**Bourdieu’s *habitus* and field: implications on the practice and theory of critical action learning**

This paper considers the logic of practice of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu in relation to critical action learning: in particular *habitus* which is co-created with field and the interplay among the two in the form of misrecognition and risk. We draw on interviews with participants who have experienced action learning as part of an NHS leadership programme. We argue that Bourdieu provides helpful ways of understanding and explaining the complex processes of social interactions which are centre stage in action learning – especially the ‘social friction’ through which action learners gain new insights and new prompts to action in their workplace from learning set members. These insights can support action learning practitioners keen to explore their own practice.

Keywords: critical action learning, Bourdieu, *habitus*, field, social friction

# Introduction

The objective of this paper is to explore the interconnections and opportunities between the practice of critical action learning and the theoretical contribution to practice by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu (b1930-d2002), whose work covered anthropology, sociology and philosophy, was a scholar of major significance in contemporary sociology. His interests included human action in all its incomplete, patchy and hesitant forms where people pressed for time compete for stakes that they are invested in. In other words, he was interested in the ‘real world’ where action, thought and engagement with others is a continual process that shapes perceptions, identity and power; themes often rendered invisible by ‘the obvious’. These are similarities we note with action learning in general and critical action learning more vividly.

Whereas Donovan (Donovan, 2014) explores the role of the action learning set facilitator, here we also draw our attention to the participants themselves, particularly how we might reflexively pay attention to the ‘destabilization’ of contradictory power relations (Vince, 2012) involving set members, us as facilitators and the organization. We are drawing on a leadership development programme of senior doctors leading to a post graduate certificate that was part of a wider organizational development strategy by their employer, an NHS trust in England.

Our paper provides a body of thought that has yet to be comprehensively explored in critical action learning literature that might help facilitators to pay attention to the shifting nature of relations as participants embark on a process of unsettlement. Drawing on Bourdieusian concepts we introduce the notion of social friction to explain and communicate the action learning processes in the minds and bodies of participants. This includes how we become aware of power relations that we are immersed in yet unavailable to notice and the heuristic processes of science, politics and intuition by which we begin to notice and learn.

**An orientation – power, politics and critical action learning**

Action learning is the development of people through activity, usually a task that is important to the participant in an organizational setting. It is this that provides a grounded context from which the participant can learn whilst doing; Reg Revans, who developed the practice of action learning, made the point that there can be no learning without action, and no action without learning (Revans, 1998). It is therefore an ongoing activity of exploration combining given or accepted knowledge with contextual learning. It is a process whereby the individual brings a problem to an action learning set comprising of five or six participants which is usually facilitated (Pedler, 1991) along with established ground rules that includes confidentiality. Although when described it might seem an innocuous process it can have powerful effects (Vince, 2001), both for the individual and the people that the participant works with. It can often be the first step along the path of being more reflexive and understanding of the political and social context in which they are embroiled (Marsick & O’Neil, 1999).

Since Revans developed the practice of action learning it has been taken up in a number of different ways (Kozubska & Mackenzie, 2012), for example with an emphasis on reflection, return on investment and personal and behavioural issues, with some bearing little resemblance to the original concept (Marsick & O’Neil, 1999).

To provide an orientation of our approach in this paper we draw on Gilbert Ryle (Ryle, 1949) an English philosopher of the 1950s of the ordinary language school. Ryle came up with the notion of category mistake whereby the *thing* of theory is mistaken for the *activity* of practice; a habit of rational people when they find themselves in unusual circumstances. The point being that one cannot learn by following rules, but learning is shaped and formed by practice too; theory has its agency in practice but this has to be done with humility. We therefore think in terms of movement of thought rather than static concepts to be applied. Action learning is not a set of rules and theory, it is a process of learning that comes to affect the individuals of the learning set, the organizations but also the facilitators as a reflexive practice - as we will illustrate. We are pointing to a reflexive process of forming and being formed (Cunliffe, 2009; Warwick & Board, 2013) by the patterns of power relations we are all part of, action learning facilitators included. It is for these reasons that we are drawn to the notion of critical action learning (CAL) that seeks to make explicit these relationships as an opportunity for learning (Coghlan, Rigg, & Trehan, 2012; Rigg & Trehan, 2004; Trehan, 2011; Vince, 2008). Although action learning has its ‘source’ with Reg Revans, the ‘tributary’ of more critical stance can be located in the work of Hugh Willmott (Anderson & Thorpe, 2004; Trehan, 2011; Vince, 2004, 2008) who expressed concern that conventional action learning is unlikely to develop a critical perspective that might serve to counter the unquestioning positivist traditions in management education ( Trehan & Pedler, 2009). It is here that Schön’s reflective practice (Schön, 1991) and Critical Social Theory (feminism, post-structuralism, Marxism etc) can serve as prompts to enable greater critical engagement. Some characteristics of CAL according to Vince (Vince, 2008) include how learning is affected by power relations and complex emotions of what it is to be a person in an organization, which may be conscious or unconscious to the individual; processes that are contradictory, confusing and ongoing. It is this relationship between participation and deliberation in a social context that has the opportunity to enable the development of people to work with the micro-politics of tasks and their organization ( Trehan & Pedler, 2009). All of this requires a more active form of facilitation to make these relations available for discussion ( Trehan, 2011). The question we are drawn to is how can we notice and discuss these dynamics in ways that enhance action learning practice and the participants’ learning?

