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Entrepreneurial Learning through Action: A Case Study of the Six-Squared Program

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ABSTRACT
This paper explores the role of 'action' in entrepreneurial learning and illustrates how programs designed to support action learning can enhance management development in entrepreneurial businesses. The paper begins by exploring action learning and the way 'action' is conceived in different types of program. In the following part, the paper details the policy and theory issues that have led researchers to argue for action learning for entrepreneurs. Here two basic drivers are identified: first, the inadequacy of current management development support and secondly, the growth of entrepreneurial learning as a new area of research. The paper develops an argument to illustrate how action learning is valued within this context. Finally, the paper introduces a case study of an action learning program, reports the evaluative research undertaken and explains the benefits of action learning for entrepreneurs.

INTRODUCTION
This paper will explore the role of action learning for supporting entrepreneurs. Before progressing it will briefly introduce action learning and action learning sets and then progress to explain how action learning can be used in the context of entrepreneurship. Action learning can be traced back to the educational theories of John Dewey and the principles of Kurt Lewin’s social psychology both of which are rooted in the idea that human beings learn from experience, especially where it is collaborative (Marsick and O’Neil, 1999). When examining action learning it is evident that it is: a form of management development; that it involves social interaction and learning; that it focuses on a problem; that it requires actions to address the problem; that these actions may involve ‘stress’ and ‘risk’. Action learning uses the idea that human beings must ‘act’ and in doing so they can learn. 'Problems', as the focus for action, have significant components of risk, uncertainty and complexity and "do not have clear solutions" (Marsick and O'Neil, 1999, p. 164). The 'action' in action learning takes a 'voluntaristic' stance, which sets it apart from some other forms of management education (McLaughlin and Thorpe, 1993; West and Choueke, 2003). There are, however, different forms of action learning that lead to different types of application. These are underpinned both by differences in policy and views about practice (McLaughlin and Thorpe, 1993; Marsick and O'Neil, 1999). Despite the differences many forms use the action learning set as a key method; although they may apply the method differently (West and Choueke, 2003). An action learning set can be defined as:

"...action learning sets are groups of people (usually six to eight) who meet voluntarily to address work-related problems of managing and organising. Their purpose is founded on action, learning and reflection with the focus on learning at three levels... first, they are learning about the problem that is being addressed. Second, they are learning about what they are learning about themselves and third,
they are learning about the process of learning itself.” (West and Choueke, 2003, p. 216)

Action learning sets have several characteristics: they are usually composed of small groups; they have a specific problem or set of problems on which they work; the meetings are formed on an organized process of action, learning and reflection; and, they are often facilitated in order to encourage learning through action, as well as, effective problem solving (Revans, 1982). Action learning sets have been used in many industrial contexts to assist managers to learn while solving a problem that needs to be addressed in their workplace. Over the last two decades such approaches have also been used within the context of entrepreneurial learning for supporting small business owners’ personal development but these have been rarely discussed in the academic literature (Clarke et al., 2006). The purpose of this paper and its contribution is to further build on empirical work that has explored how action learning assists entrepreneurs to learn; how action learning sets as methods work in this context; and, what learning benefits are acquired by entrepreneurs. The paper will now explore how action learning approaches, particularly action learning sets, have grown within the support system for entrepreneurs and what benefits they provide.

**ACTION LEARNING FOR ENTREPRENEURS**

The growth of action learning to support entrepreneurs has been guided by two inter-related developments. The first is an increasing awareness of the inadequacies of current support (Sullivan, 2000; Clarke et al., 2006). The second is the beginning of a new area in entrepreneurship research that moves away from deterministic views about human behavior into more voluntaristic ones; a shift which is articulated through the concept of ‘entrepreneurial learning’ (Gibb, 2002; Cope, 2005). The paper will explore each of these developments in turn and show how they have a role in explaining why action learning is considered valuable within the entrepreneurial context.

Over two decades a number of key programs have developed action learning designs to support entrepreneurs and often these approaches have used learning sets (Gibb, 1997; Devins and Gold, 2000; Gibb, 2002). These efforts have sometimes been reported in the academic literature and have occasionally impacted on general attitudes to small business support. Despite increasing awareness of the efficacy of these approaches and increasing evidence within the research field of their value, general small business support has not
widely adopted action learning and there are only a few studies outlining what entrepreneurs gain from such approaches (Gibb, 1997; Devins and Gold, 2000; Clarke et al., 2006). As a consequence, there are a number of factors that advocates of action learning have highlighted when questioning whether current support for entrepreneurs is effective (Gibb, 1997; Gibb, 2002; Clarke et al., 2006). There is a problem of engagement where government-backed programs to support learning and development for entrepreneurs have failed to persuade them to get involved (Stanworth and Gray, 1991; Storey, 1994; Westhead and Storey, 1996; Matlay, 2004; Stewart and Beaver, 2004). These programs have been criticized for being supply-sided and lacking designs that engage entrepreneurs in the way that they prefer to learn (Gibb, 1996; Devins and Gold, 2000; Clarke et al., 2006). There is also a contextual problem, management in entrepreneurial businesses varies considerably between: types of firms; types of problems being experienced; the entrepreneur’s motivations (Goss and Jones, 1997; Gibb, 2002); the stage of growth (Cope and Watts, 2000); and, the immediacy of the issues being addressed (Clarke et al., 2006). It is widely argued that most provision fails to address this diversity of need (Thomson et al., 1997; Devins and Gold, 2000). There is also a problem of value. Entrepreneurs often find it difficult to see how support will directly help their business and value must support their interests. It must also impact on the performance of the business or the entrepreneur in a way that is meaningful to them (Thomson et al., 1997). Due to the discrepancy between ‘management support’ for learning and the value placed on the learning provided, many researchers have begun to question both the support infrastructure and current knowledge about how entrepreneurs learn (Gibb, 1997; Cope and Watts, 2000; Thomson et al., 1997; Gibb, 2002). Action learning, through action learning sets, has been identified as a possible alternative form of management development which may be more appropriate to the way in which entrepreneurs learn (Taylor and Thorpe, 2004; Clarke et al., 2006), as has coaching and mentoring (Devins and Gold, 2000; Sullivan, 2000). Over the years many of these advocates of ‘experiential approaches’ have tested them and sought to both demonstrate their veracity in helping entrepreneurs learn and have disseminated information about what entrepreneurs might gain from learning in this way. These efforts have led some researchers to conceptualize entrepreneurial activity differently leading to our second driver for increased interest in action learning within the entrepreneurial context, which is a growth in research on entrepreneurial learning (Gibb, 2002; Taylor and Thorpe, 2004).

The second area driving a view that action learning may be useful is research on ‘entrepreneurial learning’ (Gibb, 1997; Rae, 2000; Cope and Watts, 2000), which has
expanded over the last decade. Conceptualizations in entrepreneurial learning are becoming fairly advanced; they are worth exploring in more detail as they show why action learning may have value within the entrepreneurial context. The paper does not seek to add to the theoretical constructs of entrepreneurial learning but is designed to apply existing constructs to explain why action learning is valuable for entrepreneurs. The paper’s value is to focus on what is known about entrepreneurial learning and show why this knowledge supports the efficacy of action learning methods in the entrepreneurial context.

