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**A story of participants' learning  
experiences: Illuminating the  
complexity and multi-dimensional  
process of learning on a  
postgraduate executive action  
learning programme**

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DBA

April 2018

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## ABSTRACT

This research presents a story of learning, a story that illuminates the complexity and multi-dimensional process of learning on an accredited executive Master of Business Studies programme, a programme underpinned by an action learning philosophy. The voices and perspectives of the participants are privileged. The research is underpinned by a social constructionist epistemology adopting a qualitative approach. Data were generated using individual and group interviews with 13 participants across four cohorts that had completed the programme.

Analysis adopted a narrative approach, the process was both iterative and messy, and culminated in developing a conceptual framework of learning and crafting a story of learning. The story of learning was crafted around themes that emerged during analysis: a trusted safe space; honesty and openness; emotion and feelings; being and becoming reflective; being supported: learning with and from each other; change and transformation. This research provides novel insights into the depth and richness of learning that can occur when adopting an action learning approach to executive management higher education. The research illuminates the role of emotion during the learning process and the importance for executive participants of having a trusted supported space for their learning.

This research extends the current body of knowledge of action learning, conceptually and methodologically. It presents a story of participant learning, sharing what it looks and feels like to be a learner on an executive management action learning programme. Practically, it is of value to academics, action learning facilitators and participants engaging with action learning in higher education by providing them with an insightful and holistic understanding from a participant perspective. Methodologically it makes a contribution vis-à-vis the use of story writing during the analysis process, as a way to make sense of the data, and as a means to present the findings.

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## DECLARATION

I declare that the work contained in this thesis has not been submitted for any other award and that it is all my own work. I also confirm that this work fully acknowledges opinions, ideas and contributions from the work of others.

Any ethical clearance for the research presented in this thesis has been approved. Approval has been sought and granted by the Faculty Ethics Committee on the 6<sup>th</sup> of July 2015.

I declare that the Word Count of this Thesis is 59,346

Name:

Signature:

Date:

## ABBREVIATIONS

<b>Action Learning Reflection</b>	<b>ALR</b>
<b>Action Learning Set</b>	<b>ALS</b>
<b>Critical Action Learning</b>	<b>CAL</b>
<b>Higher Education</b>	<b>HE</b>
<b>Higher Education Institution</b>	<b>HEI</b>
<b>Institute of Technology</b>	<b>IoT</b>
<b>Master of Business Studies in Innovation and Leadership</b>	<b>MBSIL</b>
<b>Republic of Ireland</b>	<b>RoI</b>
<b>Small Medium Enterprise</b>	<b>SME</b>

# 1 CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

---

## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

This research inquiry presents an enriched understanding of participant learning on an action learning higher education (HE) executive Master's programme in an Institute of Technology (IoT) in the Republic of Ireland (RoI). It illuminates the complexity and multi-dimensional nature of participant learning, and presents this understanding in the form of a story of learning, which is narrated with a participant voice. The empirical research process can sometimes dampen the voices of research participants, through unconsciously sanitising the research process through academic writing (Tracy, 2012). In presenting a story of learning narrated with a participant voice the aim is to lessen this dampening effect. In listening to and giving voice to participants' perspectives, it is possible to gain an enhanced understanding of learning in action learning from those who engaged with the process first-hand: the learners. This enriched understanding provides the possibility of enhancing learner experience on such programmes.

The current chapter provides an overview of the research. Firstly, it presents a discussion of my motivations in conducting the research and my own personal story in the context of the research. Secondly, the chapter introduces concepts of management education and action learning. Thereafter, details of the site of inquiry, the specific questions the research asks and the approach taken to answer these research questions are provided. The chapter ends by outlining potential contributions of the research and the structure of the thesis.

## 1.2 MY MOTIVATION AND RATIONALE FOR UNDERTAKING THIS RESEARCH

My interest in conducting this research stems from my involvement in a part-time executive Master of Business Studies in Innovation and Leadership (MBSIL) at an IoT in the RoI. I have been involved with this programme since its inception in 2008, as a module co-ordinator, dissertation supervisor, action learning set (ALS) facilitator, and since 2016 as programme co-ordinator. Because of my engagement with the MBSIL at so many levels, I have observed the positive impact that the programme has on the participants who are senior and middle managers across a diverse range of organisations.

Over the duration of the MBSIL, I have noticed transformations in the dispositions of some these managers, many of whom claim to have changed their management approach because of their learning on the programme. All feedback from participants, both informal and in formal course evaluations, has been resoundingly positive, something that I had not found on other courses: usually there was some less favourable feedback but not here. These insights sparked my curiosity, what was it about this programme that led to these positive stories of learning, what could I, as a management educator, learn about participant learning on this programme that I could incorporate into other programmes on which I teach or indeed could share with other educators ?

I had some initial ideas as to what might be behind such positive stories of transformation. Perhaps it was that during the MBSIL participants, rather than reviewing case studies, inquired into their own organisations and in their ALSs sought to resolve current organisational problems. Or, was it possibly because participants took ownership of their own learning, by learning from actions taken in dealing with a current organisational issue and in turn acting from further learning? However, I wanted more than an idea or a sense, I wanted to understand and provide evidence of what was behind these positive tales of learning; what was it like for the participants, and how did learning manifest itself for them on this MBSIL? The reasons I wanted to know were firstly to improve my own practice, both my practice as a management educator and my practice as an ALS facilitator. Secondly, I wanted to share this learning and insight with others, as I believe action learning, whilst not a panacea, has much to offer to management education in HE. In order to share this learning, I wanted to provide credible evidence of what this learning in action learning looks and feels like from a participant perspective.

Additionally, I noticed from the extant literature that whilst much was written about action learning in organisational contexts there was a paucity within a post-graduate HE management education context. Moreover, within the HE context few empirical studies focused specifically on a participant or learner perspective. Notable exceptions include Burger (2013); Lawless (2008); Van Schuyver (2004); Yeadon-Lee and Worsdale (2012) and Yeadon-Lee (2013b). These studies adopting a participant only perspective have enhanced and extended understanding of action learning theory and practice. Each focuses on a particular aspect of the participant story of learning using action learning: Burger (2013), resistance; Yeadon-Lee and Worsdale (2012) and Yeadon-Lee (2013b),

intra-personal relationships within ALSs; Lawless (2008), action learning as legitimate peripheral participation and Van Schuyver (2004), the role of questioning insight in learning. However, what my research aims to do is to tell a whole story of learning in action learning from a participant perspective, a story that illuminates the complexity and multidimensional nature of the learning process, this is something that is currently not available in the extant literature.

Whilst this research presents a story of learning in action learning from a participant perspective, it is also important to tell my story as the researcher.

### 1.3 MY STORY

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) draw attention to the importance of the researcher not only telling the participants' stories but also her own story. They suggest the researcher herself is "one of the starting points" of the research and emphasise "the importance of acknowledging the centrality of the researcher's own experience" (Clandinin & Connelly, p.70). Therefore what follows is a brief overview of my story.

I have always had a great interest in learning, as a child I wanted to know how the world worked; I constantly wanted to know more, much to the annoyance of others at times. A particular memory that I have, in a learning context, is from secondary school. We were studying *Hard Times* by Charles Dickens and I was struck by one particular instance in the classroom. Mr Gradgrind, the teacher, had asked a child, Sissy, to provide a definition of a horse: she was unable to do so despite her father working with horses and her seeing them every day. Next, Bitzer, who had never had significant contact with a horse, was asked the same question, he provided a perfect scientific answer and was deemed the model student: a vessel filled with facts, hard rational facts. This scene struck me, as I thought how sad it was for Bitzer that he could define something with no concept of what it was.

When I first began lecturing in the field of management, 15 years ago, I sought to be more than someone who filled empty vessels with facts; I wanted my teaching and students' learning to be strongly linked to practice, for it to be more than purely theoretical. Having come to HE from a career in private industry I was in a position to share my practice experience along with my knowledge of theory with my students. Moreover, when I first

became acquainted with the concept of action learning, I was immediately drawn to it, as it aligns with how I prefer to learn. In this research, I needed to be conscious of my biases towards action learning as a way of learning through action, questioning, and reflection, especially as there are many in academia who do not view the world in the same way as I do. However, in conducting this research, and telling a story of learning in action learning from a participant perspective, I hope others will see the value for the participant of learning through action learning and appreciate the potential for adopting an action learning approach in HE management education.

#### 1.4 MANAGEMENT EDUCATION

Management education typically views management as a discipline that can be taught by academic experts in a classroom setting (Raelin, 1994, 2009b). The teaching of management in HE is by and large compartmentalised into silos of managerial functions such as marketing, operations, finance and human resources, leaving learners to think that all problems can be neatly broken down using analytical tools and so solved, which is rarely the case in the organisational life (Armstrong & Fukami, 2009). O'Toole (2009, p. 547), echoing Holman (2000), views management education as an “artificial construct” which comprises “training programs, undergraduate business programs, MBS programs, corporate universities, on-line courses”. Notwithstanding this diversity there has been much criticism of management education, in particular its lack of relevance in attempting to solve complex organisational problems and its over-reliance on purely analytical approaches (Datar, Garvin, & Cullen, 2010; Grey, 2002, 2004; Mintzberg, 2004; Paton, Chia, & Burt, 2014; Pfeffer & Fong, 2002; Warhurst, 2011). Bennis and O'Toole (2005) argue that business schools have become too scientific in their approaches and that there is a need to find a balance between practice and theory in management education, a sentiment shared by others in this ongoing debate (Gosling & Mintzberg, 2006; Mintzberg, 2004; Paton et al., 2014; Pfeffer & Fong, 2002). A further criticism is that there tends to be more of a focus on teaching than on learning. This can lead to “a lack of attention to learning to learn”, despite learning to learn being considered important for managing in complex environments where managers are required to deal with challenging and dynamic organisational issues (Dyllick, 2015, p. 20).

More holistic approaches to management education have been called for, that move beyond the analytical and the conceptual (Waddock & Lozano, 2013), approaches that prepare managers for an ever-more complex world whereby problems require multi-faceted approaches drawing not only on cognitive abilities, but also emotional and social abilities (Karakas, Manisaligil, & Sarigollu, 2015). One key question for management education is “if tacit knowledge is what distinguishes successful managers from others”, how can we develop programmes that “shift from tutor-driven teaching to near total participation and engagement of the learner” (Armstrong & Fukami, 2009, p. 9). Incorporating an action learning philosophy into HE management programmes can go some way to addressing this question, especially considering action learning’s focus on learners and learning (Raelin, 2009b).

## 1.5 ACTION LEARNING

Defining action learning has been a somewhat “contentious” issue (Simpson & Bourner, 2007, p. 174). Reginald Revans, considered the father of action learning, was reluctant to constrain its use by providing an absolute definition within which it should operate. Instead of defining what it was, he was more likely to say what it was not (Revans, 1982, 2011). Action learning is not problem based learning, business consultancy, job rotation, or group dynamics. At its core, action learning is about learning through action and acting from learning (McLaughlin & Thorpe, 1993). Revans (2011) posits his learning theory in the form of the equation  $L = P + Q$ , where L is learning, P is programmed or book knowledge and Q is insightful questioning. A key premise of action learning is that it is through insightful questioning of P that participants come to understand and take action on complex organisational problems that have no prescribed solution (Willis, 2004). At the heart of action learning is the ALS, Revans (2011, p. 10) calls it “the cutting edge of every action learning programme”. It is where peers come together voluntarily in groups of four to eight members to support each other, through Q, in tackling wicked problems (Pedler & Abbott, 2013). Action learning has been applied in a variety of sectors, including health, business, public sector and education, to resolve organisational problems, to support leadership and for team development (Park, Kang, Valencic, & Cho, 2013). The focus for this research is action learning within a postgraduate HE teaching and learning context.

When incorporated into a learning and teaching approach, action learning places the learner at the centre, and in control of his or her own learning (Raelin, 1994). Here learners are considered experts of their own learning; they have a wealth of knowledge as managers in their organisations and in trying to solve organisational problems. As Pfeffer and Fong (2002) state, in giving the learner control, learning is enhanced. Unlike much management education, action learning is not about doing something to managers, rather it is about managers taking responsibility for their own learning, “in deciding what to learn, when and how to learn” (McLaughlin & Thorpe, 1993, p. 21). Educators have incorporated action learning into HE programmes in a variety of ways. Some use action learning to support individual modules on programmes (Milano, Lawless, & Eades, 2015); others use it to support dissertation development (Harrison & Edwards, 2012); whilst others, similar to the MBSIL, underpin entire programmes with an action learning philosophy (Edmonstone & Robson, 2014). Given the diversity with which action learning is used, it is important to explain how action learning is situated (Simpson & Bourner, 2007) within the MBSIL, the programme upon which this research is based. Chapter 2 presents a more detailed discussion of action learning and action learning in a HE context.

## 1.6 THE SITE OF INQUIRY

This research seeks to understand participants’ learning experiences on a two-year part-time accredited executive MBSIL in the RoI. The MBSIL, whilst underpinned by an action learning philosophy of learning being through action and action from learning, would not fulfil all the criteria of what is termed as ‘Revans’ classic action learning’ (Willis, 2004). However, it is unlikely that many action learning programmes would. The MBSIL was developed drawing heavily on the work of Revans (1982, 2011), Coghlan and Pedler (2006) and McGill and Brockbank (2008) and whilst not meeting all the criteria of Revans’ classic action learning (Willis, 2004) meets many of the criteria as outlined below.

In Revans’ classic action learning, insightful questioning (Q) is given primacy, and programmed or expert knowledge (P), is considered secondary (Brook, Pedler, & Burgoyne, 2013). Although the MBSIL acknowledges that participants are experts in terms of their own learning in engaging with their organisations’ problems, it does not

discount academic learning and knowledge (P). The MBSIL spans four academic semesters; in each of the first three semesters participants undertake three two-day block modules while the fourth semester is dedicated to writing up an action learning research dissertation. Lecturers at the IoT are responsible for developing and co-ordinating the modules in areas such as innovation, leadership and managing change. Typically, three guest speakers are invited to share their practical experiences with the participants during each of the two-day modules.

Participants are encouraged to participate through engaging in questioning (Q) and dialogue with each other and guest speakers. In addition to guest speaker input, module co-ordinators provide an academic underpinning for the modules, what Revans (2011) terms P. Traditional assessment techniques, normally a written paper or a project are used to assess participants on the modules. However, as part of the assessment participants are asked to insightfully question (Q) their own practice and to critically evaluate it in the context of the module topic. Additionally, they are required to link their evaluation and reflection to relevant scholarly literature (P).

In addition to the block modules described above, participants are required to undertake an action learning research dissertation, accounting for one third of the overall MBSIL award. In their research, participants attempt to resolve a current complex organisational problem in their organisation, adopting an action learning approach. Problems addressed in the past include how to develop an innovation culture; finding new ways to work in challenging times; how to engage demotivated staff; addressing the online challenge; how to close a business in such a way as to minimise the negative impact on staff. Programme ALSs support the participants in conducting their research. Participants are also strongly encouraged to establish ALSs within their organisations to support them in tackling their organisational problems – this is not always possible due to a variety of reasons, such as the organisation being too small or getting buy-in from others proves too difficult in the given time frame.

Together, the programme co-ordinator and the relevant academic manager assign participants to their MBSIL ALSs. In assigning participants to a particular ALS, an attempt is made to represent the diversity of the cohort. Over the duration of the programme the ALSs meet eight times in four hour blocks with a facilitator who is an

academic from the School of Business within the IoT. The facilitator's role is to guide the action learning process within the ALS and to intervene only when is necessary. The facilitator is not to be considered as an expert to advise participants (Pedler & Abbott, 2013) and the intention is that over time the role of the facilitator diminishes. The ALSs meet for the first time shortly after the first two-day module and subsequently ALSs meet at intervals over the remaining two years.

In writing up their action learning research dissertation, participants use Revans' systems alpha, beta and gamma as a guide. System alpha evaluates the environment within which the problem is situated; system beta comprises the cycles of action, reflection and further actions taken whilst addressing the problem and reframing it, and system gamma explicitly focuses on the personal and organisational learning during systems alpha and beta (Coghlan and Pedler 2006).

The first ever MBSIL cohort commenced in September 2008. The School of Business at the IoT recruits a new intake of middle to senior manager every two years: the sixth cohort commenced in January 2018. The number of participants on each cohort has ranged from 10 to 16. Participant managers come from a diverse range of industries including pharmaceuticals, medical devices, software development, dairy, health services, retail, catering and media. There has also been diversity with respect to organisation size ranging from large international multi-nationals down to indigenous micro businesses. In relation to gender, on average approximately one third of each cohort has been female.

Action learning on the MBSIL is more than just tackling complex organisational problems. It involves participants learning together while they attempt to understand and resolve these problems, developing themselves professionally and personally, with the purpose of becoming managers who are equipped to deal with the complexity, and multi-faceted nature of organisational life. To gain a deeper understanding of participant learning on the MBSIL a number of specific questions are asked and answered in this research.

## **1.7 RESEARCH AIM AND QUESTIONS**

In conducting this research, an overarching aim guided me: to inquire into former participants' experiences of learning on the executive MBSIL, with a view to developing

an improved understanding of participants' learning. Taking a participant-only focus was justified due to the paucity of empirical studies in a HE context that explore a participant-only perspective of the learning experience (2.4 provides a detailed discussion). Leading on from this overarching aim the following are the specific research questions asked in this research:

1. What is it like for participants to learn on an executive action learning MBSIL?
2. How do the stories they tell of their learning experiences illuminate the process of learning on an executive action learning MBSIL?
3. How can the insights from these stories develop and enhance the practice of action learning on HE programmes?

Answering the questions posed required adopting a flexible and emergent approach that supported taking an holistic view of participants' experiences and one which facilitated generating thick descriptions (Geertz, 1994).

## **1.8 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

Understanding and making sense of participants' learning experiences requires an approach that facilitates the generation of rich participant data. Aligned with my social constructionist worldview, I believe there is no single reality and that people give experiences meaning in the social realm through language (Gergen, 2015). Thus, I adopted a qualitative approach in conducting this research. A qualitative approach is well suited to this research which seeks to gain fresh insight, and to achieve depth rather than breadth, of understanding of participant learning experiences (Turnbull, 2002). Data generation with participants commenced early in the research process. Whilst I did not ignore the extant literature in the early stages, rather than engaging with it a priori and in isolation to data generation and analysis I engaged with it in tandem. In doing so I sought to dampen pre-existing ways of understanding, which may have constrained my thinking and clouded me in gaining new insight (Alvesson & Sköldböck, 2017). Additionally, I adopted a narrative attitude to this research, where I listened to participant stories, analysing the data generated with a narrative approach, which entailed iteratively drafting versions of participants' stories of learning. Chapter 3 of the thesis provides a detailed discussion of the methodological approach taken.

## 1.9 THE POTENTIAL CONTRIBUTION OF THIS STUDY

This research contributes to practice, theory and methodology. By listening to, and gaining insight into the participants' learning experiences, management educators and ALS facilitators can gain an enriched understanding of what it is like for participants to learn on an action learning HE management programme. Through this greater understanding of participant learning on an action learning MBSIL, there is the possibility to enhance management education programmes, and therefore managers' professional development, by incorporating an action learning pedagogy or aspects of it into such programmes. The story of learning crafted in relation to participant learning can support ALS facilitator training, and as preparation for ALS facilitation, given that it provides insight and understanding of what learning is like for a participant and so can help facilitators prepare for ALSs. Additionally, by sharing a story of learning in action learning, evidence is provided to those management educators and academic managers who are unfamiliar with action learning, of what learning is like for participants and its potential value. In so doing, it has the possibility to dispel some of the scepticism and cynicism ascribed to action learning as pedagogy (Anderson, 2008).

Furthermore, I envisage this research makes a theoretical contribution. It contributes to the theory of action learning and to the existing knowledge base in the extant literature, in particular understanding of participants' perspectives. Moreover, it answers calls for more research on the use of action learning in education (Anderson, 2008; Haith & Whittingham, 2012; Tosey & Marshall, 2017; Yeadon-Lee, 2013a).

Finally, this research makes a methodological contribution. There has been some criticism regarding the lack of rigorous and quality research in the action learning domain (Cho & Egan, 2010). The research addresses this criticism by providing a detailed and transparent account of how this research was conducted. Moreover it makes a contribution vis-à-vis the use of story writing during the analysis process, as a way to make sense of the data, and also as means to share knowledge of the findings and in privileging the voices of participants. Chapter 6 provides a more in-depth discussion of the contribution this research makes.

## 1.10 THESIS STRUCTURE

**Chapter 1**, the current chapter, provides the background for this study whilst **Chapter 2**, sets the context within the extant literature. **Chapter 3** provides a detailed account of the research design and implementation. It seeks to be authentic and transparent about the process of analysis, which was iterative, emergent and somewhat messy. **Chapter 4** presents findings through the medium of a story. The story is one of participant learning, which was crafted from both data generated and analysed. By using the medium of a story it is hoped to convey the complexity of learning in action learning (Polkinghorne, 1995). In **Chapter 5**, key themes, which were the bases for crafting a story of learning in Chapter 4, are discussed in the context of scholarly literature. Additionally, this chapter presents a conceptual framework of learning in action learning, developed from an understanding of and insight into the data. Finally, **Chapter 6** details the contributions this research makes to practice, theory, and methodology. Furthermore, it returns to the research evaluation criteria, as discussed in Chapter 3, for a final reflection on the research process and to suggest areas for further research.

## 1.11 CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter outlined a rationale for the research detailed in this thesis. It provided an overview of the purpose of the research, and the approach taken whilst also sharing my personal motivation for conducting this research. Listening to the stories of participants, and gaining an understanding of what it is like for them to learn, is an important step towards developing enhanced management education.

## 2 CHAPTER TWO: ACTION LEARNING

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### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

Before getting to the heart of this research, to inquire into former participants' experiences of learning on the executive MBSIL, with a view to developing an improved understanding of participants' learning, it is important first to set the context for the research. This context setting has undertones of what Revans (2011) calls system alpha, that is setting the scene in which a problem is to be tackled. This context setting comprises an explanation of action learning in its many guises, followed by outlining the process of action learning leading on to an overview of the most common benefits and challenges attributed to the use of action learning. Next, the focus moves to action learning in a HE context. This discussion examines, and comments on, the key areas of research of action learning in a teaching and learning context. Subsequently, areas worthy of further investigation and inquiry are identified leading to stating specific research questions. In completing this context setting, the purpose and goal of the research is linked to the extant literature.

### 2.2 ACTION LEARNING: MANY GUISES

Reginald Revans (1907-2003) is commonly accepted as the father of action learning and (Boshyk, Barker, & Dilworth, 2010) though he used it extensively during his career it was not until 1972 that he first used the term action learning in public (Boshyk, 2011). As a concept, action learning is not new, and according to Revans (2011) has been around for time immemorial with its main premise being that people learn from action and act from learning. In essence, action learning is about learning by doing, in Revans' (2011, p. 11) own words "there can be no action without learning and no learning without action". It is an approach used in tackling messy or wicked problems: "an issue, concern, an opportunity or task you want to do something about" (Pedler, 2008, p. 41) through insightful questioning and with the support of peers.

With action learning, the participants are positioned as experts who have the ability to solve their own problems with the support of their ALS, the ALS being "the cutting edge of every action learning programme" (Revans, 2011, p. 7). An ALS comprises peers

working together, using insightful questioning in order to address the problem at hand; they “generate, consider, discuss, argue about the nature of issues and problems” (Mumford, 1997, p. 11) challenging each other in action and learning (Pedler, 2008). Raelin (2009a) says that it promotes courage, is a relational and shared process leading to change whilst Marsick and Watkins (1997) assert that it “depends on people’s willingness to admit mistakes and to subject themselves and their experience to constructive criticism” (p. 306).

Dilworth (2005) reminds us that Revans shied away from providing an absolute definition of action learning for fear of constraining it by words. However, this did not stop Revans (2011) spending time explaining its main precepts in his ABC of action learning. These precepts include that: learning is cradled in the task; expert knowledge (P) is not enough; to solve problems insightful fresh questioning (Q) is required; learning is voluntary, it cannot be done to a person; the ALS and the contributions of peers are central to the process (Revans, 2011, pp. 3-13). Revans’ theory of learning is presented as an equation, after all he was first and foremost a physicist, the equation is  $L=P+Q$ . And while Q comes after P in the equation it is Q that Revans views as taking precedence. It is Q that differentiates action learning from traditional approaches, which usually privilege P and the outside expert. Revans, in Dilworth’s view, was interested in “deep self-questioning” (Dilworth, 2010a, p. 11) something Mezirow (1997) calls transformative learning, that is looking for the why behind the why, examining that which is taken for granted and changing “behaviours which are now clearly dysfunctional” (Dilworth, 2010a, p. 12).

There are few, if any, who are purists in their use of action learning, most practitioners use an adapted version of Revans’ action learning (O’Neil & Marsick, 2007). Some action learning approaches favour the use of expert facilitators who take a pivotal role, while others adapt a light touch facilitator role. On many HE programmes (and indeed organisational management development programmes) which are underpinned by an action learning ethos, programmed knowledge (P) plays a role. Mumford (1997), while agreeing with Revans as to the primacy of Q, does not however consider it fruitful to see P and Q as “Cain and Abel” (p. 18), that is bitter rivals. It is Mumford’s view that P should be delivered in a manner that fits with the action learning philosophy, participant context, and relevance. Where action learning is the underpinning pedagogy in HE it is common to include P, indeed, it is unlikely to see a programme devoid of P on an accredited higher

education programme. It is important to note that Revans did not discount P; he however did not give it the reverence that it receives in most academic settings. Furthermore, voluntary membership of an ALS, a principle espoused by Revans, is not always a viable option on some action learning projects (Boshyk, 2010; Dilworth, 2010b; Mumford, 1997).

O'Neil and Marsick (2011), updating their 1999 work where they classify the use of action learning in practice into schools, present a revised classification of five schools. Their classification provides a means to understand differing approaches taken by practitioners, though they note no “practitioner fits neatly into a ‘school’” (p. 185). The first school they present is the Tacit School, here action is privileged and learning tends to be incidental or tacit. Programmed learning comes first in the Tacit School, followed by an action project. Next explained is the new addition, the Collaborative Self-Directed Learning School where action learning is linked to communities of practice, and learning is considered as collaboratively created by the group, with action learning being used to “foster the environment needed for collaboration” (O'Neil & Marsick, 2011, p. 186). The Scientific School classification is classic action learning as proposed by Revans (described previously above), where  $L=P+Q$  and the methods are comprised of Systems Alpha, Beta and Gamma. In this school, questioning insight is paramount, it is by asking insightful questions that participants come to understand and take action on the problem. According to O'Neil and Marsick (2011) action learning programmes developed within this school “focus on problem resolution more than development of interpersonal skills”. Next to the Experiential School, which is firmly aligned with Kolb’s learning theory and learning cycle (Kolb, 1984). Kolb’s (1984) learning cycle comprises four steps: 1) the learner has an experience; 2) the learner reflects on said experiences and then 3) draws learning from this reflection, which leads to 4) amending further actions. Similar to action learning, learning is through action. Action learning in the Experiential School privileges learning; learning is the ultimate purpose and is explicitly highlighted. The role of the facilitator in this school is to elicit learning with participants.

Finally, to the Critical Reflection School, which, while similar in many ways to the Experiential School distinguishes itself due to its emphasis on reflection being critical reflection. Critical reflection here is where “people recognize that their perceptions may be flawed because they are filtered through uncritically accepted views, beliefs, attitudes

and feelings” (O’Neil & Marsick, 2011, p.188). By being critically reflective in action learning participants question their assumption and “the rationale underlying their action” (O’Neil & Marsick, 2011, p.189), this process can be unsettling yet powerful. As with the previously mentioned Experiential School, the role of the facilitator is pivotal in encouraging critical reflection through insightful questioning. In their 2011 update, O’Neil and Marsick add critical action learning (CAL) to the Critical Reflection School. CAL adds a further dimension to action learning where it acknowledges the role of power, politics and emotion within the action learning process. In recent years, there has been a greater focus within the action learning literature, both theoretically and in accounts of practice, on CAL (Brook, Pedler, & Burgoyne, 2012). If Revans is viewed as the founding father of action learning then Wilmott can be view as the initial proponent of CAL where he attempted to “promote a synergy between critical thinking and critical management” (Trehan, 2011, p. 164). The concept and theory of CAL has been further developed by many scholars (Allison & Lawless, 2011; Anderson & Thorpe, 2004; Ram & Trehan, 2010; Reynolds & Vince, 2004; Trehan, 2011; Trehan & Rigg, 2015; Vince, 2010). CAL attends to issues of power, politics and emotion within the ALS towards taking a more critical approach to learning (Trehan, 2011; Vince, 2010). Here, participants are encouraged to question their underlying assumptions and values and to consider tensions and contradictions within the ALS and the wider organisation.

Regardless of the variant of action learning used, some components are considered common. Action learning is centred on a problem that participants tackle in an ALS with the support of its members through a process of action, learning and reflection (Marquardt & Waddill, 2004; Pedler & Abbott, 2013). The next section elaborates further each these components: the problem, the ALS and the process in this context of the literature.

### 2.2.1 The problem

An action learning approach starts with a problem, a real problem that has no single answer, but many alternative answers, hence a problem not a puzzle (Revans, 2011). Tackling the problem is dependent on the context in which it is a problem, the values of those addressing the problem and the resources available. Managers using action learning to tackle organisational problems must be empowered to take action on the problem; action can be thinking, exploring, rehearsing and doing (Pedler, 2008). It is the problem that provides the vehicle for learning (Sofa, Yeo, & Villafañe, 2010), both at an individual

and organisational level (Brook et al., 2012; Lawless, 2008). Mumford (1997) stresses the importance of the problem being a genuine problem and not merely a simulation where actions are only recommended, with Raelin (2009a) adding that where problems are real, they matter to participants, as the risk they take and their actions have genuine implications. Furthermore, it is because of this focus on ‘real problems’ that action learning is so attractive to managers, as by working on real problems they are doing their day to day job, with the added value of paying attention to learning, and self-development, or what Mumford (1997) calls the “double value” of action learning (p. 6).

Problems can be categorised as: individual problems or joint problems (Dilworth & Boshyk, 2010); familiar problems, unfamiliar problems; known context, unknown context (Mumford, 1997; Pedler & Abbott, 2013). Individual problems are common in an educational setting whereas joint problems tend to be more common in an organisational setting (Dilworth, 2010a). Dilworth (2010a) contends that there can be issues where problems are individual; it is his view that other members may not be interested in problems in which they have no stake, and he has found that there is a risk of less spontaneity as compared to when everyone is familiar with the problem. Brook et al. (2012) are of the view that tackling organisational problems collectively with action learning provides more opportunity for organisational development and “impact” than an individual problem focus (p. 279). However, it is possible to argue that learning and professional development, as a result of using action learning to tackle individual problems, adds to organisational learning given the manager is a part of the organisation. Rigg (2008, p. 114) perceptively comments, “we have to recognise that, at times, individual issues will prevail and may need time first”.

### 2.2.2 The ALS

The ALS is of utmost importance to action learning, it is integral to the process (Revans, 1982, 2011). It involves four to six peers (Pedler, 2008), who Revans (1982) calls “comrades in adversity” (p. 68), engaging in friendly and critical questioning, in a trusted environment that enables set members, or participants, to get clarity regarding their problem and actions taken, with a view to taking further action (Pedler, 2008). ALSs meet on a regular basis, participants present their problem (individual or collective), while their “comrades” listen attentively, after which they pose insightful questions to the presenter, who reflects on the questions and agrees subsequent actions. ALSs operate according to

agreed principles including trust, confidentiality, commitment, active listening and presenting fresh questions (Pedler & Abbott, 2013). The set provides the space for the members to reflect on actions taken and learn from both actions and reflections. The ALS is a place where new meanings and understandings are constructed collectively, a place of shared and relational learning, learning which can continue outside the set (Lawless, 2008). In the ALS participants challenge each other through questioning; they question underlying assumptions about the problem and support each other in agreeing actions (Raelin, 2009a). It can take time to develop trust and openness in the set; reflecting on being a participant on an action learning programme Caie (1987) informs us that little learning happened in the first few months as it took time to settle into a new way of learning, and to be comfortable with the process of action learning.

In most practices, bar self-managed ALSs, a facilitator or a coach has a role to play. As mentioned briefly in the discussion of the schools of action learning above, depending on the school the role of the facilitator may be light touch or heavy touch. In Revans' action learning the manager/learner is at the centre of learning, not the tutor or expert academic. He was not an advocate of the expert facilitator but rather saw the role of the facilitator as that of establishing the set and moving on, that is light touch facilitation (Dilworth, 2010b; Mumford, 1997). In the Critical Reflection School, in which action reflection learning (ARL) and CAL fit, and in the Experiential School, the facilitator/coach takes a pivotal role in facilitating the ALS and enhancing the learning experience for the participants. The facilitator in ARL is a combination of "facilitator, coach and instructor" (Marsick & Rimanoczy, 2010, p. 254). Supporting participants in their reflection is the role for the ARL coach, Marsick and Rimanoczy (2010) accept that where participants no longer require or need their coach to enable reflection, the coach should step aside and become the type of very light touch facilitator Revans advocates (Marsick & Rimanoczy, 2010). The learning coaches need to know when, and when not, to intervene, avoiding the temptation to put themselves "in the limelight" (Marsick & Rimanoczy, 2010, p. 247).

McGill and Brockbank (2011), who would best align with the Experiential School, claim the main role of the facilitator is to enable and elicit reflective learning, and optimally transformative learning, by attending to the affective domain and the emotional dimension of learning. It is their contention that "[r]eflective dialogue which includes emotion" (McGill & Brockbank, 2011, p. 265) can provide the conduit for higher levels

of learning. However, they caution that where the affective domain is attended to in ALS facilitation, the skills of the facilitator are crucial.

Dilworth (2010a) is critical of the expert facilitator and claims that expert facilitators put themselves at the centre of action learning, not trusting the learner/participant to solve their own problem without the facilitator's guidance and direction. He asserts that the interventionist facilitator disturbs the flow of the ALS, and that it would be better to set time aside specifically to focus on and distil learning, rather than to interrupt the flow of the ALS. Furthermore, he argues that advocating empowerment while at the same time wishing to control the process, as he claims expert facilitators do, is contradictory. Tension between control and empowerment by those engaging in CAL is, however, acknowledged with the challenge for the facilitator being to release the brake without total loss of control of the process (Breen, 2014).

### 2.2.3 The process

The action learning process comprises iterative cycles of questioning, action, reflection and learning. The cycle may appear neat when described, however, in practice, it can be a messy process. Both questioning and reflection are central to the process as they are the drivers for action and learning (Kramer, 2007). However, it is action learning's "pragmatic focus" on learning that distinguishes it from other action modalities and problem-based approaches (Cho, 2013, p. 7). Although taking action is crucial to the process it is learning and not action that is the goal: action is the vehicle or servant to learning (Rooke, Altounyan, Young, & Young, 2007). How this learning is enacted is through the insightful questions of peers in the ALS regarding actions taken, a process supported by reflection.

This insightful questioning is a key part of the process, "it invigorates thinking, learning, actions and results" providing the opportunity to explore problems and look at them differently (Adams, 2010, p. 119). Indeed, it is often considered the instrument that leads to change in the behaviour of participants and so is "the pathway to learning" (Raelin, 2009a, p. 421). Adams (2010) reminds us how underpinning each of Revans' (2011) alpha, beta and gamma are questions such as: what is happening? what do I want to happen? what assumptions am I making? what information is there? what is my role? how am I influencing the problem? how could I do things differently? Good questioning can

help to unblock thinking and facilitate seeing things in different ways and it can help participants to make progress particularly when they may feel stuck regarding which actions to take (Raelin, 2009a). It provides the scope for “discovering more about yourself, more about the process, more about how to transfer particular experiences to other situations” (Mumford, 1997, p. 12). However, although insightful questions can lead to breakthroughs and unleashing new ways of thinking it can also be very challenging and lead to discomfort, especially where it questions firmly held beliefs and assumptions (Brook et al., 2012; Marsick, 1990; Vince, 2010, 2015).

Reflection, and being reflective, is increasingly considered a desirable behaviour of practising managers (Corley & Thorne, 2005; Petriglieri, Wood, & Petriglieri, 2011; Reynolds, 1998; Trehan & Rigg, 2012). It is moreover an “intrinsic” part of action learning that supports participants in realising and distilling their learning (Adams, 2010, p. 125), and facilitating converting “tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge” (Cho, 2013, p. 6). McGill and Brockbank (2008, p. 11) emphasise the “continuous process of learning and reflection” in the process. Reflection during the ALS requires participants to reflect on their experience and the actions they have taken to tackle their problem. It can be individual or collective, and can help in “uncovering hidden assumptions” (Sofa et al., 2010, p. 212). Depending on the variants or action learning school, reflection can be an instrumental and rational process, or it can take the form of critical reflection where deeply held convictions and assumptions are challenged (Marsick & Maltbia, 2009; Mezirow, 1990; Reynolds, 2011). Marsick observes that she has “come to appreciate that reflection looks different for each person. An extrovert reflects by talking to someone, while an introvert needs quiet time” (Marsick & Rimanoczy, 2010, p. 246). However, regardless as to the role of the facilitator with respect to reflection and reflecting, what is agreed is the importance of reflection and indeed critical reflection.

The reflective component of action learning is where you harvest the key learning that has occurred before it has a chance to decay. This is strategic in nature, because it not only builds the capacity of the learner to tackle future problems, but it can also serve to build the competitive advantage of the business enterprise (Dilworth, 2010b, p. 273).

Mumford (1997) too observes that by reflecting on our experiences we learn. However, he cautions that such reflection on experiences may lead to invalid conclusions, and participants being defensive and seeing problems everywhere other than with themselves.

To avoid this, he suggests participants be advised to critically question each other, question whether there are other ways to do things and encourage dissention.

Adams (2010, p. 129) says of action learning that it can be considered a “generative gift” that may result in the “transformation of participants – from answer-driven problem solvers to more thoughtful, strategic, collaborative and inquiry-based one”. It is a social process where learning and knowledge are co-constructed with the set members through a process of dialogue, reflection and insightful questioning having the potential to offer the necessary conditions for transformative learning (Ajoku, 2015; Brooks, 2004; Marsick & Maltbia, 2009; McGill & Brockbank, 2008, 2011; Rigg, 2011). Mezirow (1997) who first presented a theory of transformative learning claims it to be “the essence” of adult learning (p. 11). It comprises learning by making meaning of experiences calling for critical reflection and autonomous thinking. It can result in changing one’s point of view and/or habit of mind, albeit the latter is considered more difficult and less common than the former (Mezirow, 1997).

Over the years Mezirow continued to build and add to his original theory of transformative learning which “remains largely cognitive and implies a linear process” (Cranton & Kasl, 2012). However, in later years he acknowledged the role of the social and emotional dimensions though still placed his emphasis on conscious awareness and the rational cognitive process (Mezirow, 2009). In the early years he suggested a linear process of transformative learning where a disorienting dilemma sparked transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991, 1997) later acknowledging that “[t]ransformations may be epochal (involving dramatic or major changes) or incremental and may involve objective (task oriented) or subjective (self-reflective) reframing” Mezirow (2009, p. 23). Scholars critiquing the over-emphasis by Mezirow on the rational cognitive process and the absence of including social and emotional dimensions in the theory have added to the theory of transformational learning (Cranton, 1994; Cranton & Kasl, 2012; Dirkx, Mezirow, & Cranton, 2006; Illeris, 2003, 2004, 2014; Taylor, 2009, 2017).

Illeris' (2004) conception of transformative learning lies somewhere between that of Mezirow's (1997) transformative learning that gives primacy to the cognitive, and Dirkx's (2012) which embraces the affective and the unconscious with its emphasis on the soul and dark shadows. Illeris (2014) seeks a balance somewhere in between

understanding transformative learning as not a predominantly cognitive process but equally influenced by the social and emotional dimensions. Positioning his understanding of transformative learning, Illeris (2003, p. 402) presents four levels of learning, based on the work of Piaget (1952) which are cumulative or mechanical; assimilative; accommodative, and transformative. Cumulative learning is more prevalent in early years and occurs where something is learned without context whilst assimilative learning is learning by addition and is, according to Illeris (2003), the type of learning that is most talked about as it is “the ordinary understanding of the concept of learning” (p.403). Accommodative learning implies “that one breaks down (parts of) an existing scheme and transforms it so that the new situation can be linked to it” (Illeris, 2003, p. 402), it is about internalising learning. With accommodative learning the learner deconstructs and reconstructs in a new context what has been learned, it is a process that is not without pain and requires “mental energy” (Illeris, 2003, p. 402). In Illeris’ (2003, p. 402) own words “it is typically experienced as having got hold of something which one really has internalized” and is able to apply in varying contexts. The final level of learning presented by Illeris (2003) is one he terms transformative or expansive learning and is learning that may occur in “special situations” and “is characterized by simultaneous restructuring in the cognitive, the emotional and the social-societal dimensions” (p. 402). Mezirow’s concept of transformative learning aligns with Illeris’ understanding of accommodative and transformative learning (Illeris, 2004).

