Research on Action Learning of Teachers in Higher Vocational Colleges*

Ming-jiang Song
Southwest University; Chongqing Youth Vocational 
& Technical College, Chongqing, China

Jian-zhuang Shi
Chongqing Youth Vocational & Technical College, 
Chongqing, China

Action learning refers to that man try everything to find out the new pattern of action in similar situations of the future by introspection and comprehension about past and present experience (affairs) in order to achieve a certain purpose or solve a certain problem. Compared with the traditional vocational teachers’ training model, the action learning model based on “experience-introspection-action” is better to promote and enhance the practical knowledge growth and personal theory construction of vocational teachers. Action learning can simultaneously promote mutual development of individuals and learning groups (organizations).

Keywords: action learning, vocational teachers, problem-solving

What Is Action Learning

In daily life, people always refer to action, but very few people go deeply into its concrete meaning. Obviously, it is quite important and necessary to conduct an in-depth exploration of what is action and to specify its values. To clarify what is action learning, what is action should be known first. In Chinese context, action usually refers to an activity that is taken to achieve a certain intention (Xinhua Dictionary, 1985, p. 943). Thus, action has two meanings: 1. Action is a kind of conscious and purposeful activity; and 2. Action has initiative and proactive characteristics.

In the West, many scholars respectively put forward various understandings about action. Aristotle thought that man is a rational animal. Compared with animal, what activities that people are engaged in are purposefully and consciously rational actions. Weber defined action as interactive action or social action (Jia, 2005). This evidently comes down in one continuous line with the theory of communicative action which he has consistently advocated. Habermas (1989) defined action as purposefully rational behavior. He believed that action is the behavior activity conducted by objective guidance and rational choice. Parsons (1980) considered that all action is behavior, but behavior may not be action, because behavior needs to have certain conditions to become action (Chi, 1980). Both individual action and social action are conscious, purposeful, and systematical (Chi, 1980). Ahrendt especially emphasized the subjectivity of action and its effect on self and others. She

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Ming-jiang Song, Ph.D. candidate, Faculty of Education, Southwest University; associate professor, Research Department, Chongqing Youth Vocational & Technical College.

Jian-zhuang Shi, M.Ed., assistant researcher, Research Department, Chongqing Youth Vocational & Technical College.
believed that “Action, the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things and matters” (as cited in Wang, 2006, p. 59). She also thought that man of action can reveal themselves; or more specifically, in fact, to reveal self in the intercourse with others is an activity and a conversational action with others and for others (Yang, 2009). Ahrendt revealed the essential properties of human action. That is to say, action not only reveals self, but also has an influence on others. Accordingly, we think that action is a rational activity which man conduct for achieving a certain purpose. This kind of activity is an active and initiative self-revelation and has an active effect on others.

Learning is man’s basic way of surviving and living. It is very difficult to imagine how man will be without learning. Generally speaking, learning is always conducted in a particular situation. With increasing experience and changes, it aims at solving problems on the basis of introspection. We have related concepts of action and learning, and how can we define action learning? The British scholar Reg Revans believed that the theoretical hypothesis of traditional education is that any question has a right answer (Revans, 1971). Directed learning can help people improve abilities to find out right answers. The theoretical hypothesis of action learning is that there are no action courses can directly and effectively help people solve problems. There exists differentiation in any one of the managers’ personalities, experiences, beliefs, and ways of thinking. This will have an influence on the tendency of thinking and problem determination as well as ways to solve problems. Therefore, the ability to raise an insightful question in the uncertain situation is a more useful learning method. Professor Mike Pedler thought that action learning is helpful for self-development and organization development, and action activities derived from the problems can both help to solve problems and change people who are solving problems (Pedler, 1991). It is worth noting that action learning emphasizes people’s urgent needs to solve real problems in the real situation; meanwhile, action learning is more dependent on the model of learning partnership on the basis of introspection of individual experience.

McNulty and Canty (1985) thought that action learning is a process of learning to act by taking actions. To some extent, without action, there is no learning; and without learning, there is no right action. Generally speaking, action learning includes three elements: problems needed to be solved, learning tasks, and action learning groups. Accordingly, action learning can be understood as in order to achieve a certain purpose or solve a certain problem, man try everything to find out the new pattern of action in similar situations of the future by introspection and comprehension about past and present experience (affairs). Action learning can simultaneously promote mutual development of individuals and learning groups (organizations).

The Value of Action Learning to Teachers in Higher Vocational Colleges

Objectively speaking, no one can deny the value of action learning in enhancing individual and organizational development since action learning has been proposed. But what is the value of action learning? Different individuals and organizations have different answers, so it is hard to state the specific value of action learning for individuals and organizations. Thus, when discussing the value of action learning with various individuals or organizations, people cannot obtain consistent results. Besides, we also do not expect to have the same effect when discussing the value of the action learning with different individuals or organizations.