The first construct worth exploring is the temporal nature of entrepreneurial learning. This is the view that learning needs to be considered as a broad process involving experimentation, random events and dynamic aspects which flow over various stages (Reuber and Fischer, 1999; Woo et al., 1994; Smilor, 1997). It is possible to see this dynamic process as a series of choices that lead individuals into a course of action from which they cannot necessarily step back and for which they may be ill prepared (Gibb and Ritchie, 1982). Once engaged in this entrepreneurial act they must learn from the experience they acquire, cope with problems as they emerge, and develop personally as they experience outcomes from their actions, which may be both intended and unintended (Deakins, 1996). Cope (2005) views the first of these temporal phases as ‘preparedness’ to act or an individual’s unique acquired skills, which allow them to act confidently on their given perceptions about situations (Harvey and Evans, 1995). The ‘information available’ allow individuals to imagine ‘rival choosables’. This has also been conceived as the ‘stock of experience’ (Reuber and Fischer, 1999) or the ‘learning history’ (Boud et al. 1993) an individual has, which makes their imagined choices unique to their personal experience (Mezirow, 1990). Due to the dynamic nature of the entrepreneurial process the entrepreneur’s stock of experience changes constantly and thus to learn they must take time to reflect. Cope (2005), for example, presents four forms of reflection that would seem important: backward looking at the past; inward looking introspectively at self; outward looking at the context; and, forward imaging the future courses of action and how they may materialize (Cope, 2005). These constructs suggest that action learning to be effective in the entrepreneurial context would require learning designs that employ the ‘stock of entrepreneurial experience’ that each participant has and allow participants time to reflect in a variety of ways on experienced gained (Cope, 2005). This idea of a constant loop between prior experience, reflection and anticipated future courses of action is captured in the concept of generative learning (Gibb, 1997), where entrepreneurs need to ‘bring forward’ their experience through reflection so that they can anticipate how what they know in the present can be used in the future as they perceive it (Senge, 1990). Action
learning may be able to achieve this by encouraging entrepreneurs to reflect on past experiences, while trying to solve problems in the present and anticipate how they will act in the ‘future-to-come’.

There are also other concepts in entrepreneurial learning that have value in understanding the role of action learning. The first of these is a focus on the ‘learning task’ (Minniti and Bygrave, 2001). Here each learning task is unique and dependent on the context that the learner experiences (Boud, Keogh and Walker, 1985). Cope (2005, p. 380) points out: “In terms of the content dimension of the entrepreneurial learning task, i.e. ‘what’ entrepreneurs have to learn about, much of this learning remains context specific”. This observation is often accepted in the entrepreneurial learning domain and demonstrates that action learning may have value when it allows participants to engage in exploring problems which are specific to their particular business and industry. Action learning, in many ways, can put into operation this need for learning to be contextual. Despite the specificity of the entrepreneurial task there are also identified learning needs which include different foci for learning, for example: learning about oneself; learning about the business one is running; learning about leadership and management of one’s employees; and, learning about the business context (Sexton et al., 1997; Gibb, 1997; Gibb, 2002; Cope, 2005). Although entrepreneurs cannot necessarily know what future tasks they will need to address, as these will be specific to time, context and may be driven by serendipity. In terms of action learning there are identified foci for learning around which conversations can form and, therefore, there are categories of learning which can assist in the organization of action learning programs. As tasks emerge these can be shared within an extended action learning design and one can perhaps predict, as a consequence, that learning sets in entrepreneurship will take on a dynamic character, with events changing the nature of the tasks being discussed.

When turning to the process of learning there are many useful concepts that can help illustrate why action learning might be of value (Pittaway and Cope, 2007). First, entrepreneurs are often ‘action-orientated’ and learn through doing (Cope and Watts, 2000; Rae and Carswell, 2000; 2001). They may act first and then seek to learn through trial and error and solving problems as they arise (Gibb, 1997; Deakins and Freel, 1998). This inherent learning by doing nature of entrepreneurs is both supportive of the way in which action learning works and demonstrative of the need for designs to build in reflection. It is also argued that entrepreneurs learn through ‘events’, ‘crises’ and ‘episodes’ (Cope, 2003). Although conceptualized in several ways this notion suggests that at certain points
entrepreneurs face non-routine situations which can be transformative in what they learn about themselves and their perceptions of the world around them (Deakins and Freel, 1998). These events may be discrete one-offs, both positive and negative, but they may also be extended ‘episodes’ (Cope, 2003). Such processes have a heightened ‘emotional’ character due to ‘emotional exposure’ an entrepreneur can experience when making choices in conditions of uncertainty and ambiguity, especially if they have personal financial exposure (Pittaway and Cope, 2007). Entrepreneurs must make choices in the face of ambiguity and uncertainty and this can lead learning to be derived from action and from the unexpected consequences of action. Such learning usually has an emotional character especially when an individual’s personal wellbeing and livelihood is attached to the outcome of the actions taken. Action learning can play an important role here via its idea of ‘comrades in adversity’. Helping individuals to share this ‘exposure’ to choice and actions with others who have personal experience of the same context can provide support, as well as, encourage reflection and learning.

The final aspect that seems important is a growing shift away from conceptualizing learning as an individual process to seeing it as a social process (Cope, 2005; Clarke et al., 2006). It is argued that all learning should be viewed as being a social “argumentative process that has its origins in relationships with others” (Holman et al., 1997, p. 143). Research has started to explore this social component of learning and the impact it has on the choices about actions that entrepreneurs make (Cope, 2005; Clarke et al., 2006). First and foremost, an entrepreneur is not a ‘sole’ actor making decisions in the abstract but a relational being making decisions and choices after engaging with others (Sadler-Smith, 1995; Tell, 2000; Devins and Gold, 2004). The concepts of networks or ‘communities of practice’ and learning through these have been highlighted (Taylor and Thorpe, 2004). These ‘actor networks’ include: family and friends; professional support agents; and, peers (Hines and Thorpe, 1995; Gibb, 1997). What this development shows is that trust, respect and shared experience become an important driver behind social learning (Sullivan, 2000). It is also evident that the emotional component becomes important in social learning (Boyd and Gumpert, 1983) as emotional relationships with key others are important factors behind choices, actions and future choices. Despite this refocusing on social learning, however, it is still evident that decisions are ultimately made by the principle entrepreneur(s) and that emotional exposure created by such decisions and their outcomes make entrepreneurship an intense learning process; leading entrepreneurs to feel somewhat isolated. Action learning can provide two major roles when these entrepreneurial learning constructs are considered: it can enable entrepreneurs to engage in a social network of peers in which to
become involved in a discursive process leading to reflection. It can also alleviate the aspects of loneliness that can occur for entrepreneurs by allowing them to engage with others, who have empathy of, and experience in their ‘life-world’ (Gibb, 2002).

