Title: **Action learning as academic development**

Presenter: **Claire Stocks, Chris Trevitt, Joseph Hughes**
University of Liverpool, Australian National University

Session Learning Outcomes

By the end of this session, delegates will be able to:

- Describe how action learning (AL) has been used as an innovative approach to academic development in two universities (one in the UK and one in Australia)
- Critique AL as an approach to academic development (for instance, in contrast to workshop programmes), especially in research intensive environments.
- Evaluate the extent to which AL might be useful as/in academic or educational development interventions in their own institutions

Session Outline

The context for educational development, in particular, once saw 'workshops' play a central role (e.g. Fleming, 1997, 1) but interest in moving beyond 'workshops' for professional development in academia - despite their indisputable value - is now increasingly evident. However, while Action Learning (AL) is, on the one hand, a well-established and proven mode of pursuing change in organisational settings, on the other hand, it does not appear to have been as prominent in academic development as we might have expected. Raelin's (2009) key themes in 'action modalities' highlights some of the main characteristics of AL, and provides a useful base from which to explore the potential strengths and limitations of an AL approach to academic development:

- 1. They are dialectic rather than didactic or classroom-based
- 2. They develop contextualized and useful theory rather than test decontextualized and impartial theory
- 3. They invite learners to be active participants, leading often to change in the self and in the system in question
- 4. They endorse reflection-in-action rather than reflection-on-action
- 5. They emphasize meta-competence over competence
- 6. Learning tends to be facilitated rather than taught
- 7. They espouse the development of double-loop rather than just single-loop learning
- 8. They welcome the contribution of tacit knowledge to learning
- 9. Their measured learning outcomes are more often practice-based rather than academic

- 10. They are comfortable with tentativeness rather than certainty

Our contrasting experiences of set facilitation in research-intensive universities, with two different staff groups for quite distinct purposes (supporting individual Graduate Teaching Assistants' skill development in teaching in the UK; supporting groups of established academic staff engage in a whole-of-program curriculum innovation task in Australia) has illuminated our own understanding of AL in academic development. In this session we aim to explore the potential of AL further with the broader higher education development community.

Session Activities and Approximate Timings

The outline of the workshop is a follows;

Brief introduction to AL in HE (5 mins)
How we have used AL in academic development – 2 case studies (10 mins)
Introduction of key questions for discussion (5 mins)
Split into smaller groups – each group to consider one of the indicative questions below (10 mins)
Feedback from groups – facilitator(s) to highlight where/how AL is being used or could be used in the different contexts (10 mins)
Feedback from group on what key learning/actions they will take forward from the session (5 mins)

Indicative questions to be explored with participants include:
- Is AL useful for the development of people rather than (or as well as) solving problems (cf Stark, 2006)? If so, how, and what might we have to include to make it work in this way?
- What might our participants get from an AL approach, that they may not get from a workshop programme?
- How robust is the AL approach to academic development? What are the particular vulnerabilities, tensions and challenges with assuming this methodology (particularly in research-intensive institutions)?

References

Fleming, J. A. (1997). *New perspectives on designing and implementing effective workshops*. Jossey-Bass Publishers.
Raelin, Joe (2009) Seeking conceptual clarity in the action modalities, *Action Learning: Research and Practice*, 6:1, 17-24
Stark, Sheila (2006) Using action learning for professional development, Educational Action Research, 14:01, 23-43,