Bourdieu’s ideas are increasingly applied in organizational analysis (Tomlinson, O’Reilly, & Wallace, 2013) to explore resources, power and control particularly in multi-layered organizations. These are processes that can be complex, paradoxical (Stacey, 2006, p241-242), hard to notice and once noticed hard to fathom. We foreground two Bourdieusian concepts which are part of his logic of practice, namely *habitus* and field. As we come to explain, it is in the interaction between *habitus* and field, enabled by processes of action learning, that forms a social friction that enables a noticing and learning to occur. We are drawing attention to an important pre-condition to learning – the realisation that there is something to be learned. Or, making the obvious obvious.

It was Bourdieu’s claim that social reality exists twice – in the field, namely the environment and people around us and *habitus*, the reality in our minds and bodies (Bourdieu; Wacquant, 1992, p127). In Outline of Theory of Practice, Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1977) explains that *habitus* is: ‘understood as a system of lasting transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a *matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and action*[[1]](#footnote-1) and makes possible the achievement of infinitively diversified tasks’ (p78). Therefore *Habitus* is a generative process of habit and repetition, but not one that implies an automatic reflex. Instead it is a condition of practice that short cuts the numerous options available to the novice to a narrower range of reasonable contextual possibilities. Later he stresses in The Logic of Practice (Bourdieu, 1990) that habitus is: ‘embodied history, internalised as second nature and so forgotten to history – it is an active presence of the whole of which it is the product’ (p56).

Therefore, as we increasingly become expert we lose the ability to notice the myriad of less plausible possibilities that were once available to us and to consciously work through if we are not to blunder. But as we come to explain, this expertise comes at a cost, that of not being able to move into situations and power relations without implications for ourselves and the patterns of relations we are part of.

*Habitus* is dependent upon externalities - the field, that Bourdieu defines as: ‘… a space of relations which is just as real as a geographical space, in which movements have to be paid for by labour, by effort and especially by time’ (Bourdieu, 1991, p100). Each player whose relations constitute the field of a particular practice has their own internalised expression of the shared *habitus*. This gives everyone in the field an individualised sense of their next step, sensible or not, that needs to be reacted to by others. The field is therefore a complex dynamic affected by power, reputation, tradition, gestures and so on. The processes of field and *habitus* are not time bound; for example, an issue regarding care provision and resources raised in a NHS board meeting does not end as the meeting closes, it continues in hospital corridor conversations, during a consultant’s engagement with other members of staff, during appointments with patients and families and in reviewing care plans and pathways. Therefore, in a well-established practice *habitus* and field make a *matching pair* in the minds and bodies of the participants.

In teams and organizations people do what seems natural to them, the range of possibilities is narrow only to be glimpsed when a new team member asks: ‘but why do we …?’ We now draw the notion of *habitus* and field to that of action learning. The crux is how the match between *habitus* and field in the bodies and minds of participants can be ‘teased apart’ so that what is second nature becomes less so and available for discussion and reflection.

