

Critically reflective action learning

Improving social work practice through critically reflective action learning

A report received by Skills for Care from the Centre for Action Learning Facilitation, for social work educators and senior practitioners facilitating action learning for colleagues.



Preface

The use of action learning in supporting newly qualified social workers (NQSW) has been promoted by Skills for Care since we began supporting employers firstly through the NQSW Framework for adults' services, and latterly through the Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE). Many employers now use this methodology as part of their 'support package' for NQSWs, to enhance supervision and reflective practice discussions, provide additional learning opportunities or as a support for supervisors and managers. Skills for Care's approach has been to develop a sustainable resource for employers through training action learning facilitators. The ASYE along with other reforms following the Social Work Reform Board has, among many other things, thrown renewed focus on developing reflective and analytical practice. Employers needing to support their staff can see through this report how 'critically reflective action learning' can contribute to this professional activity, thereby improving the outcomes for people who need care and support and their professional social work staff.

Skills for Care is pleased to publish this report as received from the Centre for Action Learning Facilitation (C-ALF), and places on record its thanks to Mike Pedler, Christine Abbott, Cheryl Brook and John Burgoyne for researching and compiling the report, and to all the contributors to their work.

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Critically reflective action learning: Improving social work practice through critically reflective action learning

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Executive summary

This study sets out to test the proposition that ‘critically reflective action learning’ (CRAL) can help social workers to address and better resolve their complex or ‘wicked’ problems. It further proposes that this is done partly through helping participants to develop more robust personal and professional identities.

CRAL (critically reflective action learning) is a variant of critical action learning (CAL) which supports a critical view of how action and learning are constrained and shaped by power and politics in human systems (Trehan & Pedler 2010). The term CRAL is chosen here because it takes particular note of the reflective processes appropriate to the complex situations, wicked problems and ethical dilemmas such as are found in social work practice (Hillman 2012). Both CRAL and CAL are developments of ‘ordinary’ action learning (see 2. Background theory, below).

Of particular interest in this study is whether CRAL can help with the addressing of the ‘wicked’ issues, which are differentiated from the ‘critical’ (in sense of urgent) and ‘tame’ problems of managing and organising. The wicked problems are described as being messy, circular and aggressive, as defying merely rational analysis and as characterised by a high degree of uncertainty. Simple solutions are ineffective and indeed likely to generate other problems; and progressing a wicked problem is likely to require high degrees of both collaboration and of learning on the part of all concerned (see 2. Background theory, below).

The findings are based on the following data sets:

- 15 case examples taken from the accounts written by social workers who participated in an ILM Level 5 Certificate in Action Learning Facilitation
- six group interviews with participants of the action learning sets which were facilitated as part of the ILM programme
- six case studies developed from interviews with individual participants of these action learning sets.

This data is examined for evidence of learning under four overlapping headings: skills development, learning about self, changes to practice, and fresh insights and new perspectives. All these categories of learning, especially including the last, are relevant to learning about personal and professional identity, and a consideration of identity development leads on to evidence for critical thinking and reflection in practice. Finally, the data is searched for evidence of wicked problems addressed.

The conclusions of this short study are necessarily tentative, but nevertheless give cautious support to the hypothesis that a critically reflective practice of action learning can lead to improved decision-making, increased confidence and a willingness to act in difficult and wicked social work situations. Social workers equipped with knowledge of critical concepts and with the habits of critical reflection are more able, and perhaps more likely, to address the wicked issues.

Stronger support is found for the second research question: that CRAL helps social workers to refresh the ideas and ideals that brought them into the work, and strengthens them in their work to meet client needs under complex and stressful conditions.

The report culminates in two recommendations to employers and social work organisations; that:

- CRAL should be considered as part of support and supervision strategies for social work staff
- CRAL (and ‘ordinary’ AL) should be seen as applicable not just to NQSWs and junior staff, but to all social work professionals, including the most senior.

The report closes with suggestions for the further research to investigate the connections between CRAL and the addressing of wicked issues in social work practice, to consider the role of action learning facilitators in stimulating and supporting critically reflective practice in social work, and to design tools to support critically reflective practice in social workers.

1. Introduction to the research

The aim of this study is to test whether a critically reflective practice of action learning can lead to improved outcomes in certain complex social work situations and equip social workers with new insights and professional capabilities by illuminating the following research questions:

- Does a ‘critically reflective action learning’ (CRAL) help social workers to better resolve their complex or “wicked” problems?
- Does CRAL promote the development of a more robust professional identity in social workers?

Action learning is an approach to practice development which takes the challenges of professional work as the vehicles for learning. It is employed in leadership, management and professional development programmes in a wide range of commercial and public service settings. In social work, action learning is increasingly offered to managers and professionals including in the supervision and development of NQSWs (newly qualified social workers).

Action learning is seen to have particular strengths in promoting reflection on and in action (Schön 1983). Critical reflection and critically reflective practice are central to social work. “Critical Reflection and Analysis” is a central feature of the College of Social Work’s Professional Capability Framework (PCF), and is required to different degrees in all levels of social work practice. The PCF expects the integration of critical reflection into all social work practice, and the ability to apply critical reflective skills is a key aspect of social worker development. (College of Social Work 2012a)

“Critical reflection and critically reflective practice are central to social work – indeed ‘Critical Reflection and Analysis’ is one of the nine domains of the PCF, with capability statements built into all levels.” (College of Social Work 2012b:1)

CAL (‘critical action learning’) is a development of action learning which supports a more critical view of how action and learning are constrained and shaped by power and politics in human systems (Trehan & Pedler 2010). The term CRAL (‘critically reflective action learning’) used in this study takes particular note of the reflective

processes found in social work practice (Hillman 2012).

Since 2010, as part of the resources for employers linked to the NQSW framework and ASYE, Skills for Care has supported 70 social work managers, learning and development professionals and practice educators to undertake an ILM Level 5 Certificate in Action Learning Facilitation through the Centre for Action Learning Facilitation (C-alf). Through this programme participants have been working with the CRAL ideas in their workplaces to develop newly-qualified social workers and their own social work practice. As part of this work, participants write accounts of their practice detailing their learning from experiences of initiating and facilitating action learning.

This study is based on an analysis of 15 case examples taken from the accounts written by the members of the ILM Certificate course together with six cases developed from interviews with members of the action learning sets which they facilitated as part of the programme.

The findings support the hypothesis that a critically reflective practice of action learning can lead to improved decision-making, increased confidence and a willingness to act autonomously in difficult social work situations. However, the conclusions of this short study are necessarily tentative, and only begin to reveal some of the connections and possibilities. The report closes with suggestions for further research which is needed to make stronger connections between CRAL and the addressing of wicked issues in social work practice.

2. Background theory

Social work, 'wicked problems' and action learning

In action learning, Revans famously distinguishes between puzzles, “difficulties from which escapes are thought to be known”, and problems, which have no existing solution and where: “no single course of action is to be justified ... so that different managers, all reasonable, experienced and sober, might set out by treating them in markedly different ways” (Revans 2011: 6-10).

Revans' problems have similarities with the notion of “wicked problems” (Rittel & Webber 1973; Grint 2008). In his leadership model (Fig 1) Grint proposes a threefold typology of problems where the progression from 'critical' to 'tame' to 'wicked' shows up in increases in uncertainty about solutions and with a much greater need for collaboration (2008: 11-18).

Figure 1 -Three types of problem (Grint 2008)



Three Types of Problem- (Note that Grint is using the word “critical” here to denote an urgent crisis, and not as in the ‘critical thinking’ sense used in this report).

Problems such as heart attacks, train crashes or natural disasters are critical in that they demand swift action, leaving little time for procedure or uncertainty. Tame problems such as planning heart surgery or building a new hospital can be very complicated, but are tame because they are

amenable to the tools of rational planning and management. The wicked problems defy rational analysis and are characterised by a high degree of uncertainty. They are messy, circular and aggressive: for example, eliminating drug abuse, homelessness or crime in a neighbourhood,

motivating people, developing entrepreneurship or working across boundaries in organisations are all examples of problems which are complex and unpredictable in this way. Any single solution to a wicked problem is likely to generate other problems; there are no right or wrong answers, but only better or worse alternatives. Progressing a wicked problem is likely to require a high degree of collaboration and a great deal of learning.

Social workers are likely to be faced by situations that fit this sort of description in the course of their work. [The College of Social Work's Professional Capability Framework \(PCF\)](#) does not use the language of wicked issues or problems, but defines professional capability as including the ability to “apply the principles of critical thinking, reasoned discernment (and) critical reflection and analysis to increasingly complex cases” and “provide critical reflection, challenge and evidence-informed decision-making in complex situations” (see appendix 1).

Social workers are expected not only to master these demanding analytical skills, but to act on their judgements. An experienced social worker should be able to: “manage potentially conflicting or competing values and ethical dilemmas to arrive at principled decisions”, and even to pursue such issues in wider forums: “Raise and address issues of poor practice, internally through the organisation, and then independently if required” (see appendix 1).

Action learning is the approach designed by Revans for such complex and wicked issues. These are situations where simple solutions and straightforward strategies may often lead to unintended consequences amongst the complex interdependencies of issues and stakeholders. Action learning involves proceeding by questions, rather than rushing to solutions, learning from making deliberate experiments and taking deliberated risks in the company of helpful, supportive and also challenging colleagues.