Taylor (2009) notes six core elements for fostering transformative learning: individual experience, critical reflection, dialogue, holistic orientation, awareness of context and authentic relationships. Critical reflection, which Mezirow (1997) considered a trigger for transformative learning, concerns questioning own values and assumptions. Taylor (2009, p. 7) highlights three types of reflection, which can lead to meaning making: “content (reflecting on what we perceive, think, feel and act), process (reflecting on how we perform the functions of perceiving), and premise (an awareness of why we perceive)”. He continues by noting that premise reflection is the “least common” although the “basis for critical reflection” (Taylor, 2009, p. 8). A suggested tool to support improved reflection is to use the written medium to construct “artifacts of ideas of the mind”, which “challenges learners to both recall from memory and verbally articulate reflective moments” (Taylor, 2009, p. 9). Dialogue, Taylor tells us, is “the essential medium through

which transformation is promoted and developed” (Taylor, 2009, p. 9). Dialogue takes the form of questioning underlying assumptions of ideas held and of truths asserted; it requires trust, openness, empathy with others and a willingness to make sense of experience amongst other things. Indeed Mezirow (2000, p. 12) emphasises the need for “trust, solidarity, security and empathy” as preconditions for this type of learning though they may not be as easily established as Mezirow makes them sound. Dialogue that fosters transformative learning can be uncomfortable and laden with emotions, “it is much more than having an analytical conversation” (Taylor, 2009, p. 10). The fourth component outlined by Taylor (2009) to foster transformative learning is an holistic orientation towards teaching where the whole cognitive, social and emotive learner is engaged. It is an environment where the role of emotions in learning is acknowledged and supported, particularly as emotion can help trigger reflection. Recognising and understanding the learners’ context, both professionally and personally, is important in supporting transformational learning. Finally, noting the importance of the relational element of the transformative learning process Taylor says that those authentic relationships by

establishing positive and productive relationships with others is one of the essential factors in a transformative experience. It is through building trusting relationships that learners develop the confidence to deal with learning on an affective level, where transformation at times can be perceived as threatening and an emotionally charged experience (Taylor, 2009, p. 13).

Fostering transformative learning can be a challenge to educators, the process itself can be unsettling, messy, and uncomfortable for learners considering that it requires questioning core assumptions and therefore educators need to be cognisant of the emotion which can be entailed (Baumgartner, 2001; Dirkx, 2012; Dirkx et al., 2006; Dirkx & Smith, 2009; Taylor & Jarecke, 2009).

Many scholars caution about the over-use of the term transformative learning, saying that this can lead to devaluing the contribution and significance of it (Illeris, 2014; Taylor, 2009; West, 2014). They note the importance of real change happening, where perspectives are changed and long held assumptions and beliefs critically questioned. Argumentatively Newman (2012, 2014) asks whether there is indeed a need for the term transformative learning and indeed should not all good learning transform or change the learner. He contends that it is sufficient to call what some call transformative learning

merely good learning. Whilst I appreciate the arguments he puts forward in both 2012 and 2014, my own view is that the term is worthwhile as it distinguishes transformative learning from other types of learning. However it should not be used too flippantly so as to be undervalued (Illeris, 2014; Taylor & Jarecke, 2009).

## **2.3 BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES OF ACTION LEARNING**

Adopting action learning approaches in attempting to resolve organisational problems has both benefits and challenges which are outlined briefly in the next two sections and returned to in Section 2.4 where the discussion focuses on action learning in a HE context.

### **2.3.1 Benefits of action learning**

There are numerous benefits attributed to the use of action learning in tackling organisational problems. It has been found to encourage participants to see their world from differing perspectives or “through the lens of the other company because, when working in one's own environment, you're not so wide in your sight” (Marsick, 1990, p. 55), thus opening the opportunity for new ways of thinking and acting. The process encourages the participant to become more self-aware and to gain insight into themselves as managers (Marsick, 1990; McGill & Brockbank, 2008). Reid (1997) suggests the following benefits of action learning: increased confidence of participants; participants becoming more accepting of their own fallibility; transfer of learning back to the host organisation; and work getting done.

Additionally, with its focus on learning from action, action learning can facilitate participants in learning how to learn and in double loop learning (Rigg, 2011). It can also result in improved outcomes for organisations (Pedler & Abbott, 2008; Turner & Heneberry, 2013; Waddill, Banks, & Marsh, 2010), in enhancing management practice (Leonard & Marquardt, 2010) and developing leadership skills (Stewart, 2009). In Vince's (2012, p.209) words “action learning is a powerful and effective approach to managers' learning and it can underpin transformations of management practice.”

### **2.3.2 Challenges of action learning**

Notwithstanding the benefits claimed for action learning, it is not without its challenges. It can be time consuming and resource hungry, there can be issues with establishing and maintaining the set, and encouraging set members to share openly and honestly (Marsick,

1990). It is common that there is initially scepticism when faced with this innovative approach (Reid, 1997). Action learning, and particularly CAL, can place participants out of their comfort zones, and even be an unsettling experience especially where it challenges the status quo (Reynolds & Vince, 2004; Vince, 2010, 2012). Participants can fear losing control during the process and also fear exposing themselves which can result in anxiety (McGill & Brockbank, 2008, 2011).

Evaluating action learning is another key challenge facing those using it as there is no “magic bullet” (Edmonstone, 2015, p. 143; Trehan & Pedler, 2011). Edmonstone (2015) asks the question as to what is it exactly that we are trying to evaluate when we evaluate action learning? Is it action? Is it learning? When should the evaluation happen? During, directly after or some time after? A trickier question is, how can the action learning elements be separated out from other things, which are likely to be happening at the same time in the organisation? Furthermore, what does success actually look like and to whom? These are challenges that are not insurmountable but which need to be considered when evaluating action learning.

#### 2.4 ACTION LEARNING IN A HIGHER EDUCATION CONTEXT

Though action learning is mainly used in organisational settings and as a management development tool in corporate settings, it is also used as an approach to learning in HE settings (Park et al., 2013; Raelin, 2009a). Though its use in HE is “only very modest” (Pedler, Burgoyne, & Brook, 2005, p. 50) it is increasingly found at post-graduate and post-experience levels (Corley & Thorne, 2006). Action learning challenges a traditional didactic approach to teaching, where the expert academic fills the learners’ empty heads with expert knowledge (P), and where there is typically little active learning or transfer of learning back to the work place (Bunning, 1997). In contrast, learners are at the centre in action learning, and the approach is grounded in values of trust, personal responsibility, autonomy of learning and confidentiality (Pedler & Abbott, 2013) providing the opportunity for “wide and deep learning” (Gosling & Ashton, 1994, p. 273). With action learning, it is the learner, not the teacher, who is viewed as the expert. Rather than seeing learners as deficient of knowledge, action learning views learners as the controllers of their own learning and experts in solving their own problem and should be considered as a “dynamic approach to teaching and learning” (Anderson, 2008, p. 187).

Coghlan and Pedler (2006, p. 127), echoing Thorpe (1988), tell us that

[I]n the context of management education, action learning has been controversial, both because of its elevation of the role of practitioners over experts and teachers, and because of the manner of its emergence in opposition to traditional business school practice.

Dilworth (2010b, p. 23) calls it “an uncomfortable fit”, whilst Anderson (2008, p. 190) claims that it can be viewed with “derision” and seen as “soft” in business schools more used to a rational approach to business education. Nevertheless, it “has seen an increasing use in postgraduate and post-experience management education programmes” in the past two decades due to the growth in practice-based education, and the desire to harness the work experiences of participants in achieving their own qualifications (Coghlan & Pedler, 2006, p. 128). Indeed, in 1994 Howell held the view of action learning holding “the keys of the future” for management education (p. 20). However, contrary to this positive outlook, Bourner, Cooper and France (2000, p. 8) suggest that action learning “has made only limited inroads into management education in universities”. It can be seen as “threatening” to those who value programmed learning over practical experience, a view echoed by Edmonstone and Robson (2014). Furthermore, action learning is viewed as resource heavy, both time and cost wise (Brook & Milner, 2014; Edmonstone & Robson, 2014).

Within HE programmes there is much diversity concerning the use and application of action learning (Dilworth, 2010b). It has been used to support professional and personal development; to improve reflection; as a tool to support writing of a dissertation; to enhance learning, and; to underpin the pedagogy of an entire programme (Beniston, Ellwood, Gold, Roberts, & Thorpe, 2014; Brook & Milner, 2014; Corley & Thorne, 2006; Milano et al., 2015; Mughal, Gatrell, & Stead, 2018; Ruane, 2016; Tushman, Fenollosa, McGrath, O’Reilly, & Kleinbaum, 2007; Van Schuyver, 2004; Yeadon-Lee & Worsdale, 2012). Action learning approaches to teaching and learning are most commonly found in business schools in HEI (Bourner et al., 2000; Brook & Milner, 2014; Edmonstone & Robson, 2014; Johnson & Spicer, 2006; Lawless, 2008; Milano et al., 2015; Tushman et al., 2007; Yeadon-Lee & Worsdale, 2012) and the health sciences (Machin & Pearson, 2014; Mc Kee & Markless, 2017; Waugh, McNay, Dewar, & McCaig, 2014) though it has also been used to support engineers and scientists (Beniston et al., 2014; Marchand,

2017). While both Revans and Mumford stress the primacy of Q, neither discounts P. However, it would be fair to say that Revans does not put as much value on it as Mumford (1997) who sees it as unnecessary to see either P or Q as trying to usurp the other. It is Mumford's view that P should be incorporated in a manner that fits with the action learning philosophy, participant context and relevance. Where action learning is used as pedagogy in HE it would be unusual to find a programme devoid of P on an accredited programme.

#### 2.4.1 Research on action learning in higher education programmes

Commonly, research concerning the use of action learning on HE programmes is underpinned by an interpretivist epistemology adopting a qualitative approach. Much of the research is presented as accounts of practice (Beniston et al., 2014; Boak, 2011; Bourner & Frost, 1996; Burger, 2013; Dunphy, Proctor, Bartlett, Haslam, & Wood, 2010; Gosling & Ashton, 1994; Harrison & Edwards, 2012; Lee, 2006; Marchand, 2017; Mc Kee & Markless, 2017; Mendonça, Parker, Udo, & Groves, 2015; Milano et al., 2015; Naftalin, 1996; Paton et al., 2014; Thorpe, 1988; Trehan & Pedler, 2009; Young, 2010) which present how action learning is incorporated into programmes, and the benefits and challenges associated with its use. Fewer are rigorous empirical studies (Burger, Bogolyubov, & Easterby-Smith, 2013; Edmonstone & Robson, 2014; Griffiths, Ingle, Massey, & Pokorny, 2008; Lawless, 2008; Machin & Pearson, 2014; Tushman et al., 2007; Yeadon-Lee, 2013b; Yeadon-Lee & Worsdale, 2012). The extant literature takes various perspectives; some incorporates the academic-only perspective (Boak, 2011; Paton et al., 2014), most present a combined perspective of academic and participant (Beniston et al., 2014; Brook & Milner, 2014; Dunphy et al., 2010; Edmonstone & Robson, 2014; Machin & Pearson, 2014; Milano et al., 2015; Pedler et al., 2005); few take the participant/learner only view (Burger, 2013; Lawless, 2008; Van Schuyver, 2004; Mendonça et al., 2015; Yeadon-Lee, 2013a, 2013b; Yeadon-Lee & Hall, 2013). This participant-only focus, despite being underrepresented, is very important as it provides rich insight into the learning process from those who experience it. In focusing in on the participant perspective, the voice of the participant is recognised as significant in gaining a richer understanding of learning.

#### 2.4.2 Action learning in higher education programmes: benefits claimed

There are many benefits attributed to the use of action learning as an approach to learning in HE. Tushman et al. (2007) in their empirical research found courses delivered using action learning, in comparison to more traditional methods, significantly enhanced learning for both the individual and the organisation. Incorporating principles of action learning has been found to foster deep learning among students (Lizzio & Wilson, 2004; Young, 2010), enhance learner engagement (Griffiths et al., 2008) and “helps students overcome the feeling of being stuck” (Yip & Raelin, 2012, p. 348). According to O'Hara, Webber, and Reeve (1996, p. 21) the principal benefits of action learning in management education are focused around learning, in particular learning to learn, self-managed learning, learning with and through others and enhanced self-awareness. Supporting this assertion Edmonstone and Robson (2014, p. 5), in their account of practice of using action learning on a postgraduate programme, say that action learning can lead to a “major contribution to learning”. They find that action learning supports developing leaders and managers with the skills necessary to address complex issues. Furthermore, from their evaluation, they claim the use of action learning led to the Master's programme being “inclusive of personal growth and development; was socially empowering” (Edmonstone & Robson, 2014, p. 12). Beniston et al. (2014) attribute an improvement in learner reflection and critical reflection skills to the use of action learning, suggesting that despite action learning programmes being resource heavy “it works amazingly well” (p. 17). They also report that participants attributed advancement in their careers to the learning gained on this programme. Additional benefits suggested by Trantom (2013) are improved leadership skills, confidence and patience.

Marchand (2017) in an account of practice shares his insights from the use of ALS to support doctoral students with their research. The main benefit participants found was that ALS gave them a place to share and “connect” (Marchand, 2017, p. 93) with other students; it provided a sense of “community” (Marchand, 2017, p. 92) which supported them on their doctoral journey, a journey where they could at times feel isolated and stressed. The ALS provided the space to explore problems and issues with peers, a place where they were listened to. Supporting these findings Trantom (2013, p. 248), in his account of practice of using action learning in a HE leadership context, tells of the relief of managers realising they are not the only ones facing problems, and how they no longer

feel “a sense of isolation” and value being able to share in the ALS. Likewise, McKee and Markless (2017) note the value of ALSs to student doctors in particular supporting them in facing challenges of feeling isolated during work-based training.

Furthermore, in their research into the effectiveness of using action learning on a nursing programme Waugh et al. (2014, p. 1236) found it to be a positive experience for both participants and academics, creating “an enriched learning experience for students and lecturers”. This positive response to the use of action learning is common in the literature (Beniston et al., 2014; Corley & Thorne, 2006; Edmonstone & Robson, 2014; Marchand, 2017; Van Schuyver, 2004). Echoing Harrison and Edwards (2012), Waugh et al. (2014) contend that incorporating action learning into the programme provided a safe space to try things out. They also observed that the ALS helped to build key “interpersonal and relational skills”, develop self-awareness, facilitated the learners in seeing others’ perspectives, and helped the learners to manage their own emotions (Waugh et al., 2014, p. 1236). Similarly, Machin and Pearson (2014) found that action learning contributed to enhancing participants’ professional selves through improved awareness of others’ views resulting in them becoming more empathetic, which is a valued skill in this nursing profession study. Whilst the concept of providing this safe space is viewed positively within the literature (Waugh et al., 2014), Corley and Thorne (2006) ask the interesting question as to whether it can be too safe, in so much as it can discourage the participant addressing conflict outside the ALS.

Research conducted by Van Schuyver (2004) in his doctoral study provides an in-depth participant focus on learning of two Masters’ programmes using action learning. This participant-only focus is not common in the empirical research on action learning with other notable exceptions being Burger (2013); Burger et al. (2013); Lawless (2008); Yeadon-Lee and Worsdale (2012). Van Schuyver (2004) found that participants experienced learning at both lower and higher levels, with transformational learning observed in the form of participants displaying behaviours of learning how to learn. The data provided evidence that the majority of learning came from insightful questioning, thus supporting Revans’ proposition that without insightful questioning, programmed learning is insufficient (Revans, 2011). Burger et al. (2013) also found that action learning could lead to transformative learning coupled with perceived feelings of empowerment

by participants. They link these perceived benefits to the level of engagement of the participants during the learning process.

Yeadon-Lee and Worsdale (2012), also taking a participant-only view in their research on members' experiences of ALS on an action learning Master of Business Administration programme, confirm the importance and integral role played by the ALS. They highlight the synergies created by being a member of an ALS, and present evidence that working as part of the ALS can lead to better outcomes than if work was carried out individually. The ALSs were found to provide a "positive psychological climate" (Yeadon-Lee & Worsdale, 2012, p.10) for participants and this safe climate enabled the participants to share ideas, question openly, challenge themselves and others, without fear of recriminations and thus resulted in "better prospects" (Yeadon-Lee & Worsdale, 2012, p. 12) of task completion. These findings support earlier claims by O'Hara et al. (1996), which were based on their experiences as academics delivering action learning programmes.

Moreover, action learning develops learner self-confidence and capability (Brook & Milner, 2014; Corley & Thorne, 2006; Griffiths et al., 2008). There is evidence that its use in HE programmes can lead to better outcomes for the learners than would perhaps be the case compared with more traditional approaches (Brook & Milner, 2014; Edmonstone & Robson, 2014; Tushman et al., 2007). Interpersonal and transferable skills have been found to be developed as a result of adopting an action learning approach (Waugh et al., 2014; Yeadon-Lee & Hall, 2013) and, as would be expected, there is evidence that it develops learners' ability to problem solve (Griffiths et al., 2008). In research on developing criticality through action learning Breen (2014, p. 21) found that participants enjoyed the approach, saying that it was "fascinating, excellent, enjoyable, creative and [a] different learning approach for them".

#### 2.4.3 Challenges and issues of adopting action learning in higher education programmes

The use of action learning on HE programmes, akin to action learning in other settings, is not without its challenges. Many writers have explored the challenges faced while designing and delivering action learning programmes (Dunphy et al., 2010; Edmonstone & Robson, 2014; Johnson & Spicer, 2006; Mendonça et al., 2015; Milano et al., 2015). In agreement with Edmonstone and Robson (2014) and resonating with Bourner et al.

(2000), Stephens and Margey (2015) surface the difficulties which can arise with respect to measuring learning and assessment on action learning programmes. This is an issue also acknowledged by Beniston et al. (2014) in their discussions of the credibility of action learning programmes in academia, and at times is seen to lead to unfavourable attitudes within academia to incorporating action learning into programmes.

Lizzio and Wilson (2004, p. 484) caution facilitators and academics not to “underestimate the demands” an action learning approach can place on learners. Similar to Machin and Pearson (2014), they find that learners can be confused as to what is expected of them and so note the importance of being clear as to what action learning is, and what is to be expected. They even go as far as to say that perhaps a “health warning” (Lizzio & Wilson, 2004, p. 484) should be attached to the use of action learning in education where learners are explicitly made aware that action learning is a messy busy where “imperfection” and dissonance are to be expected (Lizzio & Wilson, 2004, p. 484).

The potentially challenging nature of action learning can lead to uncomfortableness during the process (Beniston et al., 2014; Bourner & Frost, 1996; Dunphy et al., 2010; Harrison & Edwards, 2012; Machin & Pearson, 2014). O'Hara et al. (1996, p. 18) speak of the “anxiety” felt by some participants, Breen (2014) observed that the change in power dynamic from tutor to participant could result in emotions running high and learners feeling perplexed. Furthermore, Dunphy et al. (2010) found there could be “confusion about the purpose” (p. 308) and discomfort at “the level of self-disclosure” (p. 307) required in the process, an observation supported by Griffiths et al. (2008). Marchand (2017) too describes action learning as a challenging and emotional process, a process that could leave participants “exposed” and at times “exhausted” (p. 92). Lawless (2008) also cautions of the danger of learners feeling isolated when they “question taken-for-granted assumptions” within their own organisations (p. 127).

Moreover, hierarchical and power issues can arise in ALSs potentially undermining severely the success or otherwise of programmes adopting the use of action learning (Yeadon-Lee, 2013a, 2013b). Yeadon-Lee (2013a, 2013b) cautions the facilitator to consider potential hierarchical issues when deciding on the composition of the ALS; get it wrong and there is the danger that participants’ engagement and learning may suffer. Interestingly, Mughal et al. (2018) raise similar hierarchical and indeed cultural issues

that can arise. Their research identifies challenges that can manifest themselves due to gender and cultural norms, both for participants and facilitators, when using action learning to support dissertation studies on a MBA programme in Pakistan. Both Yeadon-Lee and Mughal et al.'s research highlights the importance of creating a climate of trust "which creates reciprocity within the sets, thus encouraging individuals examination of individuals own views [sic], with opportunities to reframing where appropriate" (Yeadon-Lee, 2013b, p. 991). Trust is acknowledged as an essential component within an ALS. However, it can be challenging to establish (Johnson & Spicer, 2006) and, without trust, ALS members can be reluctant to share openly and honestly (Stephens & Margey, 2015). Time and "patience" are required to establish trust and to facilitate ALS members in bonding (Marchand, 2017, p. 94).

Given that a key principle of membership of an ALS is that it should be voluntary (McGill & Brockbank, 2008), it can present a challenge in an educational setting particularly where credit is not linked to attendance. Mendonça et al. (2015), in an account of practice reflecting on their experiences of being a part of an ALS on a doctoral programme credited lack of attendance at, and commitment to, their ALS as a prime reason why their ALSs were not as productive or useful as they could have been. In fact they found the ALS disappointing and a missed opportunity. They observe that ALS members were not committed to the process, as there was no obligation on them to attend. Some of the authors attributed the lack of commitment and poor attendance at ALS to an overly structured and formal ALS approach, which in turn was constraining and a hindrance to sharing progress honestly (Mendonça et al., 2015).

Facilitation of ALSs can also present a challenge. Boak (2011, p. 165) stresses the importance of an "experienced action learning facilitator" in order to support the efficacy of action learning programmes. Breen (2014) too notes the importance of the facilitator being well prepared, whilst Corley and Thorne (2006, p. 41) recommend that the "inclusion of an expert facilitator can enhance the quality of questioning by introducing P (expert/programmed knowledge) in order to enable better Q". Edmonstone and Robson (2014, p. 9) suggest that "while prior experience of action learning is not necessarily a precondition for set facilitation", being familiar with experiential learning, reflection and questioning techniques is helpful. Dunphy et al. (2010, p. 312) provide advice regarding how to support participants in ALS, and advocate a half-day training to explain what

action learning is and how it works. Additionally, they advise “that dissonance and incongruity are an inevitable part of any genuine learning process” (Dunphy et al., 2010, p. 312) and require careful facilitation so as not to hinder learning but rather to enhance it. Edmonstone and Robson (2014) highlight the difficulty for the facilitator of ensuring that ALSs are challenging enough, and point out that finding the right balance is important and may take time, cautioning that where members are challenged too much, too early, learning can be hindered. Allowing sufficient time is necessary to allow ALS participants to become comfortable in the ALS.

Burger et al. (2013) take a phenomenological approach to inquire into participant experiences of resistance to learning on an action learning programme. They find that resistance is not necessarily negative and can in fact support learning at a more meaningful level. It is their contention that action learning can be better understood by adding a relational cycle to Revans’ learning cycle and Vince’s (2010) emotional cycle. Drawing on Illeris’ (2003) learning theory, they present “a three-dimensional model of action learning, where all three processes – cognitive, social and emotional – work simultaneously and influence each other” (Burger et al., 2013, p. 25). They find the concept of resistance to be complex and “a product of a variety of forces, including the previous understanding of the action learning concept, the social setting and the participants’ perception and sense of self-efficacy” (Burger et al., 2013, p. 26). In a separate article, based on the same research, Burger (2013) provides her account of practice where she explores the concept of resistance further. Interestingly, she suggests “it is particularly the doubtful and resistant participants who may gain deeply transformational insights” (Burger, 2013, p. 271). Following on, she asserts that ALS facilitators should work with participants’ resistance and view it as an enabler and “an opportunity” for learning towards developing “meaningful insights” (Burger, 2013, p. 272). Towards this she suggests two strategies, one of individual empowerment and one of collective empowerment.

Milano et al. (2015), in their account of learning on a Masters’ programme that incorporated the use of ALSs, draw attention to potential ethical issues, which can arise as a result of the learner/manager being an insider researcher as is usually the case with action learning research. Sharing their reflections and lessons learned from being a part of the programme, both from participant and facilitator perspectives they note the

constraints put on the action learning process due to “time pressures to complete” the programme, which can result in learning loss through not having the opportunity to spend more time understanding and reframing the problem. Additionally, they draw attention to the potential issue of an over-reliance on programmed or expert knowledge when faced with a particularly tricky problem. Finally, they caution that where the “destination” of the programme rather than the “journey” is paramount then learning can be “undermined” (Milano et al., 2015, p. 323).

Whilst the studies discussed above extend knowledge and understanding of an action learning approach in a HE context and provide valuable insights about action learning in these contexts, what is missing is an holistic and in-depth perspective of what it feels like to be a participant and a learner on such programmes.

## 2.5 FOCUS FOR MY RESEARCH ON ACTION LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION CONTEXT

As discussed above, much of the recent research on action learning in HE provides a general evaluation of the programmes from multiple views. Brook et al. (2012, p. 269) observe, “the focus of literature reviews has been on gathering and exploring accounts of practice and examples of application”. Many academics have provided their own accounts of practice of their experiences of using action learning within an educational setting, describing the programmes and sharing their insights and recommendations (Gosling & Ashton, 1994; Harrison & Edwards, 2012; Naftalin, 1996; Thorpe, 1988). In the context of HE research on the use of action learning as pedagogy, few empirical studies explore the learning process in depth from a participant-only perspective. There are exceptions, notably: Burger (2013); Burger et al. (2013); Lawless (2008); Van Schuyver (2004); Yeadon-Lee (2013b).

What is missing in empirical studies is research where participants’ learning experiences, in all its complexity, is presented as a whole and privileging the participants’ voices. The extant literature presents snippets of the participants’ learning stories (Bourner & Frost, 1996) or presents a participant perspective focusing in on a particular aspect of the participant perspective of learning in action learning : Burger (2013), resistance; Yeadon-Lee (2013b), Yeadon-Lee and Worsdale (2012), intra-personal relationships within ALSs; Lawless (2008), action learning as legitimate peripheral participation and Van Schuyver (2004), the role of questioning insight in learning in action learning. In my

search of the literature, I have found no empirical study that adopts a narrative stance or that presents findings as an holistic participant story of learning using participants' own words in the re-telling. This research seeks to tell a story of what it is like to learn on a programme underpinned by action learning and in so doing to illuminate the process of learning. It aims to tell a story in the words of the participants, which evokes both visceral and emotional dimensions of the learning journey, that is what it "feels like" rather than what it "thinks like" to be a participant on an action learning programme (Traeger, 2017, p. 130). In so doing, it answers the following questions:

1. What is it like for participants to learn on an executive action learning MBSIL?
2. How do the stories they tell of their learning experiences illuminate the process of learning on an executive action learning MBSIL?
3. How can the insights from these stories develop and enhance the practice of action learning on HE programmes?

This research answers the call for more scholarly research into the use of action learning on HE programmes (Anderson, 2008; Haith & Whittingham, 2012; Van Schuyver, 2004; Yeadon-Lee, 2013b). Furthermore, it answers calls by Vince (2008, 2015) and (Burger et al., 2013) for more research on emotional and social dimensions of learning by presenting a story that conveys what it feels like for participants on the MBSIL. Additionally, it answers a call for new ways of conducting and presenting research on management learning through its use of storytelling to hear and feel the experiences of participants (Bell & Bridgman, 2017).

Finally, research on action learning has been criticised for its lack of rigour and anecdotal nature by Cho and Egan (2009, 2010). They claim, from their systematic review of the action learning research literature from the years 2000-2007, that there is a lack of rigorous, systematic research on action learning.

Only one third of the studies (17) met the key methodological traits of quality research including use of a conceptual framework, reports of participants, study design, analytic methods, and the precise description of these traits in the study (Cho & Egan, 2009, p. 446).

They call for more in-depth rigorous research on participant experience of action learning to support its efficacy, and for more “conceptual and theoretical development” of action learning (Cho & Egan, 2009, p. 444). This call is also made by Leonard and Marquardt (2010, p. 122) who raise the need for “greater evidence as to whether action learning does indeed work and if so, how and why”. This call is further supported by Johnson and Spicer (2006, p. 50) who observe that more rigorous research of action learning “helps its diffusion and adoption” in the academy. My research addresses these calls, by providing evidence developed through a systematic process, as to the how, and what is it like, from a participant perspective, to experience action learning in a HE context.

## 2.6 SUMMARY

In this chapter, the theoretical context for this research was set out by first discussing action learning more generally before moving to a discussion of action learning within a HE pedagogical context. This discussion identified a number of areas worthy of further investigation and led to specific research questions for this research. The next chapter justifies and elaborates on the research design and implementation used to answer these specific questions.

## 3 CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

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### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter explored the concept of action learning, with a particular focus on action learning in HE for teaching and learning. This discussion and critique illuminated a number of areas worthy of further inquiry, and facilitated the framing of specific research questions, which address the principal aim of this research (restated below in Section 3.2). The purpose of this chapter is to explain the research design and process adopted to answer the research questions. This design and process consist of decisions regarding methodological approach, methods used to generate data and subsequently to analyse them. Additionally, it is important to consider ethical issues, which may affect the research, and to present criteria for assessing the quality of the research process. However, prior to going into detail regarding choices made, it is important to first share my own worldview, how I understand the world and how I come to know it (ontology and epistemology). In sharing my worldview I acknowledge my own values, assumptions and inherent biases and provide my context in designing this research.

### 3.2 AIM OF THIS RESEARCH AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Decisions taken with respect to research design and process were taken in the context of the research aim and research questions and therefore are re-stated here. The principal aim is to inquire into former participants' experiences of learning on an executive MBSIL, a programme underpinned by an action learning philosophy, with a view to developing an improved understanding of participants' learning. Following on from this aim, the research questions guiding this research are:

1. What is it like for participants to learn on an executive action learning MBSIL?
2. How do the stories they tell of their learning experiences illuminate the process of learning on an executive action learning MBSIL?
3. How can the insights from these stories develop and enhance the practice of action learning on HE programmes?

### 3.3 PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERPINNING

The question of philosophical issues pertaining to research is one that has been keenly debated (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011; Crotty, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, & Jackson, 2015). The nature of inquiry essentially asks how we view and understand the world; how it is that we come to acquire knowledge and what is the very essence of that knowledge (Cohen et al., 2011). There are varying, and sometimes confusing, terminologies used in the literature when discussing research paradigms and philosophy: positivism and anti-positivism (Cohen et al., 2011), positivism and interpretivism (Bryman, 2012); positivism, post positivism, critical theory, constructivism and participatory (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). In an attempt to clarify my own philosophical underpinning and positioning, it is the work of Easterby-Smith et al. (2015) and their four rings of a tree trunk model, which I use as a guide. Figure 1 recreates their model, overlaid with details of my philosophical and methodological underpinnings.

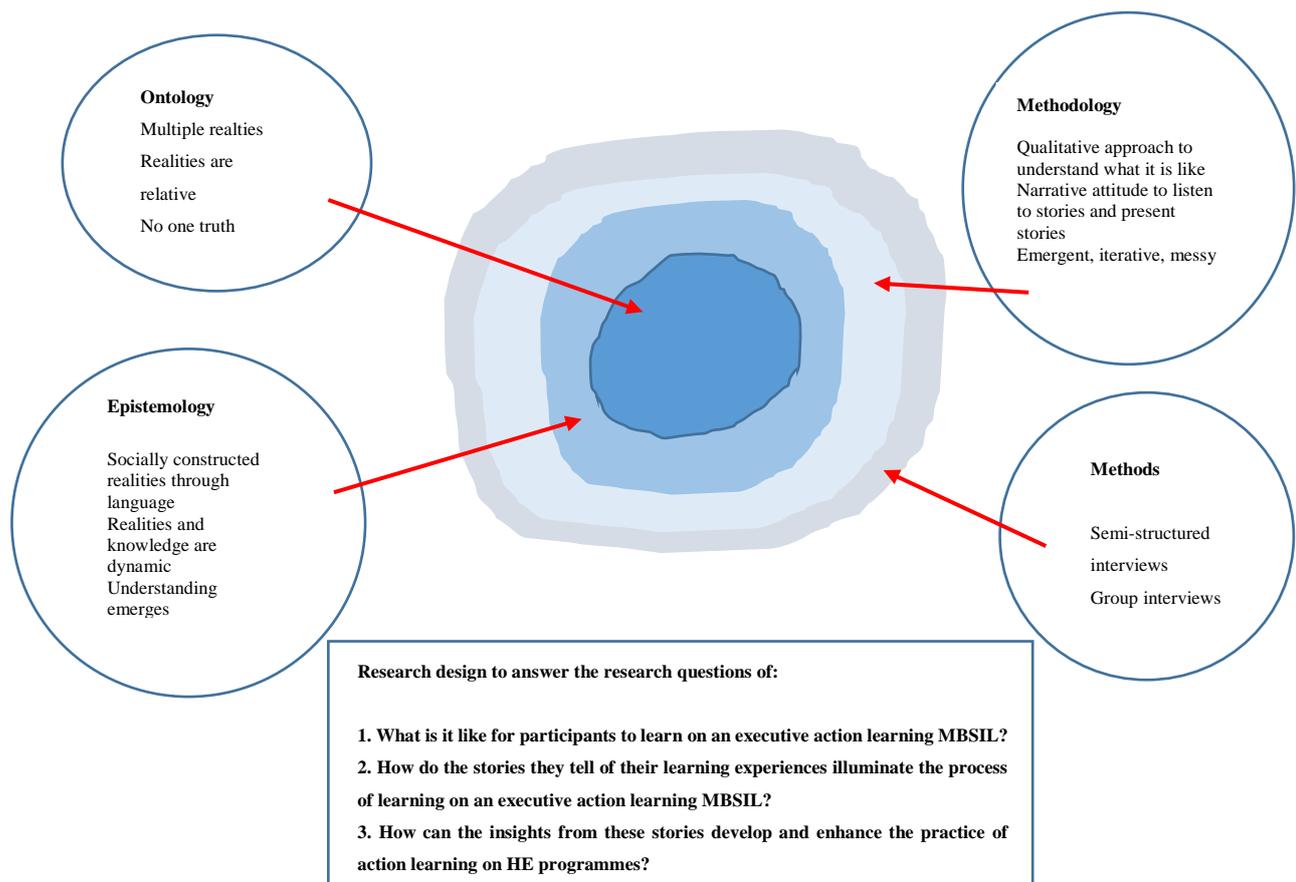


Figure 1: My philosophical underpinning adapted from Easterby-Smith et al. (2015)

The outer ring of the trunk is methods and techniques, which are the most visible part of the research. However, they are dependent on the methodology chosen, which in turn is influenced by both the epistemology and ontology of the researcher. Following Easterby-Smith et al. (2015), I explain the methodological approach taken in this research by starting at the inner ring of the trunk setting out my ontological position, moving on to my epistemological underpinning before explaining the methodology I adopted for this research, including methods and techniques used.

### **3.3.1 Ontology – what is there to be known and what is the nature of reality?**

My ontological positioning is that there are multiple realities and these realities are relative, context dependent, and socially constructed. However, this is not to deny existence, but rather, it is my belief that existence is given meaning in the social realm by language, that is, realities are socially co-constructed. It is my contention that meaning is attributed by human beings, and that this meaning is constructed by language, which in itself is contextualised as a result of a person's culture and societal values, and so is socially constructed (Gergen, 1985, 2015). Therefore, the world can have many different meanings, and these meanings are constructed in many different ways. The world we live in is an interpreted world, interpreted by human beings based on who they are and what has happened to them. No one reality, in my view, is a true reflection of reality – there are multiple realities, each valid in its own right. In the language of Easterby-Smith et al. (2015) I position myself ontologically as taking a relativist perspective close to the nominalist border, where relativism contends that there are many truths, which are dependent on the observer, and nominalism contends that there is no truth and that “facts are human creations” (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015, p. 50). In the context of this research, it means that I am not of the view that participants' learning experiences exist of themselves, waiting to be discovered, and unearthed by the researcher. Rather, I am of the view that the participants' learning experiences are dynamic, and a creation of the participants' recounting of that experience to another at a given time and context; therefore I consider their learning to be socially constructed.

### **3.3.2 Epistemology – how do I come to know and understand the world?**

As set out above, I believe in a world that is socially constructed and, aligned with this belief, it is my view that the world cannot be fully understood through measurement and quantification, rather, it is through digging deep and asking insightful questions that it is

understood in a given social context. I consider there are no absolutes in knowing and no one truth to be unearthed. Knowledge for me is contextualised, and socially constructed at the time of knowing and meaning is constructed by people through language (Gergen, 2015). Furthermore, I contend that an individual's learning experience is also context dependent and socially constructed. I see a world where everything is changing, life is in flux, understanding emerges and is not static and there are multiple interpretations of realities. Given this as my epistemology I position myself as aligning with a social constructionist view.

What draws me in particular to social constructionism is that it is a way of thinking, it is a way of looking at things that does not eliminate anything. It acknowledges that there are many possible realities, which depend on who we are, what our values are, and how we interact with others. Furthermore, it does not talk of truths, instead it claims "that meanings are construed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting" (Crotty, 1998, p. 43). Gergen (2015, p. 225) explains it well when he says "constructionism does not itself seek to be a final word, but an orientation to life that will help us to avoid building worlds in which claims to Truth bring an end to dialogue". Social constructionism is about being open to alternative views, it "is not about destroying traditions, but favours absorbing, questioning, and creating" (Gergen, 2015, p. 222), all concepts that resonate with me, and reflect my ways of knowing. In the context of this research, it means that it is not my intention to seek a singular truth but rather to understand the ways of learning on the MBSIL from a participant perspective to continue a dialogue with regard to understanding learning in action learning.

I do not attempt to extract myself from this research but instead recognise that I am a part of it, the participants and I "jointly create (co-construct) findings from their interactive dialogue and interaction"(Ponterotto, 2005, p. 129). I seek to "illuminate different truths", and what realities there might be (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015, p. 84). Interaction between the participants and me is crucial and I aim for the voice of the participant to be heard loud and clear (Cohen et al., 2011; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). I do not believe that I can remove or control my values within the research process; instead, I acknowledge my values, assumptions and endeavour to be transparent during this research.

### 3.4 METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

Research methodology comprises the steps taken to generate and analyse data for further understanding of the researched topic (Creswell, 2008). Developing a research methodology depends on a number of key issues such as the aim of the research, the type of information required, where and how the data is to be generated, when the information is needed and what resources are available to generate the data (Bryman, 2012). Furthermore, it is determined by the philosophical underpinning of the researcher (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Commensurate with my positioning as a social constructionist and the aim of this research, which is to inquire into participants' experiences of learning, I adopted a qualitative approach to answer the research questions as stated above. Viewing the world as being composed of many possible realities, co-constructed with individuals, and dependent on individuals for their existence, is aligned with taking a qualitative approach to answer the questions of this research (Cohen et al., 2011). This approach is well suited to help answer 'how', and 'what is it like', questions, questions which this research seeks to answer. A qualitative approach "engages us with things that matter, in ways that matter" (Mason, 2002, p. 1) and takes the emic view to explore in depth the research aim. Additionally, it values the context of the situation and strives to generate rich data and insight (Cohen et al., 2011; Freebody, 2003; Geertz, 1994). It is characterised as exploratory, open, flexible and loose in terms of research design (Bryman, 2012).

To answer the questions posed by this research a qualitative approach that facilitated taking a holistic view of the participants' experiences where I listened to research participants attentively, and where their voices were authentically represented, was considered most appropriate. The questions posed, though simply stated, were complex and required a process that was iterative and flexible and which facilitated making changes to the design during the process. For these reasons I was drawn to the work of Clandinin and Connelly (2000) and their use of narrative inquiry. Clandinin and Connelly (2000)'s portrayal of narrative inquiry resonated with me, in particular their view of the research participant as the embodiment of the learning experience, and more than just an instance of learning which could be measured and quantified. They consider the participant as a whole person, full of complexity, and note that it is through listening to her story, from her perspective, that the researcher can more fully understand her

experience. They speak of the researcher always being in the midst of time, space, the personal and social, emphasising the importance of looking forward and back whilst being cognisant of emotion and social aspects of the research. These ideas resonated with me and guided me during this research; they led me to being attentive to the context within which participants re-told stories and to being attentive to the emotional and social dimension of these stories of learning as told by the participants.

Furthermore, this narrative attitude aligns with the aim of this research and my understanding of the world, a world where there are no singular truths and where understanding and meaning are socially constructed. It is my view that human phenomena are better understood by looking at the complexity of the whole, rather than reducing them down to constituent parts to be examined under a microscope (Clandinin, 2006b; Webster & Mertova, 2007). Sometimes in research the story of the participant can be lost due to reductionism, where through detailed analysis and breaking down of data, the voice of the participant can be lost (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2017; Clandinin, 2006b). It is this desire to see the whole and to hear the voices of the participants, who I see as the embodiment of learning, which has led me to this narrative attitude where I am enmeshed in the research.