To the extent that each member of an action learning set comes from a different practice-world, not just one outsider is present in the set, but several. The questions, steps, attitudes and elisions ingrained in each member’s *habitus* may lose their obviousness when followed up or challenged by other set members. If this happens, a space is opened between *habitus* and field which attracts possible new actions. In getting the individual to take action that goes beyond the unnoticed rules of the field it causes ripples through those relationships affecting power, how people see themselves and how they relate to each other. By ripples we mean implications for power relations and noticing beyond the set and affects other organizational members.

This comes with risk, with benefits and harms. Marsick and O’Neil describe the relationship between risk and process as:

… people should not enter into Action Learning lightly. In comparison to other action technologies, Action Learning might be looked upon as relatively mild and unprovocative, yet our experience is that people can experience it as powerful and even frightening. We conclude that it is often the first step for participants in a journey toward greater self-insight, greater capacity to learn from experience, and greater awareness of the political and cultural dimensions of organizational change (Marsick & O’Neil, 1999).

Affecting the dynamic between field and *habitus* risks what Bourdieu termed symbolic capital, a concept closely linked with *habitus*. It is the activity of doing things differently that creates the social noticing amongst the field; the complex dynamic of conversations, thoughts and actions. This risk is hard to estimate other than to recognise that expertise of the field is required, along with the problems it brings in terms of the ability to notice; in short, we are caught in a trap. It is here that Bourdieu introduces the notion of misrecognition, that perception is always bound with and to misperception; of actions taken up in ways not intended, imagined or considered. In the confines of confidentiality and the supportive but challenging conditions of the learning set these consequences are more controllable, but less so when actions are taken into the wider organization.

In a study of leadership development in the UK public sector, Tomlinson and others (Tomlinson et al., 2013) use selected Bourdieusian concepts to explore how centrally initiated development programmes serve to perpetuate political elite domination through symbolic violence, this being achieved through processes of tacit misrecognition between policy elites and those in frontline leadership roles by persuading the latter that their agendas are the same. In consenting to this, frontline leaders perceive it enhances their own standing in the organization. Principally this is: ‘through the acquisition of additional forms of capital and also facilitating their embodied dispositions as leaders’(p82). And in doing so serve to: ‘collude in affirming and legitimating the reproductive power of those who dominate them’(p82). We see people who are caught up in the process of the game that they are invested in and as a result reinforce dominant power relations.

Here we are drawing attention to misrecognition, risk and the realisation of power relationships and how it acts as a social friction that occurs at a local level between leaders who are expert in their own area (their *habitus*) and other fields within their organization. For example:

* The clinical leader who is an expert in their own speciality and has direct management control over their own small team whose interactions between each other have become second nature. Here the power relations may be established, unchallenged and unnoticed, and;
* The wider teams and groups that the clinical leader needs to interact with in order to influence and persuade so as to bring about service improvement. However, here their ways of working are not second nature, they may be baffling or confusing. In stumbling into new figurations of power they become available for discussion both with the clinical leader and those teams.

In summary, the destabilisation of the matching pair of *habitus* and field in the minds and bodies of individuals creates an ability to notice and discuss the figurations of power one is part of. We term this social friction. And in doing so we recognise the attendant issue of risk that requires reflexive negotiation in relation to activities in the learning set and the organization, a dynamic that the facilitator is also part of.

**Context**

*The wider stage*

The nature of the NHS has changed considerably since its inception in 1948. To give a sense of the scale of events over the years here are some of the milestones that have come to affect the role of the clinical leader, particularly those in this study coming to a leadership development programme many years after their initial clinical training.

The Griffiths Report in the 1980s ushered in the role of the professional manager and lessons from the private sector affecting the status and nature of the clinical leader (Baker & Denis, 2011). The Nicholson Challenge of 2006 set the case for £20bn worth of savings to be achieved by 2012 (Nicholson, 2008); a task yet to be completed, the impact of which is acutely being felt today. There was the shock of the Mid Staffordshire NHS setting the case where at least 400 people prematurely lost their lives due to poor care (Francis, 2013). In addition, there are further contradictory pressures of an ageing and more demanding population, financial constraints and advancing medical technology. Finally, there are political reforms such as the Health and Social Care Act of 2012 that ushered in the most significant reforms since its inception which dismantled many of the NHS structures (King’s Fund, 2016).

These challenges increasingly require an approach to leadership that extends beyond defined organizational boundaries; they are complex, political and challenging where expertise and power is not wholly in their gift (Welbourn, Warwick, Carnall, & Fathers, 2012) all of which undermine the confidence that was once the comfortable realm of the senior doctor.

