

Laura Abbott RGN RM BA BSc (hons) MSc

l.abbott@herts.ac.uk

Senior Lecturer in Midwifery: University of Hertfordshire; Supervisor of Midwives: East of England
LSA

ABSTRACT

Supervision of Midwives is a statutory responsibility which provides a “mechanism for support and guidance to every midwife practising in the United Kingdom” (Nursing and Midwifery Council, NMC and The Local Supervising Authority Midwifery Officers National Forum, LSAMONF, 2008). To become a SoM requires a midwife to be nominated by her peers and to undertake a course at Masters Level over two semesters. A learning strategy on the preparation course is Action Learning whereby groups of 6 or 7 student supervisors compulsorily attend 6 AL sessions. Action learning requires skills of analysis, scrutiny and reflexivity. Revans (1982) makes the suggestion that AL is an ideal form of learning when there is no right answer to a problem. An exploration of action learning as a teaching strategy on the SoM preparation course led to the conclusion that this is an appropriate and high quality teaching method which develops the reflective skills of the participants as well as developing their self awareness and communication skills to a high standard.

INTRODUCTION

Action Learning (AL) has been used as a teaching method on the preparation to become a Supervisor of Midwives (SoM) course at The University of Hertfordshire (UH) since 2004 (Mead et al, 2006). This learning method is unique in that it is currently only utilised by the lecturers on the SoM course within the midwifery department. Action learning is used to develop student SoMs to a deep level of critical and reflective thought, enhancing their skills as listeners and questioners.

Each member of an AL set has airtime as a problem holder and this time is usually utilised by sharing a supervisory issue or an area of development is discussed in relation to the supervisory project that the student may be undertaking as part of the summative assessment on the course. The problem holder has approximately 30 minutes to air an issue, which is usually related to supervision. The other participants listen, reflect and then ask specific and non-leading questions to encourage analysis and reflection. An action plan is then devised and agreed and revisited at the next AL meeting. AL is structured and the questions used are designed to be open and non-leading. It is one of the principle roles of the facilitator to ensure that questions are designed to be helpful and empowering for the problem holder and that she/he is not led or given solutions.

SUPERVISION OF MIDWIVES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF HERTFORDSHIRE

Supervision of Midwives is a statutory responsibility which provides a “mechanism for support and guidance to every midwife practising in the United Kingdom” (Nursing and Midwifery Council, NMC and The Local Supervising Authority Midwifery Officers National Forum, LSAMONF, 2008). SoMs are responsible for the safeguarding of women and their babies (NMC, 2004). With this in mind SoMs are required to have excellent communication skills and be approachable in order to be able to maximise the relationship between midwife and SoM. The SoM course aims to prepare future SoMs for this role. AL is an excellent teaching strategy that facilitates enhancement of communication and reflective skills at an expert level (Benner, 1984). At The University of Hertfordshire (UH), the

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preparation programme for midwives' to become Supervisors of Midwives (SoMs) involves a variety of teaching, learning and assessment strategies. One of these methods is through action learning.

At The University of Hertfordshire, the SoM preparation course is at masters' level and runs over two semesters. Student SoMs are required to attend twenty one study days, six of which are designated as Action Learning days. Action learning has been defined by an abundance of theorists (Revans, 1982; McNulty, 1979; Pedlar, 1991). However, Fry et al (2000) sum up action learning succinctly by defining it as a "relationship between reflection and action..Put simply it is about solving problems and getting things done". When applying this definition to the SoM preparation course and Supervision in general, this seems to be the most appropriate way to describe the process.

THE ROLE OF THE SET ADVISOR

Each AL set has a designated facilitator who is a lecturer in midwifery and either a SoM her/his self or is an experienced facilitator. The role of the facilitator is to help set up the group, provide guidance and to role model such techniques such as intuitive questioning and active listening. The key learning that goes on within an AL set is multifaceted. Whether a participant is an active listener, presenter, questioner or reflector, learning should be continual. With any adult education, the importance of safety within the group is paramount therefore ground rules such as confidentiality, respect for each other and a non judgemental attitude are often pre requisites when the group is being set up in the first few sessions.