Critical action learning (CAL)

Revans elaborated his idea of action learning over a long career with many of the key ideas coming together in the 1970s. He never defined action learning once and for all, and this allows for its ongoing development. Critical action

learning (CAL) is a term coined by management academics in the early 1990s. These writers were dissatisfied with the current business school provision which they saw as being rationalist and technicist, over-concerned with the ‘how’ and neglecting the ‘why’. Willmott (1994; 1997) proposes CAL as a means of correcting what he sees as an unquestioning tradition in management education, which promotes formulaic problem-solving and a technical “management by numbers” approach.

The idea of action learning is seen as having the radical potential to reclaim professional and management education from these functionalist preoccupations, especially because of the peer relationship and the power it puts into the hands of learners. However ‘ordinary’ action learning is not seen as sufficient to this task; its lack of tight definition means that it is easily adapted to serve local agendas, and is also therefore easily ‘captured’ and harnessed to existing positions by powerful people and groups. Because managers and professionals are socialised into sets of values and share dominant ideologies, they are unlikely to question their practices from an independent standpoint. In this perspective, how can action learning avoid the trap of being “selectively adopted to maintain the status quo”? (Willmott 1994: 127).

To avoid this, critical action learning (CAL) sets out to understand how attempts at action and learning in the human systems of organisations, communities, networks and societies are structured, governed and constrained by power and politics:

“...action learning can encourage an awareness of the ‘primacy of politics’, both macro and micro, and the influence of power on decision making and non-decision making, not to mention the ‘mobilization of bias’” (McLaughlin and Thorpe, 1993:25).

The practice of CAL involves engaging with these political, emotional and cultural processes to deal with the problems and also to enlarge freedoms

and to reduce oppressions. This is difficult and risky territory, where problems change shape, meanings are slippery and there is often little 'common sense'. However, CAL offers a way of approaching problems that are otherwise avoided or masked, and holds out the promise of emancipation from old ways of thinking and organising. Revealing the patterns which have become oppressive is a step towards new ways of working.

Reflection & critical reflection

The concepts of reflection and of being critically reflective parallel those of action learning and CAL. Reflection and reflective practices have been gaining prominence in many professional and management fields in recent years. Long recognised in the context of individual and practitioner learning, of particular recent importance is the use of collective and public reflection to make sense of complex and ambiguous problems which are of great relevance for organisational development and learning (Vince, 2002; Reynolds & Vince 2004; Nicolini et al., 2004).

Reflective practice is a core aspect of a social worker's formation and professional development. [The College of Social Work's Professional Capability Framework \(PCF\)](#) makes it plain that this is something expected even in any student's practice and then, in increasing depth and complexity, throughout the social worker's professional development and career progression.

A respondent describes what reflective practice means to her; demonstrating how her understanding has progressed over time and with experience, whilst remaining intangible:

"...reflective practice ...is the backbone of my learning, when first embarking on my social work training I was asked to complete a process recording of my intervention with clients. At first, I had a limited understanding of where processing my thoughts, feelings and reasoning fitted into my practice, for as an undergraduate, social work for me was in short, about 'helping others'. Over the years; in supervising staff and newly qualified social workers,and more recently participating on the Action Learning Programme,

I have become more adept at understanding the role that reflection has on my practice. However, whilst at the same time encouraging reflection in colleagues, I can most certainly identify with their struggles to engage in the process as it is always easier to explain or describe what you did but not why you did it, or to write about how you felt, what impact you thought your intervention had on your client and how you would improve things next time, etc." (Case 14)

The concept of reflection can also be seen to have changed over time. A classical conception is of thought turning in on itself, not so much for action but for private consumption (apparent for example in the writings of Henry James). The idea of reflection becomes less interior and more visible in John Dewey's recognition of the important role it plays in experiential learning. In 1983, Donald Schön (1983) proposes that reflection "in action", as well as "on action", is the very mark of what it means to be a professional. The ability to reflect, and thereby to correct or vary one's actions to the situation, becomes a warrant of professional service—as is clearly seen in the extract above from Case 14.

Schön's conception has been seminal in many fields of professional development. However, it is a largely individualistic conception; the site of reflection being the individual practitioner, and the aim the improvement of individual performance. In the action learning set, reflection becomes more collective and also more public (Raelin 2001). Individuals are encouraged to share their different reflections, to interrogate them and to push them further. Revans' epigram: "Sets for reflection; Projects for action", depicts a situation where individuals take their own directions from what is, at least in part, a joint production.

Reynolds (1998) distinguishes critical reflection from other forms of reflection as being more concerned with:

- questioning assumptions
- a social rather than individual focus
- the analysis of power relations
- emancipation.

Added to which, it seeks a public and collective effort which distinguishes it further. As in CAL above, critical reflection can:

*"create new understandings by making conscious the social, political, professional, economic and ethical assumptions constraining or supporting individual and collective action in a specific context."
(Trehan 2011: 187)*

We can see this in the words of the writer of Case 14 (above). Here she quotes from one of her set members to illustrate the difference between reflective practice and a more critically reflective practice:

"By being encouraged to look at issues about my power base and my influence over others within the context of the culture of the organization and my profession, I was moving towards a critically reflective position which began to question some of my underlying assumptions about management as a discipline, as well as about me as an individual." (Case 14)

A difference between RP and CRP is shown here in the focus of the reflection. In the first extract from Case 14 above, the focus of is on her practice with individual clients; in the second, it is on the impact of context – of organisation, profession and the discipline of management – on her practice.



3. Methodology

Sampling

We sampled two populations: the 70 social workers who attended the ILM Level 5 programmes to develop themselves as action learning facilitators; and the participants, mainly newly qualified social workers (NQSWs), with whom these facilitators worked as members of action learning sets.

- The facilitators: each participant on the ILM Level 5 programme was required to complete three assignments, including an account of their practice as action learning facilitators. With their permission, we sampled these accounts to extract 15 cases for analysis (see appendix 2 for examples of cases 1–15).
- The participants: six action learning sets were chosen from among those facilitated by the facilitators to represent a range of organisations and participants. Individual set members were interviewed to construct six cases for analysis (see appendix 3 for examples of cases A–F).

Case selection

The facilitators' cases (cases 1–15) were chosen on the basis that they displayed elements of critical reflection beyond what we called the personal or technical level. This also informed the choice of interviewees from whom cases A–F are constructed.

Level 1 reflection – Personal/Technical

This perspective sees the self as an individual actor in cause and effect relationships with other actors.

Everyone was asked to reflect on their practice, but those who limited their comments to how they felt before running a set (e.g. anxious) and then reflected on how this activity worked, or what they would do differently next time, were not chosen. If the account described difficulties with co-workers or managers, this became more interesting. But if the reflections just led to practical adjustments, such as talking to these people, or changing some process, then these would not generally be chosen.

Level 2 reflection – Critical

These accounts made mention of critical reflections beyond the personal and the technical, for example:

- focusing on conflict or emotionality which is not just individual and interior, such as conflicts between the different role pressures of managers and social workers, and emotions produced in these situations questioning assumptions on which understandings were based, especially in terms of how power – resources, interests, gender, race, rank, privilege, etc., – are used, misused and distributed
- being concerned with emancipations from previous narrower perspectives and assumptions of how things are and should be, etc
- using critical concepts or making explicit reference to CAL ideas and literature to illustrate something that had happened, e.g. the mirroring of external work relationships in the set
- showing awareness of social and organisational contexts, and a sense of self as not just an individualised actor but as taking part in a wider network of actors, institutions, rules, cultures, etc., and as being at least partly socially constituted.

Case analysis

The cases were content analysed by the research team using an analytical framework constructed from the literature on critical action learning (CAL) and critical reflection (CR). Fifteen questions emerged from various iterations between the research team to serve as markers or indicators of CAL/CR awareness and activity (Fig. 2):

Figure 2 - 15 research questions

1. What was meaningful about the experiences described and why?
2. What learning about self is demonstrated?
3. What emotions are surfaced?
4. How is Identity explored and developed?
5. What “challenged perspectives” emerge from the narrative?
6. What evidence is there of liberation from previously restricting mindsets?
7. What changes to future practice are noted?
8. What ethical issues or dilemmas are raised?
9. What evidence of “wicked problems” is addressed?
10. What is the surface problem and what is the CAL task?
11. What evidence of dissonance? How is this handled?
12. What darker aspects of organisational life are explored?
13. What critical concepts are brought to bear (from feminism, critical pedagogy, etc.)?
14. What learning about organisational power and politics is displayed?
15. What is the evidence of critical reflection “working well”?

We then grouped these 15 questions under five factors of what we have called ‘critically reflective action learning’ (CRAL) to create an analytical framework (Fig. 3):

Figure 3: Analytical framework

CRAL Markers	CRAL Factors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ What was meaningful about the experiences described and why? ■ What learning about self is demonstrated? ■ What changes to future practice? 	Learning 1 & 2 L1 = “Ordinary AL”; L2 = “CAL”)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ How is Identity explored and developed? ■ What “challenged perspectives” emerge from the narrative? ■ What evidence of liberation from previously restricting mindsets? 	Identity
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ What evidence of “wicked problems” is addressed? ■ What is the surface problem and what is the CAL task? ■ What darker aspects of organizational life are explored? ■ What learning about organisational power & politics? 	Organisational Tasks 1 & 2
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Are critical concepts brought to bear? ■ What evidence of critical reflection “working well”? ■ What evidence of dissonance? How is this handled? ■ What ethical issues or dilemmas are raised? 	Critical Ideas & Thinking (Reflection 1 & 2 after Reynolds, etc.)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ What emotions are surfaced? 	Emotions (Runs across all of above?)