*The local context of this study*

The leadership programme we discuss here took place in an NHS Trust comprising of two acute care hospitals in England. Seen as successful by regulators it was formed several years previously by the merger of two smaller trusts. The Chief Executive was keen to develop the Trust moving towards a shared sense of purpose.

The Trust and the University developed a leadership development programme comprising of the following elements: breakfast session with the Chief Executive or executive team member to talk through current issues of the day; a morning of exploring a topic such as strategy, HR and finance with the afternoon dedicated to participants’ practice with action learning. The conversations in the action learning sets were influenced by external factors and often the most evident were the topics raised by the chief executive at the breakfast session and informal conversations. Even in how we designed the programme with the Trust’s senior team, issues of power were evident including the choice by the Chief Executive to speak openly about her concerns. There were ten sessions over the course of a year with successful completion leading to a Post Graduate Certificate in Leadership and Management. There were four cohorts of approximately 20 people comprising of senior nurses, doctors and managers, the first being in 2013 and the last in 2015. Participants in the programmes were at or near director level; those that were the subject of this study were senior medical consultants.

**Methodology**

Here we paint a woven picture between a conventional research project with semi-structured interviews and how we (J and R) came to reflexively interpret them as participants in the research process and as learning set facilitators. In doing so we draw on a reflexive methodology (Warwick & Board, 2012) from which the interview notes act as reflexive prompts. It is worth noting issues of power between J and R as they come to make sense of the interview transcripts, their own experience as facilitators on the programme and as researchers with their own professional identities. Here we are illustrating our own social friction between *habitus* and field. We conclude this section with commentary on the implications that attention to this process has on validity.

*Ethics*

Full ethical approval was gained from the university ethics committee. Prior to any involvement, participants were forwarded an information sheet and consent form for signature. We as authors are ‘insider researchers’ being facilitators of action learning, and recognise an additional ‘ethics of care’ in addition to the usual considerations (Costley & Gibbs, 2006). We appreciate the delicate balance between exploiting generalised knowledge from the project for all parties, for example, strategic leaders, whilst protecting individual relationships and roles within organizations.

*Interviews*

The first cohort of twenty individuals were approached to be interviewed to explore the phenomenon of action learning that they had experienced, of which nine agreed to take part. Seven were males aged 40-60, two were females aged 30-50. Two participants had chosen leadership as a career and 7 had established medical/clinical specialisms. A research assistant conducted the semi-structured interviews that lasted approximately one hour and were carried out at the participant’s workplace. The interviews were undertaken over one month, six months after the programme was completed. This provided opportunity for post course euphoria to dwindle and more formative learning experiences to reflect on their attitude and practice and retold in their striking moments (Corlett, 2012) of action learning.

*Reflexive Analysis*

The interviews were transcribed and then analysed by three of us who worked on the programme (J, R and A). A number of themes became apparent to us around the areas of resilience and reflexivity (McCray, Palmer, & Warwick, 2015) whilst recognising that shifting contextual and cultural complexity (Baynes, 1995) affected the setting of the research (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). Despite our differing backgrounds the comments that we drew attention to demonstrated a large degree of similarity.

To explore assumptions and biases we wrote and shared narratives of our formative experiences, acting as a learning set of our own enquiry. This approach has for J a usefulness in this specific piece of work. J is from a social science background, in part influenced by socialisation in nursing practice: with some reliance on completion of tasks rather than engaging in the process of getting to the task. The topic of this research has not created painful or upsetting memories to be revisited: instead it has been enabling in that alternative approaches to research and to the researcher have been offered and critiqued, moving away from a behaviourist boundaried set of actions ‘I always work in this methodological way’ to that of exploring dispositions in relation to *habitus* and the possibility for reflexivity.

R comes from a microbiology background, although having since spent over twenty years in NHS management and consultancy, he still draws heavily on biological metaphors to make sense of organizational processes, albeit with a scepticism of the scientific method with its separation between subject and object.