From this review of entrepreneurial learning the paper argues that action learning should be an effective means to enhance learning for entrepreneurs through action and that learning sets as one of the main methods of action learning may be particularly effective. The next part of the paper will explore the research that has been carried out on the role of action learning and action learning sets in entrepreneurship more closely.

**DESIGNING ACTION LEARNING SETS FOR ENTREPRENEURS**

The process designed into learning sets can differ between particular contexts and between facilitators (Davey, et al., 2002; Coughlan and Coghlan, 2004). Often a set may begin by identifying a problem, which is conceived as a complex organizational issue (Coughlan and Coghlan, 2004). A set initially explores individual perceptions about the problem and seeks out insights into potential solutions (or rival choosables), on which a course of action might commence (West and Choueke, 2003). Set members take action based on the potential solutions, make a choice about which to pursue and develop ‘a sequence of choices and actions’ which generate new insights into the problem and into the outcomes created by the actions undertaken. Learning sets then reflect on the outcomes and on the process in order to learn from the experience gained (Clarke et al., 2006). Learning sets also have a significant social component (West and Choueke, 2003; Coughlan and Coghlan, 2004; Clarke et al., 2006). They are often groups working on problems over a prolonged period of time (Marquardt, 1999), although sets can form and separate more quickly. The group is often conceived as ‘comrades in adversity’ (Smith, 2001) or as ‘fellows in opportunity’ (Mumford, 1996). The terminology used demonstrates the strong bonds that can be created in learning sets. The group becomes the focus where individuals can learn from each other through questioning each other, by sharing new experiences and by encouraging each other to reflect on experience (Smith, 2001). Brown and Duguid (1991) describe these groups as ‘communities of practice’ where shared meaning and understanding, shared activity can lead to different interpretations about the problem, the wider environment and can reframe how the individual chooses to act (Raelin, 2001). What is demonstrated is that the social component can lead to social, emotional and
intellectual transformation of the individual, as well as, enable the individual to learn from experience.

Studies exploring how action learning sets can be beneficial for entrepreneurs have been carried out (Boddy and Lewis, 1986; Choueke and Armstrong, 1998; Davey et al., 2002; Clarke et al., 2006). Choueke and Armstrong (1998) for example argue that entrepreneurs see action learning as having a positive effect on organizational effectiveness and Davey et al (2002) found that entrepreneurs benefit from the opportunity to interact with other entrepreneurs. In an empirical study conducted by Boddy and Lewis (1986) participants in their program highlighted the ongoing benefits for growth and acknowledged ongoing changes in personal learning. A more comprehensive study conducted by Clarke et al. (2006) showed that entrepreneurs found a range of benefits including: that reflection enabled vocalization of action and assumptions behind action; that learning occurred more effectively in diverse groups; that learning sets led to the development of ‘communities of practice’ beyond the immediate need; that sets enable entrepreneurs to reflect on the relationships between the personal, emotional and business issues associated with entrepreneurial acts; and, that sets enabled entrepreneurs to disengage and step back from the business and think more strategically (Clarke et al., 2006).

Although there have been some studies on the value of action learning and specifically action learning sets for entrepreneurs (Boddy and Lewis, 1986; Choueke and Armstrong, 1998; Davey et al., 2002) these have been limited to a focus on the reasons for engagement and value to the business and have perhaps neglected the nature and content of learning acquired. Only one paper seems to focus specifically on this aspect (Clarke et al., 2006) and the study reported in this paper seeks to support and add knowledge on the nature and content of learning acquired through entrepreneurial learning sets. This paper makes a contribution to understanding about the benefits of action learning by exploring a case study of one program of action learning for entrepreneurs and by reporting the nature and content of the learning acquired by the entrepreneurs involved. The next part of the paper will introduce the case study; it will highlight the methodology used and explore the learning gained by entrepreneurs in the program.
CASE STUDY: THE SIX-SQUARED PROGRAM

Action Learning Set Design

In 2006 the University of Sheffield developed an action learning set program call Six-squared. The program used the concept of action learning sets (West and Choueke, 2003) as its main method to encourage peer-to-peer learning. The learning set design was based on Kolb’s (1984) learning cycle but it also included some innovative features. First, it included peer-to-peer mentoring to enhance one-on-one discussions about actions being carried out (Devins and Gold, 2000). Secondly, it had an exchange element, set meetings were hosted by entrepreneurs in their businesses, time was allocated to explore the business, and the design included a commitment between peer mentors to spend time within each other’s business to help resolve a jointly negotiated problem. Thirdly, participants committed to become an action learning set facilitator after they had been involved in a set. The process aspects of the set design are highlighted in Figure 1 and the history of the growth of the program is highlighted in Figure 2.
FIGURE 1:

The Action Learning Set Design

Meeting 1&8: Social Gathering

Meeting 2: Problem identification and scrutiny (E1 and E2)

Meeting 3: Problem identification and scrutiny (E3 and E4)

Meeting 4: Problem identification and scrutiny (E5)

Meeting 5: Action planning (E5)

Meeting 6: Action reporting (ALL)

Meeting 7: Action reporting (ALL)

Meeting 7: Reflection on actions (ALL)

Peer to Peer Mentoring

Problem-based exchanges
There were no fees for joining a set; participants had to sign an agreement committing their own time and accepting the basic principles. The principles were:

i) All meetings were conducted under Chatham House rules, a morally binding acceptance to discuss issues openly within meetings but not to share information with non-participants.

ii) Diversity within action learning sets was deliberately built into the design (Clarke et al., 2006). Entrepreneurs came from different industrial backgrounds, different sizes of firms and had different challenges.
iii) Careful selection of participants was carried out to ensure firms were not competing against each other and that set members were happy with the other members of their set.

iv) Participants had to commit to being involved in a set and being a facilitator of a set. The name Six-squared derives from this principle.

v) The learning set meetings were held every four to six weeks over a 12 to 18 month period.

vi) During the gaps between meetings mentors committed to be in contact at least once a week.

The meetings followed Kolb’s (1984) learning cycle (Lessem, 1991; McGill and Beaty, 1992) and are illustrated in Figure 1. The first meeting was a social gathering, was used to explain the process, and build personal interaction and trust. The next two to three meetings involved each entrepreneur identifying a business related problem or issue that was causing them concern. The group discussed each issue as they were raised and applied their prior experience to identify some possible solutions and to reconstruct the problem if necessary. Each individual who raised a problem was then asked to reflect on the discussions, talk to their personal mentor, identify further information needs and begin to develop an action plan for addressing the problem. The second series of meetings involved action planning. Each individual brought a plan of action to the group and these were discussed. The group scrutinized the plan of action in each case and challenged the entrepreneur to improve the plan. In the next stage one or two meetings were held that focused on action. Here each individual had begun to act on the identified need or problem and the learning set convened to discuss progress on actions and discuss any unexpected challenges. Finally, the learning set met a final time with a specific remit to reflect on actions already carried out. To explore what worked, what did not work, and why certain things happened or occurred and where the facilitator specifically asked about personal learning. This learning cycle typically took a nine month period to complete, in some cases learning sets began the cycle again. A final informal social gathering was used to celebrate the conclusion of the set when the participants believed it had reached its natural point of closure. Considering the different forms of action learning this approach is best categorized as being within the experiential approach (Marsick and O’Neil, 1999, West and Choueke, 2003). The approach used can be considered both a philosophy and a form of problem solving. A philosophy in the sense that it is driven by a view that this form of learning is
effective for entrepreneurs and an approach to problem solving, as entrepreneurs are focusing on problems within their own and each other’s businesses (McLaughlin and Thorpe, 1993). In terms of the different faces of action learning identified by Marsick and O’Neil (1999) this approach is best categorized as fitting within the ‘Experiential School’. It can be classed as experiential because it applies Kolb’s learning cycle and focuses principally on actions, with reflection, the support of others and further action being built into a cycle of learning (Bunning, 1992). The Experiential School designs the attention given to learning deliberately in to the action and the learning set design described applies this approach.