This narrative attitude also fits well with action learning, which similar to narrative inquiry, is both methodology and philosophy. Both adopt an iterative and messy approach (Coghlan & Coghlan, 2010; Coghlan & Pedler, 2006; Cousin, 2009). Like action learning, narrative inquiry does not begin with theory but rather with the stories of the participants so that it is the data generated that drive insight and understanding of the experiences (Clandinin, 2006a). It is by listening to these stories we come to better understand how people experience various phenomena and make meaning from these experiences. In this research, I sought to hear the stories of the participants with a view to understanding their experiences and in turn to learn from them.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000, p. 182) suggest using a “language of wakefulness” so as to be alert to the potential risks associated with the research, risks such as “narcissism, of solipsism and of simplistic plots, scenarios and unidimensional characters”. Throughout this research, I have undertaken to be wakeful through being reflexive, questioning my assumptions, decisions, and paths taken (Cunliffe, 2004). I have recorded my thoughts,

concerns, feelings and dilemmas faced as I have progressed through this research in my research journal and in memos. Critical friendships have been particularly beneficial to me on this journey at all stages. They provided a forum where I could surface issues and challenges I faced, knowing I would be questioned and challenged about them. This facilitated me in coming to a clearer understanding of the issues and in taking subsequent actions. Recording these interactions and reflections provided me with rich data, which I was able to refer to and reflect upon during analysis of data generated with participants.

### 3.5 DATA GENERATION AND ANALYSIS

Data generation and analysis occurred in two phases as shown in Figure 2. Phase one comprised the generation of data using individual face-to-face semi-structured interviews with seven research participants. The data from this phase were analysed simultaneously

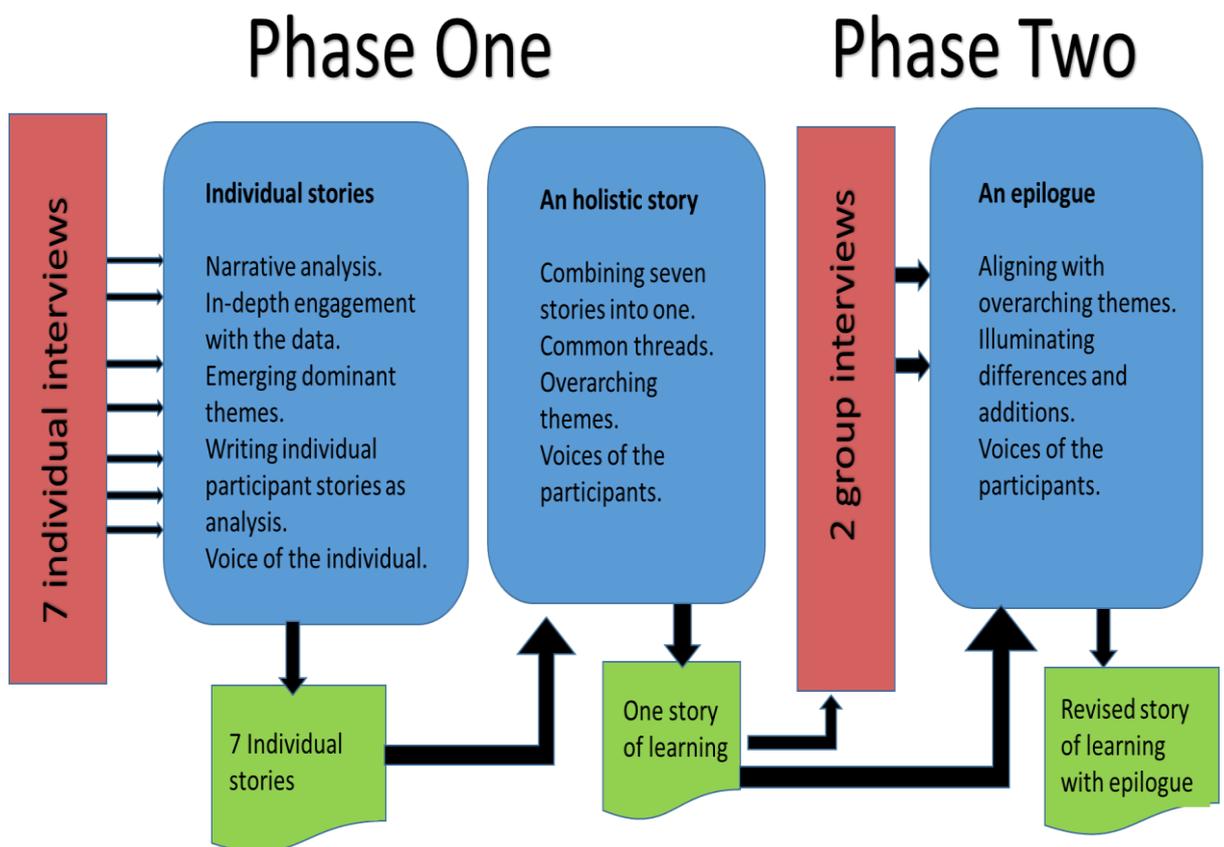


Figure 2: Data generation and analysis overview

with data generation. The output of phase one analysis was a story of participant learning. I shared this story of learning with additional research participants who were subsequently

interviewed using group interviews in phase two. Phase two built on data generated and analysed from phase one and culminated in an epilogue added to the story of learning of phase one. I generated all data between July 2015 and July 2017 though analysis continued until December 2017. However, before detailing these two phases it is first necessary to explain who the research participants are and the process used to select them.

### 3.5.1 Research participants

How many participants to include in research studies is an issue facing all researchers regardless of approach taken. In qualitative research, the purpose of participant selection is to generate rich data, from which to gain insight and understanding. The number of participants to include can be an issue of considerable debate, with the literature suggesting anything from 60 to just one participant being enough in qualitative research. Indeed, Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) found, through their research analysing 60 in-depth interviews, that data saturation occurred as early as 12 interviews. Cousin (2009, p.99) suggests that at least five narratives are required in order to say “something plausible and compelling” reminding us that “like all qualitative research the goal is not to secure a representative sample but to generate understandings from going deep rather than wide”. Savin-Baden and Major (2013, p. 317) add to the debate telling us that data generated should be “extensive enough to produce believable explanations and descriptions”. They explain that technically saturation occurs when there is nothing new to learn, however I find myself agreeing with Savin-Baden and Major (2013) that this never happens with narrative research as there is always something new to learn.

Given the emergent nature of qualitative research, it is difficult to be definitive when deciding on sample size at the outset. At the beginning of this research, the population size was 43, three cohorts had completed the MBSIL, with an additional cohort completing during the research, which brought the total population size to 58. Initially I intended engaging with 15 former participants of the MBSIL, however, as the research progressed and I generated and analysed data, it became apparent after seven in-depth face-to-face interviews that continuing in this manner was not going to generate significant new insights (see section 3.5.2 for more detail). Upon reflection, and from subsequent feedback at a conference at which I presented a paper on my findings to date, I took the decision that there would be more value in generating new data in a different way. This new way took the form of a group interview with six former participants, all of

whom had been members of the same ALS during their MBSIL (section 3.5.3 provides detail of this process). It provided an opportunity to generate data in a group setting where all participants had been together during their learning experiences in their ALS. This group interview method provided the opportunity to talk about these experiences together and to co-construct intersubjective meaning in the process.

Following Guest et al. (2006), the research participants can be described as an homogeneous group, all research participants were former participants of the MBSIL, all were executives (senior and middle managers), and all had successfully completed the MBSIL. However, I do not wish to suggest that the participants are identical; given that they are people, and as people are all different, they are unique in their learning experiences; however, they shared many similar characteristics.

As mentioned above, in total 13 former participants participated in the research. Following the aim of this research to inquire into learning experiences and to generate in-depth and rich data with each research participant, I commenced by interviewing a purposive sample from the population. In total seven former participants were interviewed, from across the cohorts. In selecting the seven participants I sought to have a gender balance and representation from the diversity of organisations represented on the programme: for example, multinational and small businesses; retail, pharmaceutical, technology; owner/managers and employee managers. In the interests of endeavouring to maintain confidentiality, it is not appropriate to provide exact details of each participant profile. Due to the small size of the population, such information could be used to identify specific participants with relative ease.

Based on the criteria above I created a list of former participants and categorised them. From this categorisation, I initially selected 15 participants to contact as I had originally intended to use only individual face-to-face interviews. I contacted the 15 participants by email, providing them with details of the research and asking if they would participate in the research. All replied, and were willing to participate. However, over the course of the research initial plans changed as explained above, resulting in a change to seven face-to-face interviews and one group interview with six participants. Whilst I chose the seven individual interview participants from the purposive sample of 15, it was not possible to select all of the remaining six from this group, as it was not possible to form an intact

ALS from the remaining eight. Therefore, I returned to the population of 58 and once I removed the initial seven participants from the population only two complete ALSs remained from which to choose. To decide which ALS to choose, I used convenience as a criterion and chose the one that required the least travel for all participants. Again, I used email to make contact with all members of this ALS. Although all expressed an interest in being a part of the research, due to work commitments only six were available to participate. In summary, 13 former participants from across all cohorts of the MBSIL participated in this research (Table 1: Research participants).

*Table 1: Research participants*

<b>Phase one – Research participants individual interviews</b>	
<b>Name (Pseudonym)</b>	<b>Participant Details</b>
Charles	Senior Manager Multinational
Cormac	Senior Manager Multinational
Alex	Owner Manager Small Medium Enterprise (SME)
Julie	Middle Manager Multinational
James	Middle Manager Multinational
Anne	Middle Manager SME
Suzanne	Senior Manager SME
<b>Phase Two – Research Participants Group Interview (Group One)</b>	
Robert	Owner Manager SME
Nina	Middle Manager Multinational
Luke	Senior Manager SME
Aoife	Owner Manager Micro Enterprise
<b>Phase Two – Research Participants Group Interview (Group Two)</b>	
Orla	Senior Manager SME
Rachel	Middle Manager Multinational

The 13 represented a mix of participants from across industries; from multinationals and SMEs; owner/managers and senior managers; male and female and from across all completed cohorts of the MBSIL.

### 3.5.2 Phase one: Data generation and analysis

Phase one data generation and analysis happened simultaneously. Data were generated with seven participants in face-to-face semi-structured interviews. Data analysis adopted a narrative approach, which was iterative and emergent.

#### 3.5.2.1 Phase one data generation: Face-to-face Interviews

Although there are various data generation methods available to the qualitative researcher – including individual interviews, group interviews, observations, visual methods and surveys – I chose semi-structured face-to-face interviews as most suited to answering the research questions for phase one. The overarching purpose of this research is to listen to the participant voice and authentically present a participant perspective of learning in action learning. A semi-structured interview comprising of open questions is well suited to having a conversation and listening to the participant story. It is flexible and conducive to emergent thoughts, reflections and ideas; it enables the co-construction of experiences of learning on the MBSIL (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015). Interviews provide scope for the research participant to elaborate and clarify their learning while also making it possible for the researcher to follow the “participant down their trails” (Riessman, 2008, p. 24). On average interviews lasted between an hour and an hour and a half; I conducted some at my workplace and others in the participants’ workplaces. The location did not appear to have any influence on the style or ease in the interview.

Kvale and Brinkmann (2009, p. 123) say of the interview that it “is an interpersonal situation, a conversation between two partners about a theme of mutual interest”. It is their view that during the interview “knowledge is created ‘inter’ the points of view of the interviewer and interviewee” (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 123). They assert that the interview or rather “conversations” are “the most engaging stage of an interview inquiry” (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 123). They talk about interviewing providing great insights and being “an exciting and enriching experience” (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 123). This is something that I found during the research interviews, which were very much conversational with participants sharing stories of their experiences on the

MBSIL. Both the participants and I enjoyed the interview process and the chance to talk about their learning experience. Many of the participants noted welcoming the opportunity to reflect back on their learning experience. The interview process helped them to understand their experience (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015) and also led to new learning and realisations for some participants (Corlett, 2012). I found listening to and conversing with the participants during the interviews an “enriching experience” (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 123) finding myself gaining insights from the start.

Data were co-authored as opposed to being collected during the interviews: the participants responded to questions asked which in turn led to new questions and avenues for explorations (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009), at times the participants also asked me questions, in particular whether I remembered particular instances, and how I remembered them. At another time and place, data generated would be quite different depending on the context. Participants in re-telling the story of their learning experience were interpreting their own past (Riessman, 2008). During the interview the learning experience was formed as a result of the interaction between myself and the participant, the interview was indeed “a site of data production” (Elliott, 2005, p. 12). If participants were to re-tell their story at another time, in another context/place, the story told would be different. The researcher or listener relationship with the narrator is integral to the quality of the data constructed (Elliott, 2005). Some of the participants while telling their stories mentioned that they had never thought of what they were telling me in that way before. As Elliott (2005, p. 24) says

the meanings and understandings that individuals attach to their experiences are not necessarily pre-formed and available for collection, rather the task of making sense of experiences will be an intrinsic part of the research process.

Asking participants to tell their learning stories is not without limitation. As people, our capacity to recall our experiences is limited, limited by the passing of time, by our values and the importance we attach to certain events and not to others, by context, both the context of place and the context of time (Polkinghorne, 1995). Through telling the story of an experience or phenomenon, we reconstruct that experience in the telling. The question arises, would we tell the story in the same way to a friend as to a researcher? Probably not. Does hindsight cause us to wear rose-tinted glasses? Perhaps, however, as

discussed previously the purpose of this research is not to find the one true story but rather to gain insight into the participant learning experience. How would the story differ if it had been told during the experience as opposed to after it? Based on the stories told, it is reasonable to expect the stories would be quite different depending on when they were told. For example if they were told at the point when the participant was unsure about what exactly action learning was then their story could be one of scepticism. Alternatively, if the research was conducted at a point of crisis for the participant then it may well be a story of pain. However, these are not insurmountable limitations but rather the way meaning is constructed.

The researcher-participant relationship is central to data generation (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). It is important to inform interviewees of the purpose of the interview and to build rapport to make them comfortable and willing to share experiences openly. Prior to the interviews taking place I sent each participant an email outlining the purpose of the interview and providing a copy of the informed consent form (Appendix 1 Informed consent form), which each participant was asked to read. They were encouraged to raise any issues they may have had regarding consent. At the beginning of each interview, I explained the research aim and interview process drawing the participant's attention to the informed consent form and again encouraged them to raise any issues or ask any questions. Prior to commencing the interview, we both signed a copy of the informed consent form; once this was completed, I asked for permission to turn on the audio recorder (none refused) and started the interview. The opening of the interview is crucial in order to establish rapport and trust and to make the interviewee feel comfortable about opening up and sharing her experiences (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). I was fortunate in that I knew each of the participants taking part in the interviews, and so building a rapport was not difficult; however, this familiarity could also raise issues of bias, which are addressed later in Section 3.6. In order to ease into the interview I started with a quick catch up, asking questions regarding work and family before moving on to generating data about their experiences on the MBSIL.

The way in which questions are posed during interviews is very important as it shapes the nature and tone of the interview, and therefore the way participants respond (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Cousin (2009) says of questioning research participants to "think armchair not witness box" and to "explore tensions and contradictions" in the story. Kvale

and Brinkmann (2009) caution against having strict rules when interviewing and refer to it as a craft as opposed to a science. Of the semi-structured interview they speak of having an interview guide that explores a “sequence of themes” while not being so structured as to not allow change or following varying lines of inquiry (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 124), advice I took on board. The interviews, as stated above, were semi-structured in as much as I let the participant talk and lead the direction of conversation (Kvale, 1994). My questioning was guided by what the participant discussed and I endeavoured to be flexible in my approach (King & Horrocks, 2010). The interviews included a combination of introductory, follow up, probing, specifying, direct and interpreting questions. Cousin (2009, pp. 101-102) provides a list of questions, which supported me in developing my interview guide (Appendix 2 Interview guide).

While not rigidly guided by prescribed questions, I used guided broad questions to help draw out participants stories of learning (Cousin, 2009). I posed questions such as:

- Tell me about when you first joined the programme
- What was your first ALS like?
- What were the subsequent ones like?
- Can you tell me about any significant moments during your ALS?
- Can you tell me about any high or low points?
- How did you engage with others in the ALS?
- Is there anything else you would like to share with me about your experience?

It was important during the interviews to remain flexible and open to new directions, although there was always a purpose and focus to the interview, it had the potential to shift and blur at times (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). A narrative attitude to research calls on the researcher to be open and flexible in order to deal with uncertainty and change, and to be able to continuously re-evaluate aspects of the research as it unfolds (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). For example when I interviewed Cormac he started off by apologising that I might not want to hear what he had to say as he did not place much value on action learning. Though I gave him space to explain his reasoning, I also probed and asked him to tell me what happened in his ALSs, whether he brought a problem to them and how did the process unfold. Over the course of the interview, the story Cormac told me was one where what happened in the ALS had a major impact on him and his subsequent

actions. What became apparent to me was the importance of not taking what research participants said at face value, and the need to look for evidence for assertions made. It also drew my attention to the interview as a means for participants of making sense of their own learning.

Silences during the interviews gave the participants time to reflect and gather their thoughts, it also gave space and helped avoid a situation where the participants would feel like they were being cross-examined (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Elliott (2005) cautions the researcher to be attentive to how data are constructed during the interview, and warns the researcher to be aware of the danger at times of suppressing the participant's story or indeed seeing it as "problematic" (p. 21). This is something I remained conscious of throughout the interview process. Indeed, I found myself allowing participants to follow a particular avenue even if I initially thought it was off on a tangent. What I found in most interviews was that it took the participants time to settle in and tell their story. Therefore, if I had cut them off due to time concerns or because they appeared to be off point, I would have lost very valuable insights. For example, in Charles's interview it took him quite some time to talk in depth about his ALS; for the first half of the interview he seemed more comfortable in talking in generalities as opposed to specifics. Much of the rich data from his interview comes in the last half hour.

Participants were encouraged to seek clarification of questions if so required. Language used during an interview was important so as to make participants feel comfortable and so jargon which the participants might have been unfamiliar with was avoided (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015). I emphasised that there were no right/wrong or good/bad answers. I was keenly aware that the participants, knowing me as a lecturer from the programme, might want to tell me what they thought I wanted to hear. However, this worry was dispelled when I heard the words "you might not want to hear this but..." a few times over the course of interviewing. It became apparent that the participants had no issue sharing their feelings and stories with me; this is something I put down to having a good relationship with them prior to the research. It also resulted in the interview process being very relaxed and conducive to a very open and honest conversation.

During the interview, listening actively was very important, listening to what was being said and how it was being said, in order to take cues from the participant to guide further

probing. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) use chess as a metaphor to explain second questioning in an interview, highlighting the importance of active listening. They suggest to be like a chess master playing chess relying on “intuitive skills and feel for the game” (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 139) for guidance during the interview. As mentioned previously, to hear stories it is important to be a good listener, this is a skill that I have developed over the years of being an ALS facilitator where my role is not to be an expert to provide advice, but rather to actively listen as others present their problems.

At the end of each interview, I summarised some of the key points of our interview conversation (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). I informed the participants that I would forward a transcript, which they could read to ensure they felt they were represented fairly; no participants suggested amendments other than typographical issues.

As mentioned previously all interviews were audio recorded with the explicit permission of the participants and were subsequently transcribed. By transcribing the first few interviews myself, I learned a lot about my own interview style. By taking the time to self-transcribe it facilitated a closeness to the data generated and was a first step in the analysis of the data. Despite the length of time that it took to transcribe, I saw it as time well spent as I became intimately acquainted with what participants said, and how they said it. Transcription of itself is an interpretation, where to put commas, full-stops, whether to transcribe verbatim or not, how to keep data confidential and retain meaning. As to the accuracy of a particular transcription, Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) tell us it is not that one transcription is more valid than another rather what is most useful for my research. I transcribed the interviews word for word, including long pauses. Furthermore, whilst transcribing I recorded my thoughts and reflections on what I was hearing and how it was said in my methodology memo. These data were valuable once I commenced formal analysis as it facilitated me in reflecting back to that time close to data generation.

#### *3.5.2.2 Phase one data analysis: A story of learning*

As mentioned above, data generation and analysis occurred simultaneously. Indeed interpretation and analysis began even before the first interview; prior to each face-to-face interview I started a memo for each participant capturing what I thought might be said in the interview. I added to these memos on an ongoing basis when I reflected on

data generated and during data analysis. The process was iterative, messy and insightful but also frustrating.

### **Take 1: a false start of sorts**

The purpose of data analysis in qualitative research is to make sense of data generated and gain insight into the phenomenon under study (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015). Analysis of qualitative data is not a linear neat process, it is emergent and iterative, and often messy (Clandinin, 2006a; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) and this has been my experience with analysis in this research. How I had initially intended conducting the analysis and how I completed it turned out to be very different. During the very early days, I had decided to take a very structured and analytical approach supported by Computer Aided Qualitative Data Analysis Software NVivo 10. This plan fitted well with my experience as a business analyst in a former career, and with my experience of teaching technology for business use to HE learners in my current career. It made sense to me at the time and I had heard many times that ‘you can’t go far wrong starting with Miles and Huberman (1994)’. And so I started by analysing data of four participant interviews drawing on the work of Miles and Huberman (1994), and supported by NVivo, which helped in organising my data and codes. It was a time consuming process where I repeatedly listened to and re-read the interview transcripts, while open coding, all the while getting to grips with NVivo. Richards (2014) advises to “really read” the data and reflect on the interview as a whole (p. 87) which I did. She says that it is in these initial readings, or engagements, with the data that researchers are most likely to be surprised (Richards, 2014). This initial open coding led to the creation of approximately 150 unique codes. However, I was not satisfied with the approach as I sensed I was losing the very thing I was hoping to hear, the participant voice. The process of breaking the data down into small codes reduced the stories to parts which, when added back together, did not reflect the whole or the complexity of each story. Subsequently, I abandoned this approach and adopted a narrative approach to analysis, all the while seeking to maintain the voices of the participants and gaining insights into their learning experiences.

Despite abandoning my initial reductionist approach to analysis, I must admit the process was beneficial. Coding is categorising the data “in order to establish a framework of thematic ideas about it” (Gibbs, 2008, p. 38). It is a way of organising the data in order to

find meaning; it helped me in thinking about the data and facilitated me in gaining insights. During coding the researcher asks questions of the data, questions such as what is happening, what is the person saying? how are they saying it? and why are they saying it? (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013; Gibbs, 2008). It involved the contextualisation of the data and provided me with a way of looking at the data from different aspects (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). It should be remembered that coding is not an end game but rather a tool for inquiry, the purpose of which is “to learn from the data”, it is not merely the process of labelling each idea or concept (Richards, 2014, p. 104). What seems like an obvious choice in hindsight (to follow a narrative approach) was not obvious at the time as I was constrained by my learned behaviour of what research analysis should look like and had looked like for me in the past.

## **Take 2: a fresh start**

### **Seven stories**

Having decided upon a narrative approach to analysis, based on the work of Savin-Baden (2004) and Riessman (2000) I started by taking a participant-by-participant approach. The decision to take a participant-by-participant approach was with the intention to hear the voice of the individual. I began initially by returning to the memos I had maintained for each participant (Appendix 3 Extract participant memo). Memo writing is an important part of the analysis process (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013; Gibbs, 2008; Richards, 2014). Using NVivo provided an easy way to record memos and link them to transcripts and develop themes. Bazeley and Jackson (2013) encourage the researcher to record choices made and thinking as it progresses during analysis, in order to facilitate building a case for the emerging propositions. Taking this advice, in addition to maintaining participant memos, I created and maintained a methodology memo in which I captured the process I followed, decisions made and my reflections as the analysis progressed (Appendix 4 Extract methodology memo).

In each participant memo, I captured my thoughts before each interview. I wanted to document any pre-conceived ideas I had regarding what the participants might share about their learning experiences, especially considering that I knew each participant to varying degrees as a result of my involvement with the MBSIL. Additionally, I captured my thoughts as quickly as possible post-interview, usually within a few hours which

aligned with Savin-Baden (2004)'s first step one of analysis (Table 2 shows complete steps as per Cousin (2009)). The purpose of the post-interview capture was to document my sense of what was said during the interview, how the participant appeared and anything that struck or surprised me. Any key points from the face-to-face interaction can help in post interview analysis and guard against relying solely on the written text of the interview without context. Following Savin-Baden (2004), my next step was to return to the interview transcript and to re-read it carefully noting how it differed to my remembered recollections in the participant memo; had I missed something, emphasised or underplayed something more than I should have? These first two steps as outlined by Savin-Baden (2004), first my writing of the participant "biography" before revisiting the interview and next noting any discrepancies after re-reading the interview, were for the purpose of attuning me to my biases and interpretations and also to provide an opportunity to reflect on how I engaged with the data.

*Table 2: Steps towards analysis*

- 
1. Write a short biography for each participant of what you remember from their story
  2. Re-read the transcript and identify anything that you have missed. Identify quotes that support the biography written.
  3. How is what is being said, said – how is language used? Is there a subtext? How has the narrator positioned herself relative to what she is telling?
  4. What holds the story together? How does what is said link to how it is said? Where are the conundrums and things that seem to be at odds with one another?
  5. Rewrite the biography/story taking into account the analysis and interpretation
  6. Identify four or five overarching themes and be mindful of what does not fit.
- 

*Savin-Baden (2004)'s steps for analysis adapted from Cousin (2009, pp. 104-107)*

Staying with Savin-Baden (2004), I progressed with the analysis, by keeping her next four steps in mind though not following them to the letter. I returned to the original recordings and listened to how the participants conveyed their stories, noting in the appropriate memo insights and observations while I listened. In addition to listening, I also re-read the transcripts, sometimes simultaneously with listening to the audio as it led to stronger engagement with what was being said and how it was being said. I recorded key themes as they emerged using NVivo 10 to support me in managing my analysis. NVivo provided a structured way to link words spoken by the participant to emerging categories and themes, significant statements and the use of language (Appendix 5 NVivo

sample). In conjunction with using NVivo I also maintained a table where I noted themes as they emerged as I read and listened to the participants' words (Appendix 6 Table of emerging themes).

The broad aim of my research, inquiring into learning experiences, required me to listen to and explore what was being said and how it was being said. I was not looking for anything in particular, rather to gain insight into the participants' telling of their experiences. I endeavoured to be wakeful and open to what might emerge (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This analysis was influenced by my understanding of action learning, my reading of the literature and my experience as a facilitator of ALSs and indeed my own bias. Taking advice from Gibbs (2008) I allowed the data to direct me, "to pull out from the data what is happening" (p. 45) rather than "impose an interpretation based on pre-existing theory" (p. 46). I listened to what it felt like to be part of the ALS. I was attentive to social and emotional aspects and conscious of language used because as I noted in my participant memos I was struck by the intensity of their learning experience as recounted in the interviews. Whilst in the past I had observed emotional aspects in ALS, I had not considered them in any great depth. However, upon hearing the participants' stories in the interviews I came to realise the influence of emotional dimensions on the process and the pivotal role participants had in relation to each other,

Drawing on the work of Riessman (2008), Maitlis (2012), and Savin-Baden (2004) I continued to analyse each participant's story, drawing out key themes while attempting to maintain the overall sense of each story – it was a case of zooming in and zooming out (Kanter, 2011). I acknowledge that my interpretation was influenced by my own experiences of facilitating ALSs on the action learning programme and through knowing the participants of the research and participants on the programme in general (Savin-Baden, 2004). By December 2016, I had drafted seven individual stories drawing on my interpretation and analysis of each of the seven interviews, and incorporating participant quotes (Maitlis, 2012). Each story centred on a dominant theme, which had emerged during the analysis (Table 3). Writing each story took a considerable amount of time with many drafts and re-drafts. I was conscious of being authentic to the participants' stories and allowing their voices to be heard over mine. This writing in itself was a form of analysis, which helped me to better understand what the participants were relating in their stories (Cousin, 2009). During the writing and re-writing process, I shared versions of the

stories with my critical friends, other ALS facilitators, my supervisors and at conferences; I took on board their questions and feedback in subsequent revisions.

*Table 3: Participant story dominant themes*

Participant	Dominant theme of story
Charles	Honesty, openness and being out of the comfort zone: A powerful experience
Cormac	A reluctant storyteller: a bit of a sceptic but “it is good to talk”
Alex	A story of changed perspective, reflection and empathy
Julie	A story of survival and personal transformation
James	Self-awareness, digging deep and intensity
Anne	Learning with and through others. Permission to be vulnerable in a safe space with others: Peeling back the layers
Suzanne	An emotional journey and a hard road travelled made easier with good companions and support

While themes were not specific to any one individual, it was possible, though challenging, to write stories in such a way that all stories differed yet told the individual’s story. The stories I wrote were not presented as “truths” but rather were stories based on the analysis of the participants’ learning experiences as constructed during the interviews. I followed the same process for each of the seven participants, resulting in the drafting of seven learning stories (Appendix 7 Sample participant learning stories – Suzanne’s story). Although the seven stories answered the research questions of – What is it like for participants to learn on an executive action learning MBSIL? and How do the stories they tell of their learning experiences illuminate the process of learning on an executive action learning MBSIL?, they did not fully answer the final research question of, How can the insights from these stories develop and enhance the practice of action learning on HE programmes? To answer this final question, and taking on board feedback from critical friends, action learning practitioners at conferences, fellow educators and my own reflections on the stories another step was required and this step is explained next.

## **One story of learning – a holistic picture**

I re-visited the seven individual stories and though each of the seven stories was unique and echoed the voices of the participants, I came to the view that it would be beneficial to continue to follow Savin-Baden (2004) and look across the stories for common and dissenting themes. Were there particular common threads that could be pulled together to create one story of learning I asked myself? Some of the individual stories, though unique, were somewhat repetitive and I thought there was merit in further analysis of the data towards writing a combined story, depicting a sense of the overall learning experience. For example, I could have written Julie's story of transformation as a story of empowerment or shared learning. Emotion though the dominant theme in Suzanne's story was also part of the other participants' stories. Looking across stories for common themes I believed would provide enhanced insight and be more valuable to others when presented as one story of learning.

Continuing with my analysis, I used a number of tools to help me decide on common themes and threads and to highlight contradictions across the seven stories. I decided on these subthemes by being attentive to the data, referencing my memos, drawing on themes that had emerged during the analysis and writing of the seven stories. I yet again immersed myself in the data recalling the words of Savin-Baden and Major (2013, p. 440) that

what is unique about thematic analysis is that it acknowledges that analysis happens at an intuitive level. It is through the process of immersion in the data, considering connections and interconnections between codes, concepts and themes that 'aha' moments happen.

The tools I used included pen and paper, a white board and markers, images, NVivo, a spreadsheet, a smartphone for recording my thoughts and recording notes while I walked and reflected on the data. Using NVivo to support me, I created subthemes for each participant interview; each subtheme was linked to participants' words from the interview (Figure 3).

Further supporting this, I used a modelling tool in NVivo to group the subthemes within the models before settling on one particular combination, which for me was a good representation of the participant (Figure 4). I do not claim that this was the only

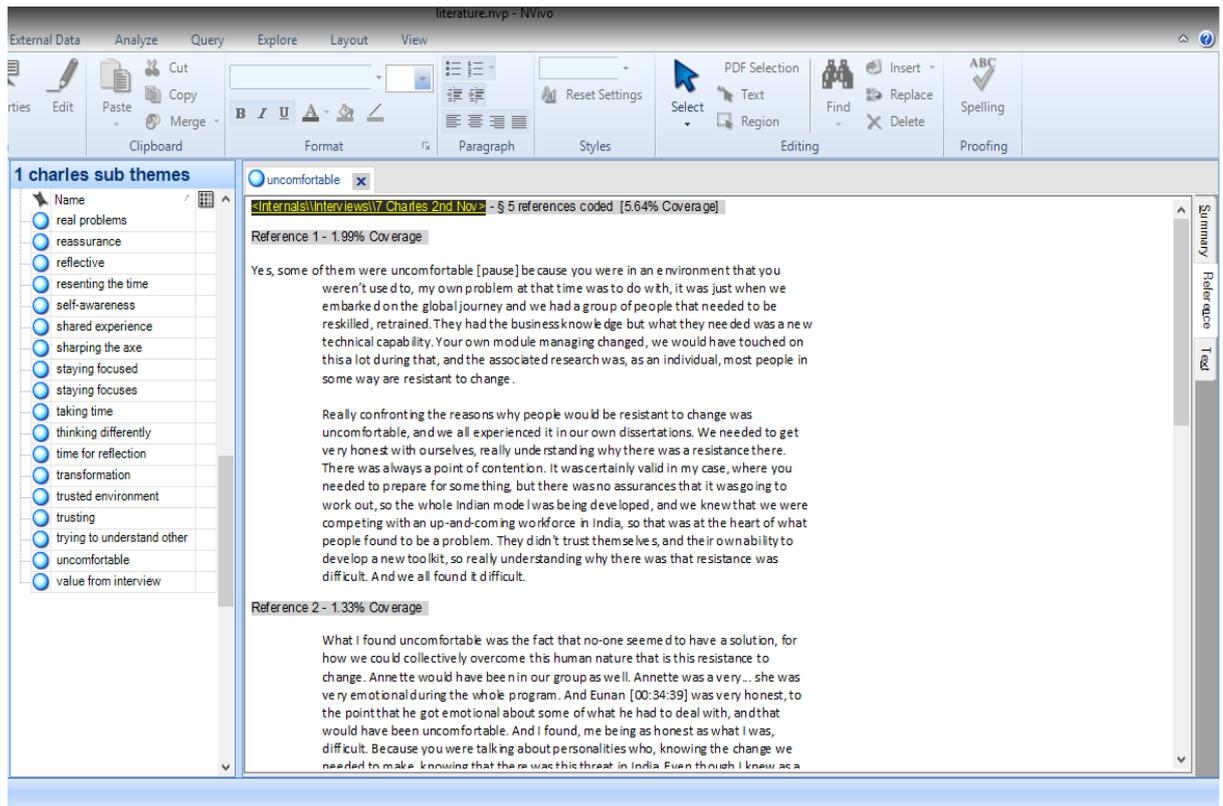


Figure 3: Charles' subtheme, uncomfortable

representation, merely a good one in my view. Looking at Figure 4 it is possible to see subthemes grouped into themes. For example on the bottom right-hand side of the figure there is a grouping comprising of: uncomfortable, resenting, energised, reassurance, emotion, self-awareness, all of which could be grouped under a theme of emotion and feelings. Creating these models was very much an iterative process with themes emerging as I progressed. I followed this process for each participant. When I had completed the process for each participant, common themes started to appear, I do not intend to suggest that the models were absolute representations of participants, rather modelling was a tool I used to help me think and make sense of the data. In conjunction with the NVivo modelling tool I also used an Excel spreadsheet to support my analysis and to facilitate generating over-arching themes.

In Figure 5 the reader can see subthemes on the left hand side, linked to key themes on the right-hand side, for example those subthemes marked in yellow form the key theme of shared learning and support, also seen in yellow to the right. Whilst the themes were not exactly the same for each participant, similar threads flowed through their stories. The

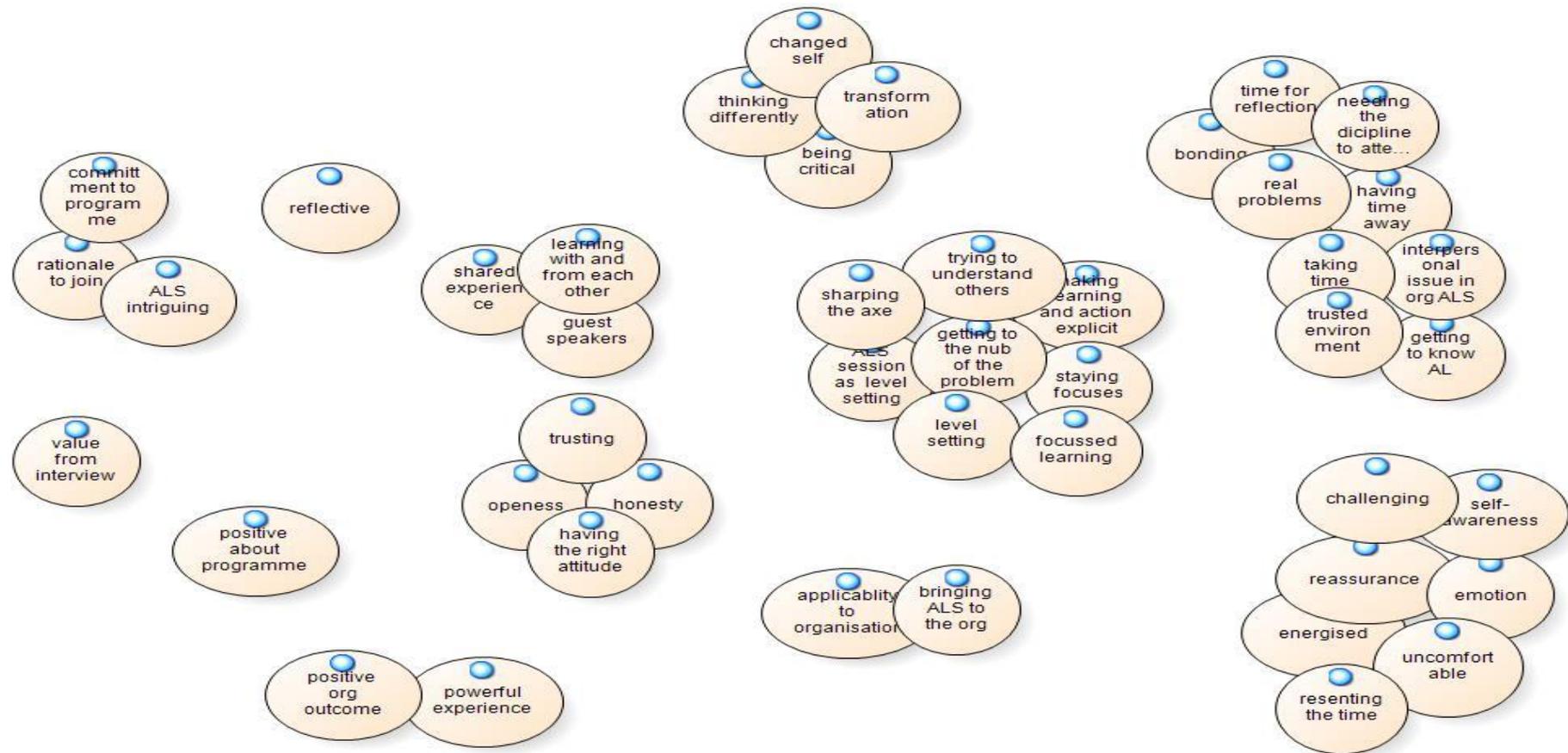


Figure 4: Charles' unfolding themes

Charles				
ALS intriguing				
changed self		shared learning and support	common journey	
honesty		feeling emotion	self awareness	
learning with and from each other		safe space	time	
reflective		reflection		
openess		challenging		
uncomfortable		change		
positive org outcome		openess /honesty		
bringing ALS to the org				
having time away				
shared expeience		applied learning		
commitment to programme		discipline to learn_guided process	permission?	space time
energised				
focussed learning				
guest speakers		value from interview	learning in the interview	
having the right attitude				
positive about programme				
rationale to join				
self-awareness				
sharping the axe				
staying focuses				
taking time				
thinking differently				
value from interview				
ALS session as level setting				
applicability to organisation				
being critical				
bonding				
challenging				
emotion				
getting to know AL				
getting to the nub of the problem				
interpersonal issue in org ALS				
level setting				
making learning and action explicit				
needing the dicipline to attend ALS				
powerful experience				
real problems				
reassurance				
resenting the time				
staying focused				
time for reflection				
transformation				
trusted environment				
trusting				
trying to understand others				

Figure 5: Charles' subthemes linked to main themes

common themes did not emerge immediately; they emerged after a process of trying things out and assessing how authentically they represented the participants' stories as a whole. After much consideration, six common themes emerged (Figure 6). It was around these that I wrote the combined story of learning of participants' experiences of learning on the MBSIL. The six themes are a trusted safe space; openness and honesty; emotion and feelings; being supported, learning with and from others; becoming and being reflective; change and transformation.

Suzanne themes	Anne themes	Charles themes	Over-arching themes
shared learning and support	shared learning and support	shared learning and support	Sharing and support
feeling emotion	feeling emotion	feeling emotion	emotion & feelings
safe space	safe space_place	safe space	safe space/time out
reflection	reflection	reflection	reflecting
challenging	challenging	challenging	change/transforming
change	change	change	trust honesty
openess	openess /honesty	openess /honesty	openness
being struck			
	action learning mis-understood	applied learning	
	postive outcome	discipline to learn_guided process	

Figure 6: Subthemes across participants linked to overarching themes

Based on the identified themes I wrote one story of learning, with seven characters and six chapters, each chapter based on a theme. To help me in writing each chapter I first created a Word document for each theme into which I copied all the relevant quotes for each participant, which had been stored in NVivo. I used these quotes as a basis for writing each chapter. Clandinin and Connelly (2000, p. 144) reminds us the narrative researcher is “always located somewhere along the dimensions of time, place, the personal and the social”. While conducting the analysis and in particular writing the story of learning I looked forward and back at the learning experiences, across all cohorts (temporal), seeking to understand the experience at both a personal and a social level.