Figure 3 is not proposed as a definitive model. The groupings are approximate and some questions could be listed under different factors. This is especially true of emotion, which is given particular significance in parts of the CAL literature but is also likely to be present in all learning, can be found with most of the other markers.

The analytical framework is a loose but shared template for the research team to use in interpreting the data. This was important in two ways: first, to help us code the Cases for the evidence of the marker questions and the CRAL factors, and secondly, to make sense of the data and develop the ideas in the report.

A note on the 'double hermeneutic'

In making sense of the data we were often aware of the workings of the “double hermeneutic”. Hermeneutics generally means serving to explain or interpret and is sometimes specifically applied to the interpretation of texts. In studying social phenomena we are studying something that is also making sense of itself. So for example, we impose the meanings of ‘stone’ and ‘stoniness’ without argument as it were, but the meaning of “identity” must include the sensemaking of the person themselves.

In this case, then, the data came from learning set facilitators who had already been referred to information about critical reflection. The study itself had therefore created an a priori frame of reference in which the responses were being generated.

This is sometimes referred to as the hermeneutic circle because, as Weick puts it: “Sensemaking never starts. The reason it never starts is that pure duration never stops. People are always in the middle of things, which become things.” (1995: 43). So we are always in the middle of understanding and also in the middle of being embedded in various structures such as organisations, professions, social classes, families, etc., from where we derive many of our pre-existing meanings. This is the first hermeneutic.

While natural scientists necessarily have one hermeneutic circle made up of their scientific community, social scientists have also to enter the circles of those they study. In other words, natural science operates in a single hermeneutic while social science operates in a double hermeneutic.

As meaning has to be understood, and cannot be simply measured or counted, there is always an interpretive or hermeneutic element in social science. Our sensemaking, as actors trying to understand other actors, is the second hermeneutic. We are trying to understand other peoples’ experience which is already partly shaped by them absorbing other people’s theories, and so on.

The dynamic of the double hermeneutic is part of the reality that we are part of as researchers, and which comes into play through our own involvement. Put simply, in seeking as actors in our own circle of sensemaking to understand the meanings of actors in another circle, there is the ever-present danger of finding in the data what we would like to see there.

For example, Freudian concepts like the unconscious, neurosis, repression, projection and so on have entered everyday language through films like ‘Psycho’, and thus present themselves as fitting Freudian theory. Although this in itself does not validate the theory, people would not take up these ideas, or for that matter experience ‘Psycho’ as gripping, unless the concepts resonated with their experience to some degree. As applied to this study, the facilitators’ data came from assignments which drew their attention to literature on critical reflection. If this is reported back as fitting their experience, this does not prove the theory, and although they might not have told us these things if the concepts of critical reflection had not been drawn to their attention, nevertheless this does demonstrate at least that they can understand those concepts and apply them to their experience and practice.

4. Findings

The findings from this study are based on 15 cases taken from the facilitators' accounts of practice (Cases 1–15) and six cases from interviews with participants in six action learning sets analysis (Cases A–F). They consist of statements made by social workers in either the facilitators' accounts or the set participants' interviews, together with our commentary. Where a quotation is given, the case from which it comes is indicated at the end of the quote.

The findings are grouped under four headings derived from the analytical framework (Fig. 3):

- 4.1 Learning
- 4.2 Identity
- 4.3 Critical thinking and reflection
- 4.4 Evidence of wicked problems addressed
- 4.5 CRAL as a wider way of working
- 4.6 An hypothesis about action learning (AL) and critically reflective action learning (CRAL)

The first four analysis categories are taken from our analytical framework. The fifth category of Emotion has not been used here because examples of this appear in virtually all the cases and is present, either explicitly or as inferred, in many of the quoted extracts to be found below. Feelings and emotions are likely to be present in most learning situations, and in most situations where questions of identity and the difficult problems of practice are being considered.

However, it is important to note here that Revans' proposal for action learning was designed precisely for these problematic situations. The purpose of the action learning set is to help people to face up to the difficult issues and not to avoid them. The peer support and challenge of the action learning set is designed to encourage each of us to tackle such issues through experimentation, action and learning. Without such support it is likely that our criticality and impact may be inhibited. In her study of nursing, Menzies Lyth (1960), points out how risky situations can result in the strengthening of rigid rules and hierarchies as a "defence against anxiety". We return to this point in the Conclusions.

There were some difficulties in applying the analytical framework to the case data.

There are several reasons for this: the framework was a loose one, and the grouping of the 15 questions under the five factors was approximate, and alternative groupings were possible. We varied in our readings of the data using this framework and this led us to pose more questions both about the framework and especially about the nature of the data and the issues under study. This included our awareness of the operation of the double hermeneutic (see note above).

By far the most significant factor concerning the difficulty of coding is the difficulty of separating one element from another. Statements could sometimes be coded in more than one way, and the elements we were looking for in the data often appeared all mingled up with one another. So, for example, a paragraph could start with a statement of emotion, caused by a situation in the set which is indicative of a wider organisational problem, which then led on to statements about critical reflection, sometimes first on the problem and then on the nature of critical reflection itself. Even at the finer level of analysis of the 15 questions, separation was often difficult and, in any given piece of text, several or even most of the questions seemed to be in play and to appear together.

Notwithstanding these difficulties and limitations, a pattern can be discerned which links the abundant examples of Learning of various types, with the development of personal and professional Identity, through to the engagement with Critical Thinking and Reflection and the addressing of Wicked Problems. A section on CRAL as a wider way of working follows and the findings end with a hypothesis about AL & CRAL.

4.1 Learning

As might be expected, the data is rich in examples of learning, which form the most numerous category in our classification. However, learning is revealed here as a family term encompassing several varieties. We were looking for examples of critical action learning, but many examples were of what we called by contrast “ordinary” learning, as in learning a new technique or skill in action learning, quite without any critical content. There are many examples of learning about self, often accompanied by clear ideas about how to change practice in future. This sort of learning ranged from relatively minor changes to practice to evidence of challenge to existing practices which led to fundamental shifts in perspective.

Some examples of these types of learning are given below grouped under four overlapping headings:

4.1.1 Skills development

4.1.2 Learning about self

4.1.3 Changes to practice

4.1.4 Fresh insights and new perspectives

4.1.1 Skills development

Many accounts demonstrate learning about the skills of facilitating action learning. A number of the accounts report on changes in approach and the use of specific techniques to support the learning experience:

I achieved (participation) by encouraging people to take part in the set from the start...I have found warm up exercises...a great tool for breaking the ice and getting set members to relax and feel positive from the start...when completing my facilitator training I found these exercises reduced my initial fears and anxiety of taking part in a new group. (Case 6)

I began each session acknowledging that I was using techniques borrowed from action learning to facilitate a discussion around the issues for individual and organisational practice raised by their reading of the Serious Case Review materials. (Case 8)

Some informants reported on the development of a more proactive and assertive approach to facilitating:

If any conversation deviated away from the problem, I was able to re-direct the discussion back by simply refusing to become involved with those discussions and focusing my attention back to the problem holder. I felt that I was modelling the value of offering the person with the challenge the most attention and this helped the group to re-focus. (Case 11)

Some skills learning shows the benefits of reflection upon practice, especially in terms of increased confidence in using the action learning approach:

I am continuing to use action learning in different contexts, but have recently re-negotiated the goals of this type of intervention. Far from being a solution to how social workers meet outcomes, I have re-framed it as a method to encourage reflection and analysis of cases. (Case 7)

I notice that I no longer need to assume a teaching role preferring instead to facilitate ownership and deeper levels of learning by set members. (Case 13)

The action learning training has boosted my confidence in that facilitators are not required/expected to be experts in the field. (Case 9)

And some of the skills learning in evidence is very impressive and sophisticated:

For example one of the social workers in the group was behaving inappropriately. He had snapped at me and others members of the group. I tried to explore with them what was making him feel this way. At times I found myself getting irritated with this person. I was however aware of these feeling and was able to take control of the situation by remaining calm and encouraging them and set members to explore his issue in a calm way. I also reminded the individual and the set of the ground rules we had agreed re respecting each other and acting in an appropriate manner towards other set members. After the session I received feedback from my colleague. She felt I had handled the situation well. I confessed I did not feel as if I did. (Case 6)

4.1.2 Learning about self

Accounts often show evidence of individuals gaining a deeper understanding of their own behaviour and values. One respondent writes about how they began the action learning process focused solely on their own problem and their own concerns until the realisation that once they listened properly to others' issues the problem it became apparent that they were facing was the same problem, and they could then begin to tackle it collaboratively albeit from different perspectives. Learning about self is also very clearly present in the accounts of set members. In this example, a respondent is shocked to discover an apparent lack of listening:

I remember asking why these problems had aired themselves now, and they said they had been talking about them since the first set meeting, hadn't I been listening. Well no I hadn't clearly. I had been so involved in my own issue and using the group as a listening forum, I hadn't heard my colleagues' problems. This was a real revelation to me. Was I listening to anybody? (Case E)

Less dramatically but perhaps more fundamentally, the cases frequently report the opportunity to reflect upon personal beliefs and values in relation to practice:

My time spent facilitating NQSW has given me an opportunity to reflect on how as a facilitator my beliefs, values and ethics influence my practice. (Case 11)

Cases A & F (Appendix 3) give other powerful examples of this sort of learning.