**Research Methodology**

An evaluative project was commissioned by the University of Sheffield, which was funded by the Northern Leadership Academy; the research was conducted by Stratagia Ltd. At the point at which the program was evaluated the first learning set (started in 2006) had been completed, two participants from this set had become facilitators in two new sets (started in 2007) and in early 2008 a fourth set for start-ups had just formed but was not included in the study (see Figure 2). At this point 20 entrepreneurs were involved in the program. Participants were recruited to the program through a series of methods. In the first stage, the members of the set were recruited through their association with the University of Sheffield and through their association with other set members. Five entrepreneurs and one academic facilitator constituted this first set. Two of the entrepreneurs were founding members of the set and helped to develop the design of the program; the remaining three entrepreneurs were recruited through founding members’ personal networks. In the second stage several methods were used to recruit another 15 entrepreneurs to the program. Snowballing was used whereby existing set members approached people in their personal networks and invited them to participate in the program. Some entrepreneurs joined the program via existing business support agencies acting as intermediaries, while a number or participants in the second stage were existing contacts of the University of Sheffield. Of the 20 entrepreneurs involved in the program 15 took part in this research study, two of whom withdrew from the program during the study. A profile of the 13 entrepreneurs and 1 academic facilitator who were involved in the entire study are shown in Table 1. Two other entrepreneurs were involved in some aspects of the research but not all because they left the learning set program while the research was being conducted.
Table 1 – A Profile of the Research Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person</th>
<th>Year joined program</th>
<th>Size of business</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Descriptive overview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic facilitator</td>
<td>2006 (Set 1)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Sheffield (University)</td>
<td>The academic facilitator was an academic at the University of Sheffield at the time. He was the founder and facilitator of the learning set program. An experienced academic in entrepreneurship, who was an active researcher in entrepreneurship education and had credibility with participants by being involved in several University spinout ventures.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owner-manager of a small consultancy firm.</td>
<td>2006 (Set 1) &amp; (Set 4)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Chesterfield</td>
<td>A founding member of the program. This person had spent over fifteen years as a researcher in central and local government and left to start his own consultancy business. This was supposed to be a vehicle for his gradual descent into retirement. Instead the family members he had brought onboard to help the business started working for it full time. The business had seven staff and offered consultancy services in research, IT and learning and skills policy.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Serial and portfolio small business owner.</td>
<td>2006 (Set 1) &amp; Program manager</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Sheffield (Millhouses)</td>
<td>A founding member of the program. He started his first business in 1990 as a Canoe retailer in Newcastle Upon Tyne, he has now moved into small business development providing training and consultancy to small businesses and their support network with a team of ten associates (part-time and portfolio workers). He maintains an interest in canoes being an active paddler, owning an e-commerce store and holding the post of CEO for the Association of Canoe Trades for over 10 years.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing director of a medium sized business.</td>
<td>2006 (Set 1)</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>Sheffield (Westfield)</td>
<td>A managing director (but not founder or owner) of a local company that was founded in 1989. The firm employs 140 people in the south east of Sheffield and is the UK market leader in the direct to schools supply of school uniform. In 2004, the company transferred into Employee Ownership.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing director, joint founder and owner of a small design company.</td>
<td>2006 (Set 1) &amp; (Set 3)</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>Sheffield (Norton)</td>
<td>The MD a small company employing 50 employees that specialises in e-learning, design and communications management. Clients included the BBC; Barclays; the National College for School Leadership. The firm has four owners and has arisen from a merger between two companies one of which was founded by the learning set participant. The business was going through a period of ‘growth and transition’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing director and owner of small manufacturing company.</td>
<td>2006 (Set 1) &amp; (Set 2)</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Sheffield (Handsworth)</td>
<td>The managing director of a manufacturing specialist in bathing equipment since 1984. The company is now established as one of the foremost suppliers in the assisted bathing market, with recognised brands such as Easibath and Contour. The company’s products are used in thousands of homes, hospitals and residential environments. The originally bought the company rather than founding it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portfolio entrepreneur</td>
<td>2007 (Set 2)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Sheffield (Heeley)</td>
<td>Ran a small group of companies, that are all in the hi-tech market space, an IT hardware supply company that provides new and used high end hardware to the trade and some end user business, a home automation company that provides digital home systems and home cinema solutions. A small interior design consultancy and a digital media operation that supplies plasma and audio display systems. Prior to starting the group he was sitting at board level in a multi discipline PLC.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role</td>
<td>Year (Set)</td>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Details</td>
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<tr>
<td>Graduate entrepreneur</td>
<td>2007 (Set 2)</td>
<td>Sheffield (Heeley)</td>
<td>The company was a consumer product design company that turns innovative product ideas into real products, many of them fully patented. Moving into their third year of trading, they had a turned over £400,000 and an order book of around £500,000 and were growing quickly. They engage in the entire process of design, development, manufacture and supply to retail. The firm was founded in 2004 by a geography graduate of the University of Nottingham.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Portfolio entrepreneur</td>
<td>2007 (Set 2)</td>
<td>Rotherham</td>
<td>Participant was the Deputy Chairman a company that has a proven track record of providing creative and engaging solutions to the entertainment industry, the fitness industry and more recently the public sector, particularly within the field of education. The company was one of the largest media employers in the Sheffield region and is firmly positioned within the creative and digital sector employing upwards of eighty people, encompassing multi-media, graphic design, audiovisual and music production. He was also the Chief Executive of Investors in Education, an employer led initiative to enable businesses to understand and work more effectively with local schools and colleges to support skills development.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chief executive of a non-profit</td>
<td>2007 (Set 2)</td>
<td>Rotherham</td>
<td>Appointed Chief Executive of South Yorkshire “not for profit”, a small independent organisation established 5 years ago, with around 40 staff and a turnover of approx £1.4M pa, its purpose to engage businesses in the learning and development of young people. A Board oversees the business. Previous to this she was Deputy Regional Director of Business in the Community in Yorkshire and Humber, a national “not for profit” organisation, with coverage across England, Wales and N. Ireland, inspiring and supporting business in corporate social responsibility.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Self-employed designer and manufacturer of furniture.</td>
<td>2007 (Set 2)</td>
<td>Sheffield (Banner Cross)</td>
<td>The company was a multidisciplinary contemporary design practice specialising in the bespoke production of high quality fit-for-purpose, contract and domestic, leading edge contemporary furniture.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University spinout entrepreneur</td>
<td>2007 (Set 3)</td>
<td>Sheffield (University)</td>
<td>He completed a PhD from the Department of Engineering Materials (University of Sheffield) in 1992. He then spent 11 years working for British Steel/Corus in a variety of posts that covered the direction and management of R&amp;D. In 2003 his keen interest in innovation and technology exploitation led to him taking a post as Manager of the Polymer Centre at the University of Sheffield. At present he continues in this role and he is Managing Director of a University spinout in polymers. The firm provides R&amp;D services that help industry make connections between polymer technology and their needs (current problems or new product development).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-employed IT consultant</td>
<td>2007 (Set 3)</td>
<td>Sheffield (Woodseats)</td>
<td>A computing graduate of Lancaster University he worked in a number of companies as a software developer and project leader working on projects from small one man e-commerce sites to what, at the time, was considered the largest e-commerce site in the country. He went freelance in 2005 and formed a limited company in 2006. He works with local SMEs building websites and bespoke desktop applications and focuses on IT security.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-employed marketing consultant</td>
<td>2007 (Set 3)</td>
<td>Sheffield (Totley)</td>
<td>A marketing consultancy, PR, Direct Marketing and Events Management firm employing three people. Her experience included successful event and project management, as well as PR and marketing on limited budgets. She had previously</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Telephone interviews were conducted in November 2007 with all of the participants of the original set and nine out of the ten new participants. The telephone interviews conducted can be categorized as semi-structured, as there was a broad set of themes for the interviews within which probing questions were asked that were relevant to the conversation at the time (Thorpe and Holt 2008). The broad themes for the semi-structured interview included: their experience of the learning set process; the results they gained from participation; their anticipated longer-term impact from involvement and what they considered they had ‘learnt’. Probing questions were developed with each participant as the conversation developed within these themes (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005) and in this sense the methodology can be considered to meet the principles of interpretive research (Denzin, 1983). The telephone interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed after the interview. The data analysis was conducted principally using manual methods, such as underlining key text relevant to the identified themes, reading and re-reading of transcripts and listening to the recorded interviews. In this sense the coding of the data can be considered ‘grounded’ in the sense that interpretations emerged from the data and were later analyzed according to the theoretical aspects explained in the earlier part of the paper (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). There was also a longitudinal aspect to the research design with research interviews being undertaken in November 2007 and March 2008. The original participants (5) were asked questions about the whole set process and the results for them of participation in the November interviews. As the new sets, at this point, had only just formed the November interviews for the second and third learning (11) sets focused on the participants’ initial reactions to the first meetings and their aspirations for the sets. A second round of telephone interviews were conducted in March 2008 with all of the action learning set participants (14). These interviews assessed the progress in the new sets; revisited the themes highlighted above; and, reviewed the longer term impact that the original set members had gained from their involvement. The data set, therefore, constitutes transcripts from 30 interviews in total, covering 14 participants who remained in the program throughout (highlighted in Table 1) and two who left the program during the research.