This point should be clarified for teachers in higher vocational colleges. Action learning is derived from the training of enterprise management personnel, while it is relatively less applied in the education field. In training, it is mainly applied in that trainers and trainees are trained and practicing for some key issues to which they pay close attention in practice, and that they learn and study in practice until they finally solve problems.
For higher vocational colleges in China, vocational training of the vast majority of teachers starts from imparting knowledge. This kind of training mainly emphasizes that teachers obtain teaching knowledge and skills. The basic hypothesis is that teaching knowledge and skills obtained by teachers can improve teaching practice and teaching quality and highlight the public knowledge instead of teachers’ practical knowledge. There is little or less attention to professional development of teachers. Teachers are in the passive position of teaching training. Obviously, the traditional training paradigm is not conducive to the professional development of teachers. Therefore, it is imperative to innovate learning methods of teachers in higher vocational colleges.

Action learning is a good choice. First of all, action learning emphasizes learning initiative and introspection based on experience. It is conducive to the improvement of passive learning methods in the training pattern for teachers in higher vocational colleges. Introspection, based on experience, largely fits with practicalness and operability of higher vocational education. Secondly, action learning, as an adult learning method, is in line with features of working and cognition of teachers in higher vocational colleges. It can promote the development of practical knowledge of teachers in higher vocational colleges and the construction of personalized theory. Meanwhile, partner learning helps to improve introspection and cooperation awareness of teachers in higher vocational colleges, and further promotes their professional development and mutual development.

Certainly, not everyone approves these positive effects of action learning. However, how many people can make right value judgment after putting it into practice? We believe that only in a real situation can people face real problems, take actions, and realize the essence.

**How to Conduct Action Learning for Teachers in Higher Vocational Colleges**

As we know, a perfect theory is not equal to a perfect reality. From the ideal point of view, numerous schemes about how teachers in higher vocational colleges conduct action learning can be designed. However, here we do not intend to make detailed strategies about how they conduct action learning, because we cannot accurately predict many uncertain factors, such as real teaching situation and teaching psychology. However, it means that we have no advice on this issue.

It is not difficult to understand that the most effective way for teachers in higher vocational colleges to conduct action learning is experience introspection, rational action, and team learning. On the basis of experience introspection, teachers in higher vocational colleges can learn how to solve real problems by rational action and team learning. Furthermore, they promote the growth of practical knowledge and the construction of personalized theory, and then have the professional development. Teachers’ professional development is a lifelong process, so action learning also needs a continuously cyclic process.

At the same time, learning is a very complicated system. In the era of post-figurative culture, knowledge production, technological innovation, and information dissemination are far more booming and unpredictable than any previous era. Consequently, the rate of frequency and the difficulty of real problems which teachers in higher vocational colleges encounter are greatly increased. This even more needs team knowledge and team wisdom. The emerging of numerous modern wise ideas is the best example.

As mentioned before, action learning is a kind of adult learning. The hypothesis of adult learning is based on solving problems. That is to say, the logical starting point in professional development of teachers in higher vocational colleges is usually not modeled knowledge system, but complex and changeable real problems. The goals are to solve problems. At present, the great challenges that teachers in higher vocational colleges are
facing are the complexity of internal and external changes in higher vocational education tends to trigger a serious of adaptive problems of upgrades, such as the industrial organization of regional adjustment, employment impact of market orientation, revolution of global information technology, etc.. It is difficult for teachers in higher vocational colleges to find out the right approach to solve the problems if they lack the consciousness of professional development, the desire of active learning, and the ability of profound introspection, and if they do not learn from others’ experience or ask experts’ advice.

Obviously, action learning which is centered on problems is just the starting point for the development of teachers in higher vocational colleges. There are various interests in different professions, so the same problem encountered is bound to have a different understanding. Even if the same person faces the same problem, he/she will have a totally different understanding because of different locations and time. Therefore, in team learning, it is very important to have a personal independence for every teacher in higher vocational colleges. Only teachers remain independent consciousness and take active participation, action will be conducted, introspection will be in effect, and learning will be started.

**Conclusion**

In summary, we believe that combining with working and professional features of teachers in higher vocational colleges, it is a feasible choice to have a project based on real problems as the core and a team of task-oriented action learning. Here, “experience-introspection-action” are interrelated basic elements to achieve individual development of teachers in higher vocational colleges and mutual development of learning teams. A nonlinear cyclic process exists between these elements. Through deep introspection on the past and present experience, teachers in higher vocational colleges have the specific grasp of real problems, take actions in specific projects and tasks, and finally solve problems.

**References**