4.1.3 Changes to practice

Facilitators commented on their changing practice as facilitators, which often involved them modifying existing ideas and methods:

Reflecting on this feedback I realise it is difficult for me to get the balance of being supportive but also challenging, particularly when managers are part of the group. Trying to be caring and nice doesn't make for a strong facilitator and I realise that this is an area that I need to continue to develop for future learning sets. (Case 3)

Although feedback suggested I was warm and reassuring in my style, I found myself becoming increasingly 'strict' with one group member

in particular who, in spite of other members' skills in using open questions, persisted in giving advice to the issue holder. At one point I used a technique I had learned from family therapy training (Hayley, 1996) of making a 'stop' gesture with my hand to this participant and inviting someone else to ask a question instead by 'waving them on'. The 'advice-giver' seemed quite affronted by this, and soon stopped attending. I may have been able to avoid this if I had spent more time explaining and rehearsing techniques with the whole group rather than putting a spotlight on the dynamics in the room, which created an unhelpful and competitive atmosphere and placed me in an authoritarian role. Having now learned more specific techniques, I would consider the use of particular tools and strategies to encourage open questioning by all. (Case 4)

Set members also indicated changes to their practices as social workers as is again clearly shown in cases A and F (appendix 3). In another example, a respondent has a revelation not just about their own practice but about that of their colleagues:

So armed with this new insight I went back to work and got the managers together and went through the same process—how they were trained and supported in their first year and how with the changing world we could offer support to those newly committed to the profession. The end we all realised that doing the same things or fighting to do the same things that worked 15 - 20 years ago was not going to work and that new solutions needed to be found. We then looked at what could be done and related this to the ASYE. It's not perfect but we are working with it in a different way. (Case D)

4.1.4 Fresh insights and new perspectives

Learning about self and changes to practice were often consequent upon fresh insights and new perspectives:

The set helped me to look at the problem with fresh eyes. [The] questions were really helpful from a technical point of view, but then one person asked me about my role as the care manager / broker and I started to get quite upset. I remember saying 'I am a social worker, not a broker'. (Case C)

Repeated cycles of listening, reflection and questioning lead to the emergence of a different perspective on the problem and to specific collective action being taken on the issue:

I had the undivided attention of the group, I don't think I have ever experienced the support of peers to that extent before and with their encouragement found myself being able to explore my feelings about this man and the situation. (Case F)

We then explored how I could check out the information I now had (gathered) with my manager in a non-career limiting way. So I did. (Case F)

Both facilitators and set members commented on the extent to which action learning provided what might be termed sufficient 'reflective space' and time in which to address issues, together with the collaborative environment fostered by action learning. One account, which involved finding solutions to issues involving a young man with learning disabilities who had lived in residential care for a many years, commented on the way in which the set enabled them to help them to 'look at the problem with fresh eyes' and focus upon core issues:

The group started to help me explore the problem using the core values of social work. (I realised) I was allowing the care planning approach to prevent me from doing what I should be doing as a social worker. It was a revealing moment for me. (Case C)

In this case the social worker was able to report back at the next meeting and the group 'helped me to explore what I could take that was realistic to support this young man' (case C). The process of critical reflection helps participants to become much more aware of aspects of their professional life with which they are comfortable, and which require some action:

At the third set meeting one of the set suggested that I was displaying helpless victim behaviour, which hit me. She was right of course and it did get me thinking about what this (i.e. the problem) was doing to me and whether I was allowing the team to see me this way too. (Case E)

From the facilitator's perspective, handling these difficult issues in a set can also be difficult and require new insights:

As a facilitator I have often felt uncomfortable when people raise difficult issues or identify obstacles that I can't do anything about. I was quite content to work with people who did not question or challenge the way things were done. Critical action learning has helped me to recognise that my discomfort may result from the contradictions of the environment within which I am facilitating. (Case 5 from Hillman 2012)

4.2 Identity

When the learning progresses beyond straightforward knowledge and relatively technical skills, then the question of the person's identity – personal and professional – is usually present. This is apparent in many of the learning examples given above and also in the appended cases.

Other cases also provide considerable evidence of reflective practice helping in developing a sense of professional identity, often in approaching decision making in complex cases in a more informed and thoughtful way:

The set helped me look at the problem with fresh eyes – this young man had been on my case load for only a very short time and I was challenged about the reports I was given by the residential care home. These questions were mainly from a technical point of view, but then one person asked about my role as the care manager/ broker and I started to get quite upset. I remember saying "I am a social worker not a care manager." The questioner asked me gently what the difference was and what value could a social worker offer over care management. (Case C)

From the case studies is suggested that the process of CRAL has challenged the social workers interviewed to review their role of social worker.

I am proud to be a social worker but this really brought home to me that identity and the responsibility that goes with it. (Case A)

That felt better to me and was what I felt as a social worker I wanted to do. So I started to explore with the set how I could achieve my new vision. (Case B)

The facilitator asked me to put all the organisational politics to one side, all the resource issues, etc., and just paint a picture of what a social worker response to the case would be. I wasn't sure but suggested that for the next meeting I would try. It was really liberating to be free of the other stuff and I found as I started to talk that I could. (Case C)

I felt brave and for the first time in years I felt like I was a social worker not just someone who sweeps up the mess and hides it under the carpet; a job nobody else wants to do. (Case F)

Some of the facilitators' accounts showed deep and prolonged reflection on identity:

I learned early in my action learning experience that I was not required to be an expert or to have the answers (Lowe 2010 p.187). Recently, however, I realised that the same principle applied to me not being required to take on responsibility for an organisational directive over which I had no control; 'I think my tendency is to try to solve everything. I can't be held responsible for organisational issues, nor can I solve them. I need to have clear boundaries...' (Action Learning Log 6th Sept 2011). I concluded that the problem that W raised could have been worked on as an action learning problem, potentially leading to action-based solutions, and my co-facilitator and I need not have felt defensive of her challenge. I noted that action learning, with its ongoing evaluation throughout, could help to reduce our defensiveness as facilitators. (Case 15)

Taken as a whole the case studies demonstrates how a critically reflective action learning (CRAL) can be integrated into and support all the College of Social Work's PCF domains (2012a). The cases above demonstrate that in grappling with complex cases, social workers have been supported in re-evaluating their identities and the core values that they came into the profession to uphold, yet which under the pressures and workplace cultures, are easy to lose in practice. In this context, a critically reflective form of action

learning CRAL seems to have helped those interviewed to regain their professional identity (PCF Experienced Social Worker domain 1) and apply the social work ethical principles and values to their professional practice (PCF Experienced Social Worker Domain 2).

4.3 Critical thinking and reflection

The critical thinking skills of participants in the action learning sets appears to produce better problem solving:

Over the course of ten months creative thinking about problems has improved, and instead of a culture of 'can't do' an approach that is proactive and assertive is becoming well developed. (Case 11)

Humour also plays an important part in this set, though admitting weakness and confusion has also been praised, particularly in relation to decision-making and assessment. (Case 13)

Critical thinking is often associated in the data with opportunities for reflection:

I suddenly saw that this (AL) could be used as a tool for social workers to develop their reflective practice, I saw how what I had been struggling with could be effective in giving social workers a space for individual learning and reflection, with peer support and challenge, with the potential to improve their practice. (Case 7)

I have been given the mandate to use action learning with newly qualified social workers, so to use it to enhance their capacity to reflect on action in a space away from technical rationality... this felt liberating and two sessions have now been delivered bringing problems from their current work. (Case 7)

Both the facilitators' accounts of practice and the interviewees show evidence of addressing critical concepts such as conflict, power and emotionality. The accounts also demonstrate facilitators' developing skills in handling conflicts and working with the feelings expressed in the set meetings:

I experienced the frustration of a set member who, while presenting an issue she felt emotional about, became very frustrated with me during her

presentation... I felt her anger was more about her frustration regarding the issues than her being angry with me asking a question she had already thought about, although I was not to know this. That was a learning experience for me as it made me think about the feelings people may come with to a set...and the skills I need to work with the feelings. (Case 6)

Critical reflection involves the questioning of assumptions and beliefs on which understandings are based, especially in terms of issues involving, for example, gender, race, power or particular vested interests, and there have been some striking examples of informants using action learning to address some of these issues. For example, in relation to the question of examining and exploring the impact of particular stakeholder interests in relation to dealing with an especially complex and long-standing problem, one of the informants remarked on how the set had enabled her to make progress in the interests of her client:

I felt liberated by the progress I had made. This case had gone on for 18 months for me and a few years for others. I felt brave and for the first time in years I felt like I was a social worker not just someone who sweeps up the mess and hides it under the carpet – a job nobody else wants to do. (Case F)

Evidence of informants surfacing questions of emotions, power and politics arise from a number of the facilitators' accounts and some of these are noteworthy for showing how the facilitators use their skills both to challenge and support participants in dealing with these critical issues:

One participant in particular was very vocal and seemed to exert an air of dominance in the set, talking over others and in her interactions with the nurse practitioner somewhat dismissive... I directly challenged the individual... I reminded her of the need to remember that all issues brought to the set were relevant... Looking back, the avoidant side of me wanted the set to manage these conditions themselves... they had a responsibility to challenge behaviours. (Case 14)

The third time we met another member was tearful and threatening to resign from her job, so I encouraged other set members to support

her, and she was brave enough to present her problem to the group. They helped by asking useful, critical but supportive questions about how she could manage her situation. (Case 15)

The social and organisational contexts in which sets are operating, are often apparent:

The pilot was supported by senior managers but some line managers struggled to see the benefits and remained ambivalent which impacted negatively upon the NQSW experience. NQSWs told me frequently that they liked the sets but loathed the portfolio. (Case 12)

In these situations the facilitators and set members are often dealing with the perceived 'micro-politics' of the organisation, for example in getting action learning off the ground and managing the process:

Even as we spoke it became evident that she and I were being asked to skin more than one rabbit; it transpired that there was an expectation that teaching on supervision standards would be incorporated into these action learning sets! My heart sank when X said "Oh good! Well, that ticks a few boxes". (Case 8)

This liberated me from feeling responsible if change initiatives, for which I produced a training programme, failed. I always disliked being seen as an 'expert' and in action learning there is no place for one. (Case 10)

In these examples, critical thinking and reflection seem obviously linked to personal learning and considerations of identity. This suggests that achieving a level of critical thinking and reflection rests on previous learning and identity development.

