put into effect after lunchtime.

To begin, I distributed large sheets of blank paper and each set member, including myself, was free to select a thick, coloured marker from a box. The individual exercise was to create a narrative, using simple drawings and graphics, of the significant events, people, and things that had shaped our lives. To my mind, this exercise is highly effective in shifting people's thinking about themselves beyond the confines of professional identities and motivating them to reflect upon the core values and qualities that constitute them as whole persons. For a group of academics trained to think and express ideas almost exclusively through the written word, the task of drawing our 'stories' proved especially potent at liberating us from conventional introductions, which, in academic settings, routinely reduce individuals to a list of qualifications, publications, awards, and research specialisations. The introductions inspired trust and a greater level of intimacy, and allowed us to learn about one another as rounded individuals with multiple social networks and social roles.

The AL process we would implement was modelled closely on that which I had learned during the AL facilitator course I had completed the previous year. That streamlined and effectual process included the presenter's presentation of their issue(s), questions from set members, and identification of actions. All stages were focussed entirely on the presenter as solution-seeker and owner. My introductory talk on process defined the role and responsibilities of set members, and mine as facilitator, and described the aims and potential benefits of AL. I also explained the functions of clarification questions and open ones, and at which stages in the process each was appropriate. Through a series of short mock exercises, we explored the different effects produced by asking closed questions and open questions, and the kinds and qualities of responses they elicit. In this way, set members came to more fully appreciate the power of open questions – especially succinct, direct ones – for supporting presenters in their critical investigation of the issue they bring to the set and in owning the insights they discover during the process.

The art of formulating good, helpful open questions (without rambling prologues) and posing them at appropriate moments within the flow and rhythm of the exchange proved to be the two greatest challenges for set members – but challenges that they soon came to relish intellectually. Anthropologists are (or

should be) trained to pose open questions to field informants, and in such a way that does not bias or steer the response(s) they receive. Formulating relevant fieldwork questions is also informed and guided, first and foremost, by the conditions, situation, and concerns of people in the given context, and not by the anthropologist's theoretical agenda. The aim of the discipline, after all, is to elicit the knowledge, practices, ethos, and worldviews of other cultural and social communities, and to bring sensitive, nuanced (and impartial) interpretation and understanding to them (while, at the same time, critically reflecting upon one's presence and positionality in the field).

In everyday dialogue, asking questions is a device commonly used for initiating or sustaining polite conversation, whereby the phrasing, timing, and tone of such questions abide by established cultural norms and social etiquette. Questions can also be motivated by the search for specific kinds of information needed for planning, taking action, making decisions, or accumulating knowledge. Ulterior motives, too, may lurk beneath the surface of a question. Questions can be used, for instance, as vehicles for soliciting affirmation or seeking confirmation of a belief or position already held. Their tone and wording may be choreographed to persuade or coerce the respondent into acknowledging or adopting the truths of the questioner. Their phrasing may embed – covertly or explicitly – opinions, judgements, or advice. Questions may be posed with the aim of hijacking the conversational focus and holding it hostage to the questioner's own interests and expertise – a tactic too-often employed in academic meetings and seminars. They can also be devised to display the wit and 'cleverness' of the questioner, to convey their status, or to reinforce existing hierarchies. Too rarely, however, is the impetus behind question-asking a genuine desire to support one's fellow interlocutor in exploring their own issues and in discovering their own wisdom and solutions.

The initial struggle to articulate open questions in our AL set was therefore not surprising. The entrenched idea that 'cleverness' is the measure of academic performance meant that it took time and conscious effort to adjust the format and aims of questions posed in the AL context; but, the shift happened. Participants became mindful and began policing their own questions when necessary. Increasingly, they abstained from giving advice or proffering opinions, they paused to reformulate closed questions into open ones, and they rephrased wandering lines of inquiry into crisp, direct questions.

As the facilitator, the need for me to mediate continued for the duration of our four set meetings, albeit with diminishing frequency as participants became more practised and sensitised to the affect of their questions on presenters. Notably, the participants were enthused by the power of open questions, and embraced the learning involved in formulating and using them as a valuable transferrable skill. The skill of asking good open questions, they believed, would improve fieldwork methods, and even everyday interpersonal skills. It was also suggested that open questions that support the enquiries of presenters could make

academic learning and research more collaborative and thereby positively transform the tenor of seminars, workshops, and conferences.