Writing the story was by no means an easy task, and at times I wondered whether it would have been easier to present the findings in a more traditional way. However, as I wrote and rewrote the stories, I gained more insight into the participant experience and gained a better understanding of their learning experiences. Here again writing and re-writing the story was a form of analysis. To write the story I really had to think about what was being said, what it meant and how the participants felt; I had a duty to present an authentic story. In the story, I intertwined participants’ words with my words and interpretation to create one story of learning. It was important in answering the research questions to hear

the voice of the participant and to use their words to show their meaning and understanding.

Whilst in the story of learning I present the themes linearly, they were by no means distinct and mutually exclusive. Rather the themes are intermeshed and embedded in each other. As I wrote, and rewrote, the story of learning I shared drafts with critical friends, ALS facilitators and with my supervisors. The feedback and questions asked from sharing these drafts helped me rewrite the story of learning and assisted me in the analysis. By writing the story I also found I was better able to conceptualise the learning visually which helped with creating a conceptual framework of learning, presented in Chapter 5.

### 3.5.3 Phase two: Data generation and analysis

Following on from crafting the story of learning in phase one above, I then used a different method to generate data in phase two. Once data generation in phase two was completed analysis followed.

#### 3.5.3.1 *Phase two group interview – a reflective conversation and sharing of experiences*

Subsequent to the seven face-to-face interviews discussed above, additional data were generated by sharing the story of learning of phase one with six new research participants in a group setting. The purpose of sharing the story of learning was to gain further insight into participants' learning experiences and to ask the question of whether or not the story reflected their own experiences. Once participants agreed to participate in the research as a group, I emailed the story of learning to them. I asked them to read the story, and to reflect on it before we met as a group.

Group interviews offer the “opportunity to attain opinions or attitudes at another level” (King & Horrocks, 2010, p. 61). They are closer to everyday life where people talk together, they tend to be more natural than the face-to-face interview. During group discussions, ideas and reflections can be stimulated because of what someone else says. The decision to bring the story to a pre-existing ALS as opposed to constituting a new group was because I thought it would be interesting to elicit the learnings from the ALS group given that they had met as an ALS at least eight times over the duration of the MBSIL. Bonds and trust were already established between them as they had journeyed together throughout the programme. It was my view that while their stories were

individual, their shared and co-constructed experience of action learning would add valuable insight to the data generated and could also add to the authenticity and richness of the story of learning crafted.

When it came to agreeing a date and time, it transpired that the date that suited the majority would not suit one person due to work commitments. The day came for meeting as a group (of six), and as is normal in organisational life things crop up, therefore, two of the six participants were unable to attend at short notice. They did however express a keen interest to still participate in the research, something I organised and describe later in this section.

King and Horrocks (2010) advise paying attention to the environment when meeting as a group. Taking on board their advice, I organised a room at my workplace, with comfortable seating where everyone could see each other; I also provided refreshments. The session was audio recorded with the informed consent of those participating. I emailed informed consent forms to participants to review prior to the session and encouraged them to contact me with any queries. Before commencing the group interview, I again asked if there were any queries regarding the research or the informed consent form, none were raised and both the participants and I signed the appropriate forms. Prior to beginning the session, and switching on the recording devices, I stated that, like our ALSs of the past, we were in a confidential setting; King and Horrocks (2010) tell us that confidentiality in group interviews is essential. I explicitly asked if everyone agreed to confidentiality within the group, all agreed, and so we started.

The session began, similar to our ALSs in the past, with a catch up about work and day-to-day activities, which allowed us all to settle in. I, again, outlined the purpose of the session as being to inquire into their experiences on the MBSIL. I told them I wanted to hear their stories, and their thoughts on the story I had sent them. The session flowed very well and was very fluid. Everyone took turns to share their thoughts, and indeed at times it became like an ALS, with the participants asking each other questions about their re-told stories. It was very much a case of talking and sharing together, I was not the centre of the discussion, but rather had reverted to my previous role of ALS facilitator, there to guide the proceedings if required. It was very interesting to be a part of this session, and to listen to what was being talked about. Some participants gained insights into their own

experiences as they talked and listened, others re-formed and re-framed their thinking as they answered questions posed, and were able to distil their own thinking. During the course of the session participants re-reflected on their experiences similar to experiences reported by Corlett (2012). Interestingly, some participants expressed surprise over what others shared, about a sense of vulnerability, commenting that despite being in their ALS they would never have realised the others had felt that way. Another example was when Robert told the story of how a particular question, asked by Nina in a previous ALS, really got to him, unsettling him and making him rethink his whole approach as a manager. Nina was surprised that her question had had such an impact. These interactions were very rich and could not have been gained through one to one face-to-face interactions alone, and they have added to the completed story of learning, in particular in the epilogue to the story. During the course of the group interview, participants were able to construct together their shared realities of their learning experiences.

I too was part of the co-construction of data, joining in the conversation and remembered experiences. Again, my intervention was more armchair than witness box, as Cousin (2009) suggests. As with the face-to-face interviews, I found it a very enjoyable and insightful experience. I believe the context where the participants had been members of the same ALS on the programme added to the richness of the encounter; there was a great sense of openness and engagement during the session. At times, it was easy to forget that this was for the purpose of research and not just an ALS revisited.

As mentioned previously, two of the participants of the group session had to withdraw at short notice but were keen to share their experiences and still wished to be involved. I agreed to meet with the two to hear their stories. This group interview followed the same format as the first one described above, and although a smaller group, it too was a fruitful data generation session where we informally talked in a relaxed setting. Both participants were very open and forthcoming with their stories and experiences. Again, it was a case of talking together and not at me as an interview might suggest; there was a felt sense of trust and the strong bonds were still evident. Similar to the first group interview, this too generated rich data and thick descriptions, supporting stories previously told and providing additional insight.

### *3.5.3.2 Phase two data analysis: the epilogue*

The analysis of the group interviews followed a similar pattern to analysis in phase one. Prior to the group interview I created a memo in which I recorded my thoughts about what I thought I would hear in the interview and then again directly after the interview I noted my thoughts on what I had heard, what surprised and struck me and how what was said was said. This was the first step in my analysis and interpretation of the data generated. The next step was to return to the audio recording to listen and re-listen, all the time taking notes and annotating sections of discussion. I noted things that surprised me; what had resonated with the participants from the story of learning; any new insights or additions to the story of learning; language used; the dynamics of the group. The themes, which were identified in the story of learning, were evident in phase two data. Two of the participants had even provided marked up versions of the story of learning where they noted resonance throughout.

Based on my analysis of data from both group sessions I wrote an epilogue to the story of learning. It was important that the epilogue was not merely a repetition of what had emerged in phase one. The epilogue needed to draw out additional understanding and insight, what more could be learned from this data. As with the story of learning, there was much drafting and re-drafting of the epilogue, which in itself facilitated understanding and meaning. I wrote the epilogue in the voice of a participant in the story of learning. The narrator of the epilogue is reflecting back and commenting on the story of learning having recently spoken to other former participants (the six of phase two). The epilogue ties the themes of the story of learning to additional insights of phase two data and in so doing provides a combined story of participant learning presented in the next chapter of this thesis.

### **3.5.4 Reflections on the data generation and analysis**

I was particularly struck by the intensity of emotions participants talked about having experienced. Furthermore I was taken aback how open and honest the participants were in sharing these emotional experiences. Whilst I had been privy to some emotional insights as a facilitator, I had not, until hearing the participants' stories, realised the full impact. I found myself reflecting on my role in this emotional dimension of learning and indeed my duty of care to participants on the MBSIL. I also found myself feeling envious of the participants and their learning stories, which they told with such passion. This

spurred me on to gain further insight to learning in action learning, in particular the emotional dimension. I wanted to know what was it that led to these participants telling such evocative stories of learning, and I wondered how I could convey their stories authentically to others through my research.

While a story gives voice to the participants, and research gives voice to me the researcher, I was mindful that like truth there is no 'one' voice that is heard in the research and subsequent story of learning. However, during the analysis, it was important not to lose the voice and the story of the individual, particularly when writing the combined story of learning. This was challenging given word count constraints. Furthermore, there was a challenge when analysing and deciding on common themes across participant stories. For example, while emotion and feelings, as a theme, was evident across all stories, the way in which they were experienced differed. And although participants may talk about feeling uncomfortable what that actually means and feels like for individuals is likely to be different. Though a participant may explain how uncomfortable they felt, or indeed how vulnerable they felt, it is difficult to convey this in words. This difficulty was a further reason for me to use the participants' own words throughout the story to try to convey their own understanding and meaning.

Documenting and recording my thoughts, reflections and reasons for choices made throughout the research process provided rich sources of data and information for me to reference during analysis and while writing a story of learning. As mentioned previously, I maintained a memo for each participant and recorded in these memos thoughts, feelings, and ideas I had while reading and listening to the participant interviews. I also recorded my thoughts with respect to how my analysis was developing, what was being said, how I was hearing and interpreting it. I noted how the participant told their story, and the language used. I commented on my overall sense of what the participant story was about –a story of survival and transformation in Julie's case while James' was about struggle and digging deep. As I developed my analysis, I recorded decisions, choices and paths taking in the memos. These memos formed a document to which I kept returning during analysis; they formed a record of how my thinking was developing, a record of thoughts I had before interviews, soon after interviews and throughout the entire research journey.

Although I found the analysis process slow, and sometimes painstakingly so, I also found it very interesting. Through analysis, I was able to better understand the participant learning experience and gain valuable insights, which will help me improve as an educator and as a facilitator. It helped to use many tools during analysis, tools such as a white board, notes on my smartphone, post-its, pen and paper, NVivo, Excel and PowerPoint. Using the different tools helped me to look at and understand the data from differing perspectives. Furthermore, I found that by being physically in different environments, be it the office, the park or walking on the beach, opened up my thinking and facilitated me in making sense of the data. I allowed myself time to assimilate and construct my understanding as I progressed with analysis. I felt a responsibility to do justice to the participant story.

### 3.6 ADDRESSING ETHICAL ISSUES

Research ethics influence all aspects of the research process; how researchers choose topics, how data are accessed, collected, stored, analysed and presented (Creswell, 2003). Contemplating the area of ethics prior to conducting the research can assist the researcher in developing an ethical framework, which can help when faced with difficult or challenging decisions (Trevino & Nelson, 2007). There is a heightened awareness and interest in ethical issues in education research (Cohen et al., 2011) partly due to the growth in use of qualitative research (Howe & Moses, 1999) and partly due to an overall greater awareness of ethical issues and governance more generally. Researchers face many ethical considerations, some foreseen and some emerging, when engaging in research, particularly in an educational context. It is not possible to consider all ethical issues at the outset of qualitative research due to its evolving nature, and the on-going close relationship between researcher and participants (Boden, Epstein, & Latimer, 2009; Howe & Moses, 1999). Boden et al. (2009, p. 733) suggest that ethical considerations in qualitative research “are subject to constant rewriting and reinterpretation as understandings unfold” and according to Howe & Moses (1999) necessitate the researcher being more attentive and monitoring ethical issues as the research progresses. I was conscious of this advice as the research progressed and particularly so when participants spoke of intense times during their learning on the MBSIL.

General ethical issues a researcher should consider before and during research include: voluntary participation and the right to withdraw; protection of participants; assessment of potential benefits and risks to participants; informed consent; not doing harm; privacy; confidentiality; and possibility of researcher independence (Bryman, 2008; Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007).

Cohen et al. (2007, p. 52) say, “the principle of informed consent arises from the participant’s right to freedom and self-determination”. Informed consent implies full disclosure to the participant of the nature of the research, how the data will be collected, any potential risks involved and how the data will be used in the future (Bryman, 2008; Cohen et al., 2007). Silverman (2010), in agreement with Cohen et al. (2007), views informed consent as consisting of: competence, voluntarism, full information and comprehension, and highlights the importance of participants knowing that consent can be withdrawn at any stage of the research process. With respect to qualitative research underpinned by social constructionism, as in this research, this can be particularly challenging as the researcher is unlikely to know full details at the outset of what data will emerge and may uncover details that were unforeseen and may even surprise the researcher (Howe & Moses, 1999). Furthermore, once the research findings are in the public domain the researcher cannot know how they will be used or understood, and so cannot provide such detail to the participants. One particular issue that did arise during the course of this research was the issue of anonymity. During the ethical consent process, participants were assured of confidentiality with a view to safeguarding their identities (Punch, 1994). The experiences they shared during data generation formed part of the story and great effort was made to ensure participants could not be identified due to the sensitive nature of some of the data. Some issues of anonymity arose during the write up process, specifically regarding the explanation of how I selected participants and in providing details about participants. As detailed in Section 3.5, the population size across four cohorts was relatively small at 58 and therefore, when it came to describing how participants were selected and from which cohort it became evident that if I was to give specific details about participants – gender, type of manager, organisation type – those participants could be easily identified.

To answer the research questions required generating data with participants in respect to themselves and their organisations, it was necessary to gain informed consent as per the

policies on research governance of the University of Northumbria. Consent forms were presented to each participant (Appendix 1 Informed consent form). They were easily understandable and written in plain English and participants were invited to ask any questions they had concerning consent. The form outlines the purpose of the study and the role the participant is to play. Additionally, it states what is required of the participant and any disadvantages or benefits which may ensue to themselves or others (including their organisation) by participating. Furthermore, the form contains information on confidentiality and dissemination of results. All participants and myself voluntarily signed a consent form in advance of data generation. It could be argued that participants felt obliged to be part of this research, as they felt not to do so would let me down. This did not appear at any stage to be the case, with many of the participants thanking me for the opportunity to be part of this research and being able to share their learning experiences with others. Moreover, over the course of the interviews, many participants noted that they found the interviews valuable in helping them make sense of their learning and spurring further reflection on their learnings.

While at the outset it was not envisaged that this research would cause harm to the participants, there was always the possibility that in the course of the interview, or on reflection post interview, issues or vulnerabilities could surface for participants. It was important that I, as the researcher, remained sensitive to such possibilities and was prepared to address them appropriately. Fortunately, no issues arose, however being aware and alert meant that I endeavoured at all times to act in an ethical manner. Additionally, some data generated were confidential or sensitive in nature, and therefore were stored securely and without real names linked to them. Data are presented in the study in such a way as to protect the identities of the participants. Finally, there is an ethical responsibility for the researcher to fairly and authentically represent the perspective and story of the participants. This is something I have endeavoured to do in how I have generated data, analysed and presented them.

Finally, given my embeddedness in the research process, as a lecturer on the programme and as an ALS facilitator, I needed to be conscious of my potential influence on the research process. As mentioned previously, I needed to be wakeful and attentive to my role. I was conscious of not leading participants in their stories and allowing them the space to tell their story. What I was challenged to do was to be authentic in presenting the

participant story of learning, from the participant perspective. Part of the process in achieving this was in sharing the story of learning crafted in phase one with research participants in phase two for their comment regarding resonance. In crafting the story of learning I consciously intertwined the participants' actual words with my own to ensure their voices were heard. Moreover, by being transparent in the approach I took to analysis and crafting of the story of learning, I have provided clear details of how I conducted this research towards an authentic presentation of the participant story of learning.

Being ethical during research is about not only ticking boxes and signing forms; it is about being cognisant of potential ethical issues and having an ethical attitude. It is about listening attentively and not judging and about having a responsibility to conduct good research while remaining faithful to the data generated. It was important for me to remember during the research process that the data were not abstract concepts; they were the words of people who deserve my respect, and to whom I, as a researcher, have a duty of care to represent authentically.

### 3.7 RESEARCH QUALITY EVALUATION

Some of the benefits of using a qualitative approach include that it is in-depth, facilitates understanding, is flexible, allows the researcher to follow a line of investigation that may be raised during data generation and provides rich data (Bryman, 2012; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Notwithstanding these benefits the criticisms include: lack of generalisability, issues with rigour and validity when compared with quantitative research; tends to be anecdotal; resource heavy; difficult to replicate; issues of transparency; bias or at times extreme bias; and can be difficult to make sense of the volumes of data (Bryman, 2008; Creswell, 2008). Adding to these is criticism levelled at research of action learning in particular. For example, Cho and Egan (2010) in their review of action learning research found that there were issues with respect to the quality of some of the qualitative research conducted, in particular they found;

...it was common that a specific methodological framework was not identified, verification procedures were not articulated, and study contexts were often not clearly detailed (Cho & Egan, 2010, p. 169).

Therefore, it is crucial that quality issues are addressed in order to add credibility to qualitative research of action learning. Indeed Leonard and Marquardt (2010, p. 121)

comment that without this attention to quality evaluation, action learning may be viewed as “an unproven methodology that is based more on passion than on evidence”.

To address such criticisms of qualitative research and research of action learning in particular, quality criteria suggested by numerous authors (Bryman, 2012; Dressman, 2008; Lincoln et al., 2011; Mason, 2002; Spencer & Britain, 2003; Tracy, 2010) have been reviewed, and applied, where appropriate, for this study. The worldview and guiding paradigm of the researcher has an influence on how evaluation of qualitative research is understood (Corlett & Mavin, 2017). Those closer to a post-positivist and realist view tend to advocate measures such as validity, reliability and generalisability more akin to that proposed by quantitative researchers (Bryman, 2012). However, according to Bryman (2012) the further one moves away from the positivist end of the spectrum towards constructionism and the postmodern worldview, the more the criteria move away from the traditional trio of validity, reliability and generalisability.

Mason (2002) proposes the following as characteristics of quality qualitative research: it should be carried out systematically and rigorously, though this is not to suggest rigidly and lacking in flexibility; it should be set in context and produce explanations and convincing arguments, and not be merely descriptive; the researcher should be reflexive and critique decisions and actions along the way, and finally; the research should have a wider resonance beyond itself without making inappropriate generalisations. Lincoln (1995) proposes credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability as the criteria by which qualitative research can be assessed with Spencer and Britain (2003) suggesting 18 criteria, including, but not limited to: credibility; scope for drawing wider inferences; rigour of data generation and analysis; attention to ethical issues; how well the process was documented; justification of the explanations and arguments put forward.

It is my view that Tracy (2010) encapsulates many other scholars' views of quality criteria for qualitative research (Bryman, 2012; Easterby-Smith et al., 2015; Lincoln, 1995; Mason, 2002) into her framework. She proposes using eight criteria by which to evaluate qualitative research. They are worthy topic, rich rigour, sincerity, credibility, resonance, significant contribution, ethics and meaningful coherence. I have selected Tracy's (2010) framework to evaluate the quality of my research due to its comprehensive nature and inclusion of criteria of other authors, coupled with its suitability to the philosophical

underpinning of this research (Table 4). The first criterion proposed by Tracy (2010) is worthy topic. The topic for this research is inquiry into learning in action learning on an executive MBSIL, and is a worthy topic as it extends current understanding of learning in action learning from the learner perspective and adds to the ongoing conversation regarding the efficacy of management education. The research shows rigour in the methodological approach taken and has been discussed in detail in this chapter. Throughout the process I have endeavoured to be transparent about choice made and paths followed. The research can be considered credible and is marked by thick description of the learning experience crafted from two phases of data generation using two methods and analysis which took an iterative approach in interpreting and making sense of the data. At all times during the research I have been consciously aware of acting in an ethical manner as explained in Section 3.6. The three remaining criteria of resonance, significant contribution and coherence are considered in Chapter 6 after findings have been discussed.

*Table 4: Quality criteria for evaluating research.*

Criteria	Application to this research
<p><b>Worthy topic</b> The topic of the research is</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relevant</li> <li>• Timely</li> <li>• Significant</li> <li>• Interesting</li> </ul>	<p>This research is worthy as a topic of enquiry. It is conducted in an area where there is a paucity of published research; it takes a learner centred view by privileging the participant perspective. The research is timely considering the ongoing conversation and debate regarding the efficacy of management education and the increasing interest in social and emotional dimensions of learning. The research is interesting to those involved in delivering action learning programmes, both academics and ALS facilitators. It is also of interest to those responsible for developing executive and management programmes. Additionally, it is of interest to managers who wish to learn and change by engaging in accredited HE programmes.</p>
<p><b>Rich rigor</b> The study uses sufficient, abundant, appropriate, and complex:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Theoretical constructs</li> <li>• Data and time in the field</li> <li>• Sample(s)</li> <li>• Context(s)</li> <li>• Data collection and analysis processes</li> </ul>	<p>I have taken a rigorous and systematic approach to the research. Chapter 2 discusses the theoretical constructs used in this research whilst this chapter has explained in detail the research design. I have provided rich detail of how the sample was chosen; the context within which the research occurs and how data was generated and analysed. This was particularly important in light of criticisms that are levelled against qualitative research and research of action learning in particular.</p>

Criteria	Application to this research
<p><b>Sincerity</b> The study is characterised by</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-reflexivity about subjective values, biases, and inclinations of the researcher(s)</li> <li>• Transparency about the methods and challenges</li> </ul>	<p>Throughout the research process, I kept a reflective journal and research memos as described above. I have endeavoured in the research, and in my write up, to be transparent, honest and authentic. In writing up the research, there is also the danger of sanitising the approach taken, this is something I have been conscious of, and attuned to, so much so that there is a danger that in attempting to be authentic to the process it may be difficult at times to follow the explanation of it.</p> <p>During the research process, I was aware of my relationship to the participants and to the programme and the potential for it to influence my interpretations and analysis. In the interests of transparency, I have made clear in Chapter 1 my 'story', and my positioning in the context of this research. In the course of describing the methodology above, I have made clear the challenges encountered and how I have tackled them.</p>
<p><b>Credibility</b> The research is marked by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thick description, concrete detail, explication of tacit (nontextual) knowledge, and showing rather than telling</li> <li>• Triangulation or crystallisation</li> <li>• Multivocality</li> <li>• Member reflections</li> </ul>	<p>The data generated in both phases provides a rich resource of thick description and concrete detail that were analysed and interpreted for sense making. Two methods were used to generate data as explained previously; the group interview was used as a means of triangulation in that the findings for phase one were shared with them to ascertain their credibility, and to ask whether they reflected their own experiences. The group participants confirmed that the story of learning represented their experiences.</p>
<p><b>Resonance</b> The research influences, affects, or moves particular readers or a variety of audiences through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Aesthetic, evocative representation</li> <li>• Naturalistic generalisations</li> <li>• Transferable findings</li> </ul>	<p>Discussed in Section 6.3</p>
<p><b>Significant contribution</b> The research provides a significant contribution:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conceptually/theoretically</li> <li>• Practically</li> <li>• Morally</li> <li>• Methodologically</li> <li>• Heuristically</li> </ul>	<p>Discussed in Section 6.2</p>

Criteria	Application to this research
<p><b>Ethics</b> The research considers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Procedural ethics (such as human subjects)</li> <li>• Situational and culturally specific ethics</li> <li>• Relational ethics</li> <li>• Exiting ethics (leaving the scene and sharing the research)</li> </ul>	<p>Throughout the research, I have committed to conducting this research in an ethical and responsible manner. Section 3.6 above discusses in detail how I attended to ethical issues during the research.</p>
<p><b>Meaningful coherence</b> The study:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Achieves what it purports to be about</li> <li>• Uses methods and procedures that fit its stated goals</li> <li>• Meaningfully interconnects literature, research questions/foci, findings, and interpretations with each other</li> </ul>	<p>Discussed in Section 6.3</p>

*Adapted from Tracy (2010, p.840)*

### 3.8 SUMMARY

In this chapter, I have explained the philosophical underpinning to my research design and explained in detail the research process. Positioning myself as understanding the world through a social constructionist lens, I adopted a qualitative approach with a narrative attitude to answer the questions asked in this research. Whilst data generation and analysis were iterative, complex and messy, they gave rise to crafting a rich story, one which tells the story of participant learning in action learning where the participant voice is privileged. Additionally, I have presented the criteria by which this research is judged, and will return to these criteria for a final assessment in the final chapter. The next chapter presents the participant story of learning, which is the output of the analysis of data presented above.

## 4 CHAPTER FOUR: INSIGHTS FROM THE DATA

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### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I present the findings from the analysis of the data generated as described in the previous chapter. I use the form of a story to present the findings. The main body of the story contains three parts and seven characters; these are the seven participants interviewed in phase one of data generation and described in the previous chapter. Following Parts I, II and III is an epilogue. The epilogue draws on data generated in phase two data generation where I generated data during group interviews with six additional participants.

### 4.2 A STORY OF LEARNING

Stories are accessible and people have used them down through the ages to share knowledge, they have the power to evoke emotion and engage the reader in the subject matter (Brown, Gabriel, & Gherardi, 2009; Horrocks & Callahan, 2006). In this story, there are seven characters, Parts I, II, III and an epilogue. It is a shared story authored from the stories told by the research participants. The narrator of the story is an amalgam of the voices of the participants; it represents my interpretation of what they shared with me in the data generating phases. Where quotes are notated, these are the actual words spoken by the participants. I do not claim this to be the one true story of learning on the MBSIL; rather in the retelling of participants' experiences I endeavour to present an authentic story, to give a sense of what is like to learn on an action learning programme. For the research participants it was a difficult journey, a roller coaster of sorts but, in the end, it was worth it. At times, they were uncomfortable, unsettled and self-doubting. Having to face up to not knowing and not having the answers was tough. Emotions were stirred and vulnerabilities exposed. Creating a trusted safe space in the ALS gave participants a place where they could support and learn with and from each other, a space where they could be open and honest with themselves about the particular organisational problems they faced. It was a space where organisational baggage could be left behind and problems addressed with fresh eyes. In the end everyone changed, some even transformed. All became more reflective in their management practice.

Before I present the story let me introduce you to the seven characters whose voices you can hear in the main body of the story. These are real people, former participants of the programme. To protect their identities, pseudonyms are used. Where participants speak of other people or organisations, acronyms are used to protect identities, three letter acronyms for people and two letters for organisations.

### 4.3 CHARACTERS IN THE STORY

**Charles:** Charles signed up to the programme on a recommendation from his manager. He had heard many good things about the programme and had seen first-hand the positive impact it had had in his organisation. He was also aware of people in other organisations similar to his, who had previously completed the programme “and if they were seeing the value in it and considered it relevant to their work”, it sounded like something he should do. The block delivery structure and practical application of the programme also greatly appealed to him, as it suited both his work and personal life. He joined the programme with the goal of becoming a better manager and coming to a better understanding of himself. In his own words, “I wanted to do it and I was prepared for whatever work was involved in it”.

**Cormac:** The timing of the start of the MBSIL programme could not have been better for Cormac from a work perspective; there were major changes afoot, which would have a very big impact on the organisation and Cormac’s role. The programme provided him the opportunity to gain another qualification while at the same time helping him “retain some degree of sanity” during the major work changes. He was drawn to the applied nature of the programme, and the opportunity to study and learn with other senior managers. Cormac says he is naturally a very guarded person and does not like to disclose too much about himself. Being open is not something that comes naturally to him, though he claims this has improved because of being part of the ALS on the programme.

**Alex:** Alex very seriously considered his decision to register for the MBSIL programme; in fact, he decided to withdraw two days before the programme began, only to be convinced otherwise, a decision he never regretted. He joined the programme as a means to support himself in his senior management role, and to gain credibility through having a MBSIL qualification. He is not a fan of what he terms ‘traditional learning’ and believes that, in order to learn, action is required. His story is one of a manager who changed his

perspective through reflection, and learning from, and through, others. He comes across as a caring person who greatly values the bonds created during the ALS and the support it provided.

**Julie:** Julie was a middle manager in a multinational organisation when she commenced the MBSIL. She was initially cautious about committing to the two-year programme, and though she eventually took the plunge to register, it was not a decision taken lightly. When Julie started on the programme life at work was not good, indeed the environment was very negative with redundancies, reduced hours, and her own relationship with her direct manager proving very challenging. Julie felt insecure in her role, and lacked confidence in her ability. She claims the programme, and in particular action learning, has helped her “survive” in her organisation and find new ways forward.

**James:** James’s MBSIL experience was a positive one, yet at the same time one of struggle and soul searching. James actively competed in his organisation to join the programme, which he saw as a pathway towards advancing his career. When he commenced the programme, he felt he had more to offer his organisation, and having a Master’s qualification was a vehicle towards this. During the programme, and by engaging fully with his ALS, James came to know himself better as a manager, and to question how he managed people in the past. He is very candid as he reflects back on his management approach, and is very open about how he now manages differently. Action learning for James was about digging deep within himself in a bid to understand and know himself. In telling his story James is very enthusiastic, sincere and even passionate, it is evident that the ALSs have had a profound effect on him.

**Anne:** Anne joined the programme at a time when her career path was changing, not by choice but due to circumstances out of her control. She saw joining as an opportunity to get a Master’s qualification to support her extensive practical experience. Her lack of academic qualification was something of an issue for her, and she believed that without it her opportunities would be severely narrowed, and potentially it could prove to be a roadblock to employment. At the time of joining the programme Anne was very much results driven and task oriented, which was no doubt due to the scientific nature of the industry in which she worked. She was also her own worst critic, unable at times to see the key skills and competences she had to offer. Fear of appearing weak or not having the

answers also blocked Anne from taking needed action. However, with the support of her ALS she came to face and address her fears.

**Suzanne:** At the time of joining the MBSIL programme Suzanne was managing director of an SME. Joining the MBSIL programme made sense to her as her organisation was facing some significant challenges. The block delivery structure and applied nature of the programme appealed to her as did the use of action learning which she had previously experienced. Like others, she was nervous starting the programme not knowing what the two years ahead would involve but at the same time enthusiastic about the possibilities that lay ahead. During the programme, she was facing significant organisational problems and challenges that required making some very tough decisions. The support she received from her peers on her learning journey greatly assisted her in tackling these tough decisions.

#### 4.4 PRESENTING A STORY OF LEARNING –THE STORY BEGINS

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# A story of learning

## Introduction

Our first ALS set happened on a Friday morning about three weeks after our first block module. There were friendly handshakes, nervous smiles and '*what-have-I-let-myself-in-for?*' thoughts. Only Suzanne had experienced Action Learning before so we really weren't sure what was in store for us. It had been introduced during the induction session, but what would it be like in practice? Most of us were somewhat sceptical, wondering what value there could be of sitting in a room for half a day talking about our problems when there was lots to do back at the office where the real work happened.

The facilitator explained the process to us and re-iterated the underlying principles of action learning, emphasising the core tenet of confidentiality, knowing how important that was to us. After all, Ireland is a small place and we needed to know that what we said was staying in the room. We each had a time slot to present a problem we were experiencing in our organisation. Initially, the facilitator had difficulty getting us to speak up and go first. We waited to see what others would say, gauge the level of openness that would be acceptable. In those first sessions, we talked about issues that were not really issues. We '*fluffed*' it a bit [Cormac]. But, as time went by openness and honesty gradually developed. In the early days the facilitator led the questioning ...what's the problem....but is that really the problem? She pushed and pushed. Over time, we started to become more forthright with our questions, leading ultimately to uncovering the core of our problems and a better understanding of them. By about the third ALS we were openly talking and sharing, trusting each other. We could see the process was working and the value coming from it.

## PART I

### A trusted safe space in a busy world

During the working day, it is hard to take time out and to give ourselves the space to pause; our workplaces and our work are a constant distraction and compulsion. This programme and the ALSs provided a trusted safe space where we could stop and stand back. The programme required us to conduct an action learning piece of research; this requirement gave us the permission, and the legitimacy, to take time within a trusted safe space to come together and share our real and significant organisational problems, time to ask challenging questions, reflect on the actions we were taking, explore options and commit to further actions. It was a place where we were not judged and did not judge, where we were challenged and questioned by our 'comrades in adversity' and where we supported each other in tackling problems.

Admittedly, it took time to build up trust, but once trust was formed we felt we could let our guards down and admit to not having the answers; it was okay to show weakness within the safety of the ALS. Furthermore, we were bound by confidentiality within our space, and we trusted each other not to break that confidence.

Cormac, naturally a guarded individual, was not initially comfortable with sharing sensitive organisational issues, however, in this trusted safe space he felt able to share.

I don't think I said that to anyone else in the factory so it was probably the only place at the time that I mentioned it, you know. I thought about it before I went into that ALS, I probably did think about whether or not I should be saying this, it's a small town [Cormac].

Our ALS was a for us like a sanctuary, where we all believed no matter what was said it was not going to leave the space. We trusted each other not to break that confidence. As Cormac said,

.....you know it really was like the sanctity of the confession box, and I felt that anything that was said in there was sacred and would not be breached, and I think we all felt the same you know, so if that wasn't there and there was any risk of anything leaving that room I wouldn't have spoken about something like that, you know. That whole thing was massive, confidentiality was absolutely massive, you wouldn't get that anywhere else. Well I didn't undertake any other training programme or course that had that. It wasn't just implicit, it was explicit, it was constantly said. I think we did all trust each other, you know, so there was no fear of asking any stupid questions or anything like that, it was fantastic like really good [Cormac].

This 'sanctity' gave James, who shared this ALS space with organisational colleagues, permission to talk and address his problems, happy that they would not be discussed outside of this space. Others also shared very serious and sensitive issues:

I wouldn't have said probably half of what I did say, I would have been worried that TVP may have gone back and repeated it, that for me anyway was very important. Some of the things we would have talked about were important, at one stage someone was laying off people, so it gave them that confidentiality and trust that word wouldn't get out. That confidentiality is very important and I think it does allow you to throw yourself out there and you don't do that the first week, you might not even do it on the second one, but then you go 'Okay, here is the real problem.' But it is important I think [James].

On a daily basis we were used to reacting to what was happening in our organisations and getting the job done. There was never time to step back, to pause, and consider. In our trusted safe space we had the time, to step back and pause. "It was nice to have the space to bring your challenge to the table, like you had time to think about it, you weren't rushed, you know, it was nice that you had that kind of, space." [Suzanne]. The trusted safe space expedited getting to the nub of the problem "...because we were in a trusted kind of group, you actually got into the real problem a lot quicker than you would get in business." [Anne]

This time away from the organisation was important. It allowed us to park our organisational baggage and take a step back, look at things from different perspectives and ask fresh questions.

I think it was good that I was away from the organisation it was a day out where we went up to BB or wherever you were going. It was a day away from the organisation so you had that time to focus on whatever challenges you had, that was good you got away from the everyday routine [Julie].

Building trust and feeling safe took time, like James says, it did not happen straight away, it took a number of sessions, a sentiment shared by others. We needed time to get to know each other and form bonds, but we also needed something to focus on, a goal. As the sessions progressed, and we began to reframe our problems for our dissertations, we found more of a focus. This focus and direction helped us get more from our trusted safe space. The more we bonded the closer we got, the easier it was to share.

The first number of sessions were, they were a bit haphazard and that is not a fault of anyone that was through us as individuals. I think not knowing enough about what we wanted to focus our dissertation on. So they were more brainstorming, but the more that we had..., we corrected. Once we all got a bit more specific in what we wanted to do, we were then able to... be closer. The first two or three were a bit more brainstorming whereas the others were more... we got more out of them than we put into them.

I think we needed to get to know to each other. I think when we got to know each other a bit better, that helped as well, so you needed to feel that you were comfortable, you needed to be in a safe environment. I don't think any of us thought we were there at the beginning because we didn't know each other [Charles].

Having the common goal of completing the MBSIL meant we had a shared purpose; that helped create a bond between us. We were on a shared journey, all facing similar problems in our organisations. We had nothing to lose, and a lot to gain, by sharing with and supporting one another on our way.

We were meeting each other on the grounds that we were all in this, we're all in this ship together and we're all trying to get to the same place. We had a common bond. Everyone was kind of going the same direction [Suzanne].

We knew each time we came back to our space we would be held accountable by others for what we committed to at previous sessions, this helped keep us on track, and focussed us on our organisational problems. It also helped that there was a structure to our sessions, it encouraged us to be explicit about both our actions, and our learning.

I suppose it was a very focused learning for us in that sense, we were using it as a means to an end, each time you came it was like "Well what are you going to do about this problem?" and "What are you going to do about that?", and you were actually, you were taken through a process. There was follow up from last time. Like you would be asked "Right, what action are you gonna take for that now, this month?" and then the following month they'd come back and say, "Did you do what you said you were going to do? [Suzanne]

However, at times, particularly early on, we did resent giving up our precious time to come to the ALS, but we knew that in the end it would be beneficial to our organisations and to ourselves as managers.

...the one thing that we all said to each other on the first morning was, 'I have this to do and I have that to do today'. What you're kind of saying is, the last thing that I need today is this. You knew on a Monday that your ALS was on a Friday morning, and some of those Mondays you thought, right, I'm not going to need that on Friday, because of this or that. You get so focussed on your work that you lose sight of the value that the action learning was. And quite often, I mean we had a half-day, and quite often you got to the end of that half-day, tempted to have a full day at it...there's always a distraction getting in the way of it and, as I said to you, during the early months of the programme those action learning sets were a bit of a hindrance because you saw it as a useless time that could be better handled elsewhere. But the two years, you know, changed that thinking for me [Charles].

Our trusted safe space allowed us to bracket organisational issues such as power and politics, and not fear ulterior motives and one-upmanship. As Alex said, “there was no trying to outgun each other or second-guess people”. We could remove ourselves from the problems and look at them with fresh eyes.

Somebody said, at one of the ALS, if you were to stand back and hear the question from somebody else, like if it was somebody else asking you the question, would you give yourself that advice? And I remember that always stood with me because I thought “No, if I was looking at this problem and it was your problem, I would tell you “Get that contract off your books, get them people off your books, what are you waiting for? Blah blah blah...” but you bring all this emotional attachment to it when it’s your own problem and it’s trying to separate that out, and sometimes you can’t, it’s very difficult, so that’s where the ALS used to come in, where you would be going “Right, this is my problem, this is all my baggage that was with it, so we’ll just park the baggage and tell me what you think”, you know [Suzanne].

Being able to share openly with others and feel supported was very helpful, the very fact “that there was other people there that could understand your reasons, could empathise and could fully support, yeah, very important.” [Suzanne]. Feeling we were not on our own and having a safe place to get things out in the open, “it helped massively to talk to everyone, when you talk through it doesn’t seem as big of an issue” [Alex]. It was a good feeling no longer having to keep everything to ourselves, sometimes it was just good to unburden and so defuse the power of the problem.

...I'm just thinking now about that particular instance, you know, very significant you know, it helped just, even if you weren't expecting a solution, just to be able to come in and say, Jesus, you won't believe what's happened today, it can be helpful as well just to talk about it, like, you know [Cormac].

...it gave me a forum then because I could see that was happening for others, so that probably gave me the permission to actually openly discuss mine, because one of the biggest things I had there, one of my biggest, biggest fears was being unemployed, ..... it was that fear of

standing in the queue, you know, to go up to get your insurance, and all that, you know, and why was that such a big issue for me? Why was that blocking me from even applying for jobs because I was so paralysed? So I was able to discuss that and talk about that, and everything, that was huge. I think, once you have verbalised it, that was something, for me, anyway. There was something in that I think that verbalising it is almost like, now it doesn't sound so bad, now that it's not inside any more, it's actually out, it doesn't actually feel as bad as it did [Anne].

As much as it was a space for supporting, challenging and helping each other, it could also be

refreshing, could leave you feeling energised because when you're bogged down in work and you're trying to make every solution to every problem happen as quickly as you can, you don't always think logically and clearly....the sessions helped you see beyond that and to look at things differently [Charles].

The ALS was a trusted and a valuable space where everyone felt able and willing to share, reflect, challenge and help each other find solutions. A key facet of this was our willingness to be open and honest within this space. This openness and honesty helped create shared bonds – a vital ingredient of trust.

### Openness and honesty in a trusted safe space

Openness and honesty, though critically important in shaping our trusted safe space, did not come easily to all. Take Cormac for instance, he could not to be honest about his problem initially because he was constrained by organisational and legislative confidentiality. Having to conceal his true problem from his peers made him feel disingenuous, and got him off to a bad start with action learning, leaving him somewhat sceptical of its value. In truth, he found the initial experience quite false.

I knew my dissertation was going to be about [the problem] but I couldn't tell anyone because it wasn't announced, so I made up this absolute nonsense and I went in and put my best foot forward (laughs) and explained this garbage (laughs) to anyone who would listen and, in my heart, I knew it was rubbish and

fabricated, I had no choice but to fabricate some sort of story, no choice. And I think when the action learning started, I think I probably felt it was a little bit false from the point of view of my particular project because I knew my dissertation was going to be [the problem] and I couldn't say that [Cormac].

However, even when it was appropriate and organisationally permissible to openly share, he still struggled with being open, it was not something that came easily to him: "it's just not natural for me to be honest, it's just not natural for me." But, he surprised himself. Over time, he did open up, and he actually shared a very significant and sensitive organisational issue. He shared it in the knowledge that he was in a trusted space. This was indeed a big step for him, and must have been quite difficult.

I think, one thing that has stayed with me is, and traditionally I would have been very reluctant to talk about things. I think that going into the MBSIL and ALS and opening up a bit about some of this stuff, it probably made it a little bit easier for me to open up afterwards. I think it has made a difference in that regard [Cormac].

It was hard to be open and honest automatically, we hesitated. It took time, it had to be cultivated. We all needed to get comfortable in our space, and needed time to bond with each other.