4.4 Evidence of wicked problems addressed

Cases A to F contain most of the available data on the addressing of wicked issues in the workplace, because cases 1 to 15, being written as facilitators' accounts of practice, are more focused on how processes were facilitated in those action learning sets, and are in that way once removed from the 'coal face' of the social work problems and organisational contradictions. However, the facilitators' accounts often show the interplay of critical thinking and critical

reflection with the wicked issues, as is noted later.

An example of the testing and complex nature of the issues faced by often young and inexperienced social workers is this case of a man whose care is being debated between various parties:

It was my first case that involved so many different agencies. The service user had housing problems, drug abuse issues, committed minor crime, and family problems. He was in hospital following a number of serious epileptic fits. So there were, apart from us, the housing department from the same local authority, police, probation services, a drug and alcohol abuse service, acute hospital services and the community mental health service. I was struggling to get all the services to support my client in the way I felt was suitable for him. This set had social workers from health as well as social care and one who had started working life as a probation officer. They suggested that I put all the agencies on a map that represented where they all were in the case with the service user in the middle... Then the set started to explore how that would feel from the service user. Feelings of suffocation, not being able to see the future clearly because views from where he was were blocked, not having any independence to make decisions... One person suggested he might want to fight his way out. I started to appreciate his position and the confusion he must feel, how controlling these agencies must seem. It may not be seen as support at all, and yet we all wanted to do just that ... What would happen if we re-thought the map? I explored whether we should have the agencies in view but not surrounding him. That way he could see the future but had all the agencies there backing him up to do what he wanted to do and catching him if he fell, herded him gently if things started to go wrong. That felt better to me and was what I felt as a social worker I wanted to do. So I started to explore with the set how I could achieve my new vision. It was liberating to be able to talk about the different agencies' roles without the usual snide remarks from my work team and supervisor about the other agencies. I realised we as a team always jump to blame another department or agency if a case didn't work. In this set I was encouraged to think of everyone

in an appreciative way. I realised just how much energy we waste in fighting each other (agencies) instead of working together. (Case B)

There are other examples of these wicked issues in cases A to F. These are the daily stuff of social work and place great demands on even highly experienced social workers. (See appendix 3 for further examples from cases A and F concerning a young mother and a homeless man.)

However, it is in the facilitators' accounts that we can see the interplay of critical thinking and critical reflection with the wicked issues, especially where the respondents have been encouraged to reflect on their practice through the lens of critical ideas. In this extract, the contradictions of the espoused and the actual organizational behaviour – between what senior managers say and what line managers do – are exposed as a no-win situation for the social worker:

In my facilitator's reflective log I had written: "I am so exasperated with social work teams, with NQSWs telling me in a variety of ways that there was not time for reflection on their practice, or to consider values, ethics, etc., as they had to complete too much paperwork... A manager who spoke to me privately criticised the current paperwork, which lends itself to process-driven social work but demands little consideration for reflection. She felt unable to take this any further, so I was excited when, in a training reference group, the chief executive's response to Human Resources criticising the lack of complete paperwork from social workers was 'There is so much more to a review than completing paperwork'. This made me wonder about the gaps between expectations of the most senior manager and the reality of practice by social workers, given the views of their first line managers. I wondered about the effect of this on the NQSW's ability to use critical reflection, and the impact on their confidence and ability to become a resilient worker. I wondered about my irritation at the situation where I felt the NQSW was placed in a no win situation and the organisation did not wish to take any responsibility." (Case 2)

In another case, the contradictions run even deeper and have a clearly disabling effect:

An interesting challenge arose for the whole set which caused me anxiety, as it has been an on-going issue for me. This was the limits placed on the individual social worker by the employer. How far would they be allowed to develop and use their learning within their practice? Managers stated that they want NQSWs to develop in confidence, to be able to challenge their colleagues, especially those in other disciplines, to be able to stand their ground in explaining their reasoning with disgruntled customers, and to become more self-reliant, therefore not requiring as much management input with straight forward decisions. Yet when the NQSW develops these qualities and uses them after reflection within their own workplace, managers have felt the worker has become too radical and challenging.

I believed this subtext was often present in the action learning set but rarely exposed. In set 5, when a set member was discussing the challenge arising from working as a social worker within a hospital, having to challenge the medical profession about a decision made about a service user, I began to feel the debate was going around in circles. The set felt it was powerless and stuck against the power of the medical world. Further reflection on this, whilst sitting in the set, made me ask how powerless the worker was within their own team. Interestingly the set were more reluctant to consider this preferring to concentrate on a sense of powerlessness within the larger picture.

Using critical reflection I needed to help them to question the status quo that existed in the team regarding this. This was difficult for them to do, as it meant questioning and challenging their own profession, which they were in the throes of understanding and being part of. (Case 1)

In these two cases, the social workers concerned are in 'no win' situations for which the 'organisation' takes no responsibility. This results in a lack of reflection or acknowledgement, little consideration of values and ethics, a subsequent loss of confidence on the part of the social worker and an inability to develop resilience.

It is notable here how, in the public reflective space of the action learning set, the consideration and addressing of these issues is made more possible; although it does

require an insightful and skilful facilitator. As is particularly well illustrated in the second extract, an awareness of critical concepts, plus the skills of critical reflection, legitimises thoughts and questions which enable the use of feelings and emotions as data, which in turn prompts learning about the wicked and intractable issues faced in social work.

This lends support for the argument that facilitators and social workers equipped with some knowledge of critical concepts and with the skills and habits of critical reflection are able, and therefore more likely, to consider and address the wicked problems.

4.5 CRAL as a wider way of working

There was some evidence of how action learning was being taken back into the organisation and influencing the way that organisations and teams work. In case B the social worker recognised an issue in the way her team works with other agencies:

I realised we as a team always jump to blame another department or agency if a case didn't work. In this set I was encouraged to think of everyone in an appreciative way. I realised just how much energy we waste in fighting each other (agencies) instead of working together. (Case B)

She then describes how she tried to challenge these ways of thinking. In case C the respondent now uses critical action learning as part of team meetings:

As a team we have incorporated action learning as part of our team meetings. Each week one person is invited to share a case that is puzzling them and we all help them to critically reflect on the case. Over the year we have learned to trust each other, our manager joins in as a peer with her own cases. (Case C)

Another example shows how learning from an action learning set has cascaded into a new way of thinking for a department and the support of NQSWs:

So armed with this new insight I went back to work and got the managers to go through the same process. (Case D)

In another case, three members of the same set, with the same issue but from different perspectives, were able to unite through the set to influence a major change in the organisation.

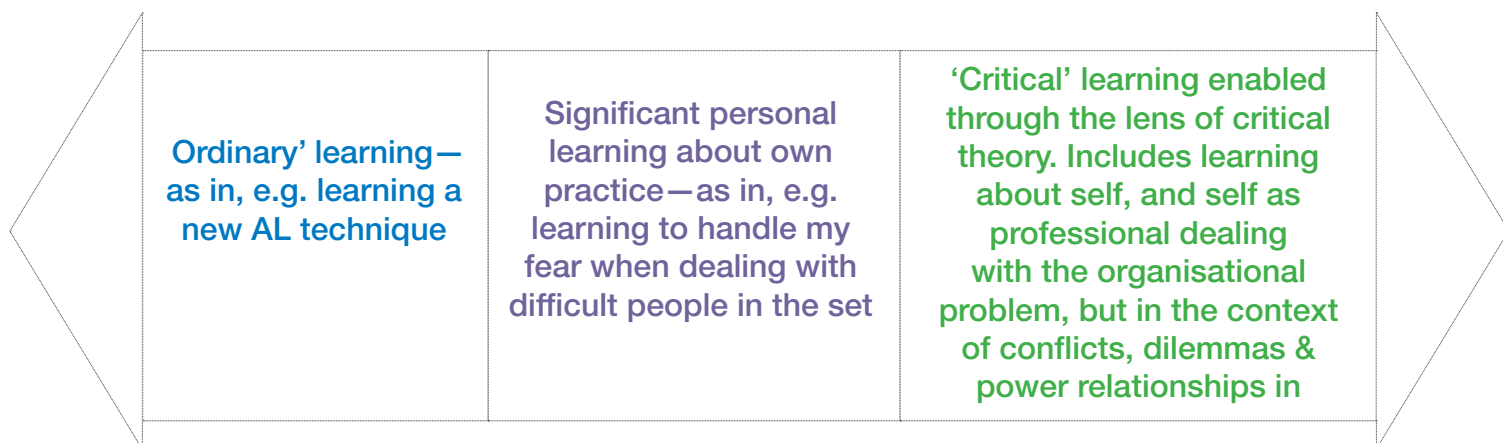
4.6 An hypothesis about action learning (AL) and critically reflective action learning (CRAL)

On the basis of these findings we hypothesise that AL (including reflective practice in the ‘personal/technical’ sense— see Methodology at section 3 above) is more likely to result in ‘ordinary’ learning of skills and about self, whilst CRAL (including critically reflective practice) is more likely to result in ‘critical’ learning about personal and professional beliefs, values, priorities and ways of seeing the world, in the contexts of the problems, dilemmas, conflicts and power relationships in institutions, communities and society.