We now use the first-person to undertake this reflexive exploration. We (J and R) were heavily involved in the action learning set project and appreciate that we do not come to this research anew. To illustrate our point, we present J and R’s reflections with each other as they were involved in the action learning programme. For example, I (R) reflected on reading the transcripts for the first time when I remembered ‘hearing’ their voices and relating their reflections to my own having worked with many of them and was prompted to note:

In the learning set one participant had become frustrated that they could not implement a medical procedure that their training had taught them would be safer, better and would cost less. Despite these advantages the set member was presented with one organizational objection after another. I felt frustrated too. It was in the set I remembered and described an art installation by Yoko Ono (Ono, 1971) I had just seen at the Guggenheim, Bilbao that was a glass maze. It was this that I kept coming back to: of me walking into those glass walls.

It was an unsettling and radically reflexive process (Alvesson, Hardy, & Harley, 2008; Pollner, 1991). We took seriously the connection between the participants’ and our experience and what was the 'imaginative prompt' that enabled this. The answer developed over several conversations in our set meetings, discussions with facilitators, a conference paper (Warwick, McCray, & Board, 2016), and various e-mails; all of which enabled further noticing and describing. Clearly we could have been beguiled into confirmation bias, something we kept in mind as we read and interpreted the scripts and reflected on experience.

In the data analysis and reflecting on R’s voice and relating his to my own, I (J) found Board’s model (figure 1) which follows later and which connects science, politics and intuition as being useful as I recalled my response to R’s use of the glass wall. Firstly, I challenged R – ‘where did the glass wall come from? I can’t see it in the transcripts …’: I was drawing on science and evidence from my training in the academy and our very similar thematic analysis to seek evidence in the data audit trail. Secondly I asked myself why was I uneasy at the message such ‘methodological leaps’-might convey? Here the use of methodological leaps refers to my judgement of the process, made by a movement away from specific set criteria to assess excellence in qualitative research (Tracey, 2010) which was unsettling. This caused a personal ‘”unsettling”, i.e., an insecurity regarding the basic assumptions, discourse and practices used in describing reality’(Pollner, 1991, p370); from my position there were standards to adhere to in the research process that created further reflection (Czarniawska, 2016). Part of me wanted to discount R’s position and override it prioritising my own values and knowledge; an issue of power affecting our research and action learning practice. Despite these feelings I was curious. I was soon searching through my own ALS notes in support of other examples of Board’s model which I had recalled (intuition) from the participants’ dialogue and wanted to re-read before speaking to R about the process. In moving away from my reliance on one aspect of my scientific training and seeking other ways of ‘seeing’ data I was developing new knowledge for use in my research practice. And Cook and Brown (Cook & Brown, 1999) came to mind as they write that by seeing knowledge as something that is gained by interaction in the social world and in engaging with others we are more open to innovation in organizations. As Checkland and Howell (Checkland & Holwell, 1998) point out this paying attention to the social heuristic process of researchers is important when claiming validity, particularly the importance of a ‘declared epistemology’ (p16) that weaves together: methods; research findings; and, the way that the endeavour was envisaged.

Findings from the interviews

In the following section we hear the participants’ voices. Our methodology indicated three interconnected themes emerging from the interviews and our experience as facilitators. Prompted by action, reaction and reflection of the action learning process these were:

* Walking into glass walls; to describe how participants became aware of their own assumptions in their interactions with others.
* What participants had noticed about their practice and how this was now developing over the course of their programme and beyond.
* The process they had experienced; to describe what they had noticed about their thoughts and practices throughout the process.

***Cluster A: Of walking into glass walls (or, making the obvious obvious)***

Here we use the metaphor of the glass wall to illustrate the increasing awareness of patterns of interpersonal relationships that previously went unnoticed. From participant 1 there is a vivid sense in how differently people sense the same workplace and express their perspective.

*Participant 1*

*… the … reason it’s been very positive is because I think there are five extremely different characters there, no two of us are similar at all. Some have overlapping traits but they really are five very, very different people (comment 1.1).*

*And I have thought, ‘blimey did you… did I hear that right… did you really say that… did it mean to come out quite like that?’ And sometimes you want to applaud them for doing so (comment 1.2).*

We also hear how unsettled participant 2 is by the experience, identifying themselves as an introvert and who then has a growing awareness of what they have not been addressing.

*Participant 2*

*I think I’m quite private, probably slightly introverted and I find the approach very intrusive and a bit unsettling. … I suppose it tells me things about myself which I know which I think I suppress (sic)… (2.1).*

There was a realization from participant 3 of how different people were despite the fact that they had been working with each other for many years in some instances.