After lunch, our bidding round concluded with two volunteer presenters. In brief, the first focussed her presentation on the related issues of managing vast quantities of field and archival data and drawing lines between what she absolutely needed to include in her dissertation and what she might feasibly leave aside for postdoctoral analysis and writing. The second presenter, who had very recently returned from the field with her young family, brought to the set her struggles to re-establish family life and residency in London and to balance domestic roles and obligations with academic work. The speed with which the set members grasped the process, the energy and focus they brought to it, and the combination of patience, support, and challenge that they offered the presenters were truly impressive. We ended with an open process review and finished on schedule at 5:00 p.m. with agreed dates for all subsequent meetings.

The group dynamic strengthened, levels of trust grew, and the fluidity and rhythm of the process was further refined over the course of the next three meetings. The participants looked forward to our scheduled dates and deeply valued the 'day out' for grappling with arising issues and reflecting on where they were at – work-wise, emotionally, and in life in general. One participant wrote to me, 'Thanks so much for bringing me into this group and making me part of the Action Learning "experiment"! I am so grateful to have been part of it - it's been a completely unique, insightful and beneficial experience.'

After checking-in, each session began with a bidding round, and everyone presented at least twice over the four dates. Presenters used the AL space flexibly to explore both research-related and broader life issues that were impeding their PhD progress. Notably, none chose to present conundrums specific to their research topic or theoretical explorations, but rather the research-related troubles they shared included concerns over the management of data, deadlines, or workload; writing blocks, boredom, or dips in enthusiasm for their subject; doubts over the broader significance of their research; and setting limitations on new data gathering or reading and getting on with analysing and writing-up what had already been collected. These issues, like the 'life issues' that presenters brought to the set, resonated with all set members at some level, and therefore each session offered collective learning opportunities for everyone.

Immediately after our first meeting I wrote to the set members by email to inform them of my plan to write an account of practice for publication that would explore benefits and challenges of implementing AL with research students. At that point and again after the fourth and final session, I invited them to deliberate on the two questions below, and requested permission to publish their anonymised responses, in part or in whole.

What was the impact on you?

If you were telling someone about Action Learning, what would you say?

All six responded – at length and in carefully considered detail. In the next section, I relay their thoughts in their own words (under pseudonyms), and I have organised the comments thematically in order to construct a narrative and to set up a dialogue among the respondents that conveys consensus as well as variance in perspectives and experiences. Their prose persuasively expresses the potential merits of making AL a core component in research student training programmes. Their responses also point to some of the obstacles that facilitators need to be aware of when working with junior scholars who may be enrolled in the same institution (and department), who know one another's supervisors and broader networks of colleagues, and who are ultimately competing for professional kudos and future employment in a narrow academic job market.

Participants' Reflections on the AL Experience

A Valued Space

Eric: The impact [of AL] on me could be best described as a 'release'. Just knowing that the space exists, and that I am a part of it, is important.

Kathleen: I looked forward to meeting with the group each session because of the people I knew would be there, and the kind of energy and presence of mind they brought with them.

Alice: Taking part reminded me of how important it is to take time out to actively reflect on and deal with some of those personal issues that are influencing my thoughts and my work; and to not allow those issues to build up. Sharing my issues and taking time to consider the questions from set members calmed me.

Eva: I think [AL] is particularly useful when I've been dealing with a problem for a long time, and have got stuck in certain circuits or patterns of thinking from which I can't get out. This happens to all of us when we talk to our partners or within our social circles about something, and the response or discussion is always the same. In the AL space, the person has a chance to figure out a new way to think about the issue and to act upon it. Presenting is also a way of building trust. It's part of the process of giving and taking.

Alice: The emphasis on a non-judgemental, non-competitive atmosphere was really positive. Even more so because it was my fellow PhDs who acted as the other set members, and we don't often relate to each other in that non-judgemental and non-competitive way. It was

great to relate in such a positive way, and experience one another as purely supportive and empathic.

Linda: Overall, I found that AL offers a space for PhD students to share and feel less isolated.

Shared Issues

Eva   Most of the PhD students I know are struggling. Apart from the difficult issues related to the actual research project, financial hardship, postponement of family planning, and a lack of a permanent home while studying are recurrent issues that put strain on mental and physical wellbeing.

Diane: I find the PhD an incredibly isolating and anxiety-provoking process. I often struggle with boredom, unreasonably high expectations, feeling inadequate, and difficulties motivating myself. Many of the things other presenters spoke of resonated with my own feelings. In the process of the group offering critical reflection on their issues, I was able to think differently about myself.

Eric: Knowing that my peers are experiencing similar issues or problems – whilst obviously not something that should be 'celebrated' – is refreshing, in that it puts my own in perspective. […] Actively and collectively working through these [issues] made me feel less isolated – that I wasn't alone in experiencing them.