Furthermore, it is suggested that it is this critical learning which is most likely to help social workers address the ethical dilemmas and wicked problems that they encounter in their work.

The data reviewed above suggests that ‘ordinary’ learning and ‘critical’ learning are not distinct or mutually exclusive categories. Indeed, it suggests that they are interwoven, but also that critical learning may rest upon earlier or concurrent experiences of ordinary learning. We suggest that this idea may be expressed as a continuum as in Figure 4:

Figure 4 - A spectrum of ‘ordinary’ learning & ‘critical’ learning



5. Conclusions and recommendations

The aim of the study has been to test whether a critically reflective practice of action learning can lead to improved outcomes in complex and wicked social work situations, specifically:

1. Does a critically reflective action learning (CRAL) help social workers to resolve their complex or 'wicked' problems better?
2. Does CRAL promote the development of a more robust professional identity in social workers?

These are ambitious questions for a small research study and our conclusions must be appropriately cautious. The findings provide evidence to support both hypotheses, but also indicate that more work needs to be done before any definitive comments can be made.

It is easier to answer yes to the second question. There is a great deal of evidence of learning in the data, much of it concerned with learning skills and learning about self. There is less evidence of critical learning about the wicked problems of social work and society, which may partly reflect the type of data collected (see Further Research below). What is supported unequivocally in the data is the value of what we have called "ordinary" action learning, which includes the encouragement and promotion of a robust professional identity.

The data as collected reveals a view of the social work practitioner as more centred on self and personal practice than on the 'wicked issues' of social work and society. This perhaps reflects the daunting nature of some of these issues and the demands they place on social workers. The findings could indicate an "inner" concern with self and personal practice as a "defence against anxiety", as classically identified by Menzies Lyth in nursing staff in hospitals (1960).

The conditions of social work are analogous to those in the health service, where "Hospitals are institutions cradled in anxiety" and where everyone – from patients to junior staff to senior clinicians and managers – is anxious and subject to crises (Revans 1982: 263).

It seems clear that social workers feel themselves to be in need of help and support:

*What is... abundantly clear is that there is a desire amongst social workers, service users, directors and managers for the profession to be liberated from the care management strait-jacket so as to be able to be creative and focused on problem-solving in its approach to supporting users and carers.
(College of Social Work 2013)*

In situations of risk, confusion and anxiety, where there are no simple or right answers, Revans' proposal is that the best help is to be found in the peer support and challenge of the action learning set. In this study, we conclude that various action learning processes can support social workers in their efforts on behalf of clients in the midst of complex pressures and processes (figure 5).

Figure 5 - A systems diagram of action learning and its outputs.

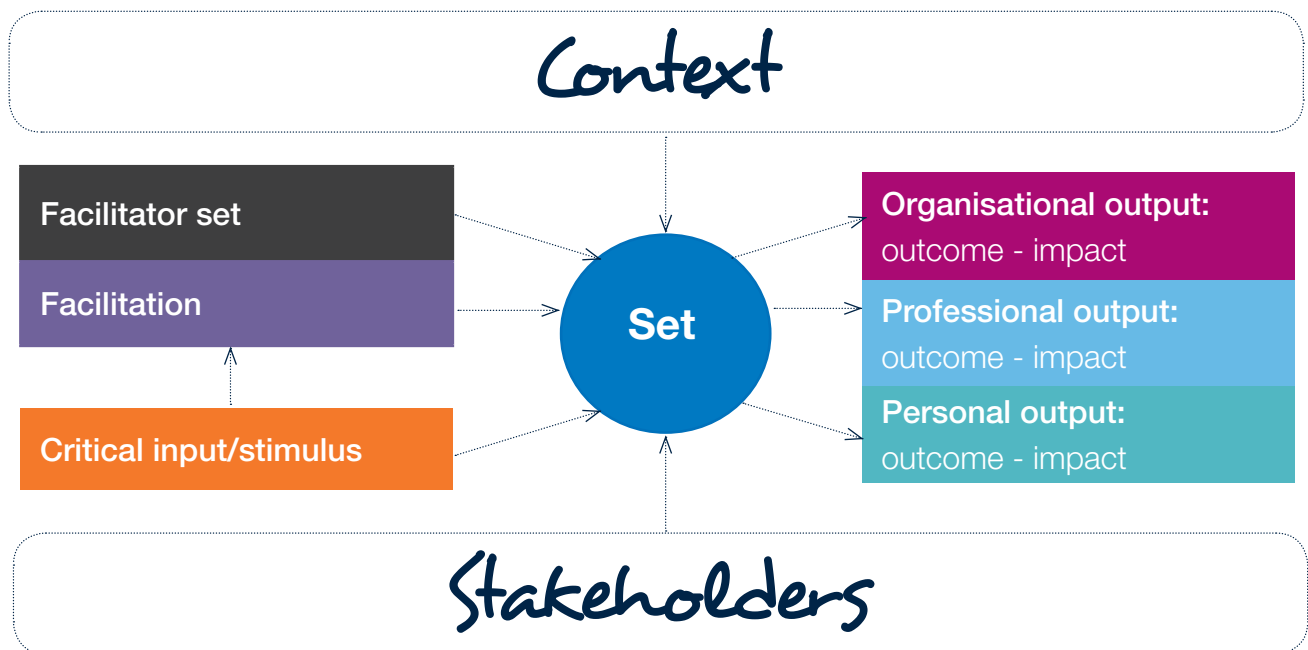


Figure 5 is a simple depiction of the inputs, outputs and conditions under which social work is delivered. The three outputs of personal, professional and organisational performance are seen as being influenced by various action learning processes, including support for critical thinking and reflection

All social workers are expected to acquire skills in critical reflection; “Critical Reflection and Analysis” is a central feature of [The College of Social Work’s Professional Capability Framework \(PCF\)](#). Action learning may have particular strengths in promoting reflection on and in action (Schön 1983); and CAL or CRAL as we have called it here, may be particularly apposite to this aspiration.

Achieving a level of critical thinking and reflection looks likely to rest on previous learning and identity development. In these findings, critical thinking and critical reflection seem obviously linked to ‘ordinary’ personal learning and considerations of identity.

Does it follow then that a more critical action learning (CAL/CRAL) adds further to this development? The answer on this evidence is a cautious yes; CRAL, and the application of critical concepts and critical reflection, does appear to help some social workers to refresh and confirm the ideas and ideals that brought them into the work, and thereby strengthen them in their daily struggles to meet their client needs under managerial pressures and amidst complex organising processes.

Recommendations

These findings provide support for the argument that a critically reflective practice of action learning (CRAL) can lead to improved decision-making, increased confidence and a willingness to act in difficult social work situations. Social workers equipped with knowledge of critical concepts and with the habits of critical reflection are more able, and perhaps more likely, to address the wicked issues. This leads us to two recommendations:

1. Although necessarily tentative, these conclusions indicate the benefits that could accrue to employers who use CRAL as part of their support and supervision strategies for their staff.

In our group interviews with action learning set participants (appendix 4), a lack of time and the pressures of workload or caseload management emerged as the biggest barriers to critically reflective practice among social workers and managers. The learning and development specialists in these discussions also stressed as major barriers the lack of understanding of what is meant by critical reflection, and the lack of tools for undertaking it. (As an example of such a tool, see appendix 5 for an adaptation of a tool to assess teachers' level of reflective practice).

2. Employers and social work organisations should see AL/CRAL as applicable to all members of their staffs, including the most senior.

In the discussions with social workers and managers during this research, it is clear that in some organisations there is a perception that action learning is suited only to NQSWs and novices, and that it is not appropriate for more senior and strategic staff. By contrast, the case study data shows action learning supporting social workers at all levels, including those with supervisory and managerial roles.

6. Further research

We have learned a great deal from this exploratory study which will guide further research.

A principal learning is that future research should focus on social work practice with clients. At the outset of this research we saw the facilitators' accounts (cases 1–15) as the main source of data and the cases based on Set members' experiences (cases A–F) in a supporting role. The facilitators' accounts (cases 1–15) are a very rich source of data but their focus is naturally on their own practice as facilitators of action learning (including CRAL) and less upon the complex or 'wicked' problems encountered in social work practice. So, while this data tells us much about the difficult issues of facilitation, for the most part there are only intimations of the 'coal face' situations implied in the research question.

There are exceptions to this, for example case 1 (appendix 2) where the focus is both on a complex organisational problem and the facilitation issues involved. However, case 13 in appendix 2 is more typical of these accounts, where the focus is mainly on the facilitation process with the organisational issues in the background. It now seems obvious that to get closer to these issues, we need more data based on set members' experiences, as for example in cases A and F (appendix 3). Consequently, we propose to make much more use of participant accounts in further research.