*Participant 3*

*… I suddenly appreciated how different people process different information. And that to me was the most powerful thing I’d have learned … (3.1).*

And finally participant 4 who noticed the value of others’ perspectives in addition to their own.

*Participant 4*

*… I started by saying, ‘when in my experience it would be better to…’. But actually everybody, everybody brought related facets to the proposal for resolution that has been taken up and as a result of further discussions with the individual concerned… has changed [me] very positively (4.1).*

Here participants demonstrate a growing awareness of power relations since they engaged with action learning, we hear the social friction that has occurred between their *habitus* and field. We also note their unsettlement and risk in the process of learning about themselves and those around them.

***Cluster B: Of what participants’ are noticing of practice***

We notice participants voicing doubt in their practice and how talking about this has helped. We hear the power of listening and a realisation of the power and influence they have. There is an increased sensitivity towards the dynamics that they are part of. There is also support from others and confidence that this has enabled, both for themselves, but also in one case a realisation that others were grappling with a lack of confidence too. From participant 4 we hear greater acceptance of difference, others perspective, an increased ability to listen and an awareness of their own power and that of others.

*Participant 4*

*Helping? I think it’s opening my eyes, sorry it is opening my eyes to areas that I previously wouldn’t have been nearly so broadminded about. And I think I get, because I’m fairly… what’s the word… I’m a bit adventurous, but I also crave success, and I am a fairly driven person. … (4.2).*

*And what I have learnt… is that one of the best ways to learn is to be really an avid listener and to let everything soak in, and then to process it by feeding back and summarising and conceptualising the intelligence that my peers have as well as my own. … (comment 4.3).*

*I’ve got to remember that I’ve got a lot of power in this organization and people do listen to what I say, so I need to use that wisely, and I need to use it carefully and I need to use it to always bring the best out of people. Not to slip back at any stage again into the snidey snarky controlling… (4.4).*

The issue of listening is a theme for participant 6 as well.

*Participant 6*

*So I would say from a personal learning point of view the first thing would be the importance of listening and hearing what you’re listening to. Give yourself a little bit of time to digest and then you know, perhaps responding if it is appropriate. … (6.1).*

In participant 2 we hear doubt and the impact of being able to talk about this.

*Participant 2*

*… I would think ‘I really don’t want to be doing this’. But it’s nice during those meetings when you get positive direct feedback from your peers, and if you express self-doubt, particularly if you are expressing any self-doubt as to your ability to actually sort of do something or your effectiveness [sic] (comment 2.2).*

From participant 5 we get a different perspective of doubt, that of confidence and the support of the group.

*Participant 5*

*The other thing I think I get from it, is a huge amount of support of ‘what you are doing is right; [you’ve] just got to keep going and don’t be too despondent’. … (5.1).*

*I think there’s been a huge impact; it has really strengthened us as a group and as individuals and I feel very confident in the rest of my personal managerial career to feel that I can always ask any of the four individuals to help (5.2).*

Finally, participant 7 comments on their ability to reflect.

*Participant 7*

*… I think I spend more time reflecting on things now, certainly writing emails, I was spending more time considering what I would write (7.1).*

In recognising the importance of listening and having greater personal insight on power the issue of misrecognition is recognised. Here participants demonstrate a growing awareness of their ability to reflect and notice and of becoming more broad minded of how others see their world.

***Cluster C: Of the process they had experienced***

Of the action learning process the issue of confidentiality and ground rules are important to allow people to speak. Being able to share emotional stories is enabled by a trusting and confidential space as was the related issue of respect, these were the consistent themes from participants 1, 4 and 6.

*Participant 1*

*I think just that, I think it’s the security, it’s the security, the fact that you can go into a room and say what you want to say (comment 1.3).*

*Participant 4*

*… People expose themselves to some extent emotionally and when they do that it’s a very trusting environment, but it’s also incredibly important, it’s incredibly important to respect that soul baring, and to be really restrained about it, [I] had to keep it to myself, which I do, which I have done absolutely (4.5).*

*Participant 6*

*It was confidential and private and secure … The action learning set is different because it’s kind of facilitated, it’s safe, it’s private … (6.2).*