I think people got more... I think the first day people didn't understand what it was about fully, everyone talked about something that might not have been the real challenge. So I think, I think people got more open, once you bonded more with the people in the group and once you trusted that it was confidential. Everybody is working in small areas and everyone knows each other, and everyone knows people in this organisation from before. You want to make sure that what you said wasn't going to be talked about again [Julie].

Furthermore, it could be very challenging and very uncomfortable to, in a way, 'wash your dirty laundry in public'; after all, we were talking about real problems that really mattered to our organisations and to us. However, over time we came to know that if we wanted to make the best progress possible

we needed to be truthful and open about what was really going on. While our strong bonds and trust in each other facilitated us being more open and honest, by being open and honest we formed stronger bonds that allowed us to support each other even more.

I found, me being as honest as what I was, difficult. I found it uncomfortable talking about that [the risk of people losing jobs], particularly when others had similar experiences, so that would have been when it got most uncomfortable. And I think, I think in hindsight, when we started talking about that, that's when trust developed, because I think we all realised then that if people are that open, and they're sharing that type of information we're all from the same community. We all know our respective employers. You wouldn't have otherwise chosen to reveal that type of information, but I think we all knew that we were never going to solve the problem unless we were honest, and it was uncomfortable, having to see people get upset about what might happen if things didn't work out the way that they'd hoped. So that was uncomfortable, yes. I think we felt obliged to be as honest... obliged to yourselves, you know. I think we knew that if we weren't totally transparent with the problem, we weren't helping ourselves help others, help us find the solution [Charles].

Time was a key element in creating and establishing the bonds between us, we had to take time to get to know each other in order to feel comfortable in opening up and sharing honestly. Our block modules, particularly the residential ones, helped us to get to know each other informally; we had plenty of time together during those blocks.

I think we needed to get to know to each other. There were different individuals; some you had more in common with than others with regard to your role at work. I think once we got to know each other a bit, then we were more comfortable with opening up with what we saw as being our own issues and problems. I think when we got to know each other a bit better, that helped as well, so you needed to feel that you were comfortable, you needed to be in a safe environment. I don't think any of us thought we were there at the beginning because we didn't know each other. What was good as well, the second module was

over in Sligo in Castle Dargan and we stayed there and that helped as well. It helped us to get to know each other [Charles].

Bonding happened through a process of getting to know each other, and realising we were all in this together. Our bonds grew strong and we genuinely cared about what happened to each other.

Everyone seemed to get on, there was just a natural kind of spark between the group, obviously there are one or two people who were quieter but they still interacted and so by the time we had a first ALS everyone knew each other and there were no problems, and everyone was open and honest. Ours was a very open group, to be honest, I think we are just lucky that we got on in that group, it was so open. But if you had an issue you could talk about it, and as you know from the ALSs we talked about a lot of problems. But people genuinely cared about the person and tried to bring them round to get an answer [Alex].

Our commitment to openness and honesty was evident in the real, and sometimes very sensitive, problems we brought to our trusted safe space; problems such as business closures, redundancies, structure changes, dealing with disruptive staff, disruptive boards and having to have very honest conversations with co-founders, some of who may have been family.

The group that we had were very open, everybody, there was nobody really within the group that didn't share significant issues that they were having, we felt like we were able to help, but they kind of pushed you to, especially to help, do you remember the one we had?, I think it was up in [names place]... [Suzanne].

We needed to have the right attitude to enable us to be open and honest. If we were cynical or sceptical it is hard to see how we could have trusted the process, and allowed ourselves to be exposed in the way we did, sharing honestly our weakness and our unknowing.

So, I really needed that attitude, I think. I don't know if I'd have been cynical, would the action learning sets have been so positive that they would have changed my

mentality because, as I said earlier, as an individual, I can be open minded and pragmatic about anything, and I don't know enough about the others to suggest that they were any less pragmatic than I was. I don't believe any of them were cynical, they were too positive in the sessions to suggest that they were cynical people. The fact is, as well, I don't think it would be possible for a person to enrol on that course if they were a complete sceptic. You know, I have to think that if you took the decision to do the course, you're open minded enough to want to get something out of it [Charles].

The process of being so open and honest could feel very challenging, particularly when we were unsure of what to do next, questioning our own abilities and judgement. Despite this, there were also times when we felt great relief, even joy at having found a way forward, seeing a way through to our next actions. It was indeed an emotional journey.

## **PART II**

### **Emotion and feelings**

Over the duration of our two years we experienced many emotions and intense feelings: fear, anxiety, relief, joy, vulnerability, empathy, discomfort, loss, enthusiasm, self-awareness, dread, gratitude, helplessness and empowerment. We came to see that no one emotion or feeling was necessarily negative; each was part of the process of coming to understand serious organisational problems, and breaking through to new ways of seeing and acting. We were all emotionally invested in our organisational problems; we cared about them, and were oftentimes stuck and unable to see a way forward. Emotions from the workplace followed us to our ALS, and at times surfaced in intense ways as we unpicked problems and tried to decide upon actions.

It certainly was a rocky ride for Suzanne. She had been unable to make a key organisational decision for a long time, paralysed by self-doubt, constantly questioning herself, her values and her motives. Initially the process led her to

becoming less confident. In her working life she would usually plough on in and make a decision without much, or indeed any, reflection, whereas now, as a result of her interactions in the ALS, she found herself asking questions as to why she was making those decisions: could she perhaps make different ones, and what would the impact be? All this questioning resulted in a crisis of confidence and she was unable to act for at least three months during the programme.

I think I became very indecisive, because you're trying so hard not to be the manager that you were before, that I couldn't find my feet for a while, I was kinda lost [Suzanne].

However, I remember there was one particular ALS that was particularly tough. It was a turning point for Suzanne. During it, she became very emotional, she was upset, frustrated and angry – this was something that was very unusual for her to display. However, when it was over, and she resolved to take certain actions, there was “a sense of relief” that the paralysis was over. She had faced her fear head on, and had overcome it with the support of her ALS and resolved to take needed actions.

I do remember that particular session being tough, I do remember that one, because most other sessions you would find challenging, but not to the point where I ever would have been emotional like, but I remember being emotional and I remember thinking “I can't f\*\*\*ing do this”, you know?

I wouldn't have considered myself an emotional person at all, but when you actually step back and look at why you make the decisions you make and how you make them, everything's underpinned by emotion. I remember coming out and feeling a sense of relief in one sense, that you could finally see what needed to be done [Suzanne].

Anne too found that the ALS could be an emotional place, a place where she had to look hard at herself and ask herself what was at the root of her struggles. She had to deal with her “insecurities and lack of self-belief”. However, she was

relieved to find that the ALS was a place where she could talk about important things without the baggage and politics of the organisation. There she was able to peel back the layers to get to the nub of the problem. She was able to

have conversations, like “What am I really struggling with?”, people would never say “I’m struggling with...”, they talk about the stresses of maybe the job, but then you start to really talk to people and a lot of times it would come back to “I’m really struggling because personally this is going on” or “In the past this has happened” or “In the past this came up” [Anne].

It was intense, this constant questioning of our problem and ourselves, all the time having to dig deeper and deeper.

....mostly it takes five or six gos before you actually found that is the problem, that’s not the problem, this is the problem and that’s really good...so digging deep is really good and I think action learning did that, I think everybody was like...PHEW, like you are being punched and ‘Okay, I think that’s the problem, but is it really?’ [James].

Everyone had his or her difficult organisational issues, and sometimes very stressful work place dilemmas. It was not easy, and could be really draining.

because it was stressful for me as well to be working in that environment [at work] and all the time wondering how I was going to handle, sometimes, you know you can let it, (...) take over your whole situation. And then, I think you know when that’s going on you’re not performing right yourself either. You know I was wasting so much energy on that I probably wasn’t doing what I should be doing every day. It takes its toll.

I suppose, I don’t think at the time that I realised how much it was getting me down, to see how dealing with that situation was so difficult. I wasn’t going to get support from anybody in my organisation, I had to find a way of dealing with it or get out of it [Julie].

Sometimes the ALS could feel like a boxing ring; you would come out feeling exhausted due to the level of emotional engagement, you “really had to throw yourself out there” and be prepared to go the distance. But, it was worth it.

You are trying to absorb a lot of this and you are also trying to input into the conversations, so it's just a different mind-set, it's something that I'd never really done before, you are in small groups, you are in small teams, but this was quite intense, this was like you are coming out after an hour and a half, two hours and you go 'PHEW I need a coffee.' Your head is really...you've taken on loads in that space of time, there's no gaps and it's like, the next and then the next, it's really...you find that after half a day you go back to work, you are wrecked. PHEW, like six rounds there. But really good.

I would have gone pretty deep into what I did, why I was doing it, where I made mistakes...I was digging deep into myself and the person that I am. Definitely, definitely challenged and it opened up a few cans of worms, but you know, that's what it was about [James].

At times, it could be difficult to watch some of the others struggling, and becoming emotionally upset. Difficult, not because we were uncomfortable, but because we cared about them and could feel their struggle; we understood how intense it could be to delve into the serious issues and show ourselves to be vulnerable, before coming out the other side.

Ah, you just see when you get people into that situation where they're open and the gloves are off you see how these things can affect them deep down. And how it consumes them because it's a massive part of their life and sometimes they got emotional bringing that out because it's constantly on their mind. When people get emotional obviously it means they've been bottling something up and when they get it out it all comes out. It's difficult to watch them going through the process but then, at the end of the process, they feel a lot better but during it, sometimes it's hard [Alex].

I found it uncomfortable talking about that issue, particularly when others had similar experiences in cases, so that would have been when it got most uncomfortable... But, I think we all knew that we were never going to solve the problem unless we were honest, and it was uncomfortable, having to see people get upset about what might happen if things didn't work out the way

that they'd hoped. So, that was uncomfortable, yes [Charles].

Engaging with the problems at an emotional level could be very challenging and really took a lot out of us. Sometimes, we had to address issues we had been trying to avoid. We had to “face certain truths” [Suzanne], there was nowhere to hide anymore: action was required and difficult conversations had to be had.

It's easy to be objective when it's someone else's problem. I think the key turning point, for me, was probably that ALS session in XX. That was the one where I thought “Okay, you need to stop f\*cking about here.”, because at the end of the day this was, I know for a lot of the guys in bigger companies, it's a career, but it's not their business, this is my whole family's income, my whole family's livelihood, and if I don't stop p\*ssing around and actually get back to getting the business back on track, and getting things done, and getting the team in place to allow the business to grow without needing me to bottleneck every decision then what impact is that going to have five or ten years down the line? [Suzanne].

Certainly, sharing our organisational problems so openly with others was difficult, it stirred emotions and could be very unnerving, particularly when we were exposing that we did not have the answers and were not in total control of the situation. We were out of our comfort zones.

I was a bit wary of it, because I'd never...it was never something I would have ever done before, I wasn't really looking forward to the ALS, looking back and kind of going 'No, no', I wasn't looking forward to it. I was thinking 'I can really struggle with this' so again I was scared a bit [James].

Giving ourselves permission to open up and to be emotional enabled us to uncover insights into our organisational problems and ourselves, “emotions really reveal the extent of the problem” [Charles]. Emotions provided an additional dimension to tackling the problems that perhaps we do not always recognise and take into consideration.

I just have the belief that emotional intelligence leads to so much learning. I think if I focused on nothing else except trying to get myself more emotionally aware of where I am and what's going on, for me, then I think that's huge. Because, I think it takes down a lot of barriers that I put up for myself [Anne].

My learning definitely had an emotional element, very much so, and I wouldn't have considered myself an emotional person at all, but when you actually step back and look at why you make the decisions you make and how you make them, everything's underpinned by emotion, yeah [Suzanne].

Our emotions revealed our vulnerabilities, and this was only possible because we knew we were in a place of trust, support, and non-judgement.

### **Being supported, learning with and from each other**

We had been told at induction of the value and support we would find in each other, and this was certainly borne out in our ALSs, which became a trusted safe space for us. They provided the opportunity to see and hear differing perspectives, and listen to how others faced and dealt with their organisational challenges. Our eyes were opened to other ways of seeing the world and our organisations.

I thought it was very interesting, you see I was working in a multinational with the support of a multinational behind us and here he was, a guy working in a small rural town with a very decent company and a very decent product, but the stuff he was going through, he didn't have the support of a multinational behind him, and I suppose in a way it almost felt more real than maybe even some of the stuff I was going through myself, like you know [Cormac].

Sometimes, in our work situations, it could be difficult to see a way forward; we could be constrained by our own ways of thinking. Our fellow ALS members asked questions and challenged our thinking, helping us free ourselves from the constraints of our own perspectives and restrictive thinking, and opening

us up to new and alternative ways of seeing our problems. We supported each through this process.

You were able to see it from different perspectives. Like I said my manager was obstructing me in small things, and I suppose that didn't sound so big, but it was holding me back, and then just the different advice of what other people would say. If you're on your own you're only looking at your own point of view all the time. And I think because that's the way I was looking at it all the time I was getting very bogged down in the way I was seeing it all the time, and I couldn't even see another way.

If I hadn't been doing the ALSs I wouldn't have seen a way to get to the next cycle, probably if I wasn't doing the ALS at all I would never have got past the first cycle. I don't see how I'd have been able to find a way to getting to the next cycle. And probably that's where I would have left it and said I can't do anything more here because I couldn't see anything more, I can only see what I could do myself within these four walls, I couldn't see outside of it. So it had a huge impact on the way I do my job now [Julie].

Although all in different organisations, we found ourselves facing similar challenges and problems as in our organisations. We came to the realisation that no matter what the organisation, as managers of people, we all have similar issues and so could learn much from each other's experiences and practice.

Yeah, I suppose you see that it doesn't matter what type of organisation, everyone has issues, and everyone has everyday challenges, and even if it is personalities and people that are working with you, everyone has to find a way of dealing with it [Julie].

I think I learned most about, was about people. So whether you're somebody, I'm thinking of JKO, somebody who's high-flying, the top multinational, or you're somebody who's in a small business, running their own company or whether you're working as a company employee or whatever, that the challenges at a personal level were very similar [Anne].

It was a big issue, it was put out on the table with people who had an opinion on it and they helped me with suggestions of how it should be dealt with. So we talked through it, some suggestions were made you thought maybe wouldn't fit, other people would have encapsulated quite well because probably they had been through the same situation [Alex].

There was comfort and reassurance in knowing that others had similar issues, and that we not alone in facing such problems.

I found benefit in that I was reassured that the problem I had, at that stage around the potential of job loss, was not a problem that was uncommon to the rest of them. And hearing how they were going to approach it kind of stimulated counter-proposals. So, I mean you can never have enough ideas. So I took a lot of notes during those types of sessions, because when someone else had an issue that was common to me, I really wanted to hear what everyone said about what they saw as being solutions [Charles].

Our interactions and learning were enriched because we were a diverse group of people. Regardless of whether we were from a multinational, or a small local business, from medical devices or retail, we could learn from each other, and gain fresh perspectives from listening to and interacting with each other.

I got great little nuggets. MMD definitely would have been a good guy and he is very much a people person, totally opposite to me I would say, hopefully I would be a bit more like MMD now. He's not in it for the money, he's in it because he loves doing what he's doing. WOW isn't that great? He's actually...the amount of people who are going there every day and the same people coming every day, they [talks about the service they provide], that's more important than what I'm doing up in GG, I'm just doing my job for a multinational that couldn't care less about me, so that dynamic for me changed [James].

There were people with experience in every walk of life, which was beneficial. It wasn't only people from the same kind of environment it was all different environments and

people brought different experiences from different environments [Alex].

Having perspectives from a variety of organisations and having differing opinions enhanced our learning and engagement with each other. It was also important that we were peers, equals, there was no holding back, no fear of sharing our thoughts, problems and experiences with each other [Julie].

Our ALSs were a rich source of knowledge and insight, stimulating new ways of thinking and acting. We willingly shared our knowledge and learning with each other. We recognised that there was mutual benefit in such sharing and collaboration.

[as] one of us got nuggets about one thing, we shared it with each other, that was one thing that was brilliant, I don't know about other cohorts but with ours it was, because nobody was like "I want to own it, I want to keep it to myself", everybody was prepared to share what was successful, if one of us got the learning, then we all took it and shared it like [Anne].

Sharing with others in the ALS and listening to their stories was "invaluable" [Anne]. We respected each other and so listened intently to what was happening in other organisations so that we could learn from the experiences and practices of others. "The learning from the other people within the group was probably the biggest thing" [Suzanne] and provided good insight into how others managed, and addressed challenges.

I think it was important for me, from a point of view of the support to get through it, but I also found that just hearing what happens and whether it's EE, FF, or GG, or whatever the company was, and I remember sitting down one time with AHR, you know, and there's different elements of the company, whether it's sales or production or whatever, and just getting all those insights. The big things for me, that were invaluable was that learning from each other [Anne].

I learned a lot from everyone. I learned a lot especially from EMD because he had his own business and I have a huge amount of respect for where he came from and where he is now, and what he was doing, just a really clued in person. Such good insights into things and like I say, got a lot from him, talking about the issues that he would have had. Again, a lot of good ideas being bounced back and forth, good people [James].

There were many rich interactions between us and we had a great affinity with one another. Ours was “a good crowd of people” and we knew “we could definitely learn a lot here” [James]. We felt connected to each other knowing we were all on the same journey, on our quest to become better managers and to complete the programme. We understood each other and could help each other in making sense of our organisational problems and challenges. Everyone had something to bring to the table; we all brought our vast individual experiences to share, and to learn with and from each other.

[w]e are all people who are working and have lots of experience and we would bring a lot to the table in the experience perspective that definitely worked [Anne].

So, I think between the group you got much more value out of what other people in that group would give you from their experiences. Like some people will be managing larger groups of a couple hundred people, like the guys in YY, now obviously they would have had other managers under them but they'd have seen a lot, there were a lot of answers got around the table as opposed to from academic content. That's where I learned the most, from the other people [Alex].

Through the support we received from each other, we learned not only about how to tackle our organisational problems, but also gained valuable insights into ourselves, who we were as individuals. By giving permission to others to question us openly, hold a mirror up to us so we could see ourselves, we were able to move forward, be more self-confident and less self-doubting. Being a

part of the ALS provided the reassurance to make leaps forward, to take chances knowing we had the support of our peers.

I think it's when you're sitting with the group, and I would share and they said "You know you keep talking negatively like this all the time, why do you never see what you are achieving? Why do you not see, because we can see this, this and this, why do you not see that as your strength?" And I would play it down and I'm thinking one person in particular, FBG, who'd be quick saying "Oh no, stop, wait a minute - I just told you that you're very good at this, this, this, and you've just ignored me. ....I was getting that mirror, it was good for me...it was probably that ALS, probably, at the end of it, I committed in my journal "I'm going to actually ask them to consider that if there's consultancy work coming up, that I'd be considered" and look what happened through that, you know, within – what was it, X years afterwards? I was in a consultancy in WW for I think it was six weeks, and then I was taken back into VV. But I would never have asked if it hadn't been for that conversation, it just took that, for me, to see my worth [Anne].

We were able to help each other make progress on organisational issues, which may not have been possible without the support from the ALS.

There were a couple of people that definitely moved on. Probably the more indecisive characters. We helped to bring them to a situation where they needed to make a decision one way or the other and face up to the problem and just make that decision, they never really wanted to make or were afraid to make [Alex].

Gaining insight from others was of great value especially when we were able to bring it back to our organisations and add value to them.

I found the PP insight very helpful. By bringing that type of thinking into my work, it prepared the people that I had working for me, for what we were now about to become, so bringing learning from ALSs to the work place was very beneficial [Charles].

Moreover, it was not just when we were physically together in the ALS that we supported and helped each other, the support permeated outside of the ALS. We were there for each other via email, on the phone checking up to see whether actions had been taken and what outcomes resulted.

during the month, somebody might've sent you an email and said "How are you getting on? Did that go the way you thought it was going to go or do you need anything?" That really helped as well, because everybody, well not everybody on the course but the people that you were closest to would've picked up the ball during the month and said "How did that go? Did it go the way you thought it was going to go? Was it a sh\*tstorm?" [Suzanne]

The shared wealth of experience and knowledge supported us in taking actions we might otherwise have shied away from or indeed never even thought about. We were "guided by other participants" [Suzanne], who supported us on our learning journey. It was important that we challenged each other to be better as managers and better at tackling problems. We had good people, experienced people, with us on our journey who helped open our eyes to new perspectives.

...it's easy to get someone to agree with you, you know, you think the same way as them, but at the same time that's not the point, the point is to try and learn something new and to see can you see things differently [Suzanne].

...what you did do was get yourself thinking differently. You would come into this and there'd be people from different backgrounds, and you were learning about them, and you were really digesting everything they've been through. And what they did for me was just level set me, as an individual [Charles].

It was a difficult journey at times; some of us thought we would never complete it. But we did. We succeeded together, supporting each other along the way and helping each other to reflect on actions taken and ways forward.

## Becoming and being a reflective practitioner

Being reflective was new to us; it was not something we were used to doing. “You are so involved in the everyday with what was going on you didn’t take the time to stand back and think about it, I don’t think I ever did it very much” [Julie]. We were used to taking action, getting things done, there was no time to sit back and reflect on what happened or, indeed, what was happening. It was good to now have the time to do that, to reflect on past experience, to take time out with others, and consider our future actions and the underpinning rationales for our decisions.

It was a day away from the organisation so you had that time to focus on whatever challenges you had, that was good you got away from the everyday routine. It was just that time to be more reflective, I never did anything like that before. I probably never really was reflective until I started doing the ALS, I just didn’t know that that’s what I should be doing or that that was helpful I just kept going from one project to the next and things didn’t always work out but at the end of the day you just moved on to the next thing [Julie].

Now that we were on the programme, and in ALSs, we had the opportunity and the permission to take the time to reflect.

You generally don’t take time to reflect at work, so I saw it as an opportunity to not only reflect on what it is I am hearing from others, reflect on my own experiences, with what I have heard from others that were similar, and then reflect on what they would have done versus what I did in a certain type of situation [Charles].

Reflecting on and re-examining our experiences and actions facilitated us in understanding why we took the actions we had, and stimulated us to make changes to our approaches for the future. We discovered the importance and benefit of taking time and looking at the big picture. “I take a big step back a lot of the times and go ‘Okay, let everybody else have their opinions and then

you start tackling and start questioning” [James]. We found that it was important to zoom out and view the whole.

Before the course, I didn’t even think about reflection, so it is a huge change. That’s what the course teaches you, to sit back and take time out. You look at things holistically and see yeah, I can actually change by reflecting. I constantly evaluate my situation now and the value of my position where I didn’t previously. So that’s reflective enough I’d say [Alex].

An important benefit of becoming reflective was the way it could move us, to stir us from the old ways of doing things and to see new ways of managing.

I value the concept of reflection a lot more now, because when you're bogged down in work and you're trying to make every solution to every problem happen as quickly as you can, you don't always think logically and clearly. And I found the sessions refreshing. Kind of energised [Charles].

It struck us that if we had had been reflective in the past we would have done things differently, maybe even better. By reflecting, we uncovered issues with how we acted in the past and this has helped us learn and improve our practice for the future.

If I had those [reflective] tools back then I would have done a lot of things differently, again that whole process of reflecting back and going ‘Yeah, I should have actually changed things differently.’ No. It’s not the way. At the time things were getting done, but not very well I’d say [James].

It actually did make you sit back and think “God, I really don’t, I don’t take other people’s feelings or perspective into account at all when I make a decision, I was like a bull in a china shop. It kind of really made me look at how I was doing things and how I handled certain situations [Suzanne].

We went from a starting point of not reflecting consciously at all, to it becoming part of the everyday. We became reflective practitioners, reflecting during the course of our working day on how we could do things better, why things happened as they did and asking questions of what if and why.

I was all the time thinking how can I use this or how can I look at this differently. I suppose the way I think about situations now, to be more critical in my thinking and more questioning. You know it's probably taught me the importance of being reflective of what I'm doing and what's going on in the organisation. And then, just to look outside of the situation as well and what's going on and what can you bring to it from outside [Julie].

Reflection became something we enjoyed doing. It was something new, we could see its benefits, and for some of us it was "revolutionary".

Yeah, it's quite a good technique, and I like the idea of give it a go, observe and look back and that looking back, taking that 10-15 minutes and looking back I really enjoy that because I never did that before, I would honestly say once something was done it was next, it was next, it was next, whereas now I'm taking that time, taking a coffee, I'm going outside, I'm going for a walk, going back and going 'Right, go again. Now start it off again.' I do think that's been...revolutionary for me anyway. It's the biggest thing I think from the whole course is reflection [James].

Now, for most of us reflection is embedded in our practice, for some it is a conscious act and others just part of who they are. "I always stand back now and am more reflective, I think once you learn that you can always take it with you" [Julie]. Where previously it was just take action and get the job done, now we are taking time to reflect and question what we will do.

So I needed to look at my own time for the last month and really suggest where my time can be better used, and if I didn't force myself to do that, I would have got probably deeper into a problem that was developing. Because when you're working till ten o'clock at night, three or four nights a week, you know something has got to change, and sometimes you're in a situation where you feel you can't get out of it. But you've got to do it, you've got to force yourself, and with not having the course on, you know,

you need the discipline so that you can have that reflection to get to where it is you need to be in terms of a better place [Charles].

I do take that 15-20 minute gap in the day, even at lunch time I'll take that, even in the morning, I go back on whatever I've done so far in the morning, whereas that never happened before. Now, I'm actually looking back in the morning at what happened last week. So definitely that's a conscious effort that I'm making to take that slot, whereas before, no [James].

We learned how to slow down, and not rush into decision-making. We came to understand that it was not all about putting out the next fire but about taking time to consider the what, why and how of our decisions. We came to realise the importance of reflection both personally and for our organisations. It helped us to be less hasty in taking action, to consider actions and motives, to determine where we had gone wrong in the past, and learn from those mistakes, to become less reactive and more proactive in our management.

Previously I'd horse on, get it done and on to the next thing. Whereas now, I realise that I have to reflect to grow, because the situation that was a year ago might have had a detrimental effect on the business if you don't reflect on that and change it the next time then it is a mistake. If you make a mistake twice it is a mistake. Reflection is a huge thing I took from the course. And I suppose it's only a mistake if you make it twice, but if you don't reflect you will make it twice. I don't make decisions in the same way as I used to. I'll make the decision but I'll make it having reflected on it [Alex].

Like Alex, Suzanne learned through reflecting on how she made decisions in the past, to pause, and not always go with her gut reaction realising that "...over the years I probably have lost really good people by being impatient and by managing the way that I managed" [Suzanne].

I'm trying to think of the most recent example, we've taken on a new hire, a team lead at the minute, and within the first week, my gut has been telling me "There's

something not right here. This is not the right fit”, you know, I’m just not getting a very good vibe, for want of a better word, good intuition and I would’ve went with that intuition more instinctively before, and now, like I sat down with one of our senior managers, the last day and I said “Look, I know I’m impatient”, and I’m really impatient at the minute because I have a deadline of trying to get this guy trained before I go off, and I says “Am I being too harsh? Am I expecting way, way too much from this guy too soon?”...So that wouldn’t have been something I would’ve done three or four years ago, no way, I would’ve just told him to go, honestly like [Suzanne].

Charles explained the power of reflection for him very well with his re-telling of the ‘sharpening the axe’ story he had heard. Reflection is like taking the time to sharpen the axe, the taking time out to really think, and really examine the what, and the why of our actions towards doing things better and smarter.

I would have to force myself to do it [reflect]. Because even during the course, I wouldn't say I dreaded action learning, but what I did dread was the fact that that was a half day or a day that I'm losing this week. Because I would look at what I needed to do, and there's a checklist of things that you need to have done, and you're churning through the cogs, you get them done, but what you don't know that you're doing is that you're doing it as smartly as you can. And I forget who it was, but during the course someone talked about sharpening the axe. And he used the model of two guys with two axes chopping down two trees. One of them never took a break. The other took a five minute break every hour, and what the guy that didn't take a break couldn't understand at the end of the day, this guy had far more wood chopped up. And he spent the five minutes sharpening the axe. That's the reflective time, as what I see as me sharpening the axe. Because it's easy to work hard, but it's not as easy to work smartly, and it's through that reflection you work smart. So you force yourself to do it [Charles].

### PART III

#### Change and transformation – seeing and doing things differently.

It is fair to say that we all changed in some way during the course, changed as managers, as influencers in our organisations, and as individuals. It was a journey of learning to trust each other and share our experiences, and challenges. We learned with and from each other, seeing ourselves through others' eyes. We had time and space to reflect, learn and change. The changes were not the same for all.

You would've seen how, some people probably more than others would've changed their style of dealing with problems over the space of the year and a half or the two years, definitely, I would've noticed that in a few people, they would've been very, I suppose like me, they would've been very...Had a very fixed mind-set on how they dealt with a problem and that changed over time [Suzanne].

Some of the changes, which might seem small to some, were significant for us as individuals. We became more open with others, and less afraid to share our thoughts because we saw the value in so doing. This was particularly true for Cormac and Charles. They both changed their behaviour and became more comfortable with sharing and being open with others, no longer feeling the need to be as guarded.

I think, one thing that has stayed with me is, and traditionally I would have been very reluctant to talk about things. I think that going into the ALS and opening up a bit about some of this stuff, it probably made it a little bit easier for me to open up afterwards. I think it has made a difference in that regard [Cormac].

Yes, I've changed with respect to my reluctance to be transparent. I would have been very guarded at work. I use the example of conveying a message, it didn't matter what the message was, it was conveyed in the same old way. So that was a big change for me [Charles].

We came to be more self-confident in our abilities “I think doing the course has given me that confidence” [Alex]. Confidence that it was acceptable to show vulnerability without losing the regard of others, that it was okay to show that we did not have all the answers all the time, that it was okay to care, and show that we cared.

The biggest benefit to me is my self-belief and my self-confidence. I think it is down to my self-belief and I’m allowing that part of me to come through more and feel, I don’t feel threatened by showing my vulnerabilities or show that caring side of me [Anne].

It gave me more confidence to take things to a higher level and to think this is good enough I should be getting recognised for it. Whereas, before I might not have shouted as loud about things so I don’t see major changes every day but I do notice a difference. So it is recognised yeah [Julie].

With improved self-confidence came happiness and a sense of freedom for Alex, the realisation that there were more things outside of the organisation and work. He came to see things differently, and change his point of view of work, and the significance of the organisation in his life. When asked if he was happier now than before the programme he said,

yeah I’m happier, yeah. I never really thought about the happiness or unhappiness situation until you’ve asked me the question. But yes I’m happier because I’m more confident, I’m not as tied to it if that makes any sense. It’s like Rory McIlroy getting the injury on his ankle he says not everyone cares about golf, there is life outside golf. There is life outside work and there’s other things you can do.

I don’t feel as tied to the company either, which is not a bad thing. And I don’t mean that I am getting fed up of the company or anything like that. It’s that if it stopped tomorrow I know I can go out and work pretty high-level, which if I’m being honest bothered me previously that if we didn’t have the company what would I do. I don’t think about that now. But I do find myself looking at different positions and saying I can do that, which is good for your

self-confidence. It means you're not making rash decisions based on emotional ties [Alex].

It took time and space to change, it did not just happen "The hardest thing to do is to change a person" [Charles]. An important realisation was that the only person we could really change was ourselves and our perspective. Change needed to start with ourselves and our practice, not with changing others. We needed to evaluate ourselves, and how we did things, to question our own motives. We could not expect others to change if we could not change ourselves.

I suppose I could see that at the end of it. I suppose at the start I thought if I can get him to change how he looks at things or I can get someone else to make him change, maybe to get PLQ to tell him to do it differently. But at the end of it, he didn't change at all, I had to change, that's what I realised at the end of it, nothing is going to change in the situation unless I change. And before I started the ALS I would never have thought that [Julie].

You know, if anyone ever needed to change, the last person it would need to be would be me. You know I thought, I was successful, I was good at my job, and I didn't think I needed to do anything differently. But when you're dealing with people, the biggest mistake you can ever make is not evaluating yourself. I find myself now asking for feedback a lot more. I do much more analysis on myself and I do a lot more evaluations, you know. Drawing out the learning has been something that I do now. I've found myself wanting to do those now, because I know that the value is there. The difficulty you've always got is there's always a distraction getting in the way of it, and as I said to you, during the early months of the programme those ALSs were a bit of a hindrance because you saw it as a waste of time that could be better handled elsewhere. But the two years, you know, corrected that thinking for me [Charles].

Being able to change our perspectives could have a huge impact on the way we did our jobs. Take Julie who, because she saw the need for herself to change and to take a new perspective, was able to "survive" [Julie] in her organisation.

I think it was so important, I don't think I'd have been able to survive in my job if I hadn't have done that at that time, so that's why the course was so important to me at that time, because I was able to work through those challenges where if I hadn't had that outlet outside of my work I don't know if I'd been able to cope with it. I don't know if I would have left, it would probably have made the situation even more difficult going on. I don't know what would have happened. I don't see any way of it having got better if I hadn't have been able to look at it differently [Julie].

Julie has become confident in her ability, and her self-esteem has increased significantly, she no longer questions her ability and is better able to see new ways of tackling problems. Now she feels better able to cope with the organisational problems she faces. For Julie the ALSs helped her realise that it was she who was the one in control and though she may have wanted to change others, her energy and time was better spent in working within the context she found herself, knowing the only person that it was in her power to change was herself.

Alternatively, look at Suzanne who, having become more self-aware, has learned how to slow down, no longer needing to be in total control of everything, no longer being the "bottleneck [to] every decision". She is more "measured" in her management style than previously and not as quick to react. No longer "so focused on operations and firefighting", now she is happy to let go and "let somebody else worry" [Suzanne]. Having become fully aware now of her impatience and its potential to impact negatively on her business she is now better able to manage it.

I think I have a lot more patience than I used to have, and I'm not saying I'm a patient person at all, but I recognize how badly impatient I was before. I would have classified myself as a complete control freak before, I would've had to have input into every single decision that I made, and I would've bottlenecked things within the company where people were waiting on me to make a decision on something and they were perfectly capable of making it themselves. There was no justification for it, that's just the way we had always done it, and that has changed, where

there's a lot more autonomy and a lot more responsibility given out to the team [Suzanne].

Alex, too, is no longer as "bull-headed" in his approach which he realises could have been "detrimental" to his organisation. The biggest change for Alex (and for James) is being a reflective practitioner; reflection is not something he had ever thought about before, whereas now he sees reflection and his ability to change as intertwined.

I didn't even think about reflection, so it is a huge change. That's what the course teaches you, to sit back and take time out you look at things holistically and see yeah, I can actually change by reflecting [Alex].

Along with becoming reflective, learning to let go some of the control has been a big change for James.

I'm not taking the front seat anymore; I'm saying 'What do you think? Where do you think you should be going? Come back and let's see it again.' So that's worked really well [James].

James has changed the way he manages; he now believes he is fairer to, and more considerate of, the people he manages. In his view, he is transformed and has become a much calmer person, not his usual "hair is on fire" person of the past.

Definitely the way I manage, definitely the way I manage, I would have been the person who is very out the door, everything is done, everybody knows what they need to do, great, move on. Now I'm taking time to take that step back, count to ten, let other people have their say and actively listening, writing down what people are saying. I didn't do this before, that whole area of active listening I wasn't being fair to people. I don't like it when it's being done to me and yet here I am doing it to people, so definitely, yeah, transformed.

I think I can offer a lot more than before, whereas before I would have thought 'I can do whatever and I'd win, I'll get you your new system, no problem.' Whereas I've got the techniques and tools to actually do it the right way,

and do it with more...being more conscious of people as well [James].

In the end, we all had a very positive experience on our MBSIL journey. It was not without its difficulties but we addressed those difficulties with the trusted support of each other. We learned to become more open about the problems and challenges we were facing in our organisations, and were able, through questioning and reflection, to gain new perspectives on how to manage and how we saw ourselves.

...I mean, before I did the course I would always struggle to see, well what could the value be of sitting in a room on a Friday morning listening to five other people talking about their problems? How is that value add when there's a list of things piling up at work? But there's a mentality shift that happened, so that for me is what has been the biggest value that I got from it [Charles].

We all changed, some of us transformed, changing habits of a lifetime. We all agreed that it was indeed a very valuable, enjoyable and positive shared learning experience.

I feel now, as a result of doing this, that I'm in a lot better position, absolutely. Do I think that, as a person, I learned a huge amount? Yeah. Do I think that from my experiences, were they invaluable? Yeah, absolutely, was there things that I'd go back and say, "I wish that had been done differently on the programme"? Very, very few [Anne].

## Epilogue

Looking back on our journey, how we travelled together, building strong bonds along the way, and supporting each other in our learning, we have a sense of missing those ALSs, and having a place to share openly and honestly. Missing the 'sanctity', as Cormac called it, where we could put everything on the table,

expose ourselves, and our ignorance, knowing that we would make progress on our challenges.

Recently, we had the occasion to hear the stories of others<sup>1</sup> who had also completed the programme. We found that our story resonated with them and theirs with ours. They, like us, took time to warm to the idea of action learning. Robert said he actually found it quite “an irritation at the start”. Similarly Nina felt she did not get much from it as she “was not completely honest at the beginning”, it was only when she started “getting really honest” that she saw “the value that others could add”. They discovered, as we had, that once trust was established, and there was openness and honesty, they experienced the power of the trusted safe space of the ALS, where organisational baggage and politics could be left at the door and masks removed in the knowledge that you would not be judged. Here, in the ALS, it was possible to “lay yourself bare and dig really deep” [Rachel]. Here too you could admit that you did not have everything under control, even though this could be a difficult and uncomfortable thing to reveal.

At work, sometimes, you are trying to convince people everything else is ok even when it is not – you have a mask of sorts on you because you cannot always tell it as it is. Then you go into an ALS where you can drop the pretence and admit you do not have everything under control and do not have all the answers, that is when the emotion comes out [Luke].

Sitting around the table with people who do not have the same fear you have about your problem is really good. People who are from different organisations do not have the same baggage you have and this helps you getting to the root of the problem and to really make sense of things [Aoife].

Rachel said that having to explain your problems to people who knew nothing about you or your organisation really made her question her own assumptions about the problem, and the process helped her to understand her problem

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<sup>1</sup> Robert, Rachel, Orla, Luke, Nina, Aoife

better. The process and knowing you were not on your own, that you had support, helped in making sense of what was going on.

Seeing that other people have the same problems – that is where openness comes and honesty – realising you are not alone. You don't want to admit to others that you have problems then you realise here we are all with the same problems [Aoife].

The ALSs were challenging places for them too, Luke called them “brutal”, Orla “exhausting”. Orla found it hard admitting that she did not have all the answers. Aoife was “totally uncomfortable not having the solution to her problem” while it “bugged” Luke. As senior managers, they, like us, were not used to being questioned and challenged, and more importantly not having the answers. “As managers we have an innate need to solve problems that others bring us and so it's difficult not to do this and instead to ask questions” [Luke].

The emotional dimension of learning rang through for all and facilitated them in understanding their problems better, and also in seeing ways forward towards actions. These were people dealing with real problems that they cared about. Problems that they were responsible for managing, and that affected other people.

Emotion is what pushes you over the edge. We are all passionate about our jobs. Listening to others talk about their jobs there is real emotion. You feel anger, fear, scared, and annoyance when being questioned about your problem [Nina].

I think when there was a breakthrough it was definitely linked to emotion when you felt vulnerable or challenged you made a breakthrough [Aoife].

They found that this emotional element made learning uncomfortable at times, especially when asking themselves, or being asked, very difficult questions that made them dig really deep. They too came to realise that being uncomfortable was not necessarily a bad thing, that sometimes to make progress it was a necessary thing. You had to get “comfortable with being uncomfortable” [Orla]

Luke shared a story of how on one particular occasion he drove away from the ALS “really irritated and annoyed”. He felt quite bothered by how he had been challenged and the difficult questions he had been asked. Indeed, he felt it was unfair, so much so that he planned to complain to the facilitator of the ALS. However, on reflection he realised that his annoyance and irritation were because of the emotion that the questions had stirred in him. In fact, it helped him really understand his problem and to make progress; for him his learning had been enhanced.

It wasn't until someone was really challenging that my emotions were triggered. You have to go through the pain to make progress. I think to learn you have to be uncomfortable. You have to be put into that position where you feel slightly vulnerable, that's how you get honest [Luke].

Having others there in whom they trusted gave them the security to be open and to show emotion. The realisation that they were all in this together, all facing similar issues and having the same doubts, really helped. Orla talked about how she used to admire the others in the ALS, how calm and collected they seemed to be, only to realise as time went by that they had the same insecurities she had. This realisation made her feel a greater bond with the group. She became ready to open up, something she had held back from doing initially. The ALS provided the support she needed to move forward.

Nina raised a very interesting topic, that of vulnerability. Vulnerability is often considered negatively but to her it was a positive thing to realise, and to accept, her own vulnerability as a manager; realising her unknowing, she believes, has made her a better manager. Now she has the confidence not to have all the answers and is not afraid of others knowing this. For her, this realisation has given her power, she is no longer afraid of not knowing.