A short list of questions for further research:

Three questions emerge as priorities for further research from the much longer list that we developed during the course of this research (see appendix 6):

1. How does CRAL help social workers to deal with the wicked problems – organisational, ethical and professional – that impact on people being supported?
And, what tools can be developed to support the practice of CRAL?
2. How does CRAL help social workers to develop their professional identity and increase their confidence in working with complex and wicked problems?
3. How can facilitators be helped to stimulate and support the critically reflective practice of action learning (CRAL)?

Along with the research findings in the previous section, we believe that these three questions, are applicable to the profession as a whole. In view of the apparently widespread use of action learning across the UK social care sector, consideration could be given to joint research proposals with other concerned institutions and organisations.

Secondly, in the midst of what was often difficult-to-interpret data, we became aware that agreeing interpretations among the research team took a good deal of effort. Whilst we individually coded and analysed the cases, we did not have enough time to explore the differences between us and often had to move on before full understanding had been reached. Further work is required to develop a proforma, covering both content and process, for more rigorous analysis.

Thirdly, we worried about the workings of the 'double hermeneutic' (See Methodology at section 3), or the dangers of finding in the data just what we want to see there. So, for example, we sampled the accounts of people who had been exposed to CAL/CRAL ideas and then found evidence of these critical concepts in their accounts. While the fact that critical concepts are used in these accounts shows that they had some impact, and while the facilitators could obviously use them in reflecting critically on their practice, this is relatively weak evidence, and stronger data from fieldwork practice would clearly be preferable.

From our various discussions and interrogations of the data we have developed a long and a short list of questions for further research. While the long list illustrates the development of our thinking (see appendix 6), we include only the short list here.

A methodological note

In any further research, there are four methodological considerations that we will bear in mind:

1. Integrate the research questions above (together with the more detailed long list) with the model in figure 4.
2. Collect and use more data from set participants as social workers engaged with workplace issues.
3. Codify the analytical process in terms of both process and content headings.
4. Consider using an action research approach.

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Appendix 1: The essential elements of critically reflective practice (CRP)

With excerpts from the College Of Social Work's Professional Capability Framework (PCF)

The PCF specifies a set of expected qualities or competences for social workers under the headings of Critical Reflection & Analysis, Professionalism and Values. Six grades of social worker are listed, ranging from Student to Strategic Social Worker and for the purposes of this research we can take this to be a spectrum of development from inexperienced to experienced. More is expected as you move along this spectrum, but arguably, the essential elements remain the same. For example, in this formulation, critically reflective practice (CRP), which includes action to raise practice concerns within and beyond the organisation concerned, is seen as building on earlier foundations.

The excerpts below attempt to capture the essential elements underlying TCSW's conception of the professional social worker, organised under four rather than three headings:

- Personal values
- Learning of self and others
- Making ethical decisions & managing ethical dilemmas
- Critical thinking, reflection & action.

NB. The statements listed are verbatim excerpts from the PCF except for a few assemblages where editing has been used to reduce repetition.

Personal values

- Recognise and manage the impact of own values on professional practice.
- Critically reflect on and manage the influence and impact of own and others' values on professional practice.
- Model and promote a culture which encourages reflection on the influence and impact of own values on professional practice.

Learning of self and others

- Recognise and act on own learning needs in response to practice experience.
- Support and empower others to develop the confidence and skills to provide professional opinion.

- Contribute to a learning environment for self, team and, colleagues. ...Foster and support an environment that promotes learning and practice development within the workplace. Identify and collaborate to resolve concerns about practice, following procedures as appropriate.

Making ethical decisions & managing ethical dilemmas

- Engage in ethical decision-making, including through partnership with people who use their services.
- Understand and apply the profession's ethical principles and legislation, taking account of these in reaching decisions.
- Model and promote confident and critical application of professional ethics to decision-making, using a legal and human rights framework, and support others to do so.
- Manage potentially conflicting or competing values and ethical dilemmas to arrive at principled decisions.
- Demonstrate confident management and arbitration of ethical dilemmas, providing guidance and opportunities for professional development, using supervision and team discussion, questioning and challenging others, including those from other professions.

Critical thinking, reflection & action

- Apply the principles of critical thinking, reasoned discernment [and] critical reflection and analysis to increasingly complex cases.
- Use reflective practice techniques to evaluate and critically analyse information, gained from a variety of sources, to construct and test hypotheses and make explicit evidence-informed decisions.
- Provide critical reflection, challenge and evidence-informed decision-making in complex situations.
- Identify concerns about practice and procedures and how they can be questioned.
- Raise and address issues of poor practice, internally through the organisation, and then independently if required.

Appendix 2: Examples of two action learning facilitators' cases

Case 1

An interesting challenge arose for the whole set which caused me anxiety, as it has been an on-going issue for me. This was the limits placed on the individual social worker by the employer. How far would they be allowed to develop and use their learning within their practice?

Managers stated that they want NQSWs to develop in confidence, to be able to challenge their colleagues, especially those in other disciplines, to be able to stand their ground in explaining their reasoning with disgruntled customers, and to become more self-reliant, therefore not requiring as much management input with straightforward decisions. Yet when the NQSW develops these qualities and uses them after reflection within their own workplace, managers have felt the worker has become too radical and challenging.

I believed this subtext was often present in the action learning set but rarely exposed. In set 5, when a set member was discussing the challenge arising from working as a social worker within a hospital, having to challenge the medical profession about a decision made about a service user, I began to feel the debate was going around in circles. The set felt it was powerless and stuck against the power of the medical world. Further reflection on this, whilst sitting in the set, made me ask how powerless the worker was within their own team. Interestingly the set were more reluctant to consider this, preferring to concentrate on a sense of powerlessness within the larger picture. Using critical reflection I needed to help them to question the status quo that existed in the team regarding this. This was difficult for them to do, as it meant questioning and challenging their own profession, of which they were in the throes of understanding and being part. Reynolds (1999), who also refers to "re-entry" issues of returning back to the workplace with new awareness and expectations, recognises that this can be a very uncomfortable and painful place to be. This is also at a time when the NQSW is trying to find their own place within the team, as described by Lave, Wenger (1990). The NQSW needs to become involved in their "community of practice"

as described in situated learning theory in order to become integrated and develop as a social worker. Yet at the same time they need to question and reflect on what they are learning. Is this too big an expectation? No I do not think it is, but I think it is an area that should be a theme throughout the NQSW year.

Case 13

After much discussion and reflection in supervision, I launched a second pilot for NQSWs in Adult Services in August 2011. This pilot was based on the Skills for Care national pilot and I now felt better prepared and equipped to implement this on my own. The planning that went in to this pilot was more thorough as I had more control over the design and content as well as recruitment and mentoring of set members. For instance, I only had two NQSWs in my organisation; although they were highly motivated, I knew that to improve the experience I needed to increase their number, so I offered places on the pilot to a neighbouring authority.

A project plan was agreed and timescales set involving regular reviews and opportunities for feedback. It became evident to me that my own knowledge and facilitation skills have improved and with practice and additional training on the Institute of Leadership and Management programme, began to focus on the process, as well as reviewing with set members at the end of each set their views on process, and clarified what actions were agreed to be worked upon between sets. By offering models and methods for reflection on their own active problems, set members have begun to appreciate the time together. (See example in appendix 3)

Improved support networks with new and experienced facilitators from the Pan-London Best Practice Forum have increased my confidence and made me feel less isolated in this work. As my knowledge grows so too does my critical thinking about the work in statutory services. Vince addresses the tension that exists between the radical potential of action learning to make change happen and the political purpose behind using it (Vince 2008, p.4-5), refers to "the reinforcing compliance to organisational norms and expectations", and warns that

“the problems of the individuals may well be a representation of broader power relations in the social context in which they work”. As a result of this reading, I have become less reluctant to avoid confrontation and conflict myself and have challenged the set where appropriate to question the impact of politics, and organisational control over their practice. I also encourage them to reflect on the process within the set to gain a deeper understanding of their issues and presenting problems.

Since launching the second learning set and attending subsequent AL workshops with peers, I am aware that I have approached the set with greater confidence and have reflected upon what this might mean to me and about the relationships within the set. I also noticed that there is a core set of members who now send me examples of their ‘problems’ in advance of the group in order to negotiate time in subsequent meetings. Initial problems associated with time-keeping, attendance and behaviour within the group that was dominated by gender differences has changed also to include the views and experiences of NQSWs from diverse backgrounds, ages and disciplines and a general adherence to ground rules.

I also notice that I no longer need to assume a teaching role, preferring instead to facilitate ownership and deeper levels of learning by set members. My attempts to use different methods and models to assist them in this seems to me to be awkward and clumsy at times but set members tell me when I ask, that this is helpful and one likened my questioning style to Oprah. Humour plays an important part in this set, though admitting weakness and confusion has also been praised, particularly in relation to decision-making and assessment. Following a recent review of the programme with senior managers I shifted my preoccupation from completion of the portfolio to a focus on the action part of the learning within the set. As a result, the set seems to value the time together exploring the darker side of their authoritarian roles.

Appendix 3: Examples of two action learning participants' cases

Case A

I was working with a young woman of 15 who has just given birth to twin boys. Her boyfriend was in prison and they remained in close contact. We had placed her in foster care with the children. In four weeks' time she will be 16 and the father of the children will be released from prison in eight weeks. They are keen to raise the children together and want their own home. The foster carers have raised concerns about her ability to care for the children saying she seems to be reluctant to do basic things like change nappies and feeding. She stays in bed late in the morning. She does bond with the children, however.

