

ACTION LEARNING

INTRODUCTION:

Action learning has become a popular, increasingly institutionalized, aspect of management programs, countering criticisms that business school training is sometimes too theoretical for real world value. While action learning exists in varied versions at different business schools, it is typically characterized by certain key components: a “real business” problem as content, learning through teamwork, and time for personal and group reflection on lessons learned.¹

Action learning’s emphasis on self reflection and real-time lessons makes it a particularly powerful vehicle for achieving student understanding of social and environmental issues. This *Closer Look* examines how action learning is being utilized by business schools worldwide to integrate social and environmental issues into business school curriculum.

LESSONS FROM THE TEACHING INNOVATION PROGRAM

This edition is part of a special fall 2007 *Closer Look* series of three articles prompted by the experiences of schools who participated in the first round of the Aspen Institute Center for Business Education’s Teaching Innovation Program (TIP). TIP is a forum intended for the exchange of ideas and the testing of new models of MBA curriculum that better integrate social and environmental thinking into core management education. Eleven schools worldwide and a select number of corporations, including GE and 3M, participated in TIP’s first round, conducted from 2004-2006. The descriptions of courses and activities in this series are drawn directly from the TIP participants, and complemented by newly-collected 2007 data from *Beyond Grey Pinstripes*, a biennial survey and alternate ranking of MBA programs conducted by the Aspen Institute Center for Business Education. The second round of TIP will be launched in Bangalore, India in October 2007.²

THE BOTTOM LINE:

- Action learning encourages the cultivation of distinct leadership qualities in business practitioners. According to the International Foundation for Action Learning (IFAL): “[During action learning] assumptions are challenged, results are confronted, feedback from others increases self-understanding.”³ The onus action learning places on the individual – to act thoughtfully, reflect on one’s own agency and imagine solutions beyond the status quo – aligns

¹ Dierk, Udo and Scott Saslow. “Action Learning in Management Development Programs.” May 2005. *Chief Learning Officer Magazine*. 1 June 2007
<http://clomedia.com/content/templates/clo_article.asp?articleid=950&zoneid=63>

² The forthcoming two *Closer Look* articles in the TIP series will feature the topics Cross-Sector Partnerships (Oct 2007) and The Role of the Business School in Society (Nov 2007). The eleven global schools that participated in the 2004-2006 Teaching Innovation Program are: Ashridge Business School; Case Western University, Weatherhead School of Management; Cornell University, The Johnson School; McGill University, Desautels Faculty of Management; Northwestern University, Kellogg School of Management; S.P. Jain Institute of Management and Research; Tecnológico de Monterrey, EGADE; University of Michigan, Stephen M. Ross School of Business; University of Navarra, IESE Business School; University of Stellenbosch Business School; and University of Toronto, Joseph L. Rotman School of Management. To learn more about the TIP program visit: www.aspenbsp.org

³ *Frequently Asked Questions*. 2007. IFAL – The International Foundation for Action Learning. 19 June 2007 <<http://www.ifal.org.uk/>>

Smith, Peter A.C. and V. John Peters. “Action Learning: Worth A Closer Look.” Sept. 1997. The International Foundation For Action Learning. 1 June 2007
<www.tlinc.com/BQ%20V62%20N1%2097.doc>

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with the personal leadership qualities necessary for business leaders to effectively address social and environmental dilemmas.

- Action learning's focus on real world business problems creates a space for ambiguity in business education, which can sometimes be discouraged in traditional classroom settings. Rather than generating quick or finite solutions, action learning prepares students for the complexities of social problems confronted by contemporary business.
- Much as corporate social responsibility issues have become increasingly integrated into business strategy, action learning has also evolved from its community service origins to don a more strategic framing. As schools adopt action learning into their core curriculum, action learning has developed into a critical resource for the training and development of forward-thinking business leaders.

FACULTY POINT OF VIEW:

At the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan's **S.P. Jain Institute of Management and Research** in Mumbai, a required **Development of Corporate Citizenship (DOCC)** program brings MBA students to work – and often to live – in rural and less-developed areas of India, where they implement six-week-long projects in the social sector. Examples of past student projects include: the design of a Disaster Preparedness Policy and Action Plan for the remote and earthquake-prone state of Himachal Pradesh, as well as a feasibility study of alternate power sources in two villages in the power-deprived Ladhak region.