Alice: That [realisation] relieves some of the pressure or anxiety that arises from comparing myself to other 'imaginary' people/ peers/ PhD students, whom I think must be coping and performing better or differently from myself. It's a reality check.

Learning to Listen and Question

Alice: An important part of AL for me was not only the support I received in dealing with my own issues, but my experiences of supporting others.

Linda   It has taught me the importance of listening, which also involves accepting silences. With each session, I realized that listening is a skill that demands practice. Asking good questions relies on that skill.

Eva   I found it challenging to focus on the person presenting and to support the path that developed through the process, instead of asking the questions that interested me.

Linda	Asking questions while sticking to the 'rules' can be difficult. I initially felt that I had to express things in a way that did not seem 'natural' or spontaneous. However, with time and practice, and once I felt more comfortable with my set members, those challenges were overcome. Perhaps a certain way of communicating and of listening gradually becomes embodied.
Kathleen	One of the challenges that I constantly faced concerned the level of scrutiny that my questions could reach. I often felt self-conscious about posing certain questions to the presenter because I feared they might come across as too probing. Nevertheless, I was aware that this was part of the learning curve that accompanied this new structure, and learning how to navigate these challenges taught me a lot about listening.
Alice	Asking open questions made me realise what it actually means to explore an issue from somebody else's perspective, rather than just pursuing my own personal interest in their story or telling people what I think they should do.
Eva	This way of asking questions also makes it easier to ask what – in other settings – I would consider to be a bit too intimate or sensitive. Perhaps one can see the format a bit like a shield for everyone involved; it sort of filters out too hurtful or intimate questions, and it also filters out others' ideas, judgements and experiences. […] The format of the set avoids these problems to a large extent, and that's why it seems genius.

Awareness and Action

Diane	Being part of the AL set made me realise that we generally tend to be more generous with others than we are with ourselves. This made me think about why I don't give myself the support and the encouragement I would quite happily give to others.
Linda	I felt listened to without being interrupted and it allowed me to share some 'wandering thoughts', which, by the end of my presentation, seemed less 'wandering'.
Alice	Presenting made me more aware of the things that impact my emotional state, reactions, and decisions. Sharing issues helped me to understand why I was feeling stressed or impatient or indecisive in certain situations; and, of course, to actively do something to overcome those negative feelings and identify my own priorities.

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Linda	It's helped me to see things differently, from different angles; and importantly to focus on solutions rather than issues. It helped me to be more conscious of using 'I' instead of 'we', and to focus on what 'I' do.
Eva	What I found promising about the AL format was the way the discussion moves on and especially the way that the person who relays a problem takes ownership over it. I really enjoyed watching those speaking about their problem changing their attitudes to it.
Alice	Being part of the set has made me want to look after myself better, and to become better at anticipating or dealing with difficult issues before they become entrenched problems.

General Learning

Kathleen	I've learned a great deal about myself as a critical-thinking person. One of the major things that I took away from the experience has been this renewed ability to pause for reflection, to carefully listen, and to really push myself to formulate the most appropriate question when faced with a critical situation. […] It's given me the ability to reflect upon and reroute previous thought reflexes, and be overall more mindful.
Eva	In general, I learnt a lot about human interaction from using the methodology: how we normally shower people with our own experience or advice without realizing that this often makes the situation worse for the person. I also learnt a lot about how other people reason and think. […]These insights were and will continue to be useful for me.
Diane	In listening to members of the group being challenged to think about the worst that could happen if they let go of certain goals or deadlines, I was left considering what would happen to me if I didn't manage to meet some of my own often stress-inducing and unbearably ambitious goals. On reflection I came to realise that the very worst that might happen if I fail in the tasks I set myself is that I won't get a PhD or an academic job. On reflection, those are definitely not the worst things that could happen [in life]… This realisation is somehow liberating, and is something that I want to hold onto as I move forward with my work.