The set advisor/ facilitator appears to have more input at the beginning of the group being set up and has a unique role in that she does not bring a problem (Mead et al, 2006). The facilitator needs to have the skills to ensure that the participants do not deviate from the action learning process. With this in mind, the facilitator should be experienced in leading reflection and group work and should have an understanding of how groups function within teaching and learning. The participants learn to ask poignant, deep questions and this is enhanced as the group strengthens and goes into deeper levels of learning. Tiberius (1998) suggests that the facilitator should find ways of rewarding students for participating within a group. For example this could be a reflection at the end of each action learning session focussing upon the achievements of the group collectively. With AL each participant has an opportunity to be a problem holder where she is allocated 30 – 40 minutes of time to air the problem. It has been the experience within the SoM course that the air time is used to explore a problem related to supervision or the supervision project which is part of the course summative assignment (Mead et al, 2007). The participants are guided onto what sort of questions should be asked. The questioning approaches are very important in order to support the problem holder and written examples of the types of questions that are most helpful are made available to all participants especially in the early days of the group.

The set advisors' specific role has been explored by AL theorists (theorists (Revans, 1982; McNulty, 1979; Pedlar, 1991). Yorks et al (2008) looked in depth at the role of the facilitator and suggest that

the key function is to assist participants in developing fresh insight into the challenges countenanced in their work. With the supervision of midwives, professional challenges are faced on a regular basis and need to be dealt with calmly, professionally and with a mature non-judgemental attitude. Therefore AL learning provides a safe environment to hone the skills necessary to be an excellent SoM. With a good set advisor, AL works in the best way for all partakers, re-enforcing the importance of having a highly skilled facilitator. As the weeks move on, the facilitator's role takes more of a backseat as the AL set become experts themselves, often reminding each other to remain focused and challenging inappropriate questioning techniques.

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Student SoMs are already experienced and skilled professional midwives' who would have been used to either facilitating or taking part in structured reflection. Reflective practice, especially when contextualised within statutory supervision has been shown to strengthen professional and lifelong learning (Ralston, 2005). Reflection encourages the development of self awareness (Reid, 1993) and therefore is an essential professional skill that is developed by midwives in order to enhance their clinical practice. By using action learning as an essential component to prepare midwives to be SoMs helps to build on reflective skills and augment communication expertise. This is particularly useful because a key role of supervision is about supporting the midwife to be autonomous and reflective rather than providing answers and advice, therefore encouraging the midwife to seek out the answers herself. The evidence has suggested that SoMs who facilitate reflective sessions for midwives help develop practitioners who are more responsible for their own professional development which is positive for midwives and women alike (Yearley,2003).The journey through Action learning can be such an asset as the skill of thoughtful questioning is a key focus of an action learning set. When a SoM is faced with a challenging situation, she needs to be able to elicit information from the midwife seeking support or guidance. Therefore, the value of AL is completely transferable when the student SoM is fully engaged in the process and learns how to question insightfully. Bell et al (2007) describe the problem solving skills developed by an action learning set and talk specifically of members "listening rather than talking" and "generating a number of solutions to different problems". When applied to the supervision of midwives the skills learnt though action learning can mean that the student SoM can develop and hone skills essential in order to be an effective SoM.

DISCUSSION

Exploring the literature has found that there is not a great deal written as criticisms of AL. One criticism which has been discussed is the theory –practice gap (Smith, 1988) where the flexibility that AL offers has been described as potentially detrimental to learning. This is due to the lack of theoretical components because AL is more about self awareness development. It could also be argued that certain learning styles may not suit the AL process. A reflector or a theorist (Honey and Mumford, 1986) may find the AL style of learning more challenging than an activist or a pragmatist.

Nevertheless, as each group member has her airtime and each group member has time for reflection and question asking, the more passive group members may develop skills as activists and the more participatory members may hone their listening and reflecting skills. Tiberius (1998) suggests that within groups, breaking the silence as early as possible within the discussion may reduce individual anxieties about speaking within this kind of setting. In AL, the ice is broken very early on with each group member introducing themselves and sharing information about themselves. The success of the AL set is reliant upon its participants therefore needs universal commitment. If one or two members are not committed to the process of AL, the group may not be as successful. Also, if there are personality clashes, this may cause a problem. At UH, it is ensured that midwives' are from different workplaces in each AL set to avoid cliques forming or the resistance to share potentially sensitive work related issues. This seems to work well as each student SoM is meeting new student SoMs and forming links and networking, another benefit to supervision in the longterm.