The interaction of concepts and practice

In this section we take the above themes and comments and use the work of Pierre Bourdieu to offer some insights that might contribute to the practice of critical action learning. Whereas current literature on critical action learning focuses on issues of power, emotion and the political dynamics (Trehan & Rigg, 2007; Vince, 2004, 2008, 2012), here we explore the nature by which these become available for discussion and how these come to affect practice. The connected themes here being the teasing out of one’s *habitus* and field in the process of social friction of: noticing one’s assumptions; how this comes to develop awareness of practice; and, of action learning itself. This is a process that affects both participants and facilitators. In terms of process therefore, first comes an awareness of these dynamics and then an engagement with them. We hear a growing ability to discuss associated feelings of doubt and confidence. These are long term reflexive learning processes whereby the actions participants agree to make in the learning set come to affect those around them in the organization thus offering the opportunity for reflective conversations in the set and organization.

For the action learning facilitator, the concept of social friction, to explore Bourdieu’s field, *habitus* and misrecognition, is useful in explaining the work to be done by members of a newly formed set. It can prompt conversation towards noticing power dynamics, emotional factors in organizational life and how the actions and learning have implications for the individual and those they work with. This being the case then the question becomes: how might these concepts be usefully communicated to a broad range of people. We will now discuss a way of achieving this with a conceptual idea that explains a heuristic process the participants might expect.

The notion of process is important in action learning and for Bourdieu’ theory. This issue, discussed by R and D who had worked together on a number of other projects, is explored by Board (Board, 2012, 2015) in relation to the practice of selecting people for senior roles in organizations (headhunting). Here Board, searching for language which could open up some of the possibilities for insight and action generated by Bourdieu’s thought without requiring practitioners to assimilate a new vocabulary, has proposed a heuristic process of question-asking between science, politics and intuition, see figure 1.

[FIGURE 1 HERE]

Although Board explores the practice of executive selection, it is applicable to other roles whereby one is working with others in a political context that we see in this paper with doctors. We will consider each of the three elements and return to explore the heuristic process of human interaction in action learning.

Firstly, science; this refers to the urge to reason in an objective way, to quantify and to measure and build rational argument. In our case it is a space that our doctors readily occupy with the call for ‘evidence based medicine’ and values of reproducibility, generalizability and validity in scientific truth. When it comes to politics we pay attention to the tussle for limited resources, of people and money. We also refer to the battle for attention of those in power, the chief executive, her team and others with influence. And as the participant struggles for attention ‘upwards’ they too are caught in a net where their attention is also being sought. It is a net of power whereby each player is bound to each other to some greater or lesser extent, a point brought to life by Participant 4 in saying: ‘*I’ve got to remember that I’ve got a lot of power in this organization and people do listen to what I say, so I need to use that wisely, ...’ (4.4).* Finally, that of intuition, all that seems obvious without being able to put one’s finger on it, of expert judgement borne from years of experience. All three are present as a heuristic invitation to notice and are recognised or challenged to greater or lesser extents. For example, we might privilege knowledge presented as science but in doing so one notices or questions fewer issues of politics and intuition. The dynamic, if unchecked, might bolster one’s attention on science and in doing so become trapped leading to frustration. To use a metaphor, it becomes a glass wall we are aware of only on impact but have little understanding of why we cannot progress. In the action learning process questions are posed of the participant that challenges their assumptions and makes them aware of areas such as politics and intuition that they may otherwise not notice.

Issues of power, politics and emotional dynamics have been identified as important factors of critical action learning and here we offer a way of understanding these processes both within the action learning community and participants new to action learning.

Conclusion

We have used Pierre Bourdieu’s logic of practice to find a language that illuminates the processes of critical action learning to facilitators and set members. Firstly, there is a noticing of the dynamics one is immersed in but have become second nature, secondly, the heuristic process that pays attention to science, politics and intuition.

Bourdieu’s concepts of *habitus* and field along with the friction of misrecognition are helpful in initiating a conversation of what delegates might be letting themselves in for in joining an action learning programme. Science, politics and intuition, employed as a heuristic to stimulate on-going noticing of neglected dimensions of discussion, provides possibilities for new sense-making by action learners which captures part of Bourdieu’s logic of practice but is accessible without his terminology.

Further opportunities

We only undertook one set of interviews. Work is now underway to interview the participants again, a further twelve months later. We are looking to explore longer term impacts of action learning on practice.

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Figure 1: The heuristic action learning process



End.

1. Bourdieu’s own emphasis [↑](#footnote-ref-1)