The Challenges

Alice	I was exhausted after each set! It's quite an emotional experience

	and sometimes the things that people present can be worrying, and I might feel sorry or slightly concerned for them after we leave. It's also mentally tiring to sit and think about someone else's story for several hours, ask open questions, and support them in identifying possible actions. I usually feel just drained the next day.
Eva	Personally, I found it challenging to present. I ended up feeling quite exposed, and I did not really find that useful. This had nothing to do with the other set members, but rather more to do with me and the type of problems I presented. I have been trying to figure out why it did not really work for me. Having read too much Foucault and his *History of Sexuality*, I guess I've become a bit sceptical about talking about problems as a way of solving them. The things I spoke about were long-term issues that I have tried to work with over a long period (also through counselling), and without making progress. So, to make progress in a one-and-a-half hour set would of course be pure magic.
Alice	I still find it challenging to share my own issues with the set. It can feel embarrassing, for example, when admitting to myself and to others that I am being irrational or that I am doing certain things mainly to please other people, such as my parents.
Linda	Selecting what to present was a challenge. In the beginning I wasn't sure whether it had to be related to academia or could be any other situation affecting my studies. But, gradually I felt more confident to discuss anything.
Eva	I found it a bit challenging to handle the intimacy or knowledge that was shared within the set when we were outside it. We all shared stories and exposed vulnerabilities that we would not normally share outside that context. Perhaps this was the nature of our set, but the issues we discussed often entangled personal and professional issues.
Alice	Outside of the set we're interacting with the same people, and we're competing for similar jobs. This could potentially limit how much participants will want to share with each other and whether they can fully trust one other. I'm happy it has worked out with us, but I guess there is no way of guaranteeing that level of respect and commitment with every set.

The Benefits

Eric	PhD study is an isolating endeavour for many reasons. We

sometimes work closely with others or share knowledge via seminars or presentations, but such activities are not conducive to 'knowing' people on a level above and beyond a merely academic one. In fact, due to the competitiveness that underlies academia, I feel that we actually often build walls that separate us without even realising it. So, getting to know people in a more intimate, personal sense, where the specificities of their intellectual work are left at the door is refreshing, and good for creating a sense of community based on shared experience.

Linda   Although I found that AL could be therapeutic, it is different from therapy in the sense that the relationship between set members is as equals. There is no one who knows more or who is '*the* expert'. In a way, we are all experts.

Alice   One of the major impacts on me was the experience of supporting my fellow PhD students. This kind of forum is lacking and much needed amongst us for discussing the practicalities of organising our work and lives as researchers, as well as the more emotional and existential issues we all grapple with to varying degrees.

Eric   I've described AL to others as a wholly positive experience, and we spoke about why that activity should be more widespread and commonplace, rather than the exception – especially in a postgraduate academic setting.

Kathleen   In sum, it felt good to connect with fellow students, share stories about where we are in our lives and in our work, and to see how that sharing can have a positive impact on all of us.

Conclusion

This account of practice has provided a general synopsis of the UK PhD programme, with particular reference to social anthropology; and it discussed structural and emotional challenges facing junior researchers. Some of the more salient and ubiquitous of those challenges include financial hardship, arising tensions between research duties and home-life responsibilities, a sense of isolation, pacing and exhaustion, periodic disenchantment with one's research topic, concern over the quality and significance of one's work, and uncertainty over future funding and job prospects. All such challenges transcend disciplinary boundaries, affecting PhD students (and junior postdoctoral academics) in the social sciences and natural sciences equally.

The account proceeded to a description of the AL set that I initiated with six research students in my department, enumerating the aims and purpose of the exercise. The last part relayed the results and impact of AL on the participants, which were stated entirely in their own words. For organisational reasons, I

divided the written feedback from individual participants into seven themed subsections and I curated their insightful comments to create a sort of dialogue between the shared and sometimes-contrasting views and experiences expressed.

The dialogue reveals that participation in the AL set reduced feelings of isolation and offered a valued space to reflect on one's situation, explore the root causes of stress, anxieties, boredom, or dips in productivity, and identify plausible actions for overcoming the problems. Set members seized the opportunity to think more deeply about the nature of their own thinking, and to learn about how others think. Notably, the process of presenting and receiving supportive-yet-challenging open questions from fellow set members enabled individuals to become more acutely aware of habitual patterns in their thinking, feelings, and reactions (or inaction) to situations. The power of timely, well-articulated open questions caused sometimes-seismic shifts in perspective, ultimately freeing presenters to react differently and more mindfully to their situation, and to 'focus on solutions rather than issues'. Intentional use of the first-person-singular contributed to taking ownership of both problem and solution, where the latter was defined by self-identified actions to be taken, and a realistic timeframe for doing so.

The AL process promoted social cohesion, and set members came to feel that they had established their own peer support group within the broader School community of research students, grounded in shared experience and the mutual trust that quickly evolved through the exchange of 'giving and taking'. Participants benefitted from the support they received as presenters and from supporting fellow set members. Perhaps one of the most significant results that contributed to reducing anxiety and improving wellbeing was the perceptive realisation that much of the pressure felt was self-imposed and that, as people, we often tend to 'be more generous with others than we are with ourselves'. For several presenters, this cleared a space for exploring alternative possibilities, clarifying goals and priorities, and, importantly, identifying actions for being more patient and kinder to oneself.