I became quite vulnerable, questioning my authenticity and my ability to do things. I have come to realise that I do not have all the answers, that others approach things differently based on their values. I cannot expect them to be the same as me. I used to be so set in my way of thinking now I see things differently [Nina].

The programme gave permission to the participants, permission to be honest, to be open, to share learning, to reflect, and to change, both within themselves and their organisations. As the ALS progressed, they noticed themselves and each other grow in confidence and self-belief.

You really see other people grow and become more confident in their own ability. You really begin to understand yourself and your motives. I know I was not happy with where I was as a manager before the programme, but that all changed with the ALS [Orla].

That confidence definitely comes from the ALS and from the support. It gives you the courage to change [Rachel].

I am more considerate of others; I reflect now and am much more strategic in my thinking. I am a more devolved leader. In fact, I cannot think of anything in our business we have not changed in the last three years as a result of the programme. The ALS changes how you work as a person, as a manager [Robert].

They also spoke about finding themselves better able to cope during crises than they had been in the past. Now they pause, and take time to consider the situation rather than rushing to find a solution.

My ability to cope with crisis has improved [Rachel].

Better equipped now for dealing with difficult situations. Better able to cope without being overwhelmed [Orla].

They reminded us of the importance of having the dissertation as a goal and a focus helping them to distil and crystallise their learning. Writing up the dissertation forced them to reflect back to the ALS. Indeed some things that may not have seemed important at the time turned out to be very important upon reflection.

You do not realise what you have been through until you write it down in the dissertation. It knits it all together. The light bulb really came on at that stage, writing up the dissertation [Aoife]

When I went back and read my ALS notes when I was writing the dissertation they made more sense to me, they helped me make

sense of the fuzzy mess. All the pieces began to fall into place with writing [Nina].

It was interesting to hear Robert and Aoife talking about how the Master's was only the beginning of their learning journey, they have found they are still learning since they completed the programme; the programme has been a catalyst for their continuous learning. For them, like us, learning from the programme has endured and even flourished. Just as it had been for us, being and becoming reflective was a major change for them too. Luke spoke about how he finds himself "still reflecting on some of the happening in the ALS", even suggesting that the programme should be retitled a Master's in Reflection, as the concept of reflection permeated throughout.

The MBSIL was a positive, though very challenging, learning experience for all. Nina is in no doubt about the powerful impact action learning has had for her even though it took time to realise it. They all try to incorporate the principles of action learning into their organisational roles, with Robert having constructed reflective space for his staff, even if he does not call it that. All have changed, and in their views for the better, because of being a part of the ALS, their trusted safe space and the programme as a whole. It took time, and was not easy. Robert explains it well when he says it was

[L]ike walking in the early morning dew, you don't realise you are getting wet but once you are through the field you are soaking wet [Robert].

As we did, they too missed the time and space they had spent in the ALSs during the programme, they missed having somewhere trusted to share problems and be supported.

I was lost without it. I really missed it, being able to reach out to others about your problem [Orla].

I really miss having that time and space. I miss the people [Rachel].

Even now when the programme is over, there is a sense of missing that trusted shared space. A sense of loss. "I think, to be honest, if there was a way of, kind

of, trying to maintain that, because like literally it just all stopped, a year ago, and everybody's kind of going "Hmm, what do we do now?" [Suzanne]. It would have been great to continue to keep the group together but as ever the day-to-day gets in the way. Without the focal point of the programme and the common purpose to complete it, it is hard to get everyone together, to sustain that space despite how valuable it has been. Cormac remembers thinking, "it'd be great to keep this group together, I don't know what the objective of the group would have been, but I thought that there was potential to do something". So while the learning and reflection have endured, the trusted space has not, and the routine of the everyday takes hold again.

You do miss it, I mean...I would think that if I had that Friday morning on the calendar now that this problem I'm dealing with now would have been resolved before this. I mean, things are close to getting out of hand at the minute. I might have acted on it quicker had I still had the ALS, because when you are busy and everything's a deadline, you do lose sight of yourself, and you end up working harder and not smarter [Charles].

-----Story ends-----

## 5 CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

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### 5.1 INTRODUCTION

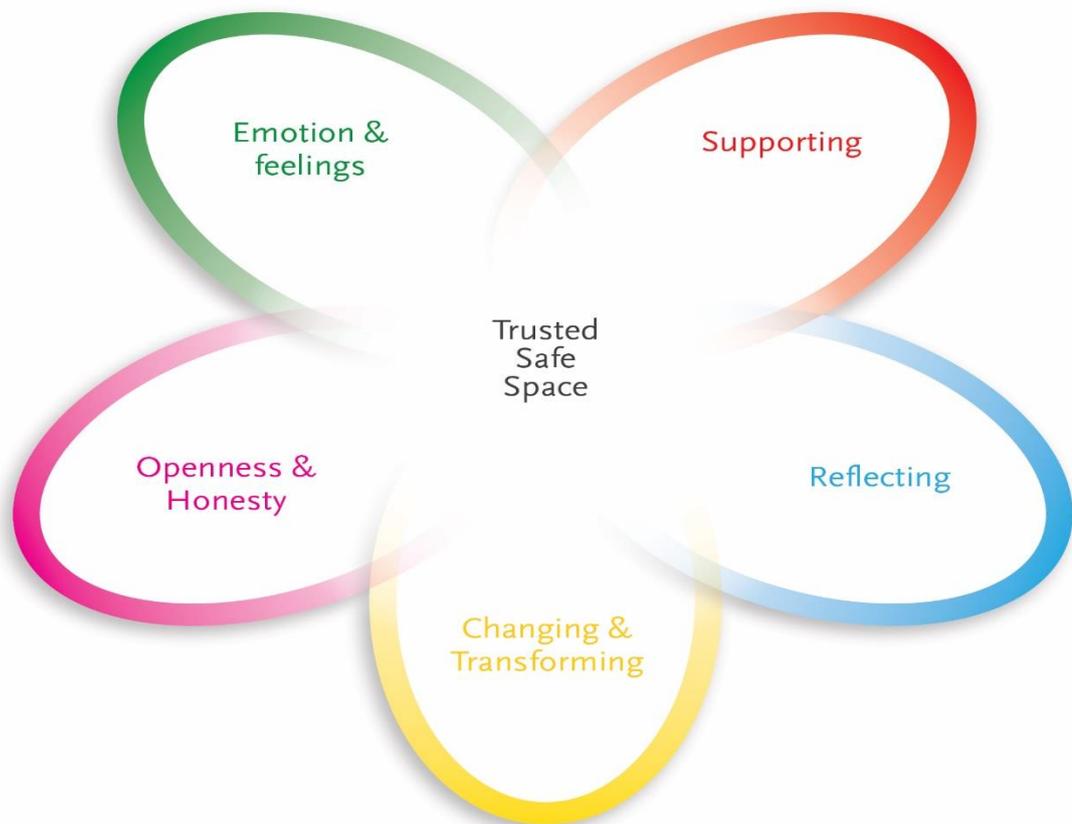
The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the iterative and multidimensional learning experiences as told by the participants, and presented in the story of learning in the previous chapter, in the context of the extant literature. In discussing the story of learning, I address the principle aim of this research; to inquire into former participants' experiences of learning with the intention of enhancing understanding of the learning process in action learning. To support this discussion, I present a conceptual framework of learning in action learning in Section 5.2, which represents the interconnectedness of the themes that emerged from the data analysis (detailed in Chapter 3) and which were the basis for crafting the story of learning as told in Chapter 4.

### 5.2 A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF LEARNING THROUGH ACTION LEARNING

The story of learning presented in the previous chapter follows the arc of a story: Part I setting the scene and context; Part II, the body of the story; leading to a resolution of sorts in Part III; and ending with an Epilogue. For the purposes of clarity and understanding, the story is recounted in a linear and straightforward fashion, with each part following on seamlessly from the previous. Whilst the story commences with the theme of creating a trusted safe space in a busy world, it is not the case that this was an absolute starting point of the participants' learning experiences of action learning, which were subsequently followed by experiences of openness and honesty, emotion and feelings, shared and supported learning, reflection, and change. Instead, the crafting and creation of a trusted safe space, where openness and honesty were embraced, was an ongoing, dynamic and emergent process. It was not something that happened in an instant; rather it required time and collaboration to form and evolve. Emotion and feeling, though a theme in Part II, were evident throughout the participants' stories and were interwoven throughout. Reflecting and being reflective, also themes of Part II, developed as the trusted safe space emerged and were widespread throughout the process. Changing and transforming are the themes of Part III, which is where the stories of change along the learning journey are shared; yet this was not the culmination or end-point of the learning journey. Rather, changing and transforming were ongoing and continuous during the process, indeed they did not end with the

programme; they continued and endured for the participants post-completion. All themes are interconnected and interwoven, with none being first or last, but all part of the story and all required, often occurring simultaneously.

The conceptual framework (Figure 7) attempts to encapsulate the interconnectedness of themes as represented in the participants' story of learning in Chapter 4. The story of learning tells the story of forming a learning space (Blasco, 2016). It is a space that is trusted and safe and which evolves from openness and honesty; showing emotion and feelings; a space for receiving and giving support; a space for reflecting; and, a space enabling change and transformation.



*Figure 7: A conceptual framework of learning in action learning*

Trusted safe space is at the centre of the framework, it is the focal point. It is surrounded by what appear as open petals embracing, or protecting, the space. It is intentional that the petals are open and interlinking, conveying the interconnectedness of the themes, which are all part of the whole. The petals also represent participants of an ALS; they have outstretched arms to the trusted safe space demonstrating openness and a willingness to be vulnerable, while

at the same time protecting the space and supporting each other. It is important to view the framework holistically; it is greater than the sum of its parts.

### 5.3 A TRUSTED SAFE SPACE

The story of learning presented in the previous chapter provides strong evidence of the centrality of the ALS being a safe and a trusted space where participants have time, to think, reflect and discover opportunities. Svalgaard (2016, p. 50) notes the difficulty for managers of finding space in organisations to think and reflect despite how important it is to have time “to figure out what is truly important”. Many managers feel the pressure of continually having to act, and fear “letting up on execution” to reflect, despite potentially missing valuable opportunities because of this constant focus on action (Edmondson, 2008, p. 60; Schein, 1992). As revealed in this research, action learning can be powerful and frightening (Marsick & O’Neil, 1999; Pedler & Trehan, 2008) therefore necessitating the crafting of a trusted safe space. Being in such a space, in particular in a HE context, can provide a sense of freedom which may be absent in an organisational context where fear of exposure of ignorance can curtail participants opening up and sharing their experiences and thoughts. In order to lessen this fear, perceived risk needs to be reduced which can be achieved from the feeling of being in a safe trusted space – such as the “sanctity of the confession box” as Cormac describes his ALS.

When participants feel unsafe or sense there is risk attached to disclosure, learning can be inhibited and opportunities missed (Dunphy et al., 2010; Wanless, 2016). The requirement for safety and trust for learning in action learning should not be minimised, as not only does it support learning but has the ability to enhance it (Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Howorth, Smith, & Parkinson, 2012; Yip & Raelin, 2012) as witnessed in this research. Furthermore, feelings of trust and safety are linked to fostering transformative learning (Gravett & Petersen, 2009; Marsick & Maltbia, 2009; Taylor & Jarecke, 2009) which was evident in the participants’ story of learning and is discussed in Section 5.9.

There is strong evidence presented in the story of learning that the ALSs were a psychologically safe space – a space where there was no need to pretend or put on a mask and where they were comfortable to speak “without fear of ridicule or punishment” (Edmondson & Lei, 2014, p. 39). Participants were comfortable with divulging their weaknesses as they trusted what they said was confidential and believed there was little risk

to them from being open and honest. Their ALS provided “an arena of psychological safety to explore their own skills and a way of seeing the world as well as a haven to experiment with new ideas” (McMillen, Boyatzis, & Swartz, 1994, p. 218). In this space, participants could come and unburden themselves because they felt safe. Sharing so openly provided a sense of relief by not having to keep everything internalised thereby leading to feelings of empowerment (Wanless, 2016).

Interestingly, the findings suggest that participants did not perceive their own organisations as psychologically safe spaces, in which they could openly and honestly express their doubts, and ask their questions. This is not to suggest that they were afraid in their organisations, rather that they felt the need to conceal certain thoughts and to wear a mask of sorts. Possible reasons for the need to conceal may include fear of not having the answers, or fear of showing weakness, which could lead to repercussions (Coutu, 2002; Hay, 2013).

Corley and Thorne (2006, p. 42) ask an interesting question as to whether the ALSs can be “too safe”: do they provide a place where participants can avoid conflict as opposed to dealing with it; is there a danger in this safety of becoming too safe over time? This idea of is echoed by Edmondson (2004) who also raises this potential issue of teams that are psychologically safe becoming too safe, i.e. too comfortable with each other over time which may result in the ALS not being challenging enough. However, it is important to note that being in a trusted safe space does not necessarily mean being comfortable (Edmondson, 2008; Harrison & Edwards, 2012; Holley & Steiner, 2005), the evidence of this research shows that whilst the participants felt safe in their ALS, they were often very uncomfortable during the process. This space is safe in that although there is challenge there is no judgement; safe in that they are supported during the potential discomfort and self-doubt; and safe to be vulnerable. This trusted safe space allows for the suspension of the usual organisational power play and judgement (Debebe, 2011), though it does not mean the absence of anxiety and uncertainty. Uncertainty is not necessarily a bad thing; if we are uncertain we tend to explore other avenues and alternatives and are open to new ways of doing things as evidenced in this research. This research finds that the trusted safe space of the ALS offers a safe place to explore alternatives, to ask probing questions of serious issues and to become emotional without risk of appearing weak. Robertson and Bell (2017) refer to it as the paradox of creating a safe space. As action learning facilitators, we too need to get comfortable with this paradox. We need to understand the importance of helping

participants to craft a trusted safe space for their learning and be prepared for the discomfort and anxiety this may entail.

#### 5.4 DEVELOPING TRUST AND SAFETY

We know from the action learning literature that ALSs are formed based on the principles of trust, confidentiality and respect (McGill & Brockbank, 2011; Pedler & Abbott, 2013; Revans, 2011). It can be straightforward as a facilitator to present these principles of confidentiality and trust to new members of an ALS. However, to ensure that they have been embraced and enacted in earnest is a challenge. It is only over time, and through the process of action learning, that they form (Yeadon-Lee, 2015); without these underpinning principles, it is easy to imagine that the potential value of the action learning approach is greatly diminished.

Trust is based on belief and perception (Schoorman, Mayer, & Davis, 2007); it evolves over time and is embedded within the context of the ALS. As seen in this research, trust is reciprocal in nature; as one person opens up and shares, others do too, particularly when they see the value realised and the sincerity with which their peers share (Edmondson, 2008; Svalgaard, 2016; Wanless, 2016). Trust creates trust (Serva, Fuller, & Mayer, 2005). Participants experienced an enhanced feeling of trust as they shared actual, not simulated, problems – problems that greatly mattered in their organisations. These were problems they cared deeply about, and which affected real people in their organisations. These were not case studies, or consulting tasks, rather they were genuine problems within their organisations that they were responsible for, and the sincerity with which they shared these problems itself developed trust among the participants. All came to realise that they faced similar problems, only the context was different, and this shared connection created strong bonds, which further developed feelings of trust and safety.

Typically, participants did not know each other prior to joining the programme, therefore trust was not based on prior experience and knowledge of each other, rather it emerged while getting to know each other and observing each other's behaviours over time. It is probable that not knowing each other helped build trust, as there was no pre-existing organisational political baggage between participants. Aspirational trust, as explained by Bradbury-Huang, Lichtenstein, Carroll, and Senge (2010, p. 26), is evident, this is trust that is not "earned"

but is rather “conferred” by virtue of the shared journey of the participants, the shared desire to complete the MBSIL successfully and to address organisational problems.

Building and establishing trust between participants started from their first meeting at induction and continued as ALSs and modules progressed. It is possible to imagine that there was a degree of excitement upon starting the programme; all had enrolled voluntarily hoping to improve their practice. This positive emotion and enthusiasm of starting a new programme and the initial comraderie possibly created an affinity among participants, which in turn may have created what Jones and George (1998, p. 534) call a “heightened experience of trust”.

As stated previously, it is fundamental for ALS participants to perceive, and believe, that their ALS is a trusted and a safe space. Without trust, it is likely that participants will censure full disclosure and be resistant to the process. Burger et al. (2013) found that resistance was greater where participants did not gel with their group or did not trust the ALS leading to fear of openness and disclosure. This highlights the importance of the ALS being a safe space where participants can trust each other, and feel supported but do not feel that they are in competition with each other. Participants in this research, similar to those in Burger et al.'s (2013) research felt nervous, and unsure, at the beginning of the process. They were initially sceptical of the value of action learning, they wondered what could be gained from sitting in a room with fellow participants asking questions about their organisational problems on a given Friday afternoon. It was by allowing time for trust and a feeling of safety to develop that this scepticism was quelled, and led to participants engaging with and valuing the process.

Time is acknowledged as an important element when forming trust (Brown, 2015; Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995; Schoorman et al., 2007), and creating a felt sense of safety within the ALS (Marchand, 2017). With action learning there is no quick fix; it takes time to establish the ALS and to realise the benefits afforded from it (Pedler, 1997). This is borne out in this research with the participants noting the requirement for time and the programme providing it. With each ALS, the participants had an allocated portion of time to focus on themselves and their organisational problems. This was precious time to them, something scarce in the normal course of a work day, where usually they were rushing from one thing to the next.

It would appear that trying to over-control this formation of trust is potentially detrimental to the process. Trust needs to evolve, as opposed to being forced; it is a process rather than purely an outcome. People, learners, and managers cannot expect to trust each other because facilitators say this is a principle of action learning. Developing trust in action learning, or anywhere, is challenging and complex (Johnson & Spicer, 2006). Trust is earned, and it takes time, and without it the full value of action learning cannot be realised. It is interesting that a number of participants mentioned that the problems they first presented were not their real ones – they were just testing the water, seeing how it would go, and how others would respond. It is natural that they were sceptical at the start; this was a new approach and very different to anything they had done before. On the MBSIL there was ample opportunity and time to get to know one another and assess each other. Furthermore, they had something in common; they had all come to the programme by their own choice, and for their own reasons; no one was forced to enrol by their organisation, they came voluntarily (Willis, 2004). From the start, there was motivation to learn and a clear willingness to engage, something that may not always be the case on academic programmes or even in organisational action learning settings.

Admittedly, while it is beneficial to have ample time to form trust and feelings of safety, as evidenced in this research, it is not always available. Milano et al. (2015) highlight the challenge of using action learning in higher education where there is pressure to complete and to achieve a particular goal, which can sometimes result in not being able to spend the desired time on the action learning process of inquiring and questioning. However, given the importance of trust and safety for the action learning process it is important to recognise the need to spend time at the outset in crafting this space.

Added to the requirement for time and indeed patience in crafting a trusted safe space is the significance of having a “clear and compelling goal” (Edmondson, 2004, p. 270); having a specific focus and “a sense of direction” can enhance learning (Schein, 1992, p. 17). Participants need to know that there is a point to being there; they need a purpose, which in turn leads to commitment and engagement with the process (Taylor & Cranton, 2013; Traeger & Norgate, 2015). Mendonça et al. (2015) and Groves (2016) found that a lack of focus and purpose led to their ALS failing. Tackling current organisational problems and subsequently writing up a dissertation provides such a focus. Furthermore, knowing that the other participants would hold them accountable for agreed actions at a subsequent ALS

helped maintain participant focus. Many participants talked about initial uncertainty and scepticism due to uncertainty, which could possibly slow down trust building. Therefore, facilitators have a responsibility to provide participants with a clear focus whilst being explicit about the purpose of the ALS and how the action learning process works. Moreover, facilitators should allow participants sufficient time to get to know each other and to feel their way around action learning without putting pressure on them to get to the genuine problem. Whilst allowing such time may be challenging, particularly within the constraints of the academic calendar, it is arguably time well spent.

## 5.5 OPENNESS AND HONESTY

Openness and honesty are key components of successful action learning (Corley & Thorne, 2006) and are highlighted in this research; “we all knew that we were never going to solve the problem unless we were honest and that was uncomfortable” [Charles]. Until participants felt comfortable and safe to speak and share openly and honestly, they did not get full value from the process. It was quite normal not to be completely open and honest at the beginning, and participants needed to test the water, as shown by Nina’s admission that it was only by “getting really honest that we saw the value that others could add”. Listening to others open up created a bond, especially when participants realised they had similar problems, and similar insecurities – only different organisations. Being open and honest can be extremely difficult for participants because as managers they are more accustomed to censoring themselves than sharing problems openly and honestly. Schein (1992) observed that being more open can lead to anxiety, in particular, if one is not in a safe space. There is risk attached to being open and honest with others, particularly when it exposes weaknesses and unknowing. However, by “daring to share” (Svalgaard, 2016, p. 55), it can also create a sense of freedom or relief.

Managers are unaccustomed to being openly challenged and admitting they need help. It was a struggle for them to be open and honest with their ALS peers and in the early days there was a certain amount of reluctance. This reluctance appears natural and can be understood as being linked to the perceived risk of such disclosures especially in the early days before participants’ perceived trust and safety were established. Charles talks about it being difficult and uncomfortable, however, he importantly notes that, once participants started opening up and exposing their vulnerability, this helped to develop and strengthen the trust amongst the participants which Yeadon-Lee (2015) also found to be the case.

Brown (2015) notes that we love seeing openness in others but tend to be afraid of it ourselves, yet the sense of togetherness and shared journey combined with a sense of security appears to have enabled participants on the MBSIL to overcome this reluctance and take the step forward to openness and honesty.

Another important part of encouraging and enabling participants to share openly and honestly was having the right attitude. Participants needed to be open to the concept of sharing honestly; if they were cynical, it is hard to imagine that the level of openness and honesty or indeed the trust would have materialised. By virtue of signing up to the programme and to its ideals it is reasonable to assume that, while they may have been sceptical, they were not cynical. All expressed positive aspirations on joining the programme and a willingness to learn.

The evidence presented in the story of learning suggests that it is the ability to leave organisational baggage and politics behind that adds to the strength and efficacy of the ALS as a trusted safe space where participants are open and honest in their discourse. It is not that they are disregarding “their embeddedness in the structural media of power relations” (Willmott, 1997, p. 174), rather it is a brief reprieve from having to be conscious of ulterior motives and agendas when endeavouring to solve complex organisational problems. By leaving their political and power baggage at the door of the trusted safe space, participants can address problems openly, with clear sight and renewed focus without the cloud of politics and the worry of keeping up appearances. It also provided a reprieve of sorts from the *busyness* of the organisation.

Power dynamics in organisations can hinder people in admitting they need help (Edmondson, 2004). The limited organisational power dynamic within the MBSIL ALS’s trusted safe space made admitting the need for help less risky and thus easier. Participants perceived there to be less risk attached to being open and honest regarding their problems, as they had no stake in each other’s problems given that problems related to separate organisations. There was little to lose by telling it like it was, and participants could tell it from their own perspective of the problem, safe in the knowledge that what they said stayed in the ALS. This absence or rather suspension of power was “seen as an important factor in promoting openness and sharing” (Debebe, 2011, p. 693).

It is arguable that the temporary bracketing by participants of their own organisational power and political issues creates an artificial setting, especially given the importance and influence of power and politics in organisational life. Nevertheless, the evidence of this research suggests the value in doing this if it provides participants the time and space to address problems openly and honestly, thereby leading to good outcomes. It is not the intention to suggest that organisational power and political issues should be ignored or discounted, rather that there is benefit in ring-fencing them temporarily to facilitate new and potentially innovative insights. By seeing how powerful it can be to suspend these issues, and by discarding political baggage whilst in the ALS, participants may become more aware of how damaging and limiting their own political baggage can be when trying to address organisational issues. Moreover, they may realise how such issues can hinder taking necessary action (Vince, 2014) and so “create limits to and possibilities for learning” (Vince, 2012, p. 213).

Though organisational power and politics is temporarily suspended or bracketed, I acknowledge that power and politics are never truly possible to suspend. All situations where groups come together involve, either implicitly or explicitly, some form of power and politics. There is the power of the facilitator who can be viewed initially as an authority - the person in charge who sets the wheels in motion. Each individual has her own power; power to participate, to engage and to speak openly – through choice there is power. The ALS as a trusted safe space is a place where participants learn from and with each other, as discussed above. However, as Tomkins and Ulus (2015, p. 600) say, although peer learning is “based on reciprocity and mutual” it is always evaluative.

Yeadon-Lee (2013a, 2013b) cautions of potential hierarchical issues within ALSs, which could impede learning and engagement with the process. No such issues were observed in this research. A possible reason for this may be attributed to the composition of each ALS; participants were not usually from the same organisation therefore the usual organisational dynamics did not play out in the ALS, instead participants were comfortable in taking the risk to be open and honest about their organisational problem and their own unknowing. The ALSs in the MBSIL were not viewed as a competitive environment and “there was no trying to outgun each other” [Alex] as might be found with organisational ALSs. Instead, participants were able to address problems and gain insights unencumbered by the power and politics that is normal in their organisational setting (Vince, 2012; Vince, Abbey,

Langenhan, & Bell, 2018). It may only have been a momentary reprieve but it provided valuable space for the participants.

## 5.6 EMOTION AND FEELINGS

This research illuminates the role of emotion in learning in action learning. The participant story of learning is replete with emotion and feelings. The language used by participants in re-telling their stories is evocative: language such as ‘struggling’, ‘surviving’, ‘being able to handle things’, ‘finding your feet’, ‘bottling up’, ‘remaining sane’, ‘fear’, ‘coping’, ‘blocked’, ‘laying yourself bare’, ‘brutal’, ‘exhausting’, and ‘being floored’. This language conveys emotional struggle during the action learning process whilst tackling organisational problems. This language is not the usual language expected of managers who are tasked with being effective and efficient in applying models and frameworks or taking a rational objective approach to managing. Rather, it is the language of people facing and dealing with difficult and challenging situations and in need of help and support.

Alex observes that the level of emotion suggests that participants had been “bottling something up” and so when it was released this led to a sense of relief. James compared the ALS to going six rounds in a boxing ring as the process was so intense, and others viewed this intensity as necessary to get to the root of the problem and find a way forward. The ALS, being a perceived trusted safe space, provided the security that supported participants to emotionally engage; it is likely that this level of emotional engagement would not have occurred without this feeling of trust among participants.

At a theoretical level the role of emotion in learning has been much discussed (Antonacopoulou & Gabriel, 2001; Taylor & Statler, 2014). Notwithstanding this, the dominant discourse in management education and practice has tended to be that of the rational or scientific approach to management where managers are taught to use models and frameworks in an objective and rational manner in the course of managing (Datar et al., 2010; Paton et al., 2014). It is a view that does not take account of emotions affecting decisions made (Vince, 2010). Here the organisation is viewed as a machine; the rational cognitive is given primacy over the affective (Kramer, 2007) and the cognitive and emotive are viewed as distinct and separate (Fineman, 1997). Showing emotion is often not considered appropriate in day to day managerial practice where managers are expected to

lead by example and maintain “an acceptable image” (Horrocks & Callahan, 2006, p. 70). Therefore, we find managers concealing thoughts and emotion (Fineman, 1997; Hay, 2013).

Participants linked emotions with progress when trying to resolve their organisational problems, especially when they found themselves “bogged down” [Julie] – engaging emotionally helped them become unstuck (Yip & Raelin, 2012). They claim, “emotions really reveal the extent of the problem” [Charles] and “everything’s underpinned by emotion” [Suzanne]. These revelations should not seem surprising given that, as sentient beings, emotion is part of who we are and how we think; “[e]motions are a part of daily life, embedded in every thought, interaction and outcome” (Fineman, 1997; Horrocks & Callahan, 2006, p. 71). It is clear that the emotional aspect of learning has, in their view, enhanced the learning, and can be viewed as “a significant component” of the process (Dirkx & Espinoza, 2017, p. 4). Through emotional engagement participants have dug deep and unlocked new ways of thinking and acting (McGill & Brockbank, 2011).

Seeing the emotional engagement of others created a sense of empathy among participants and led to stronger bonds being formed (Svalgaard, 2016). Letting others in at an emotional level evidenced the trust and commitment participants had in the process, which in turn encouraged openness and honesty. Tackling organisational problems that matter, and dealing with actions affecting people, is likely to have influenced the level of emotion displayed: actions taken had consequences – they were not abstract ideas pertaining to a case study (Yeo & Nation, 2010). “It’s easy to be objective when it’s someone else’s problem” [Suzanne], but when it is your problem and addressing it has consequences for those close to you, objectivity is extremely difficult if not impossible.

Though the overall outcome of the process may have been positive, the journey towards it can be very uncomfortable (Czarniawska, 2016). The story of learning bears out contentions by both Vince (2010, p. 36) and West (2014, p. 168) that anxiety can have a “paralysing” effect on learning. This paralysis is most notably observed in Suzanne’s data; she found herself stuck, unable to make decisions, and doubting herself all the time. However, for Suzanne, this paralysis ended when she made a breakthrough at a pivotal ALS where she became very emotional and upset. This emotional upset appears to have freed her to envision a way forward and take action (Kramer, 2007). It indicates the “productive” aspect of anxiety showing that, of itself, anxiety is not a negative thing; it can be part of an effective learning process and not something to be necessarily avoided, controlled or fixed (Vince, 2010, p.

36). Rather than blocking learning (Kolb & Kolb, 2009), anxiety and sometimes a sense of fear of the unknown have led to and supported learning. It was when their emotions were triggered and participants were deeply challenged that their thinking was unblocked and they could see other ways forward. Instead of emotions (such as fear, upset, frustration, and anger) being negative, they were instead the emotions and feelings that were associated with breakthroughs and positive outcomes. It is reasonable to say that emotions awakened senses that helped lead participants to new insights that, until emotions were stirred, had remained hidden.

However, it is necessary to consider what the outcome would have been had Suzanne, or another participant, not made this breakthrough; would they remain paralysed and anxious? I suspect that given the time allowed to, the support from peers, and the level of reflection required for writing up the dissertation, participants would see a way forward, as has been the case to date. Undeniably, not all experience the same emotional intensity as that told by some of the research participants here, but it is reasonable to assume that others had emotional experiences linked to their learning in the ALS. When you are dealing with important organisational problems that require change and that matter to actual people, it is difficult to see how emotion would not play an important if not pivotal role.

It is possible that anxiety felt by the participants is in part related to the verbalisation of their problem and not having the answers (Coutu, 2002). Managers are expected to know how to act, how to manage and to get things done; it is expected that they are in control and have the answers when asked (Mowles, 2017; Schein, 1992). They appear uncomfortable and disquieted when they do not have the answers and more so when they have to admit this (Hay, 2013; Svalgaard, 2016). Furthermore, by openly and honestly verbalising the problem, it can in a sense make it more real and means the participant can no longer hide from it or the role they play in its resolution. This links back to the importance of feeling safe and being with people whom they trust. Though extremely challenging at times, learning in the ALS could also lead to sense of relief – of being unburdening.

Often when emotion comes into play we think of rushing in, not thinking – being led by our heart not our head. However, when emotions surfaced in the context of a trusted safe space, participants had time to consider them and the possible actions they might take concerning their organisational problem. They did not need to hide their emotions or dampen them down for fear of seeming un-managerial. Frequently, when we become emotional, we react,

however, being in the trusted safe space can help contain immediate emotional responses, and provide a safe space to pause and reflect and to address problems and issues that arise because of emotional engagement.

The role of emotion in management education programmes is still developing (Ashkanasy, Dasborough, & Ascough, 2009) with calls to further explore its role in management learning (Vince, 2010, 2015). The findings in this research shed light on the importance of emotion in the learning process. Whilst the process can at times be difficult and even upsetting, emotions play a significant role in the participant learning experience, with participants viewing it as an enabler to learning (Illeris, 2003). Given the extent of the emotional dimension within the learning process, as demonstrated in this research, it is vital that facilitators of ALS in a higher education context are attuned to its importance and “explicitly attend to emotion aspects” (Shepherd, 2017, p. 13; Vince, Abbey, Bell, & Langenhan, 2018). It is possible that in engaging emotional dimensions within the learning process facilitators are potentially endangering participants (Lizzio & Wilson, 2004). Facilitators need to consider their duty of care to participants and have considered approaches for dealing with issues, should they arise. The implications of attending to emotion are important given potential ethical issues that may arise, particularly in an educational context. For example, where facilitators are attending to emotion there could be a danger of exploitation or manipulation of participants by the facilitator who admittedly is in a powerful position. Difficult as they may be, these conversations are necessary and particularly where participants are willing to expose vulnerabilities to others.

The story of learning shows that participants ultimately had a positive learning experience despite it being at times uncomfortable, intense, challenging and draining; the net result and feeling was resoundingly affirmative with a sense of missing it when they were no longer a part of it. Participants expressed feeling joy and happiness in their learning – feelings which Tomkins and Ulus (2016) note are little mentioned in the literature on learning. These feelings appear linked to feeling more confident, and being better able to cope with challenging issues. Given that emotion is an integral part of being human, as evidenced here, it is important that they are explicitly recognised in the process and not seen as “taboo” and too messy to deal with (Tomkins & Ulus, 2016, p. 168). Expressing emotion can be risky and can place participants in a vulnerable position (Raelin & Raelin, 2011), therefore there

is a need for a safe space in which to express emotion without fear of adverse consequences and also a place to practise being vulnerable.

There is continual pressure on managers to hide their weaknesses and to present a self that is in control and has the answers to problems posed; lack of knowing in organisations can be considered a weakness (Hay, 2013). Maintaining this facade can leave managers feeling alone and unable to seek support when dealing with organisational issues within the organisation. Therefore, it is not surprising that the research participants were hesitant and uncomfortable about displaying unknowing, perhaps fearing that they were bursting the bubble of what a manager is expected to be (Hay, 2013). However, with time the participants were prepared to take a risk by displaying their vulnerabilities, as they perceived themselves to be in a trusted space in their ALS (Mayer et al., 1995; Schoorman et al., 2007). This risk paid off for them as they became more adept at tackling organisational problems, understanding themselves, and became, in their own view, better managers as evidenced in the story of learning and further discussed in Section 5.9. They have become “better equipped now for dealing with difficult situations” [Orla] and to cope with complexity.

Participants allowed others to see their weaknesses; they dropped their masks and let others see them and their fears. Rachel talks about laying herself bare, and Anne dropped the barriers to which she had become accustomed. Luke talks about dropping the pretence of having everything under control. Showing vulnerability was an uncomfortable thing to do, especially given that part of the dominant discourse of being a manager is of being in control; it could be very unsettling not to have the answers to the questions posed in the ALS. This unknowing can become a great annoyance and lead to anxiety, however, ultimately for these participants, it led to gaining insight into how they might resolve organisational problems which in turn led to relief. Orla put it well when she said that you needed to get “comfortable with being uncomfortable”. Allowing themselves to be vulnerable and display vulnerabilities was significant – in doing so participants were in a better position to tackle problems, having faced their fears and moved forward.

We are all vulnerable in some way or other, many are encouraged to hide it, and it is seen as weakness yet it is inherently part of being human (Harrison, 2008; Hay, 2013). Management and business education, in the main, professes a rational approach through the use of models and structures to attain profitability (Datar et al., 2010; Hay, 2013). Even where organisations profess social responsibility, it is secondary to efficiency and

effectiveness drivers. Organisations strive to address and ‘fix’ weaknesses; there is rarely encouragement to embrace weakness or make ‘the cracks’ transparent so it is not surprising that managers reluctantly make visible vulnerability and engage in truly open and honest dialogue (Harrison, 2008). However, in this research, accepting and displaying vulnerability has come to be considered a positive thing; it is something thought of as a strength. Being able to accept and show vulnerability can defuse the power of fear and negative connotations often associated with vulnerability. Having embraced vulnerability and no longer having it as a barrier, it can lead to courage in action. This is a view echoed by Brown (2015) who says that viewing vulnerability as a weakness is a “widely accepted myth” but more importantly a very dangerous one (p. 33). She astutely notes “Vulnerability is the core of all emotions and feelings. To feel is to be vulnerable. To believe vulnerability is weakness is to believe that feeling is weakness” (p. 33).

Crafting a trusted safe space, in the ALS within a HE setting, permits participants to display vulnerability without fear of being compromised or exposed (Marchand, 2017) – this can be contrasted to situations within their own organisation where it may be perceived as inappropriate for managers to show vulnerability (Hay, 2013). Witnessing others being vulnerable creates a sense of empathy, a connectedness; if others are willing to be open and to expose their weakness, this in turn gives others permission to do likewise. By acknowledging vulnerability, we can become aware of it and the possibility of being hurt or endangered as result, and so we can therefore protect ourselves; in effect we remove its power to be destructive (Brown, 2015). Therefore, it no longer constrains action to the extent that it does when concealed and feared. Action learning sets, as trusted safe spaces, in a HE setting, can provide the opportunity to practise being vulnerable and accept vulnerability. It is arguably easier to do this in the context of a HE programme with ‘strangers’ than in an organisation with fellow managers where there is a greater risk of loss, competitiveness and misjudgement.

## 5.7 SUPPORTING EACH OTHER

Despite research participants tackling individual organisational problems they are doing so in a relation to each other in their ALS (Bradbury-Huang et al., 2010; Tomkins & Ulus, 2016). They depend on each other for support, and questioning, in moving towards understanding, reframing and agreeing actions for their problems. Insightful questions by peers on the MBSIL were particularly important as they at times led to turning points or

even disorientating dilemmas (Adams, 2010). Participants gained courage from the support they received from their fellow participants, to challenge their own assumptions and face difficult issues head on. There was a sense of community among them and acknowledgement of the extent of their learning from and through each other (Marchand, 2017; O'Hara et al., 1996).

Over time, ALS participants forged strong bonds with each other. Sharing openly and honestly, and having time, helped create these strong bonds between participants. Furthermore, displaying emotion created empathy among participants, and further strengthened these bonds and connectedness (Raelin & Raelin, 2011). When people feel “a positive connection” and relate to each other they tend to become less judgemental and less protective of their own ideas (Howorth et al., 2012, p. 375). Schein (1992, p. 13) tells us “anxieties inherent in this new learning are manageable if they are shared”, to which I would add, when supported by a safe and trusted space.

Participants would not have been able to “lay themselves bare” [Orla] without the support from each other, whom they trusted to be there to help them during the process. Others were there to hold up a mirror to each other and to ask fresh questions. They helped each other to “face up to the problem” [Alex]. Questions and issues they were previously afraid of addressing on their own were now possible to confront with the support of others. It is interesting how Charles talks about being “obliged” to be honest, that sense of interconnectedness and responsibility to each other had a very strong role in building trust, safety, and honesty (Frazier, Fainshmidt, Klinger, Pezeshkan, & Vracheva, 2017). This sense of commitment to each other encouraged and enhanced engagement with the process (Marchand, 2017). No one wanted to let others down, and all depended on each other's commitment. This commitment is an underlying principle of ALS (Pedler & Abbott, 2013) with Mendonça et al. (2015) noting the lack of it as a major contributor to the failure of their ALS. Brown (2015) also observes it is disengagement that is the first step in losing and breaking trust, further highlighting the importance of the support and connectedness in maintaining engagement with the ALS process.

Having others whom they trusted, who listened attentively to them and with whom they shared their journey, allowed the ALS participants to see things through others' eyes and so gain new perspectives. To paraphrase Julie, being on your own you can become very closed in your thinking and “bogged down”; it is only when others help you see your problem

through their eyes that ways forward unfold. Participants were so close to their own problems it was difficult to think ‘outside the box’ or ‘see the wood for the trees’. The challenging questions posed by others in the supportive environment of the ALS helped them understand the problem faced. Despite the questioning at times being frustrating, participants were able to cope due to the support they had and often the challenging questioning could lead to new insights. Rachel said that having to explain her problems to people who knew nothing about her, or her organisation, really made her question her own assumptions about the problem, and the process helped her to understand and reframe her problem. By asking questions in the ALS, and through relational dialogue, participants came to better understand the problems and issues they faced (Bradbury-Huang et al., 2010). Together they co-constructed a new reality agreeing alternative courses of action.

Participants received support that might otherwise have been missing in their own organisations. They realised they were not alone in the problems they faced; others faced similar types of problems in their organisations and they too struggled. This mutual feeling provided a sense of reassurance and a sense of familiarity which Edmondson (1999) notes as supportive in creating a safe environment. The process in the ALS provided a sense of connectedness and belonging, which also helped in building and sustaining the trusted safe space of the ALS where “there was no holding back, no fear of sharing our thoughts” [Julie]. Participants needed the support of their fellow members especially when engaging with difficult organisational problems and “digging deep” [James].

ALSs, similar to Marsick and Maltbia's (2009, p. 170) Action Learning Conversations “are powerful in part because peers learn from one another, pool their knowledge and gain direct experience of perspective taking”. All participants highlighted how much they learned from each other and greatly valued this learning. When participants feel connected, they feel safe to express themselves, to share insight and thoughts, which in turn can lead to rich dialogue and learning.