The principle underlying action learning is described by Kolb (1984), who states that by having an experience, reflecting upon it, thinking about how to improve upon it leads onto lessons being brought into "action". This deep thinking reflective process has been formalised into action learning whereby professionals are formed into small groups of approximately 6 and skills of analysis, scrutiny and reflexivity are honed at a deep level. Revans (1982) makes the suggestion that AL is an ideal form of learning when there is no right answer to a problem. In a sense AL is a process where unpicking a problem creates more questions and issues and therefore sometimes more problems. However, with this process, learning can take place on a deep and lifelong level making it ideally suited to andragogy.

Kolb (1984) illustrates the adult learning process by describing it as experiential learning, ingrained in a reflective cycle which is an ongoing and spiralling process. This approach is widely used in the midwifery department on the undergraduate and postgraduate courses where the learning process builds on prior knowledge and understanding. With student SoMs, action learning enables skills to be practised and learnt in a meaningful way. By encouraging students to formulate their own learning helps enable them to apply their learning to the real world. This is particularly important when it comes to supervision as so much of it is practical problem solving and involves real world thinking. Other educational theorists take on a similar view to Kolb (1984). Knowles (1990), for example, suggests that the teaching and learning process within andragogy is a mutual responsibility with the learner being an active participant. Fry et al (2000) suggest that learners need to be encouraged to connect with their learning to enable internal restructuring. Action learning therefore symbolises what adult learning espouses. Using a group method where participants learn through reflection, listening and self awareness (Fry et al, 2000) members can learn experientially through both action and understanding.

Mead et al (2006) looked specifically at the use of action learning for the preparation of SoMs at UH and found that AL was a new approach for learners and set advisors alike. The perception of learners was that the process of AL was a valuable tool for supervision. The enthusiasm of the set advisors was seen as an essential component and it was identified that further research and skill

development of the set advisors could be recommended. On this echelon it appears that the set advisor's skills as a catalyst, although officially a facilitative role, should be honed to an expert level (Benner, 1984). It could be argued that more training as a facilitator should be a requirement before becoming a set advisor. It is the experience of the author that time and effort is being spent in development of AL set advisors at UH. This is taking place in the form of a lecturer and SoM being supported in the role by an experienced facilitator. Thus inviting her to learn more about the theory behind AL as well as being supported in her professional development as a set advisor. The particular developmental experience for a new set advisor has so far focused upon the setting up of an AL group and developing ground rules as well as concluding an AL set at the end of six sessions. It was found that when an AL group was set up and working well, the facilitative role required less of an active function. Hence the importance of the new potential set advisor being present at the start and finish of a group as learning from the new facilitator's perspective was less beneficial with the group working well. The downside of the preparation process is the time and therefore financial commitment of University of Hertfordshire; however, it has been felt a beneficial investment educationally and personally.

Using Action Learning as a teaching and learning vehicle for student SoMs has been evaluated as useful and positive (Mead et al, 2006). However, as this remains a fairly new method of learning within the supervisors' course it could be recommended that further research into the usefulness of AL could be done at UH. A valuable study would be exploring whether the specific components of AL have been transferable to midwives' roles as SoMs. For example: the specific questioning techniques could be evaluated to see whether useful phrases and questions are still being used by qualified SoMs. Assessment of the participants within an AL set is difficult as this type of learning cannot be measured in a structured way. Therefore students are assessed by their commitment and attendance rather than in a summative way. Students that miss a number of AL sessions cannot pass the SoM course and have to start again with a new cohort. It could be argued that application does not have to be demonstrated in a summative way. For example, psychological educational theorists contend that learning can be measured when a behavioural change is permanent and internalised in attitudinal and emotional ways (Burns, 2002). Whereas Pogson and Tennant (1995) take the humanistic stance to learning and suggest that it is the whole educational experience that motivates the adult learner. However, with AL being such an essential component of the SoM preparation course, engagement with the AL process is vital. As adult learners, the student SoMs have a responsibility and commitment to pass the course. As midwives, the student SoM also has the motivation and drive that fuels the commitment to the AL process.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, AL is a teaching and learning strategy which has been part of the SoM preparation course since 2004. Although group work and reflection are used as learning methods within the UH midwifery department, the SoM course is unique in that it engages with the AL process. One study has evaluated AL at UH and found that it is a useful and acceptable to student SoMs but more development of set advisors was required (Mead et al, 2006). At present set advisors are being

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carefully developed at UH to undertake the facilitative role. This is felt to be of benefit professionally and educationally. More studies into action learning for student Supervisors of Midwives as a process is a recommendation. A qualitative study into the experiences of midwives partaking in action learning is a consideration for the future.

KEY WORDS:

Action Learning, Supervisors of Midwives, Supervision, Reflection.

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