There are some limitations to this research design. First, the approach used was principally ‘evaluative’ and was a consultancy rather than an academic research project. In some ways it was designed to explore the program’s strengths and weaknesses rather than
answer the more fundamental questions and issues posed in this paper. Despite this the researchers were briefed principally to explore ‘learning’ rather than ‘outcomes’ and the data collected has been useful for addressing the more fundamental questions raised in a grounded way (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). As the study employed telephone interviews, which were analyzed only by the principal researcher the data analysis may be open to some subjective interpretation and the data coding may thus suffer from coder bias. The final limitation is the timing of the study and the sample size. The timing meant only five entrepreneurs had experienced the full action learning set program and the remaining participants (9) were only part way through when the study was carried out. Accepting these limitations the paper will now explore the data and the interpretation of the data gained during the evaluative research.

**Motivations for Engaging in Action Learning**

One of the problems experienced in programs for entrepreneurs in public support has been the problem of engagement (Stanworth and Gray, 1991; Storey, 1994; Westhead and Storey, 1996; Matlay, 2004; Stewart and Beaver, 2004). It is, therefore, valuable to explore why entrepreneurs became involved in an action learning program such as the one described. There were a range of reasons articulated for being involved. The opportunity to work with the University and the opportunity to understand the program itself were factors underlying some entrepreneur’s motivations. All of the participants highlighted that they wanted to develop themselves through sharing experiences, learning about other business owners’ problems and by exploring how practical solutions could be applied to their businesses. These motivations illustrate the ‘community of practice’ ethic sitting behind the action learning idea (West and Choueke, 2003; Coughlan and Coghlan, 2004; Clarke et al., 2006) and they also highlight the value that entrepreneurs placed on social learning from respected peers (Taylor and Thorpe, 2004). The ‘problem-based’ nature of their motivations also confirms the action-orientation and learning through problems emphasis highlighted elsewhere (Cope and Watts, 2000; Rae and Carswell, 2000; 2001). The social learning motivation behind engagement is further illustrated in the data and as an example the following quotes illustrates two entrepreneurs’ perspective on this aspect:

"It’s really important to have trusted networks; people you can trust in terms of honesty rather than competency, people with experiences, valued people because they have the experience and know-how”.

"The people there have drive; they’re fighters, not sitting down doing nothing letting things happen. They want to solve problems and have the drive to succeed”.

The role of the ‘authentic expert’ comes out clearly as a motive for engagement in action learning. This idea is relevant here because entrepreneurs wanted to learn from somebody who understands their experience (Gibb, 1997) and who was authentic in the sense of being an entrepreneur themselves. The role of authenticity comes through as a key advantage that action learning may have over other forms of business support, which are provided by professional support agents who are not themselves entrepreneurs. When considering the problem of value, shown in previous research, it is evident that part of the problem of value is linked to the authenticity of the ‘expert’ (Thomson et al., 1997). Authenticity is gained from experience, and know-how in the world of the entrepreneur and peer-to-peer learning seems to provide this value from the point-of-view of the entrepreneurs involved (Clarke et al., 2006).

Despite authenticity and the problem solving drive that motivated many of the participants some of the entrepreneurs joined the program with specific objectives in mind, such as: to gain advice on how to scale up their business; to develop their business abilities; to network; and to improve business performance. In contrast others simply joined because the opportunity arose or because they were curious and were interested in having a ‘sounding board’ for their ideas. The contrast between those driven by a particular need and those driven by a general awareness of the potential for gaining a range of experiences is in itself interesting. It shows that the driving force for engagement in action learning may differ significantly between different entrepreneurs and that action learning is fulfilling entrepreneurs needs in two quite distinct ways: allowing specific issues and problems to be considered while at the same time providing a space within which an entrepreneur can step away from the isolation that they may experience when running a venture (Gibb, 1997; Gibb, 2002). Looking back at the research on entrepreneurial learning what can be seen here are two motivations for learning. One driven by the task, which may be context specific (Minniti and Bygrave, 2001) and the other driven by the desire to tap into the entrepreneurial ‘stock of experience’ that others possess (Reuber and Fischer, 1999).