Interestingly Dilworth (2010b) suggests that in a HE setting, where ALSs address individual projects as opposed to a joint problem, there tends to be “less of a bonding effect”. This is not borne out in this research; here, the participants saw it as an advantage that they were addressing problems that were individual to their organisation and that they were not sharing their ALS with others from their organisations. Having an individual, rather than a joint, organisational problem provided them with the space to be more open and honest. They

could be freer in their dialogue than might otherwise be the case if participants were colleagues. Furthermore, many participants talked about the importance of diversity within the ALS, which brought varying perspectives enhancing each other's learning (Waddock & Lozano, 2013; Yeo & Nation, 2010).

It is interesting to note that the support and connectedness continued outside the structured ALSs and participants were there for each other between ALSs, checking up on each other and ready to listen, support and question if necessary. Action learning, as evidenced in this research, provides the type of education that Waugh et al. (2014, p. 1235) call for, which has more "emphasis on human relating where there is an acknowledgement of the common bonds of humanity with people through an appreciation of people's connectedness". Developing strong bonds and positive relationships among participants is linked to crafting a trusted safe space (Wanless, 2016). It is the participants together rather than the facilitator alone that creates the trusted safe space. The facilitator can encourage and support moulding such a space, helping participants to realise the potential value of being in a trusted safe space where they can be themselves. However, ultimately, it is the participants that are the crafters, through supporting each other and developing trust. The facilitator, as Revans says, is the accoucheur or midwife. Just as the midwife cannot have the baby for the mothers nor can the facilitator make support or trust happen, she can merely help create the conditions and provide guidance (Revans, 2011).

There is, however, a danger of being too close and too supported, feeling the same as each other. This feeling of familiarity could mitigate against critically questioning and reflecting as participants see themselves reflected in each other's stories. Tomkins and Ulus (2015, p. 600) caution that a sense of identifying too much with peers can lead to "a narcissism of non-critical reflection, leading to an ever-greater conviction in, and adherence to, existing ideas rather than the development of new ones". Here the challenge for the facilitator is to find the correct balance between support and challenge (Edmonstone & Robson, 2014).

The learning story clearly demonstrates the importance of participants feeling a connection and an affinity to each other thereby helping in the success of the ALS process. This connection creates strong bonds that in turn were pivotal in the co-construction of a trusted safe space, discussed previously, and for enhancing learning. Without this support, it is unlikely that participants would have engaged to the extent they did in the process, thereby allowing themselves to expose vulnerability and question deeply held assumptions and

values, which could result in transformation, a theme discussed later in Section 5.9. The story told by participants regarding support and learning with and from each other echoes Mowles (2017, p. 506) who speaks of “the radical potential of groups to encourage learning”. Furthermore, it reinforces the importance for facilitators of providing sufficient time to allow these connections and bonds to form between participants and providing a conducive environment for them to get to know and trust each other. This relationship building is fundamental to establishing good support within the ALS, and even though time is a limited resource on programmes, it is an investment, which enables shaping a supportive trusted environment where participants are willing to engage fully with the action learning process.

## 5.8 REFLECTING

All research participants have come to value reflection greatly and it has become embedded into their normal way of managing. They no longer view allowing time for reflection as “unproductive” as conventional management might (Edmondson, 2008, p. 67) or as a “distraction” or “interruption” to the important work of managing (Adams, 2010, p. 125). Some like James found it “revolutionary”, others like Alex have found it to be essential to all aspects of the manager’s role, echoing Adams (2010) who highlights its strategic potential for the organisation. Whilst participants talked about how reflection became part of what they did on a daily basis, it was still necessary to reflect deliberately and consciously. It was not easy to change the habit of not reflecting at all to one of becoming reflective; however, they have found that the positive influence of being reflective has paid dividends and has been worth the effort. In being reflective, they have changed old ways of doing things, which in turn has led to better outcomes for their organisations. Engaging with reflection, the participants have come to see other ways and new insights – what Jones (2007, p. 91) calls “other voices and other perspectives”. As an example of how reflection is valued by the participants, Robert incorporated reflective spaces (although he does not call them that) into his organisation, and encourages his managers and staff to take time to reflect and be reflective.

In the trusted safe space participants now had time – time to pause and take stock: time to think slowly whereas the norm in the typical day to day is to think fast and react (Kahneman, 2011) and being continually under pressure to make decisions and to take action and perform, (Karakas et al., 2015). Taking time and pausing in the modern world can often be

viewed as a waste of time (Blasco, 2016); organisations are very busy places and action is very often prioritised over perceived inaction. However, as shown in this research, pausing and reflecting can be very valuable and can result in positive outcomes (McGill & Brockbank, 2008). The trusted safe space of the ALS, and the structured process where each participant was allocated time, enabled the participants to pause, practise being reflective, and to try to make sense of their actions. In the ALS participants had permission to take time to pause, to step back, assess and consider, focusing only on the problems at hand without interruptions. The finding echoes Traeger (2017, p. 131) who found ALSs offer "time, space and a genuine and human-scale quality of listening" while "cutting through the noise of a system" (p. 136).

When the participants talk specifically of their new-found skill of reflection, it is a cognitive rational type of reflection to which they are referring (Mezirow, 1990). This is a reflection process where they stand back, pause and think about the actions they have taken and consider the impact of these actions. However, when they tell their stories of change and transformation more generally, it is evident that they have engaged in what Mezirow (1990) terms premise reflection. They have questioned their established assumptions and practices, and their long established ways of managing (Reynolds, 2011; Sofu et al., 2010). The process they engaged with was challenging and emotional and led to many realisations about self and the problem at hand. Reflection helped participants make sense of what is happening and has happened and the evidence suggested that it also supported deeper understanding of the situation (Yip & Raelin, 2012). Participants learned to reflect in the ALSs but, more importantly, they continued reflecting when they left, for example, on their ways home or back to the office, in the office, when writing up their dissertations. Reflection became an ongoing process, continuing long after the ALS and indeed the entire programme. Reflection was not merely a deliberate action or a technique, it became part of who they were as managers (Vince & Reynolds, 2009), they were reflecting on action and in action (Schön, 1987).

There is evidence of participants not only being reflective, but also being reflexive. Cunliffe (2009) tells us that being reflexive is about: being aware of our ignorance and lack of knowing; being aware of how our own practice affects others; and recognising that together we shape realities. Suzanne demonstrated this when she became aware that she was a bottleneck to solving problems; Nina accepted not knowing and the notion that vulnerability

was positive; Alex and Robert came to find, through reflection, that they needed to alter how they managed throughout their organisations.

Though reflection is often considered an individual pursuit (Lundgren & Poell, 2016), in this research the relational aspect of reflection is evident. Fellow participants stimulated reflection in each other in the ALSs, as they held up mirrors and asked the searching questions. As Brookfield (2009, p. 134) aptly says “very few of us can get very far on our own”, it was through support of others within the ALS that participants on the ALS got far. Additionally, writing the dissertation provided a focus for reflection and made it a deliberate act; it forced participants to think, question, and reflect on the actions taken, and to articulate them in writing. This deliberate and conscious reflection on actions and previous reflections in turn led to realisations for participants and so to new learning.

Moreover, this research supports the view of reflection being desirable for managers and highlights the lack of reflection in organisations. Daily organisational life is busy, and many times hectic, so it can be challenging for managers to learn the value of reflection. However, an academic programme, such as the MBSIL, can provide the space and opportunity to practice reflecting while dealing with actual organisational problems. Once the value of reflection is realised, as borne out in this research, reflection becomes part of being a manager and additionally is transferred to their organisation.

However, being reflective can be uncomfortable; it requires questioning ingrained assumptions and motivations. In a sense, it is about giving up control and being prepared to really look at our actions and ourselves (Tomkins & Ulus, 2015) and this may not be a pleasant experience. By really looking at themselves and in the mirrors held up by other participants, people can become uncertain about themselves and the actions they have taken (Reynolds, 2011; Sofo et al., 2010). There are emotional dimensions associated with reflection (Lundgren & Poell, 2016), particularly when it leads to questioning fundamental ways of acting. In this research, we see participants who became paralysed and unable to make decisions due to insights they had gained through reflection and questioning. This emotional upset and anxiety is the darker side of reflection, which Reynolds (2011) speaks of, and something facilitators of ALSs need to be aware of and ready to manage should it arise. It is not necessarily a bad thing as it can lead to participants gaining insight and becoming unstuck (Yip & Raelin, 2012), however it needs to be recognised and facilitated in a supportive manner. Finally, providing a trusted safe space where time is available can

encourage and enhance the depth of reflection (Marsick & Maltbia, 2009) and in turn lead to transformative learning, the final petal in the conceptual framework which is discussed next.

## 5.9 CHANGING AND TRANSFORMING

We now come to the final petal in the proposed conceptual framework of learning in action learning. As mentioned previously, it is intended that the framework be viewed holistically rather than as individual petals, which are mutually exclusive. Though the petal of changing and transforming is last to be discussed, this is not to suggest that change was a one-time event that happened at the end of the process, rather change was an ongoing and continuous process that emerged over time. The evidence presented in the story of learning in Chapter 4 strongly suggests that transformative learning was experienced by participants; they all claim significant change to the way they manage and how their perspectives have altered. Some participants experienced breakthrough moments (Anne and Suzanne), others had pivotal moments due to a particular question asked (as evidenced by the stories of Robert and Orla). During the process, participants made meaning of what they were discovering about their problem that led to a change in perspective and change of habit (Mezirow, 1997, 2009). They came to understand themselves better and were able to reframe their problems. Their stories of change or transformative learning are not one-dimensional, rather they are multi-dimensional; they comprise cognitive, emotional and social dimensions all interconnected (Illeris, 2003, 2004).

The first precondition of transformative learning is a disorienting dilemma that leads to acknowledging a habitual pattern. Such disorienting dilemmas are apparent in the story of learning, be it, for instance, Suzanne's paralysis and inability to move forward until a pivotal ALS, or when Robert was struck by a particular question that shook him to his core and made him question a long-held assumption of his management approach. Often when faced with such a dilemma, a person may become defensive (Argyris & Schon, 1974), in the way Luke became angry with the facilitator, and Suzanne with herself. Where this happens, the presence of a safe environment is crucial so the participant can explore this dilemma safely and with the support of trusted peers.

Participants changed how they perceived themselves, for example, both Charles and Julie came to realise that change had to start with themselves; they could not change others'

perspectives but they could change how they dealt with problems and how they perceived their own roles. “Nothing is going to change in the situation unless I change” [Julie] and “you know if anyone ever needed to change the last person it would be, would be me” [Charles]. These realisations of the need for self-change before changing others aligns with the teachings of Revans particularly when he states, “those unable to change themselves cannot change what goes on around them” (Revans, 2011, p. 76). However, while it may be easy as a facilitator presenting this concept, actually doing this is extremely difficult and challenging. It is always easier to think that it is someone else who needs to change, or a situation, which involves others, that needs to change. Realising and acknowledging that it is our own behaviour that requires change and that perhaps it is ourselves who are blocking change – this is a significant, and I would argue, transformational step.

Slowing down and taking time to reflect before making decisions were significant changes of habits for participants. Suzanne and Alex talked about becoming more patient and more tolerant of others’ views and ways of working. It led them to feeling happier, more relaxed and less tied to their organisations. Previously, as managers, they had found letting go of control very difficult and were embroiled in the day to day, resulting in them having little time for anything else except action. Now because of their learning in the programme, they relinquished control and have become leaders: thinking strategically. Their habits have changed. All have learned to slow down and reflect before making decisions and acting; their ways of thinking and acting have changed from constantly doing to appreciating the value of stopping, listening, taking time and pausing. Accepting and indeed embracing their own vulnerability and ignorance has also been a major change in behaviour and in developing self-confidence and self-belief. They no longer assume vulnerability as a weakness but see its potential; “unless they [leaders] can acknowledge their own vulnerabilities and uncertainties”, transformational learning is not possible (Coutu, 2002, p. 105).

Whilst Mezirow presents transformative learning as a finite process, I would suggest that, especially in the context of action learning, the process is ongoing and continuous. The participants may have changed perspective or habits at points in time but the process was a continuous one. After such changes, the participants continued to question assumptions and perspectives and, whilst they may not change often, they are open to the prospect of

changing or indeed transforming their perspectives and frames of reference again – they are receptive to further transformative learning.

Additionally, providing a structured process in the ALS, where each participant had an allocated amount time and a specific problem to focus on, coupled with the requirement to write a dissertation, facilitated the participants in their learning experience. It provided a sense of stability and commonality towards an end goal of producing a dissertation. This stability and focus provided a sense of comfort during very uncomfortable times. Whilst overly structuring the learning process can be viewed as limiting transformative learning (Taylor & Jarecke, 2009), here structure was found to be beneficial and supportive.

There is, however, inherent risk in encouraging and supporting transformative learning, and, as facilitators of action learning, we need to be cognisant of our duty of care to participants. What if someone digs too deep? As facilitators we are not therapists, and so it is crucial to be aware that there may be dangers where participants question long-held assumptions and beliefs (Lawless, 2008). This is where the importance of a trusted safe space is pivotal, where participants are supported in their questioning but where there are also boundaries and a clear focus on the purpose of the process. ALSs are not therapy sessions, they are places where organisational problems are tackled, and where learning is facilitated with respect to the problems encountered.

The evidence of this research suggests that ALSs are places where participants may experience transformative learning and where their perspectives and habits change. This can be a very challenging, uncomfortable and emotive process and one in which participants are vulnerable. However, in crafting a trusted safe space, which is facilitated, participants are supported in their endeavours. The role of the facilitator, especially at the outset, is crucial in supporting and guiding crafting a trusted safe space. The facilitator is there to provide a structure, a process, to guide and to be on-hand as required. On this particular programme, the facilitator is more light touch than interventionist, allowing the trusted safe space to develop organically (Marsick & O'Neil, 1999). However, it should be noted that the block modules on the programmes, where there is a more structured approach, also adopt an action learning ethos. On these modules, participants are encouraged to reflect on their own experiences in the context of the module topic and literature. Participants talk about the modules and ALSs being extensions of each other and it is possible to propose that this interlinking has strengthened the learning process.

Taylor (2009, p. 14) cautions those educators who wish to foster transformative learning that they will

have to trust their teaching instincts, since there are few clear signposts or guidelines, and develop an appreciation for and awareness of their own assumptions and beliefs about the purpose of fostering transformative learning and the impact on practice.

Facilitators of action learning would be wise to heed Taylor's advice given the evidence provided in this research of transformative learning in action learning. The role of the facilitator must be to help the participants during this challenging and emotive process and to help craft a safe and trusted space where transformative learning is supported.

The evidence in this research showing the potential for transformative learning in action learning is further supported by Burger et al. (2013) and Van Schuyver (2004). Van Schuyver (2004) observed participant transformational learning in the form of learning to learn that he claims was as a result of insightful questioning rather than programmed learning. Burger et al. (2013) also found that action learning could lead to transformative learning coupled with perceived feelings of empowerment by participants. They linked these perceived benefits to the level of engagement of the participants during the learning process. However, what this current research adds is a holistic view of how this learning was experienced by the participants and the interlinking and overlapping threads that support it, as shown in the conceptual framework presented in Figure 7. Transformational learning is about change and change is known to cause anxiety, therefore "transformation learning is more likely in environments perceived as *safe*" (Debebe, 2011, p. 681, italics in original). It is important that facilitators allow sufficient time to craft a trusted safe space with participants and the time required should not be underestimated. Academic managers need to be aware that this time for nurturing bonds and building trust is necessary and productive, especially considering that transformative learning requires trust, and trust takes time to build as it involves both the "head and the heart" (Marsick & Maltbia, 2009).

#### 5.10 THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK EXTENDED.

In the above discussion, the importance of vulnerability, readiness to take risks, and being able to briefly bracket politics and power play in crafting a trusted safe space are apparent. This additional layer illuminates further the learning experiences of participants in action learning, and is depicted in the extended framework in Figure 8. The extended framework

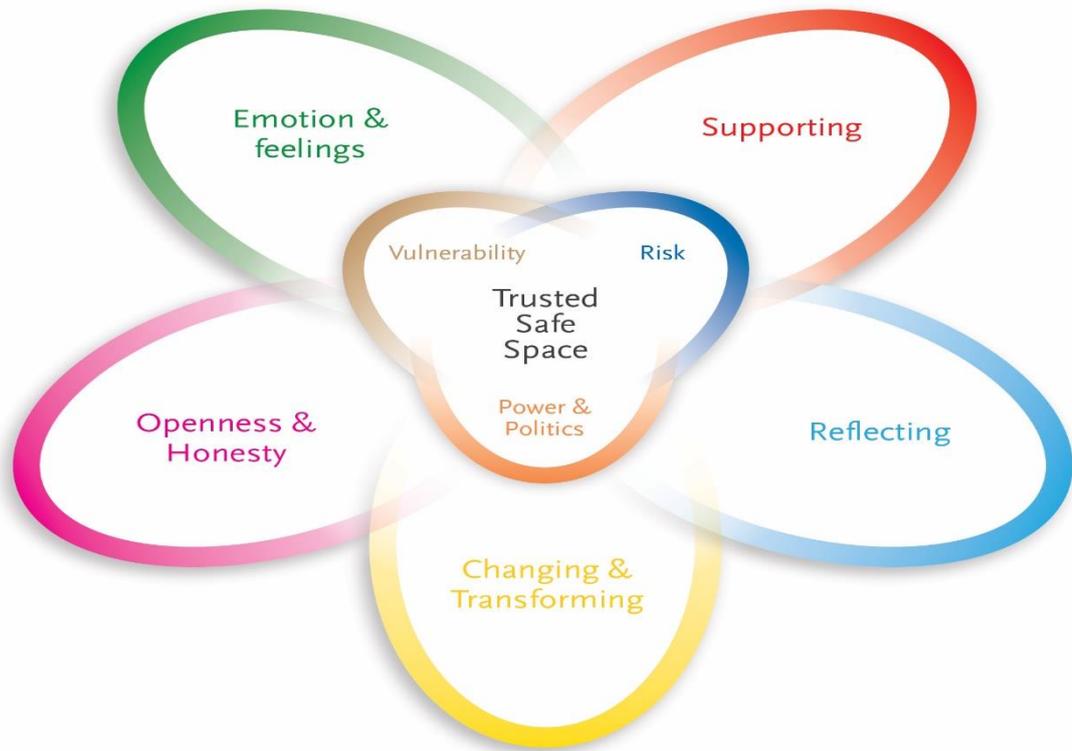


Figure 8: An extended framework of learning in action learning

has an inner area of three overlapping petals surrounding the trusted safe space. Similar to the outer petals, these petals are not mutually exclusive; they are interdependent and enmeshed with one another and with the upper level. Risk is inherent with change and taking action ultimately leads to change; Trehan and Pedler (2011, p. 185) observe that without risk there is no “profound learning”. However, it is natural to avoid risk where possible; managers are accustomed to averting and controlling for risk, and therefore taking risk may not be natural for them. Crafting a trusted and safe space with participants can alleviate some of the fear associated with the inherent risk and facilitate participants in taking the necessary steps towards this “profound learning”. In order for participants to take the risk of exposing themselves and being open and honest, they first need to trust the space they are in and feel safe. Reflection, particularly deep reflection, is inherently risky as it can cause participants to fundamentally question long-held assumptions and so disturb the status quo. With any change, incremental or transformational, there is risk – risk of the unknown process and outcome.

As discussed above, exposing vulnerability, although empowering, can also involve risk and therefore requires a trusted safe space. Displaying vulnerability requires participants to be open and honest in discussing their organisational problems. Such honesty and openness can

be unsettling, anxiety-laden and therefore the support and suspension of judgement by other participants is pivotal. Acknowledging one's own vulnerability can be a conduit in enacting change and transformation as it can break down barriers and free up thinking. By recognising their vulnerabilities and unknowing, participants are in a position to work with them, and not to see them as something that must be controlled and hidden behind masks. This can also help build empathy with fellow workers and lead to authentic working. As stated previously, having a trusted safe space provides a place where participant managers can come to realise the positive potential of acknowledging vulnerability through no longer viewing it in negative terms.

Whilst it is not possible to fully suspend the influence of organisational power and politics, being able to bracket them temporarily within a trusted safe space is seen to enhance learning and is conducive to participants becoming more open and honest. Without the fear of repercussion, participants can expose weaknesses and fears in this supported environment. Being from distinct organisations means that participants have no stake in the organisational problems of other participants, there is nothing to lose by supporting each other. Much energy can be spent in organisations trying to second-guess others or predict how others might use knowledge of others' weaknesses. Energy expended in keeping up appearances and putting on masks might be better directed towards tackling organisational problems in an authentic way where participants are open and honest with others, but more importantly with themselves.

### **5.11 THE PROCESS OF LEARNING IN ACTION LEARNING ILLUMINATED**

The process of learning in action learning, as discussed above, is a process that unfolds over time, it is dynamic and multi-dimensional. The data reveals how critical a trusted safe space is in this process of learning. A space, which is not created by a lone facilitator, nor one that is static rather it is a space crafted together by participants and supported by an ALS facilitator. Here in this space, crafted together, participants present their current organisational issues and pose challenging questions to each other. This questioning approach is a powerful tool, which can help them make sense of their problems and unlock new ways of thinking and doing. This research shows that the space where the ALS takes place and where learning occurs is a space where participants feel safe and are comfortable displaying emotion, weakness and vulnerability all of which are important aspects in this learning process. To establish trust the space requires nourishment and care, this nourishing

takes time, and should not be rushed by facilitators who may be anxious to see progress in the form of concrete actions being taken in tackling the problems.

Even before participants attend their first ALS time is required to begin establishing bonds among set members, bonds that are necessary in developing and sustaining trust within the space. This forming of bonds is initiated with participants meeting informally prior to their first ALS in a relaxed and non-pressured environment, such as joining each other for a meal. Meeting in an informal relaxed setting can facilitate participants getting to know each other on a personal level, where they can easily find things that connect them to each other. Providing induction prior to the first ALS can play a part in developing this trust and commitment to each other. At induction participants formally engage with the programme and the concept of action learning and it provides an opportunity for the facilitator to highlight the common journey they will share and how it is through supporting each other that they will arrive at their destination.

Establishing and maintaining these strong bonds is ongoing and needs to be encouraged and should not be considered a once-off event at the start especially considering how important participants saw this support to be in helping them experience profound and deep learning through action learning. Many acknowledged the significant contribution learning with and from each other made. Furthermore, as these strong bonds grew it led to participants feeling a great responsibility and need to support each other through some very difficult parts of the learning process, particularly when it came to openly exposing vulnerabilities and weaknesses. This research evidences that as participants share more openly and become less anxious of others viewing them as weak or as bad managers, a reciprocal effect occurs. More openness and honesty in one participant leads to more openness and honesty in others and an increased willingness to throw off facades and get down to the underlying issues, for it is only once a participant becomes truly honest about the problem that they can better tackle it in all its complexity, and so deep learning ensues. This increasing willingness to share openly and honestly further enhances and strengthens the trusted shared space, which is itself pivotal in supporting openness and honesty. As portrayed in the participant story when participants witness others being open and honest, and being unafraid of exposing their weaknesses, they too feel compelled to do likewise. A facilitator can support this part of the process through targeted questioning that calls on participants to question their own taken for granted and deep seated assumptions. While this part of the process can take time,

once it happens momentum is gathered and participants can experience breakthroughs in tackling their problems, leading to new learning both about themselves and about their organisations.

Reflecting is another thread in the conceptual framework and revealed to be a significant facet in the learning process valued by participants. It needs to be continuous, with participants reflecting on actions taken towards solving the problem, reflecting on questions posed, and reflecting on how they are feeling. It too requires time and being honest with oneself. Because participants are tackling actual problems that matter, the learning process can be emotive, particularly when questioning long-held assumptions about themselves and their organisations and reflecting back on past actions. Feelings and emotions surface when facing complex issues in relation to the problem and therefore it is crucial that participants feel supported and safe. Safe in the knowledge that they are in a place, with people they trust who are not judging them and who do not have ulterior motives. This process of deep questioning and openness often leads to breakthroughs where participants can see ways forward previously hidden from them. It can be transformative, not only as a single event but as an emergent continuous activity where participants continue to question their values, assumptions and that which they take for granted. This continuous questioning by oneself and by fellow participants can be unsettling and uncomfortable and participants can feel quite emotional, and indeed vulnerable, and so require the support provided by fellow participants. The data in this research reveal the substantial part emotions play in the learning process, participants linked key breakthroughs they had in tackling their problems to emotion and claimed that it was when they engaged and allowed emotion to surface that rich learning happened and valuable insight gained. In embracing, as opposed to suppressing or concealing, emotion in this process of learning participants attested to having an enhanced learning experience, which developed their managerial abilities, their self-awareness and their ability to cope more confidently when tackling complex organisational problems.

#### **5.11.1 Facilitator role in supporting this process of learning**

A facilitator has an important and ongoing role in this multi-dimensional process of learning in action learning. Facilitators can help craft the trust necessary in this learning process by drawing participant attention to their common purpose and shared goal of a MBSIL qualification and to how they are all, regardless of organisational type, facing similar challenges and struggles as managers. She can emphasis to them that it is together, supported

by each other, that they will reach their goals. The facilitator can nurture these bonds by allowing the time for participants to get to know each other and to get comfortable in each other's presence. She can help create an environment where they are willing to share and not hold back. Additionally, the facilitator can support this crafting of trust by allowing the participants to test the water at the initial ALS, giving them the time to try out actively listening and posing questions without pressure to achieve specific outcomes. It is important not to push too hard at the start thus providing a settling in period where participants can get used to the process before asking them to dig a bit deeper.

As the data in this research show, participants can be quite sceptical about the action learning process to start with, being unsure what it is or how it will unfold. The facilitator helps here by demystifying the action learning process for participants and explaining clearly what they should expect. This can be further supported by inviting former participants to share their stories of the process. It is equally important that facilitators are frank about the emotional dimension within this learning process, a dimension that can be difficult and uncomfortable. As has been shown in this research, anxiety, fear and discomfort are part of the process of learning in action learning and the facilitator should remind participants these are to be expected when they fully engage with the process. They are not something to be concealed or controlled. The facilitator can reassure participants that it is normal for the process to be unsettling and difficult and for it to stir many emotions: that in fact embracing this emotional dimension can be a powerful thing for their learning. It is not the role of the facilitator to make the ALS a comfortable place but rather to support participants with being comfortable with being uncomfortable. Throughout this learning process the facilitator is challenged to find a good balance between supporting and challenging, between controlling and letting go, all the time being aware of the duty of care she has for the participants. When challenging and insightful questions are not forthcoming it is left to the facilitator to fill this gap and to challenge participants. At the beginning, this might be required more often whilst participants become accustomed to and comfortable with the process, but over time, this role diminishes.

Taking time to pause and reflect contributes to participants' learning, they come to better understand themselves and their problems gaining new perspectives, which can help in tackling these organisational problems. The facilitator can encourage and support participants with this part of the process of learning by allocating time and allowing silences

during the ALS, without feeling the need to fill silences or intervene by answering questions. Deliberate and conscious reflecting by participants should be encouraged by facilitators; this can take the form of providing reflective questions on a handout and allocating time at the end of the ALS to complete. In doing this, the facilitator is giving participants time and permission to stop, to pause and to reflect.

As mentioned previously the process of learning, as shown in this research, is non-linear and complex, with the various facets overlapping and intertwining. Due to this complexity and intertwined nature of the various facets in this process, a facilitator needs to be alert; alert to the ways these various facets intertwine and are part of each other and to the impact they may have on participants. The emotional dimension in this process of learning, as portrayed in this research, has the potential to enrich the process of learning for participants even though this may involve exploring difficult issues and surfacing vulnerabilities. Therefore, facilitators of this process of learning in action learning need to be cognisant of their duty of care to participants and indeed to themselves.

The participant story of learning as told in this research illuminates a process of learning in action learning that is multi-faceted and complex. It highlights the pivotal role of having a trusted safe space in the process and how this trusted safe space is crafted and nurtured by many dimensions, social, emotive, reflective and transformative dimensions. All dimensions are necessary and contribute to a rich process of learning where participants gain insight into themselves and their organisations and to new perspectives that enhance their managerial capabilities. The data show that in learning in this way they have become better able to cope with the complexities associated with managing in organisations in the 21st century.

## 5.12 SUMMARY

This chapter discussed the findings of the research in the context of the extant literature. Leading on from this discussion a conceptual framework and an extended framework of learning in action learning were presented. The conceptual framework and the extended framework, portray the multi-dimensional nature of learning in action learning on the MBSIL as told by participants. It illuminates action learning as a pedagogy that provides the possibility to create transformative learning experiences and prepare managers for managing in a world of uncertainty, ambiguity and complexity. The framework depicts many interweaving elements, or petals, which support the process of learning in action learning.

All the petals combined have supported the powerful and positive learning experienced as told by research participants; they are interlinked, no one being more important than the other, and all being required. It is easy to be sceptical about the ability to craft a trusted safe space, where participants are willing to engage fully, show vulnerability and allow their masks to fall. However, the evidence presented in this research demonstrates that it is possible and moreover that it facilitates transformative learning. Though possible, this is not to suggest that this is easy.

In the next chapter I return to the aim of this research and the questions it initially posed. In doing this I present the practical, theoretical and methodological contributions that this research makes. Finally, I reflect on the research process to evaluate the quality of the research.

## 6 CHAPTER SIX: CONTRIBUTIONS AND REFLECTIONS

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### 6.1 INTRODUCTION

In this final chapter of my research journey, I reflect back on the process followed to address the main aim of this research, which was to gain an enriched participant-centred insight into learning on an action learning executive MBSIL. However, before I reflect back on the process I reflect forward by setting forth the contribution this research makes to the practice and theory of learning in action learning and to methodological approaches adopted in researching learning in action learning. Furthermore, I outline areas for further study by which the research may be taken forward.

### 6.2 CONTRIBUTION

This research provides novel insights into the depth and richness of learning that can occur when adopting an action learning approach on an executive MBSIL from a participant perspective. The story of learning illuminates the importance for manager participants of having a trusted supported safe space for their learning and in addition highlights the role of emotion during this learning process. The story of learning extends the current body of knowledge of action learning as an approach used in HE by providing a holistic view of what it looks and feels like to be a manager participant on an action learning HE programme. The research is of value to academics, facilitators and participants engaging with action learning as pedagogy. Additionally, the findings inform and support the facilitation of ALSs more generally by providing an enhanced understanding of the participants' perspective of the learning process.

Making a contribution to practice is a requirement for the award of a professional doctorate. This research makes such a contribution, but additionally contributes to theory and to methodology, all of which are elaborated on below.

#### 6.2.1 Practice contribution

The conceptual framework (reproduced in Figure 9 ), may be used as a support to facilitators and academics in designing and facilitating action learning programmes in HE settings. The framework represents learning in action learning from a participant perspective. It depicts a trusted safe space that is formed dynamically with the support of peers and guided by a

facilitator where it is important to be attuned to the emotional dimension of learning, and where reflection is to be encouraged. The framework portrays the holistic and multi-faceted nature of learning in action learning, and how all parts depicted in the flower in the framework are required during the process.

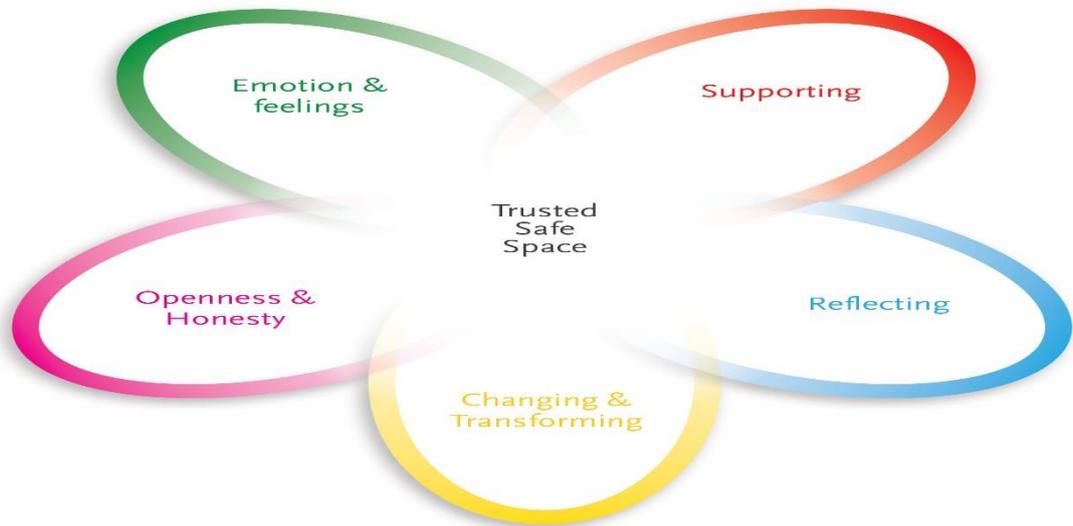


Figure 9: A conceptual framework of learning in action learning

The extended framework (Figure 10) provides a more comprehensive understanding of the complexity and layers of learning in the action learning process and how it is “more like live jazz than a Beethoven string quartet” (Tomkins & Ulus, 2016, p. 172).

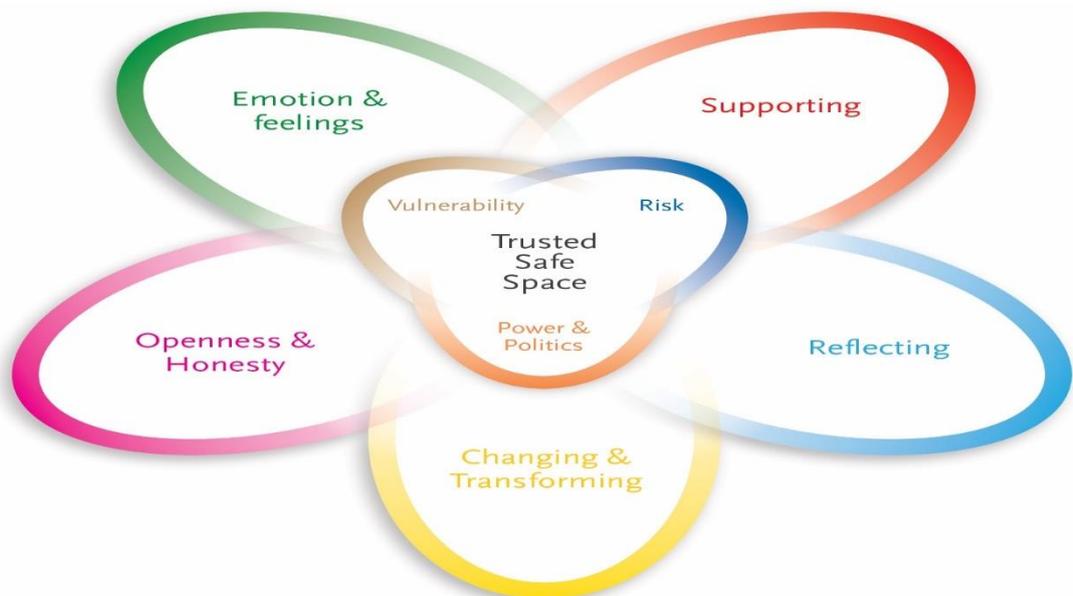


Figure 10: An extended framework of learning in action learning

This research makes recommendations to academics and ALS facilitators who incorporate action learning into their programmes. These recommendations ensue from the discussion of the research findings in Chapter 5 and are grounded by the evidence of this participant-centred research of learning in action learning. The recommendations are not ranked as all have been found to be important to the process.

### **Recommendations for facilitators and academics**

- Make it clear to participants what action learning is and how participants will use it on the programme of study. This is not a once off task but rather an ongoing process, where it is important to assess that participants are clear in their understanding of the purpose of action learning on the programme of study.
- Accept that it takes time, and quite a lot of it, to craft a trusted safe space within the ALS. Time spent early on enabling and creating the conditions to craft this space is time well spent. Participants require time to get to know each other both formally and informally in order to make connections and establish bonds.
- Recognise that emotion has a key role to play in the learning process in action learning, and that emotions are not inherently negative or positive but rather enablers and enhancers of the process.
- Nurture an environment of trust and safety, knowing when and how to intervene. Facilitators need to be prepared to relinquish control, which in an educational setting may not be natural. Moreover, academics who are assigned the role of facilitators require training and need to be made aware of the emotional dimension inherent in learning in action learning both for participants and for themselves.
- Consider the potential ethical implications associated with an action learning process and the need to be conscious of the duty of care owed both to participants, and to facilitators. Action learning can be uncomfortable and risky for participants and facilitators alike.
- Use live organisational problems that matter to participants and their organisations as these engage and commit participants to the process, creating a sense of shared endeavour.
- Consider the composition of each ALS. This research suggests that there is benefit in forming ALSs where each participant is from a separate organisation. If, by necessity, they must be from the same organisation the participants should be from

different sections within that organisation. Doing so enables participants to temporarily suspend intra-organisational politics and provides the participant a sense of freedom to engage openly and honestly in the process.

- Ensure that participants have a focus, and are clear as to the purpose of using an action learning process. The requirement to conduct an action learning piece of research provides such a focus on the MBSIL and potentially intensified the learning experience for participants when they were writing the accompanying dissertation.

Furthermore, the story of learning in Chapter 4 may be of value to participants as an aid to support the participant learning experience on action learning programmes, when shared with them by facilitators and academics. Specifically, such sharing could shed light on the action learning process participants are about to engage with and help to support them in reflecting on and making sense of their own learning. As evidenced in this research, participants can be sceptical and uncomfortable with the action learning process, as the process is new to them and they are unsure of where it might lead. There may be an opportunity to share with them the story of learning to support their understanding of action learning and to provide evidence of its potential for them and their organisations. It is likely that the story of learning will have resonance for new participants given that it represents the voice of former participants, with whom they may identify. The story of learning may be used as an aid to share with new participants the challenging and emotive nature of ALS. Furthermore, in sharing the story with new action learning participants, some of the anxiety associated with undertaking the action learning process may be alleviated. Through the story others can get a sense of what it feels and looks like to learn in action learning and find evidence of its transformational potential.

Additionally, the story of learning provides evidence of the valuable contribution that action learning as pedagogy can offer management education in HEIs, and the development of managers in practice. Management educators can use this story and the conceptual framework to persuade academic managers and other academics as to the value of adopting an action learning philosophy within management programmes. Moreover, the research illuminates the importance for managers of having a safe space to learn, where they can engage in open and honest discourse, unafraid of displaying vulnerabilities and where they are supported by peers. Regardless of whether management academics choose, or choose

not, to use action learning in their teaching practice, these insights can enhance the development of HE programmes which aim to support managerial learning.

Over the course of the research, I have amended my own practice in line with the recommendations above. On the MBSIL, I developed a module focused on action learning research in order to address some of the initial uncertainty about action learning raised in the research. Feedback from the introduction of this new module has been very positive. During one of the latter phases of data generation, a participant observed that a colleague who was part of a current cohort on the programme and had experienced the new module seemed much more conversant with action learning than they had been at a similar stage in their programme. A further change that I suggested for the MBSIL was to introduce a full-day induction where the participants met the night before for dinner. This has also proved very successful, with lecturing staff commenting on how quickly bonds appeared to be forming among participants compared to the past. Having a meal together facilitated participants in getting to know each other and making connections with each other in an informal setting before the commencement of the programme in earnest.

Furthermore, I find myself much more attuned to the emotional aspects within an ALS because of this research. Where previously I would have been aware of emotion at play, I am not sure that I would have given them the same consideration as I do now, nor would I have been as comfortable in situations that became emotional. Through making sense of the stories in the research, I am more conscious of the value and power of the emotional aspects in the learning process.

In making these contributions to practice I have clearly answered the three research questions of:

1. What is it like for participants to learn on an executive action learning MBSIL?
2. How do the stories they tell of their learning experiences illuminate the process of learning on an executive action learning MBSIL?
3. How can the insights from these stories develop and enhance the practice of action learning on HE programmes?

Questions 1 and 2 are comprehensively answered with the story of learning (Chapter 4) and the conceptual frameworks (Chapter 5), whilst Chapter 5 and the recommendations made

above answer question 3. In addition to practical contributions required for the award of a professional doctorate, this research contributes theoretically as explained next.

### 6.2.2 Theoretical contribution

In presenting a holistic conceptual framework and an extended framework, this research contributes to knowledge of learning in action learning from a participant perspective. The frameworks represent the complexity of learning and the interrelatedness of various aspects, depicted in the framework as overlapping petals (Figure 9 and Figure 10). The story of learning and the conceptual frameworks of this research help develop and extend thinking on emotional dimensions of learning and additionally provide evidence of the linkages between action learning and transformative learning.