Professor **Nirja Matoo**, Chairperson of the Center for Development of Corporate Citizenship, leads the DOCC program and talks about the educational intent of this intensive experience:

On the lessons from action learning at S.P. Jain: “The DOCC sensitizes and exposes the students to the realities of the underprivileged populace in India and develops an understanding in them of the merits and limitations in applying management principles in unstructured and challenging situations.

“The students have heard about the ‘Bottom of the Pyramid’ but the challenges faced at the bottom of the pyramid are as much structural as cultural. Each problem has to be solved like a business problem taking into account the specific social equations, which are the real constraints.

“The DOCC enhances understanding of the social structure, the aspirations and requirements of the people in these areas, which adds a new dimension to whatever the students learn in theory.”

On the influence of the DOCC on the S.P. Jain Institute as a whole: “The significance of the DOCC project is that it has carved a niche for S.P. Jain and demonstrated a unique synergy between management educators, NGOs and corporations. Most importantly, it has made a lasting impact in the lives of the students, NGOs and communities.”

NOTABLE ACTIVITIES:

- **Cornell University, The Johnson School**
Sustainable Global Enterprise Immersion – Practicum⁴
“Students spend much of their time gaining valuable first-hand experience in field projects that require them to address real problems currently being faced by companies who expect to receive practical, operational solutions. SGE Immersion projects require competency in all management areas, including economics, finance, accounting, and operations. The projects address sustainable value management, low income market development, and sustainable technological innovation.”

⁴ *Immersion Learning: Sustainable Global Enterprise*. 2006. Johnson School at Cornell University. 19 June 2007 <http://www.johnson.cornell.edu/academic/mba/sg_e_im.html>

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■ University of Navarra, IESE Business School

Internship: Fundación Chandra and Fundación Natura

“Fundación Chandra places media and new technology at the service of NGOs to help them with their activities in emerging economies. Each year a number of our MBA students spend the summer months working on projects with this organization.”

“Fundación Natura raises funds to acquire valuable but destroyed natural areas and restore them to productive areas. The work is voluntary and the NGO only pays for students’ travel and accommodations.”

■ University of Michigan, Stephen M. Ross School of Business

*Multidisciplinary Action Project (MAP)*⁵

“For seven weeks each spring, first-year Ross MBA students devote themselves exclusively to MAP as a requirement of the MBA core curriculum. When selecting MAP projects for our students, we look for outstanding corporate, entrepreneurial, and nonprofit projects both in the U.S. and abroad that require thoughtful and actionable recommendations to address pressing organizational challenges [...] We look for challenging projects that have no simple solution. MAP projects are multidisciplinary and can cover a range of business issues from developing a strategic marketing plan for China to working with an AIDS clinic in Papua New Guinea.”

ONGOING QUESTIONS:

- The cross-disciplinary nature of CSR topics can create tensions about where they should be housed in the curriculum. As action learning is increasingly leveraged as a tool for CSR-related education, where will it find a curricular home? How will the academic placement of action learning impact its legitimacy as a teaching tool in mainstream business educator circles?
- Given the power of the action learning experience to profoundly impact individual students at both an emotional and intellectual level, what are the prospects of action learning influencing the greater MBA experience? How can action learning experiences serve as an impetus for broader institutional change in business schools?

RESOURCES:

BeyondGreyPinstripes.org – World’s largest MBA database, including detailed records on thousands of courses and information on extracurriculars, university centers, and more, for 128 schools on six continents.

CasePlace.org – A free and practical on-line resource for up-to-date case studies, syllabi, and innovative teaching materials on business and sustainability. Created for the educators who will shape our next generation of business leaders!

A Closer Look is a monthly series of briefing papers on topical issues in MBA education, based on the research and programs of the Aspen Institute. The [Aspen Institute Business and Society Program](http://www.aspeninstitute.org) works with senior corporate executives and MBA educators to prepare business leaders who will effectively manage the financial, social, and environmental impacts of the private sector.

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⁵ *Multidisciplinary Action Projects*. 2007. Stephen M. Ross School of Business. 23 Aug 2007
<<http://www.bus.umich.edu/MAP/>>