The Process of Action Learning

A major attraction of the program for some entrepreneurs was the process and design aspects, especially its flexibility (Westhead and Storey, 1996; Matlay, 2004). The
program was designed around the diaries of the entrepreneurs engaged in each set and the value of this is highlighted:

“We could negotiate when we met, we could negotiate how long we met for, and there was flexibility in the program which is what I needed.”

Flexibility in learning design is a recognized requirement for entrepreneurs who wish to engage in personal development, it is often identified as one of the major weaknesses of traditional approaches and it is clear that action learning sets can provide this flexibility (Taylor and Thorpe, 2004). Flexibility in the design of this program came in a number of forms that were helpful. First, it was provided by having meetings when entrepreneurs were available and rescheduling if any one participant could not attend. Secondly, by focusing on problems chosen by entrepreneurs themselves which were changed if new circumstances arose. For example, in one case a business lost a key contract with a major customer and the learning set participant refocused their discussion on the new problem as it emerged. Finally, flexibility in making decisions about the nature of the learning design itself by being involved in the program design and by being learning set facilitators.

When exploring the process behind the action learning design the participants, as well as valuing flexibility, reported valuing ‘informality’. The ‘social’ feel of the meetings, the opportunity to get to know people and the diverse mix of companies were all seen as crucial. The social feel was important in the generation of trust and, therefore, in a willingness to share and be open. The 2006 group, for example, talked a lot about the development of ‘trust’ within the group and that participants were “...positively engaging rather than passively participating” and that this was partly influenced because they knew they were developing a ‘pioneering new scheme’. The ‘informal’ and ‘social’ aspects were also highlighted by the 2007 participants. What the data here illustrate is that the extended intervention of a learning set allows participants to develop relationships over time that helps build ‘social capital’ in the relationships. As entrepreneurs get to know each other over time, the learning set appears to build trust amongst the participants, which enables them to be more open, to share more, particularly their personal attitudes and feelings about problems, which can lead to more pronounced learning benefits. The action learning set thus performs an essential role in supporting entrepreneurial learning by enabling entrepreneurs to share and reflect on experience with others, gaining alternate perspectives, while they make decisions about their businesses (Deakins and Freel, 1998).

The mix of companies was considered essential, by many participants, because it enabled them to gain from the different experiences of entrepreneurs in different contexts.
The diversity of experience built into the learning set design explained has a number of benefits. It allows entrepreneurs to gain perspectives on their problems from a diversity of contexts, thus tapping into the entire set’s ‘stock of entrepreneurial experience’ highlighted previously (Reuber and Fischer, 1999). The learning set also enables problems to be shared amongst participants that involve ‘tasks’ or problems that they had not personally experienced before or that were embedded in a different industrial context from what they were use to. This appears to have three learning benefits for the entrepreneurs. Firstly, it enables them to envisage having to address the same problem in their own business; allowing them to consider a ‘future-to-come’ which might involve dealing with a problem currently being addressed by another participant of the learning set. Secondly, it allows them to appreciate the challenges presented by an industrial context different from their own. Finally, it allows them to see the decision-making process of another entrepreneur who might draw different conclusions from the conclusions they would have reached with the same information. This aspect of the action learning set design then clearly has important reflective qualities, which were considered valuable by the participants. For example, it is encouraging three of the four potential forms of reflection. Self-reflection because of observing how another entrepreneur deals with a problem when compared to self; outward looking at context because the entrepreneur is examining a new context and a new task; and, forward imaging a future to come whereby the entrepreneur is imaging themselves having to address the problem being addressed by someone else (Cope, 2005).

A number of the entrepreneurs also doubted themselves as ‘authentic experts’ within the context of the action learning set. This was articulated as “doubted whether he could contribute as much to those running larger businesses”; “doubted whether he could learn from different industries”; and, "doubted their ability to help the rest of the group”. These individuals all felt that their initial doubts about self had been misplaced. There are number of issues here relevant to entrepreneurial learning and the value of action learning sets. Firstly, it is evident that these individuals were reflecting perhaps somewhat critically on their 'stock of entrepreneurial experience' and considering it to be lacking in some respects. It is difficult to speculate as to the source of this confidence level but what is interesting is that being invited to engage in an action learning set itself led to self-reflection about this aspect of prior experience (Cope, 2005) and clearly these changes in individual doubts may illustrate a growth in ‘self-awareness’ and confidence for these entrepreneurs as they engaged with others that they considered ‘authentic’. It is difficult to make a conclusive point here but this aspect of the data may reflect that engagement in action learning has
enhanced the entrepreneur’s personal self-efficacy about being an entrepreneur (Pittaway et al., 2010).

While seemingly trivial aspects of the learning design the venue of meetings and the ‘entrepreneur as facilitator’ were both highlighted as being important by participants. Entrepreneur’s particularly liked to have meetings in the other participant’s places of work 'as it helped everyone to get to know the businesses better’. One could speculate that such locations for the meetings and the tours that often took place helped individuals envisage the problems discussed in learning set meetings more clearly. When thinking about other entrepreneur’s challenges and providing supporting opinions it makes sense that the more other participants know about the business the more useful their thoughts on problems might be. The concept of the ‘entrepreneur as facilitator’ was also valued by the participants. Many of the entrepreneurs involved liked the fact that they ‘were not expert facilitators but were authentic entrepreneurs’, this is illustrated in the following comment:

"I know he went on a journey with his group, but now he’s going on another one at the same time and so we’ve had snippets of what has been going on with him as well, which has added to the group dynamic, and I find that quite valuable”

This attraction to the ‘entrepreneur as facilitator’ clearly can be linked to the ‘comrades in adversity’ idea that underpins group dynamics in action learning (Smith, 2001). It was also interesting that the notion of the ‘journey’ was used to explain the action learning experience (Revans, 1982).

Social and Collaborative Learning

The value of social learning was evident throughout the data supporting some of the thinking in this subject (Sadler-Smith, 1995; Tell, 2000; Devins and Gold, 2004). For example, meetings were perceived to be ‘open and non-threatening’, entrepreneurs in the action learning sets "felt that they could call their group members outside of the meetings if they needed advice or information” and one participant -“although initially worried about the amount of time it would take, having developed relationships with the rest of the group means they now want to put in time and effort to help them”. As considered earlier what is interesting about this aspect is the way in which the action learning set begins to engender ‘trust’ to develop between the participants, so that they use the group as a support network and begin to see the value of the relationships. This aspect is further illustrated when exploring the two participants that did drop out. They did so because "his difficulty committing to pre-arranged meetings and activities due to the nature of his full-time work and setting up a business in his free time. He decided to pull out because he could not
commit the necessary time, and thought taking part would be more worthwhile at a later date“ and “the other person decided to drop out because his business was increasingly taking him abroad, and he felt it would be unfair to the rest of the group if he kept missing meetings”. Both of the two participants who dropped out demonstrate their concern that factors associated with running their business were impinging on their engagement and undermining the ‘trust’ that they felt they needed to build with the other participants².