I came to the set to explore my next steps with the babies and women. The set asked many questions about safeguarding and the care of the children which were all good technical questions and they also asked me questions about the support I was getting from my managers and the team.

Then one person in the set who wasn't a social worker noticed I had not called the woman a mother and her partner a father in the case I recounted. I was surprised at this comment and then she asked me what behaviours any woman might exhibit who had just had twins and what the differences in this case were. At first everyone was very defensive but after a while where the questioner persisted the room recognised that many of the what we saw as symptoms of neglect were just tiredness of the trauma of birth and the presence of an older very experienced mother. In fact the atmosphere lightened noticeably when some recounted their own experiences of birth and interfering mothers and mothers-in-law. What came out of the questioning was a realisation that neither she nor the father had any history of abuse or violence, there was no real risk to the children, but they would need support as neither parent had their own parents around to do the family support role. I started to question the power both real and perceived that I had over a woman who is only eight years older than me and how I could use that power to support her and the family, or to divide them.

I am proud to be a social worker but this really brought home to me that identity and the responsibility that goes with it. These aren't case studies at the university these are real life people who rely on me and the services we provide are to support them, not institutionally abuse them.

Case F

I was part of a social workers' action learning set with people from a number of local authorities within a 20 mile radius. So although we didn't work together we knew each others' patches well. In fact about half of the people in the set had worked for more than one of the organisations represented.

The case I brought to the set was, I thought, more of a puzzle, to be honest. I had been working for some time with a man who was homeless. He was repeatedly given temporary accommodation in hostels and hotels but after a day or two was evicted for causing damage to the property. He wanted a flat in [a particular area of the city] and every time he was offered accommodation on a permanent basis he found something wrong with it. He had some special needs physically and wanted accommodation where he could take his dog. In between time in hotels and hostels he lived on the streets, more specifically in the city main square. I was under huge pressure to get this sorted out.

What happened then was unexpected. I had the undivided attention of the group, I don't think I have ever experienced the support of peers to that extent before and with their encouragement I found myself able to explore my feelings about this man and the situation. I was asked about why I felt under such pressure from the organisation to sort the issue as it didn't seem to be unusual. One member of the set who had worked for the authority before asked me about the prominence of where this man lived on the street. It was suggested that I look at the correlation between the times I was put under pressure and the media attention in the city square. To be honest I thought that was a bit cynical but agreed to look. By the next set meeting I had the data—not perfect, it would have never passed research scrutiny! It seemed to show that whenever there was an elected members' event or other public show where the

media were out, I got the call from my managers to sort my client out.

The set asked how I would feel about that and whether I could check the situation with my manager. I felt angry; ...actually the thought that I might be being manipulated for the sake of the media, let alone what it was doing to my client, made my blood boil. One set member asked me whether my client was as unaware of the situation...; it didn't help that I could be manipulated by both ends! We then explored how I could check out the information I now had with my manager in a non-career limiting way. So I did. At first he was quite defensive but eventually said he was under pressure as the organisation didn't want the city to be seen in a less favourable light. I actually found myself on my client's side. How could the members want this issue of homelessness to be swept under the carpet, it is real and not confined to just this one man. It got me thinking that the only political power this man had was to get up the noses of the members by being in the city square making it look untidy.

This was a vicious circle, he didn't want to commit to housing he didn't want so he kept himself on the streets, he wanted his case to be visible and a few nights in a hostel or hotel was great. He was wielding the only power he had and doing it very successfully!

A flat did come up shortly afterwards that was suitable with a couple of adaptations and in the area he wanted. I made it clear to him this was his last chance – he wasn't happy entirely and clearly didn't trust we would get the adaptations done. This time I asked him to trust me – I would get the work done before he was asked to move in and that I would keep in touch with him afterwards. I also told him that I would not 'rescue' him from the streets if he chose to live there but there was temporary hostel accommodation in the meantime. I told my manager I would not be influenced by the sensitivities of the elected members and publicity, that my client was the priority.

I felt liberated by the progress I had made. This case had gone on for 18 months for me and a few years for others. I felt brave and for the first time in years I felt like I was a social worker, not just someone who sweeps up the mess and hides it under the carpet; a job nobody else wants to do.

Appendix 4: Factors affecting the development of the social worker as a critically reflective practitioner

Data from six group interviews with action learning set participants, February & March 2013.

All respondents are social workers, who self-nominated themselves into the categories in the top row of the table. The three columns under each category show the three main factors, in rank order, given as inhibiting critically reflective practice.

Group	Social workers			Managers			Learning and development		
1	Time	Training	Knowing what it means	Org culture	Measured outcomes	Caseload	Time	Professional development	Professionalism
2	Time	Clarity	Appropriate support available	Time	Workload	Understanding of what it means	Tools	Culture of organisation	Culture of profession
3	Time	The quality of supervision	Understanding the gap between university and practice	Meeting targets	Workload	Time	Empathy	Workplace culture	Stuck in knowledge
4	The quality of supervision	Time	Support and recognition	Workload	Targets	Time	Analytical skills	Self awareness	PCF
5	Target driven	Time	Reward	Measured outcomes	Skills	Case load management	Skills of challenge	Understanding /clarity	Tools
6	Time	Appropriate support available	Space on forms for recording	Skills of staff and managers	Time	Reliance on past what works	Clarity of what's required	Culture of teaching	Not rewarded

Appendix 5: A four-level model of reflection

(After Larrivee B (2008) "Development of a tool to assess teachers' level of reflective practice", *Reflective Practice: International and Multidisciplinary Perspectives*, 9:3, 342-344)

Level 1, Pre-reflection

At this level the social worker interprets social work situations without thoughtful connections to other events or circumstances. The social worker's orientation is reactive, believing that situational contingencies are beyond the social worker's control. Beliefs and positions about social work practices are generalised and not supported with evidence from experience, theory or research. The social worker's perspective is undifferentiated and general regarding the needs of people being supported.

Level 2, Surface reflection

At this level, the social worker's examination of social work practice is confined to tactical issues concerning how best to best achieve predefined objectives and standards. Beliefs and positions about social work practice are supported with evidence from experience, not theory or research. The social worker's view of people being supported acknowledges the need to accommodate their differences.

Level 3, Social work reflection

At this level, the social worker is constantly thinking about how social work practices are affecting the experiences of and outcomes for people being supported. The social worker's goal is continually improving practices and outcomes for people and their communities.

Stated social work values guide reflection. Beliefs and positions about practice are specific and supported by evidence from experience, as well as being grounded in theory and research. The social worker's view of social work practice is multi-dimensional, connecting events within a broader framework.

Level 4, Critical reflection

At this level, the social worker is engaged in on-going reflection and critical enquiry concerning social work practice in actions as well as thinking processes. The social worker holds up social work philosophical ideologies and practices for continuous examination and verification. The social worker consciously considers how personal beliefs and values, assumptions, family imprinting and cultural conditioning may impact on people being supported. The critically reflective social worker is concerned with promoting democratic ideals and weighs the ethical and social implications of their practices.

Appendix 6: A four-level model of reflection

1. CRAL & AL – a step-change or a continuum?

Is this a black and white issue of instrumentality vs. value judgements about what is a good thing in context, or a continuum on a 'how-why' ladder? Thought could be given to the methodology and method for this, perhaps a content analysis of similar data, plus asking informants directly.

2. Are double-loop learning and critical learning the same or different?

Similar to (1) above. Is there one dimension here or several? Methodology as for (1), plus more on review of existing theory and research, which we are well positioned to do.

3. As related to organisational problems? Or professional problems? Or personal problems?

We could look at an input–output–outcome–impact analysis in these three directions, and the overlap between them. Content analysis as above, plus multiple sources of data.

4. Is CRAL better for ethical dilemmas and wicked problems, including the impact of critically informed actions in these areas?

Not that the two may not be the same, some very complicated instrumental challenges may be wicked, and some ethical dilemmas in some contexts may not be wicked (though possibly they would not then be dilemmas?). Methodology as above, and critical incidents could be useful here.

5. Does it help increase social worker confidence, e.g. in working across boundaries and crossing boundaries of multi-disciplinary problems, etc.?

Probably a sub-set of (3) above and could be incorporated?

6. What is the place of very personal and identity-related learning in all this?

For facilitators or participants or both? Could incorporate into (3) at the beginning of the chain, or have a separate identity related cluster?

7. What is the place of professional issues and challenges in all this? (Place of ethical issues and dilemmas)

Incorporate as above?

8. Impact on practice? Do these ideas translate into critically reflective practice (CRP)?

Incorporate as above?

9. Facilitator role: do they do anything differently to stimulate CRP?

A good question. Address using content analysis based on relevant data from participants and facilitators. Lends itself to some kind of action research?

10. Impact on people being supported: who are they and what are the implications?

Another good question. Integrate into (3, at the impact end of the spectrum? Obvious implication for data sources. Are there existing performance metrics that could be drawn on?

11. Evaluation challenges and issues, including who does it for whom?

Suggests a stakeholder analysis, and developing methodology, possibly a toolkit?

12. How can we get closer to organisational action in organisational contexts, so as to explore the impact of these?

Possibly using more data from participants and a different style of questioning of facilitators. Also investigate whether there are other sources of information, e.g. participants' work colleagues, including managers and even clients, and documents (reports on clients and cases?), if this is feasible.

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