As they became familiar and comfortable with the process, the majority of participants discovered that presenting offered them a rare and precious moment to be listened to in an uninterrupted manner, to bring form and direction to previously 'wandering thoughts', and to charter a new course for navigating their problem or issue with supportive attention from peers. AL proved to be extremely effective for getting to the root sources of difficulties and challenges in the academic work place. Strong (often emotional) responses emerged as a result, but these responses normally signalled a momentous shift in the presenter's (or the group's) understanding of their situation. The AL process helped the assisting set members to sensitively manage what were sometimes intimate personal issues, to become comfortable with the silences, and to pose appropriate presenter-centred questions in synch with the rhythm and flow of the presenter's

exploration. Initial feelings of discomfort with intimacy dissipated as the set matured and trust grew.

Presenting, however, did pose a challenge to some more than others. One set member did not find the satisfaction she was seeking from the experience because, as she willingly acknowledged, the issues that she brought were in fact long-term ones for which she had previously sought professional counselling. Another participant astutely observed that AL is not therapy or counselling. It is imperative that, alongside AL's aims and purpose, the facilitator flag up its distinction from therapy at the start so that set members' expectations are attuned to what AL can realistically accomplish.

Over the course of our four daylong meetings, set members acquired and honed the essential skills of listening and questioning. They came to more deeply appreciate the affect of closed and open questions on presenters, and when to use either. The art of posing open questions that were both relevant and timely was unanimously esteemed. With some effort, set members endeavoured to articulate their questions succinctly and directly, without preamble. The power of a good open question, it was agreed, is in its ability to resonate with the presenter's concerns and to scaffold their inquiry with a blend of support and challenge that can move them beyond an impasse to discover fresh horizons. Individual members soon began to self-monitor the true motives behind their questions, retracting those that were not presenter-centred; and, with time, the competitive edge between questioners – all too common in academic forums – faded, leaving ample room for the presenter to think and feel a way through their issue.

It has long struck me that AL shares certain values and methods with social anthropology, and for that matter with any discipline that employs ethnographic methods for forging relations with fellow humans to better understand how we think, feel, problem solve, and make sense of the world around us. This is not to suggest that individuals join AL sets with an express objective to study and represent how others operate, but rather that the collaborative making of knowledge about what it is to be human lies at the core of both the AL process and anthropological methods. Learning to listen and to question are the essential building blocks for constructing both cross-cultural and interpersonal understanding. Empathic and fully-attuned understanding can only be fostered with time and patience. Duration is the *sine qua non* of anthropological fieldwork; and, similarly, the generosity of time in set meetings licenses focussed reflection and meaningful exploration that penetrates deep into the heart of the issue.

Additionally, the anthropologist, like the set facilitator, is responsible for establishing a safe environment that fosters relations of trust and s/he has a duty of care to establish clear ground rules concerning confidentiality. It is essential to uphold confidentiality and abide by a code of ethics in both working contexts to ensure that informants/presenters are not made vulnerable to harm, libel, or

misrepresentation and that their relations with others outside the informant circle or peer group are not compromised in any way.

The benefits accrued were plainly summarised in the words of the set members. It was concluded that AL should be made an integral component of the research training programme. The simple and elegantly-structured process makes room for researchers to present themselves as a whole persons and to thereby grapple with, and better manage, a wider range of real-life issues that have direct impact on their academic performance. Institutional investment in making AL a part of postgraduate training would pay back with dividends: it cultivates peer-support groups and, as a consequence, reduces dependence on – and thus workload for – academic supervisors, student counselling, and other costly and overburdened support services. Perhaps most vitally, AL incites individuals to take responsibility for their own development and learning. That isn't merely a 'transferrable skill'. It is a quality essential for achieving success in any endeavour.

References

Heywood, John P. 2016. 'Collaborating in the Virtual Space: observations from practice', at http://www.actionlearningassociates.co.uk/collaborating-in-the-virtual-space-observations-from-practice/

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[i] Full scholarships (for those fortunate to qualify and receive them) typically cover tuition fees and offer an annual stipend, but only for the first three years. Stipends are not usually sufficient for defraying the full costs of living and fieldwork. Many students, therefore, spend considerable time searching for and applying to funding schemes. Sums offered are often small, but competition is nevertheless acute.