Many of the entrepreneurs then saw the key value in this action learning set as being the establishment of a ‘learning network’ (a ‘community of practice’ or ‘comrades in adversity’). The main benefit for them was having strong networks based on honesty and trust and through which they gained external perspectives on their business (Hines and Thorpe, 1995; Gibb, 1997). Some entrepreneurs even used their experience in action learning to expand their networks of non-executive directors. This learning network component is illustrated below:

"I think it gives you a kind of different insight to yourself because you’re challenged in a way that is quite different to the dynamic you’ve got with other directors in the company. Certainly that was useful”

"I’ve learned an awful lot about having that confidence and belief in my experience, knowledge and my abilities really. That’s been really valuable to get that and have it acknowledged by a peer group”

"I think for me the thing is… you’re not alone feeling you can bounce it off your peers and it makes a difference“

"It’s seeing the fact that other people have got the same problems and the same worries as I have, but you think they seem quite confident, so if they can put on that front and actually do it, then so can I”

What comes through these points is the value that the learning set has provided by enabling the entrepreneur to deal with the isolation and loneliness that is sometimes experienced when running a business and in addressing this need for social learning (Gibb, 1997; Gibb, 2002).

Social learning was also enhanced by the peer-to-peer mentoring (Devins and Gold, 2000). For some entrepreneurs “mentoring could be the most important thing; it could be quite empowering. The mentoring element was a big pull”. The 2006 learning set members found the mentoring to be beneficial. A few of the reported benefits of the peer-to-peer mentoring component included the development of substantial relationships which led to genuine business opportunities; the picking up of skills and new perspectives from their mentor; helping them focus on delivering on promised actions by providing a focus, as well
as, encouraging more analytical decision-making. These aspects show that encouraging a social component via mentoring, in addition to learning set meetings, can support learning as a process of conversing with others (Holman et al., 2006). The opportunity to engage trusted others in decision-making through such features further enables social learning for entrepreneurs and helps develop social networks that are considered important in the literature on entrepreneurial learning (Hines and Thorpe, 1995; Gibb, 1997). Some of the entrepreneurs, however, particularly in the 2007 sets, found it difficult to be a mentor and to engage with a mentor was a new experience for many. Reflecting on themselves as mentor the entrepreneurs were aware of their own weaknesses. One entrepreneur commented, for example:

"I found it OK [meeting] once every six weeks, but I found the phone call every week for mentoring hard. It was hard to pull my finger out. The problem wasn't that time consuming; it was just getting into the habit”.

Despite these challenges it is clear from these reflections that the act of being a mentor itself has developed ‘self-learning’. A few entrepreneurs reported greater confidence in their own business skills as a result of mentoring and many thought that through mentoring they had actually gained insight into their own problems:

"You see that other people have similar problems, even in different, unrelated businesses. You're talking to them about it and you talk about a specific problem they may have presented and you actually find a solution to one of yours by coming up with an answer to theirs.”

So problem-based learning itself even through mentoring with other entrepreneurs can lead to valuable outcomes for the mentor³ (Devins and Gold, 2000; Sullivan, 2000).

**Tasks, Problems and Actions Taken**

When exploring what entrepreneurs talked about in their learning set or the ‘learning task’ component of entrepreneurial learning (Cope, 2005) there was considerable diversity. Business problems discussed in the 2006 learning set included: ownership and succession planning; growing the business; learning how to be more proactive with marketing; increasing profits; dealing with payment issues; growing sales; changing the entrepreneur’s role in the business; exploring employment strategies; and, developing tools, techniques and training to help employees achieve targets. Problems in the 2007 sets were equally diverse. The diversity of the problems being discussed highlights a number of points. First, action learning sets clearly allow management development to overcome the contextualism problem that was highlighted previously (Goss and Jones, 1997; Gibb, 2002). Each
entrepreneur is working on something, with peer support, which has a contextual value to their business need. Secondly, these conversations and problems can also be categorised into forms: about self; about the business; about management, as has been argued previously (Sexton et al., 1997; Gibb, 1997; Gibb, 2002; Cope, 2005). As the evaluation study concluded: "This wide range of issues demonstrates the high level of flexibility offered by learning sets for the participants, compared to traditional training programs" confirming the value of action learning sets as a means for entrepreneurs to examine ‘problems’ that are contextually embedded and dynamic (Cope, 2005).

When turning to the ‘action’ part the participants demonstrate a number of points that were highlighted in the thinking on entrepreneurial learning. Participants, for example, talked about the ‘wisdom’ they had acquired elsewhere and how the group discussions had ‘allowed them to build on this’ and participants “wondered if they would have made the same decisions without the group discussions”. Both of these aspects demonstrate the interaction between the ‘stock of experience’, the social component of learning and the action-making process (Reuber and Fischer, 1999). Actions were being influenced by the learning set’s social component. This is further highlighted. Participants recognized the ‘long time that it took to implement their plans’, ‘that they were aware from the outset that it would take a long time, focus and determination for their plans to come to fruition’ and that ‘external factors could delay their actions’. But participants felt that group discussions around their problems and issues “helped clarify what they should do or confirmed what they were thinking, but they had not yet acted”. The social ‘sounding board’ helped entrepreneurs identify what actions to take but also created some peer pressure to act, as well as, providing support when the courses of action chosen were blown off-course by significant events; this is highlighted in the following comment:

"Obviously life does get in the way of stuff, because it’s strategic stuff, so you kind of find that you have to commit now to benefit later on, but I think you just need that extended foresight to knuckle down and get on with it, and just accept that if you don’t do it nothing’s going to change really”

When exploring the overall impact of participating in an action learning program like this there were many benefits identified within the evaluation of the program. In terms of problem-solving entrepreneurs felt they benefited from: thinking about other peoples’ issues; bouncing ideas around; getting a range of perspectives on their own problems; and, hearing about different types of organizations to their own. These views confirm the role of ‘action-orientation’ and learning by doing value of an action learning design (Mumford, 1991). In terms of self-learning the participants reported that their thinking was broadened
and changed and that their decision-making, analysis and management skills have been improved. These benefits ranged in depth from simply having extra tools, tips and planning methods to "changing their whole way of viewing their business and their own roles"; "gaining confidence and learning how to network" and changing entrepreneurial behavior, for example:

"I think absolutely directly there has been an increase in reflection, rather than just driving in and doing things... before I think I would just choose one [direction] and just go with it without thinking; I think that has been a huge difference recently"

Here it is possible to see evidence of generative learning occurring (Gibb, 1997), the entrepreneurs involved are bringing forward their experience through reflection, as a consequence of being forced to reflect more formally in an action learning set. It is also evident that the action learning design is encouraging this generative learning to occur and engaging entrepreneurs in a way that encourages ‘self’ reflection, as well as, simply targeting the solving of a business problem (O’Neil and Marsick, 1994).