This research extends the work of Trehan and Pedler (2009); Trehan and Rigg (2015) and Vince (2008, 2014, 2015) in relation to emotional dimensions in action learning. It shows how emotion and feelings are an integral part of the learning process and play a significant part in enabling and facilitating learning. Additionally, participants claimed that displaying their own vulnerability positively influenced them in tackling complex organisational problems. Because they felt safe in the ALS they no longer felt constrained to keep up a façade of being in control and having all the answers. Participants came to view accepting and displaying vulnerability as a strength rather than a weakness, realising how through accepting and embracing it, they were able to gain fresh insight to organisational issues and so further develop themselves as managers. Unlike in CAL, in this research I considered emotion separately to power and political dynamics. Whilst this research does not suggest these dynamics should be ignored, it was evident that being able to temporarily compartmentalise such dynamics enabled participants in their learning and allowed them to gain insight to tackle their organisational problems. Consequently, the research highlighted the influence of organisational power and politics, or as I termed it ‘organisational baggage’, in potentially holding managers back in seeking fresh insight to the organisations problems.

Through the story of learning, it is possible to understand and gain insight into the centrality of crafting a trusted safe space for the learning process. Research on psychological safety provides little detail of how perceptions of safety unfold for people (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). This research offers some of this detail, both through the story of learning and in the discussion of crafting a trusted safe space in Chapter 5. Additionally it provides evidence of how this space can be a conduit for transformative learning. This research proffers additional

empirical evidence of the transformative potential of learning in action learning and so extends understanding of the linkages between transformative learning and action learning (Ajoku, 2015).

Moreover, this research answers calls for further research on action learning (Haith & Whittingham, 2012; Vince, 2015; Yeadon-Lee, 2013a) so that “valuable knowledge is not inadvertently unlearned or wisdom unconsciously forgotten” (Rigg, 2016, p. 200). In particular this research illuminates the interconnectivity of the various elements (petals) and holistic nature of learning in action learning and answers Yeadon-Lee (2015) call for more in-depth research of such interconnectivity. Furthermore, the research provides evidence of the potential of action learning in developing managers so that they are better prepared for managing and leading in an ever more complex organisational setting.

The final contribution this research makes is a methodological one and is discussed in the next section.

### 6.2.3 Methodological contribution

The methodological approach I adopted for this research may be of practical use to others who wish to research in-depth the participant voice. In privileging the voice of the participants, I am acknowledging the expertise of the learner participant whose “authority ... comes from having experienced events personally” (Brown et al., 2009, p. 330). In Chapter 3, I provided a detailed description of how I conducted the analysis, and whilst it is not, nor intended as, a step-by-step approach, it could be used as a guide by other researchers. Furthermore, it provides a new way of researching action learning (Trehan & Pedler, 2011) and whilst used here in a HE context could be used in other contexts, such as organisational or public sector.

Storytelling, as used to present the findings of this research, is not a new way of sharing knowledge; it has been used down through the ages to convey and disseminate knowledge. However, in the context of research on action learning, whilst accounts of practice are common, using a story to present empirical findings is not, and therefore this research makes a contribution. There is, nonetheless, a risk in presenting findings in an unconventional manner such as in this research, by means of a story. However, if researchers do not take risks, boundaries will not be pushed and insight may be lost (Czarniawska, 2016). In using the form of a story to present the findings, I intend for the findings to resonate with those

reading the story. Moreover, I envisage that the form of a story will enable dissemination of findings and a sharing of knowledge both within the academic and action learning community as “stories economically communicate experience” (Gabriel & Connell, 2010, p. 507).

### 6.3 REVISITING EVALUATION OF THE RESEARCH PROCESS

In Chapter 3, I presented the criteria by which I evaluated the quality of this research and discussed five of them with respect to the research. In this chapter I discuss the remaining three: resonance, significant contribution (discussed in Section 6.2) and meaningful coherence.

In the form of a story of learning, this research provides an authentic and genuine story of participant learning on the MBSIL. This story has resonated with those who have heard it: action learning practitioners, former participants and colleagues. I shared the story of learning with former participants and ALS facilitators of the MBSIL, and with others who are experienced in action learning programmes. Furthermore, I shared the findings at two conferences and at a methodology summer school. The feedback in all instances was very positive and the story of learning resonated. I also shared the conceptual framework with former participants of the programme who found it an authentic representation of their experiences. Colleagues with whom I shared the research insights are interested in incorporating aspects into their teaching. We are currently discussing how to embed the insights within other programmes at my own HEI. There is no reason to believe that the findings are not transferable to other similar learning situations and beyond.

The research fulfils the criterion of meaningful coherence which asks whether the research does what it purports to, uses methods that are suited to addressing the aim of the research and links findings to extant literature. The research asked three specific questions, all of which were answered by this research and discussed in 6.2.1. Methods were appropriate for data generation and analysis in the context of the research aim and discussed in Chapter 3. Literature is layered throughout the research, guiding and being guided by the process. The discussion in Chapter 5 discusses the insights gained from this research in the context of scholarly literature.

In all research, there is a relationship between the researcher and the participant and it needs to be acknowledged and explained in the interests of quality research. By telling my story in

Chapter 1, and discussing how I view the world and understand knowledge in Chapter 3, I have made my positionality, my values and how I have come to this research known. With this knowledge of me, the researcher, those who read this research can make their own judgement of the research, and “imagine their own use and applications” for it (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 42).

Criticisms attributed to social constructionist research include the inability to generalise findings; a lack of rigour and structure; absence of a rationale behind how the data has been interpreted all of which I have addressed in evaluating the quality of this research using Tracy’s (2010) framework in sections 3.7 and in this section. Johnson & Onwuegbuzie (2004, p.16) caution against such research being merely “one researcher’s highly idiosyncratic opinions written into a report”. This research in taking an in-depth participant focus in tandem with linkages to the extant literature avoids being merely my idiosyncratic opinion. It has not been an objective of this research to draw generalisable conclusions, rather to gain insight and enrich understanding of learning in action learning from a participant perspective. Notwithstanding this, it is reasonable to assume that the experiences as shared by the research participants would be borne out in stories told by other participants on the programme. In addition, the story of learning presented along with the conceptual framework proposed, though developed with data from the MBSIL, can be of value to academics of management education who wish to develop programmes where managerial learning appreciates not only the cognitive dimensions, but also the social and emotional dimensions of learning. In so doing these programmes will have the opportunity to facilitate learners in learning how to be managers in a complex and multidimensional world.

#### **6.4 AREAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

The participants in this study spoke of being freed to think differently and having a feeling of release during the learning process. This sense of being freed and empowered might suggest an earlier sense of imprisonment within their organisations and in their ways of thinking. The reason behind these feelings would be interesting to explore. Additionally, it could be explored in conjunction with an in-depth look at what prevents managers from feeling they can be open and honest in their own organisations.

In the current research, there was a lack of cultural diversity amongst participants and whilst they were representative of the population on the MBSIL, they were all white Irish. Thus,

another area for potential research, building on that of Mughal et al. (2018) is the consideration of the stories of participants from other nationalities and cultures and exploring whether the conceptual framework portrays their learning in action learning. Furthermore, this research did not explore potential differences in learning experiences by reference to gender; on the surface, gender did not appear to be a differentiating factor, however, exploration of stories with a focus on gender may illuminate dissonance. Finally, another avenue of further research could be to focus on an ALS facilitator-only perspective, on a similar type programme, while adopting the same methodological approach of this research.

## 6.5 FINAL REFLECTIONS

Conducting this research and in particular listening to the participants sharing their learning experiences I found myself ‘being struck’ many times (Corlett, 2012). This surprised me, as I had been part of their learning journey as a programme lecturer and ALS facilitator. Yet I had not realised the extent of their experiences and emotional investment in it. I knew anecdotally that many had changed both professionally and personally; that the learning experience had been positive. However, I had not quite grasped exactly how transformative the experience had been for some. I realised this must have been because, as a lecturer and an ALS facilitator, I was removed from what they were experiencing, there was a certain distance between us. Listening to the stories the research participants told provided an insider view of what it felt like to learn on the programme rather than what it looked like from the outside. Therefore, my hope is that the story of learning presented in this research can provide similar insight to others of what it feels (and looks) like to learn on an action learning programme, that by reading and listening to the voices of participants in this story others too will gain insights into the experiences of learning and transformation of the research participants.

Through this research inquiry, I have been awakened to the impact and influence the MBSIL has had on participants, and indeed the role I have and continue to play as a facilitator, supervisor, and academic. Indeed, it is not something I had given deep consideration to prior to the research. Now, however, it is something I find myself discussing with my colleagues on the programme and with fellow ALS facilitators, asking questions such as what is our responsibility and duty of care in this process as facilitator, supervisor, and academic given the transformative impact this programme appears to have had on the participants who have

shared their stories. The stories I have heard during data generation, and the insights I have been privileged to gain, have led me to reflect more consciously on my role as an ALS facilitator and as an educator in HE. Furthermore, it has reinforced my view that ALS facilitators need to have courage in their facilitation if they are to support participants sharing at an emotional level as this is not without risk and complexity. Whilst listening to the participants speaking about digging deep within themselves, of the annoyance and anxiety they felt at times during the process and the emotional investment they made within their ALS I knew that I would need courage in supporting them and in allaying my own anxiety regarding my responsibility as an ALS facilitator.

My journey during this research was one of reflection and reflexivity. It has been a journey of realisation and recapturing of ways I used to think in the past. I have come to recognise many things in myself, how I had come to lack pause, there just never seemed to be any time to stop, pause and reflect, similar to what participants talked about in the research. What this research has highlighted to me is the importance of taking that time to pause, taking time and stepping out from the everyday. I admire the risks the MBSIL participants took in exposing their vulnerability, in being willing to drop the pretence and subsequently realising the power of doing so.

During this research I have rediscovered things that I previously valued but had become lost due to *busyness* and the constant *on-ness* of life. I have re-discovered my love of learning and the importance of instilling and sharing that with others. I had become sucked into content driven education despite my espoused belief in student-led learning and teachers as facilitators in all but my involvement in the action learning programme. I have come again to appreciate the pivotal role of context in learning, and how students, are students in context, and not merely abstractions. What is happening in our daily lives, both personally and professionally, forms part of the learning experience – emotions and vulnerabilities form who we are and so need to be recognised within learning otherwise possibilities are, I believe, lost.

Sharing my conceptual framework with colleagues made me realise how others too crave trusted safe space and how absent it can be in educational and organisational life. I believe the trusted safe space, as conceptualised in this research, has the potential to provide asylum and respite: in hindsight, that it is important to participants is not surprising. The story I have told here is but one telling of the participant story; there are many other possible re-tellings.

This is one interpretation, one construction, one of many possible realities. I present this story of learning so others can enrich their understanding of learning in action learning and gain insight into what it (looks and) feels like for participants.

## 6.6 SUMMARY

This chapter brings this thesis to a close. It presented the practical, theoretical and methodological contributions the research makes in offering both a conceptual framework and a learning story. Returning to the criteria by which this research is judged, and first discussed in Chapter 3, I reflected on how this research meets the criteria for quality research. Additionally, I offer areas for further research that could further enrich understanding of learning in action learning. I ended the chapter by reflecting back on the process, a process that has enriched my understanding of learning in action learning and has the possibility to enrich others' understanding of learning in action learning.

Ring the bells that still can ring

Forget your perfect offering

There is a crack, a crack in everything

That's how the light gets in.

(Leonard Cohen, Anthem, on album *Future*, 1992)

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## APPENDIX 1 INFORMED CONSENT FORM



**Faculty of Business and Law**  
**Informed Consent Form for research participants**

Title of Study:	<b>Inquiring into participant-learning experiences on an executive Master of Business Studies programme underpinned by an action learning philosophy</b>
Person(s) conducting the research:	Meadbh Ruane
Programme of study:	DBA
Address of the researcher for correspondence:	Department of Business Studies Letterkenny Institute of Technology Letterkenny Co. Donegal, Ireland
Telephone:	XXX XXXXXXX
E-mail:	Meadbh.ruane@northumbria.ac.uk
Description of the broad nature of the research:	The proposed research intends to use a qualitative approach with the specific aim of gaining an in-depth understanding of the experiences of participants on an accredited executive Master of Business in Innovation and Leadership (MBSIL) programme which is underpinned by an Action Learning (AL) philosophy. It will explore how participants' learning has been formed and how, based on findings the programme could be improved for future participants. The participant perspective is considered crucial so as to gain insight to participant learning experiences given that it is only they who can know their own experiences.
Description of the involvement expected of participants including the broad nature of questions to be answered or events to be observed or activities to be undertaken, and the expected time commitment:	Participation in interviews is voluntary and participants may choose to withdraw consent at any stage. Consent is sought to record all interviews.  It is proposed that interviews will be of a duration of 1 to 1 and half hour during which participants will be asked to share their experiences of an executive masters programme underpinned by action learning with a view to answering the following questions.

	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What is it like for participants to learn on an executive action learning MBSIL?</li> <li>2. How do the stories they tell of their learning experiences illuminate the process of learning on an executive action learning MBSIL?</li> <li>3. How can the insights from these stories develop and enhance the practice of action learning on HE programmes?</li> </ol> <p>Participants are also asked for permission to access and analyse data from their dissertations and professional development log for the purposes of this research.</p>
<p>Description of how the data you provide will be securely stored and/or destroyed upon completion of the project.</p>	<p>Research data will be collected via semi-structured interviews, which will be recorded with permission; participant dissertations and personal development logs</p> <p>All data collected will be securely stored. Any data stored on electronic devices (including electronic sound files from interviews) will be password protected and backed up with back-up being stored in a locked fire proof filing cabinet. The researcher will ensure no one else will have access to the passwords. The PC will also be password protected. The PC will be locked when the researcher leaves the room.</p> <p>All hard copy documents will be securely locked in a secure fire proof filing cabinet. No one apart from the researcher and supervisor/s will have access to this information. All data will be stored in a manner that will prevent unauthorised access.</p> <p>Depth interviews will be audio recorded to help the researcher accurately capture participants' insights. At any stage participants may request to have the recording device switched off.</p> <p>Although the interview will be recorded, the name of the respondent will not be recorded on the tape. The name and identifying information will not be associated with any part of the written report of the research. All</p>

	<p>of the information and interview responses will be kept so as to protect the identity of the participant.</p> <p>Dissertations and Professional Logs are currently stored in a secure room by the department of business studies at the researcher's institution. Where data is used from these sources (with permission) it will protect the identities of the participants</p>
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Information obtained in this study, including this consent form, will be kept strictly confidential (i.e. will not be passed to others) and anonymous (i.e. individuals and organisations will not be identified *unless this is expressly excluded in the details given above*).

Data obtained through this research may be reproduced and published in a variety of forms and for a variety of audiences related to the broad nature of the research detailed above. It will not be used for purposes other than those outlined above without your permission.

Participation is entirely voluntary and participants may withdraw at any time.

**By signing this consent form, you are indicating that you fully understand the above information and agree to participate in this study on the basis of the above information.**

**Participant's signature:**

**Date:**

**Student's signature:**

**Date:**

*Please keep one copy of this form for your own records*

**Faculty of Business and Law**
**Informed Consent Form for research participants**

Title of Study:	<b>Inquiring into participant-learning experiences on an executive Master of Business Studies programme underpinned by an action learning philosophy</b>
Person(s) conducting the research:	Meadbh Ruane
Programme of study:	DBA
Address of the researcher for correspondence:	Department of Business Studies Letterkenny Institute of Technology Letterkenny Co. Donegal, Ireland
Telephone:	XXX XXXXXXXX
E-mail:	Meadbh.ruane@northumbria.ac.uk
Description of the broad nature of the research:	This research adopts a qualitative approach with the specific aim of gaining an in-depth understanding of the experiences of participants on an accredited executive Master of Business in Innovation and Leadership (MBSIL) programme which is underpinned by an Action Learning (AL) philosophy. It will explore how participants' experience learning and how, based on findings, the programme could be improved for future participants. The participant perspective is considered crucial so as to gain insight to participant learning experiences given that it is only they who can know their own experiences.
Description of the involvement expected of participants including the broad nature of questions to be answered or events to be observed or activities to be undertaken, and the expected time commitment:	Participation in the group interview is voluntary and participants may choose to withdraw consent at any stage. Consent is sought to record all interviews.  It is proposed that the group interview will be of a duration of 1.5 to 2 hours during which participants will be asked to share their experiences of an executive masters

	<p>programme underpinned by action learning with a view to answering the following questions.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What is it like for participants to learn on an executive action learning MBSIL?</li> <li>2. How do the stories they tell of their learning experiences illuminate the process of learning on an executive action learning MBSIL?</li> <li>3. How can the insights from these stories develop and enhance the practice of action learning on HE programmes?</li> </ol> <p>Participants are also asked for permission to access and analyse data from their dissertations and professional development log for the purposes of this research.</p>
<p>Description of how the data you provide will be securely stored and/or destroyed upon completion of the project.</p>	<p>Research data will be generated via a group semi-structured interview, which will be recorded with permission; participant dissertations and personal development logs</p> <p>In-depth interviews will be recorded to help the researcher accurately capture participants' insights. At any stage participants may request to have the recording device switched off and any part of the interview removed from the record.</p> <p>Although the interview will be recorded, the researcher will endeavour that the name of the respondent will not be recorded on the tape. The name and identifying information will not be associated with any part of the written report of the research. All of the information and interview responses will be kept so as to protect the identity of the participant.</p> <p>Dissertations and Professional Logs are currently stored in a secure room by the department of business studies at the researcher's institution. Where data is used from these sources (with permission) it will protect the identities of the participants.</p>

	<p>All data generated/used will be securely stored. Any data stored on electronic devices (including electronic sound files from interviews) will be password protected and backed up with back-up being stored in a locked fire proof filing cabinet. The researcher will ensure no one else will have access to the passwords. The PC will also be password protected. The PC will be locked when the researcher leaves the room.</p> <p>All hard copy documents will be securely locked in a secure fire proof filing cabinet. No one apart from the researcher and supervisor/s will have access to this information. All data will be stored in a manner that will prevent unauthorised access.</p>
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Information obtained in this study, including this consent form, will be kept strictly confidential (i.e. will not be passed to others) and anonymous (i.e. individuals and organisations will not be identified *unless this is expressly excluded in the details given above*).

Data obtained through this research may be reproduced and published in a variety of forms and for a variety of audiences related to the broad nature of the research detailed above. It will not be used for purposes other than those outlined above without your permission.

Participation is entirely voluntary and participants may withdraw at any time.

**By signing this consent form, you are indicating that you fully understand the above information and agree to participate in this study on the basis of the above information.**

**Participant's signature:**

**Date:**

**Student's signature:**

**Date:**

*Please keep one copy of this form for your own records*

## APPENDIX 2 INTERVIEW GUIDE

### Interview guide

Focus on	Points to cover	Rationale/ notes
Context/background	Can you take me through why you choose to study the MBSIL Your role in organisation at time of programme General context within organisation	Settling in – creating relax atmosphere – getting participant to talk
Experience of the Programme	Tell me about your experience on the programme – (did you enjoy it; any ups and down – elaborate)	Asking their story in an open-ended way, giving the participant permission to tell what they want without direction. Use probes if required – the good, not so good, anything in particular
Focus on Action learning sets	Can you tell me about your experiences of the ALS – <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- First one (enthused/sceptical; uncomfortable)</li> <li>- As they progressed</li> <li>- Tell me about anything that sticks out</li> <li>- Tell me about the process and how you found it; (feelings)</li> <li>- Can you tell me about your peers</li> <li>- How was the questioning – how did you feel– defensive; uncomfortable; enjoyable</li> <li>- Were some ALS better than other (why)</li> </ul> (probe about role of peers; emotions; fear, relief) (probe role of reflection)	Get participant to tell their story in the ALSs. Let me them talk. Use their ques to ask further questions if necessary. Gain sense of how it felt – avoid merely descriptive accounts.
Benefits	Can you tell me about any benefits you consider you got from the ALS /Programme? To your organisation	To gain insight to changes participant would like to see – probe benefits if participant has not already talked about them
Challenges	Can you tell me about any difficulties/ challenges during the ALS/programme Anything that detracted from the learning experience	Provide opportunity to talk about issues specifically particularly if they have not already been raised especially on the programme in general

Change to programme	Given the opportunity what would you change on the programme	
You	<p>key insights into learning experiences</p> <p>-can you tell me if believe you have changed (how)</p> <p>-do you approach problems differently (how)</p> <p>-reflection</p> <p>Others opinions</p>	Focus in on the participant learning. Link back to specifics and ask for specific examples.
	Can you tell me about any abiding memory(ies) of the programme – any high or low points?	
Closing Interview	Is there else you would like to add anything else you would like to share	Provide opportunity for participant to share anything that they may not have shared and that they think is significant

## APPENDIX 3 EXTRACT PARTICIPANT MEMO

1/01/2017

*Listening to the interview again while walking.*

*Immediate thoughts having not reviewed previous analysis in an attempt to see with fresh eyes*

Charles is open from the get go - he was keen to learn about himself and so embraced joining the programme. He looked forward to how it could improve him as a manager. Having seen the programme's impact on his own manager he was looking forward to what was ahead.

He believes that all participants were there for the same reason - to become better managers; all faced the same time pressures and busy lives.

With the ALS there was a settling in period - needed time to build trust and to get to know each other. Needed that trust so as to be open.

During the interview Charles talks a lot about how what he learned during the programme and in particular the ALS was transferred back to the workplace. He tells of the actions he took and how these played out. It is apparent that his learnings and insights into the programme and in the ALS greatly influenced his work as a manager. While he believes the organisation has gained value because of him being on the programme he is unable to put a finger on it - it is non-tangible.

To him the crux of what makes the AL work is the honesty (see minute 36) without the honesty you are not truly addressing the problem. He see a link between honesty and emotion; to him people display emotion when being honest.

The space and time away from the organisation are very important (see minute 41).

While the programme facilitated him in becoming reflective, it is not something that comes easily - reflection for him is sharpening the saw. The ALS allowed him to really find out about him; he discovered his reluctance to be transparent - he recognises that he was a guarded person; he tells of how he approached (in the past) each situation the same way with

the same tone and manner now the greatest change in him is how he communicates the words he uses; his body language and his transparency and endeavour to be honest. The programme as a whole has led him to a new way of thinking - changed behaviour. While in the past he would think of himself as the last person who needed to change now he sees the need to question himself; get others to do so too and to welcome feedback from others. Now he draws out the learning from what has happened and tries to get his team to do similarly. It is evident that he has changed his habits and points of view but that these are things that have taken time.

The programme gave him the space and discipline to reflect and question (see 1:11).

He has also used the interview as an opportunity to reflect and draw out learning.

## APPENDIX 4 EXTRACT METHODOLOGY MEMO

05/03/2017

Continuing with the analysis from the first draft of 7 stories in Dec 2016 and after more analysis 7 overarching themes have emerged

space and time  
openness and honesty  
learning with and from others  
reflection  
change habits and perspectives  
emotion and feelings  
challenging - digging deep

more general themes

positive learning experience due to the applied nature and structure of the programme  
initial scepticism of al - not really knowing what it was

The 7 themes are overlapping and inter-dependent having a trusted space & time leads in turn supports openness and honesty. the strength of learning with and through others can be attributed to trust openness and honesty - these 3 are very closely coupled so it is difficult at times to decide for example is bonding part of space or openness or indeed learning from others. it is the bonding and taking time to do it that enables the space and facilitates openness and honesty which in turn supports bonding - non-linear process. Hence the use of models to make sense and for my interpretation again demonstrating how interpretation is just that it is not a claim to be truth but a way to see the data - an insight not the only insight possible.

Openness and honesty dependent on trust being built - importance of being peers - no bosses. going back to the space being trusted where all this openness and honesty is knowing/believing that what's said here stays here, fact that it has no immediate impact on any other participants allows this honesty (this is something i recently found at an als where one person spoke to me and said weren't totally happy to be fully open as the issue affected someone outset the set who was friend of someone in it - perhaps a good reason to look at the makeup of the sets taking interpersonal issues into account (Yeadon lee discovered similar things - the so what being that consideration of the composition would be wise; not just bums on seats)

There is significant overlap between the themes of challenging, and emotion and feeling (**wonder should they be one theme**). This is to be expected. the fact that most people faced significant problems (as would be expected in any organisation) it is not surprising that some emotion surfaced (not so evident in Cormac - **though he was uncomfortable and did enjoy the programme - dealing with his problem did unsettle him and he was cautious of sharing the 'significant' problem - could link to feeling though could also be rational; his tension between both**). would expect a master programme to be challenging it's the digging deep that adds depth to it and may not have been as expected. so it's challenging at a hard work level, and solving problems level but also at an emotional level of self-awareness and challenging own assumptions of self and organisation. Question we need to ask when do we

stop digging and what is the role of exec education; duty of care and also role; is the role to unsettle and disturb the everyday mundane to shift thinking and challenge to what level' is there a danger in going too deep.it is 'wrong' that people become upset. Major change indeed transformation unsettles if this is part of the role of education then how do we, if all, manage it and how much more is it necessary to have good facilitators who early on can help construct the scaffolding for supporting the participants.

Evident the fact that all assignments linked back to the organisation was very important. The action learning philosophy running throughout the programme mattered, not just the ALS. All linked together. Applied learning in all parts. This is important. The role of EI being embedded into the programme - all tied together well - the sum more than the individual parts.

something I think that is significant is how **openly people shared very significant problems** with the other participants - these weren't disembodied problems, these were problems at times that went to the core of the business (Cormac, Suzanne and Alex) this sharing of significant and sensitive issue demonstrates a level of openness and trust - it is in their actions of sharing than merely saying it in an interview that this is demonstrated. this trust gave freedom to disclose and be exposed

[musings post walking the beach 06/03

i'm not sure that writing a composite or archetypical story for each theme fits with what I want to do. on consideration I think that it will lose the voice of the participant by removing an identity that is tied to them and their own context. while each participant shares many characteristics in common they are also different - different context; jobs; struggles different stories.

these participants/manager are not abstraction they are whole and by taking away their individual voice I think I might lose them (**need to reflect on this a bit more because the question is how do you maintain the voices of 12 (if there are to be 12 participants)**)

also on the topic of stories - stories are powerful tool e.g. the story of XXX and the bus ticket, which imparts the anxiety of viva more than just saying it and snippets of code. stories have feeling and develop a connection to the reader and perhaps through such has impact - the participants own words having impact e.g. Julie 'staying sane' and 'surviving'; James talking about it in terms of a boxing fight; Suzanne's sense of relief being palatable. **to get a sense of the intensity need long tracts of words so as to give context]**

still not sure exactly how I am going to present findings but am sure I want to hear individual voices and to move away from this notion of 'types of' and putting people in boxes though pragmatically this may not be possible.[think of the farside cartoon and the penguin "I want to be me" or the life of Brian "we're all individual" in unison "yes we're all individual". it is accepted that there are common themes but within these there are individual participants/managers

I need to ask the question is there anything striking or unexpected in the findings essentially so what?]

07/03/17

reading **Rivera, K (forthcoming) "Use your Feelings": Emotion as a Tool for Qualitative Research. In Cassell, C., Cunliffe, A. L, and Grandy, G. (eds) The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Business and Research Methods, pps XX-YY**

use the role of emotion in the research process - write it into the process; interview and analysis.

how I felt before during and after interview. how i was moved by the level of impact that some participants displayed; how i felt initially when Cormac told me AL did nothing for him early in the interview and how I just kept going but then was surprised that his story said otherwise. how i was slightly scared when James alluded to unearthing things he needed to address I just wanted to move on in case he told me something 'terrible' from his past. how privileged I felt that these people were willing to share openly and honestly with me despite sharing vulnerabilities and flaws - they trusted me and that was a privilege.

my research fraught with emotion both good and bad. like Charles I was 'intrigued' by what i was being told and really wanted to understand it and use it to enhance my practice and the practice of others.

my defensiveness when i shared my research with others only to be hear their scepticism that there's no way participants had such transformation and I was upset not so much that this could be perceived as questioning my integrity as that it questioned the integrity of the participants who I felt protected over having shared their stories - why, i wondered is it so hard to believe (from that person and I would imagine others) that (management)education could transform.

My rational self was telling me I should be taking a linear, straightforward research approach to get my doctorate but my gut told me otherwise. I was unable to stop 'myself' being part of the research, which is messy. I let my feeling be part of the research because feelings and emotion are part of everyday life and cannot in my view be removed. However this does not mean that good practice of research is abandoned instead the role of emotion within the research process is acknowledged.

This is linked to reflexivity in research and my positionality (what from my experiences colours my judgement and in this research? - set out who am I and my own bias to education - my belief that education is a privilege and can transform; teaching in Zimbabwe; importance of applied learning away from merely learning theories; importance of research for practice)

In presenting the findings how can I show the emotion - through using the participant's voices.

Acknowledge the emotion element of research - it's there, I'm just acknowledging it.

"Tracy (2007) notes, "to actually impact problems and promote change, we must not only publish in rigorous scholarly journals, but also present research to various stakeholders in a reader-friendly form" (p. 109). (from Rivera)"

11/03/17

Thought on writing stories of overlap between the stories - emotion and challenging I'm not sure how to reconcile that whether it should just be one theme and that challenging is a part of it or whether to rename the theme. Also I've changed the name of learning with people to support and learning.

I think over-arching theme centres around a **trusted space** and within the trusted space you have openness and honesty but that openness and honesty leads to the trusted shared space and because of the bonds formed everyone can support each other through challenging questions and dealing with challenging problems. people feel able to be vulnerable and to show weakness because they trust those in their space no one is there to judge them. The support is what allows people to dig deep into the real problem.

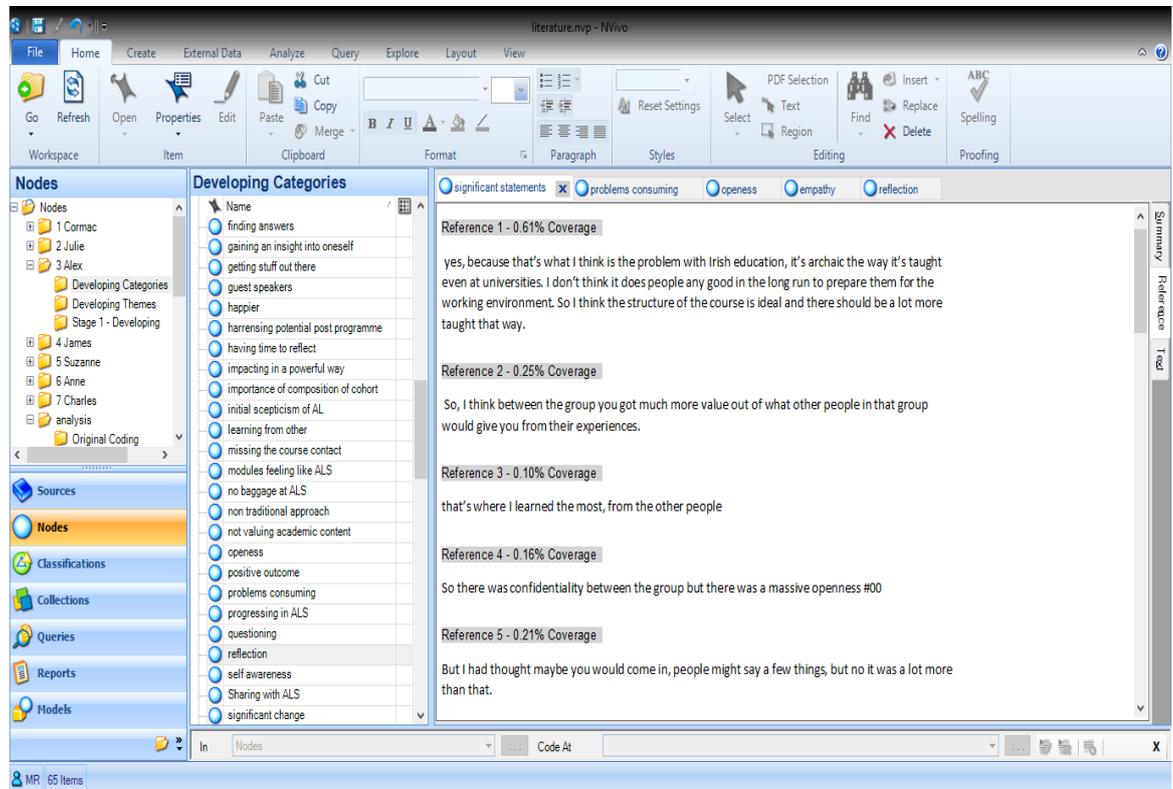
learning with and from each other happens throughout the program however within the trusted space it is possible to dig deeper and to put things on the table that previously was not possible. Kolb (2007) looks at the concept of learning space and the need to have space in experiential learning, this could be linked to trusted space or I might add to his conceptualisations it is interesting see how important that trusted space is for the participants as it becomes apparent it is not available to them in their organisations. I note the aspiration for managers to be reflected practitioners in the literature however from the evidence in this research it appears that they are not before this program Kolb asserts that within management education it is thinking and acting in the scientific way, which is privileged unlike in the arts where feeling & reflection is valued.

This new draft of the themes as stories add further to analysis it raises many questions of how to convey findings to the reader the risk of losing a sense of the person and their context. I also need to consider whether to reframe the themes and reduce the number perhaps to 6 or even five.

Further questions I need to ask is whether I should comment on each theme at the end of the section or whether I create an epilogue at the end of the findings bringing it all together. Other decisions I need to make are around the literature and how to decide what's in it and what's not this may result in reframing the research question to include mention of a social and the transformative dimension or so social and emotion dimension. I also need to deal with literature around space, which only became apparent after analysis. Do I write this into the literature and mention where it came from or into my discussions. It is difficult to write an iterative process in a linear way. Trial and error I think will be called for or action, reflection and further action - all the time learning.

## APPENDIX 5 NVIVO SAMPLE

NVivo provided a structured way to link words spoken by the participant to emerging categories and themes, significant statements and the use of language.



## APPENDIX 6 TABLE OF EMERGING THEMES

Suzanne	Charles	Anne	James	Alex	Julie	Cormac
struggle	out of comfort zone	all struggling	digging deep	open to other perspective	survival	sceptical
very emotional	Emotional unsettling	questioning own assumptions and values	intensity	emotional	taking control	wary
support from others	not alone	learning from others	support from others	not alone	learning from others	support from others
reflection	reflection	reflection	reflection	reflection	reflection	reflection

fantastic experience	powerful experience	great experience	great experience	best experience	best experience	impressive programme
transformed	changed self	changed perception of self	transformational	changed perspective	transformed	changed self
missing it	miss the discipline and focus of ALS	not all alone	missing it	missing it		Missing it
Stuck Paralysed	honesty, transparency and openness crucial	lack of self-confidence and self-belief initially	self-awareness	empathy	empowerment	disingenuous
Unburdened sense of relief	Uncomfortable	being honest	challenging			out of comfort zone

						not comfortable with being open and sharing
allowed to be vulnerable and show weakness	sharpening the saw taking time	permission to be open and show vulnerability	self-doubt			Confidentiality trust
permission to reflect	ALS as level setting	permission to ask hard questions	profound impact			being struck in the interview
	being accountable	no baggage of the organisation at ALS - nothing to hide				impressive guest speakers

coming to know herself	need to be disciplined to reflect	peeling back the layer and getting to the crux	ongoing journey			
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## APPENDIX 7 SAMPLE PARTICIPANT LEARNING STORIES – SUZANNE’S STORY

***Suzanne – An emotional journey and a hard road travelled made easier with good companions and support.***

At the time of joining the MBS programme Suzanne was managing director of an SME in the North West of Ireland. Joining the MBS programme made sense to her as her organisation was facing some significant challenges. The block structure and applied nature of the programme appealed to her as did the use of action learning which she had previously been exposed too. Suzanne has an obvious thirst for learning and knowledge, she wanted to be a better manager and was open to change, indeed yearned for it, prior to commencing the course. Like others she was nervous starting the programme not knowing what the two years ahead would involve. However, after the first day of induction she felt totally at ease with bonds already being formed.

She thoroughly enjoyed the block modules, in her own words “loved it”. She loved the interaction, the meeting up again and catching up. Similarly the ALS, which she continues to use to this day in her own organisation. She speaks of looking forward to meeting up again and the interactions that took place. For her “the ALS probably drew out stuff, it was there and it might’ve come anyway, but it could’ve come too late”. Support and guidance is a very strong theme in Suzanne's story. The ALS while challenging her and holding her to account also provided the support required.

*the fact that there were other people there that could understand your reasons, could empathize and could fully support what you were doing and why you were doing it, and that were able to point out other logical reasons to doing what you were doing as well was a help.*

What is interesting is that while Suzanne is a big advocate of action learning her experience of it on the programme was not something that could be termed totally enjoyable.

*I do remember that particular session being tough, I do remember that one, because most other sessions you would find challenging, but not to the point where I ever would have been emotional like, but I remember being emotional and I remember thinking "I can't f\*\*\*ing do this", you know?*

It was certainly a rocky ride for her. She speaks about being paralysed and unable to make a decision for a long time, paralysed because she kept questioning herself, her values and her motives. She became less confident as a result of the ALS, in that in the past she would plough on in and make a decision without much (any) reflection, whereas now she found herself asking questions as to why she was making those decisions, could she perhaps make different ones and what would the impact be, all this questioning resulted in her being unable to act for at least 3 months.

*I think I became very indecisive, because you're trying so hard not to be the manager that you were before, that I couldn't find my feet for a while.*

*She calls that time "that period in the middle I had kinda felt lost, not necessarily lost control.*

Suzanne was facing a very serious organisational problem, indeed a wicked problem, and this was partially responsible for her paralysis. A turning point came during on ALS which Suzanne acknowledges took an awful lot out of her, it was one where the other participants "really pushed her". This particular ALS really made her look at the problem she'd been trying to avoid and asked very insightful questions of her. It forced her to "face certain truths" she had been avoiding, there was nowhere for her to hide anymore and avoid deciding on actions. The ALS in a way gave her permission to act and allowed her to stop 'banging your head of the wall'.

*yeah, different decisions that were taken at the time that were very hard to take but I know that we're still here today because of that combination of decisions that were made and I wonder would I have made them as quickly if I hadn't have been doing the course.*

This particular ALS, Suzanne's turning point, led at the end of it to Suzanne "feeling a sense of relief". During it she had allowed herself to become very emotional, something that was very unusual for her, however, this display and feeling of emotion had helped her to finally come to a place where she could take action. It was what had been stopping her previously, holding it in.

*I wouldn't have considered myself an emotional person at all, but when you actually step back and look at why you make the decisions you make and how you make them, everything's underpinned by emotion.*

*No, I remember coming out and feeling a sense of relief in one sense, that you could finally see what needed to be done and then the dread of actually having to do it, which took another like, two months.*

Suzanne found benefit in all ALS but this one in particular was significant it was like up to this she had been climbing up a mountain and now she had reached the pinnacle where she could see her way ahead, the clouds had been lifted and now she had visibility. It was an emotional journey/climb which she was able to do because of the support and pushing of her fellow ALS peers.

Suzanne recognises a big change in herself as a result of the programme. She is much more self-aware, she is a self-confessed control freak who now takes the time to see this and adjust her behaviour if required. She now delegates to others where in the past she had to know everything that was happening and she believes this has led to a better atmosphere at work. She sees herself no longer as a manager but as a leader who looks

to the future, previously she would not look beyond a few weeks. Now she develops others and strives for organisational learning trying to filter her learning down. She feels she has been released from her old ways and allows herself to take time to reflect, pause and to not act - she is emancipated from her need to always be in control.

*I would have classified myself as a complete control freak before, I would've had to have input into every single decision that I made, and I would've bottlenecked things within the company where people were waiting on me to make a decision on something and they were perfectly capable of making it themselves. There was no justification for it, that's just the way we had always done it, and that has changed, where there's a lot more autonomy and a lot more responsibility given out to the team and they don't need to have my input on a lot of things.*

*I suppose the other thing, I'm just thinking now, the other thing that has come from this is that I think a lot more long-term than I used to, I used to think, at best, a week to ten days out, being deadly serious about that, I wouldn't have literally, looked a month ahead, I was terrible like. Now when we're looking at, when we sit down and we look at strategy – we do that every three months – I actually am not looking three months, or six months, out now, I'm looking five years out, and I'm going.*

Suzanne's emotional attachment to her problem is apparent - it was a problem she very much cared about and needed to resolve. It is likely that this strong attachment is linked to the emotional intensity she faced in the ALS of note. This emotional intensity may have hindered her in seeing the forest for the trees and so the role of the members in questioning her during the ALS was very important. The fact that the other set members had no vested interest in the problem other than to help her come to a resolution could

well have been an advantage allowing them to insightfully question her. If the ALS had been internal in the organisation it could be the case that others being strongly vested in the problem would also have difficulty standing back with fresh eyes. The detachment of the programme ALS members removed the politics and inherent power struggle with respect to the questioning and allowed Suzanne to address the problem without much of the baggage - this could potentially be a key advantage for management education using programme ALSs - being places where managers can drop the pretence/veil for a time so as to see the problem with fresh eyes.

*“yeah, different decisions that were taken at the time that were very hard to take but I know that we’re still here today because of that combination of decisions that were made and I wonder would I have made them as quickly if I hadn’t have been doing the course”.*