The concluding part of the paper that will follow next will pull together a detailed interpretation and analysis of these findings and it will draw on the previous research to highlight some conclusions about the value of action learning for entrepreneurs.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has explored action learning and the value of action learning sets for enhancing entrepreneurial learning. The work reported builds on and enhances the conclusions of Clarke et al.’s (2006) work by replicating their field research and looking in more depth at the nature and content of learning experienced by entrepreneurs when they engage in action learning sets. ‘Action’ as presented here is central to the entrepreneurial process. Entrepreneurs must make decisions about future courses of action when faced with uncertainty and ambiguity. As a consequence the way in which entrepreneurs learn is influenced by the nature of the entrepreneurial act and the context they face when acting. The literature discussed shows that traditional support programs do not engage entrepreneurs effectively in this ‘action-making’ process because they are not designed in a way that supports entrepreneurs’ needs (Sullivan, 2000). Typical support programs have a lack of engagement, are not context specific and are insufficiently focused on activities that are valued by entrepreneurs. Despite two decades of programs that have used action learning designs and proved their veracity there has only been limited penetration of action learning in general business support and only a few studies demonstrating its value (Gibb, 1997; Devins and Gold, 2000; Clarke et al., 2006). Advocates of this approach have thus
deepened their argument by seeking to understand how entrepreneurs learn and have in recent years demonstrated many key constructs (Cope, 2005). By drawing on these constructs, in co-ordination with the field research reported, it is possible to see why action learning programs appear to support the entrepreneurial learning process. In this way the paper builds on prior studies that have examined the value of action learning sets for entrepreneurs, it confirms some of their findings and offers some new insights (Boddy and Lewis, 1986; Choueke and Armstrong, 1998; Davey et al., 2002; Clarke et al., 2006).

Many of the studies carried out confirm that entrepreneurs consider action learning to be beneficial and this finding is supported in this study (Boddy and Lewis, 1986; Choueke and Armstrong, 1998). The benefits identified were; it had a positive impact on organizational effectiveness (Choueke and Armstrong, 1998); that entrepreneurs benefit from the opportunity to interact with other entrepreneurs (Davey et al., 2002); that participants saw the benefits for growth (Boddy and Lewis, 1986); and acknowledged ongoing personal learning from their engagement in sets (Boddy and Lewis, 1986). Even though these studies have been critiqued in this paper, for their focus on ‘measurable outcomes’ rather than the nature and content of learning; some of their findings were confirmed. For example, the social component of learning and the fact that entrepreneurs value action learning sets as a means to created ongoing personal learning is supported in the data. The extent to which action learning had a direct benefit on the business through improved growth or organizational effectiveness cannot be confirmed from the research conducted.

When examining the nature and content of the learning that took place as a consequence of this action learning program there are many interesting findings that support and build on prior studies (Clarke et al., 2006). The underpinning motivations for engaging in action learning, for example, demonstrated two guiding principles. One motive that is driven by a practical need to share experiences, learn from others problems and explore practical solutions, which links well with the idea that entrepreneurs are action orientated (Cope and Watts, 2000). The second motive is driven by a desire to find authentic experts who have entrepreneurial credibility and who can act as a ‘community of practice’ (Clarke et al., 2006). On the process side this research confirms other studies that conclude that flexibility is essential in programs designed for entrepreneurs (Westhead and Storey, 1996). In addition, however, it also shows that ‘informality’ built into program design is important because a ‘social’ feel leads to the development of relationships, trust and ultimately social capital within the set. The study also identifies that the mix of
companies is important and that learning benefits are enhanced if there is diversity in the learning set. The reason uncovered illustrates that the depth and breadth of the 'stock of entrepreneurial experience' in a more diverse group is what is valued by participants (Reuber and Fischer, 1999). Diversity also leads to a widening of variety in the learning tasks (or problems) focused on by participants, which it seems supports some forms of reflective learning. The research also shows that entrepreneurs gain considerable learning benefits from the social and collaborative learning component. By enhancing their 'community of practice' or network of trusted people (Clarke et al., 2006); by learning through the process of conversing with others (Holman et al., 2006) and by learning to become more authentic experts through mentoring. They also benefited from the opportunity to share problems, to think about solutions and to test possible courses of action within a group whose views they trusted and valued (Davey et al., 2002). Action learning sets enable the development of a deep level of trust to accrue which enable the sets to expand into longer term 'communities of practice' and allowed the sharing of issues that had a substantial 'emotional' component (Pittaway and Cope, 2007; Clarke et al., 2006).

As a form of management development for entrepreneurs, this study can suggest that action learning works. There is a wide range of personal learning benefits reported (Boddy and Lewis, 1986; Clarke et al., 2005). These learning benefits are contextually embedded; they are based on the needs of the entrepreneur and the firm that they manage (Goss and Jones, 1997) and are not easily quantified. In this study learning benefits for individuals ranged from significant changes in behavior to more 'learning task' specific forms (Minniti and Bygrave, 2001). In many cases personal learning was substantial; the flexibility of action learning being adaptable to the learner’s needs was widely noted as one of the major drivers behind enhanced learning outcomes. The learner in many cases could not predict in advance what aspects would be valuable; it was the 'learning through action' that led to learning gains for individuals.

The role of action learning in providing a focus on a 'problem' and action to address a problem, where the problem was complex and uncertain also enhanced substantially the value to entrepreneurs (Kolb, 1984). This was important for entrepreneurs in terms of the 'value' and 'engagement'; by focusing the problem on a business need time spent had a direct value for the business. As time for those running businesses is an important commodity this places action learning ahead of many other forms of management development in terms of its potential for engagement. This focus on the 'problem shared
with peers’ enhanced entrepreneurs opportunity to reflect before, during and after actions encouraging generative learning and bringing forward their experience (and the experience of others) into considerations of the courses of action to take (Gibb, 1997; Cope, 2005). The focus on the problem within action learning directly led to greater reflection on personal, business and emotional issues and it enabled entrepreneurs to step back and consider more deeply strategic issues (Clarke at al., 2006).

To conclude being an entrepreneur is difficult; it is fraught with risk, uncertainty and ambiguity. Action learning it emerges is the ideal method of management development for entrepreneurs. It works because it allows the learner flexibility; it is action and problem-based; and, because it enhances the social learning from ‘authentic’ others that entrepreneurs prefer.
In REFERENCES


NOTES

1 Although the ‘entrepreneur as facilitator’ role is not without its challenges including: ensuring appropriate training for facilitators; assisting with the organization of set meetings; and, encouraging networks across learning sets.

1 The first entrepreneur’s comments also indicate why it may be important to carefully select participants and only include entrepreneurs who have already started and are running their businesses.

1 The problems experience for this program do suggest that mentoring support and training may be required although some entrepreneurs felt that this "spoil the whole idea of it“ because it removed the ‘learning by doing’ method for a traditional method. Others were more supportive and felt that just having "...a few pointers to help get through it“ would suffice.