Virtual Peer Consultation: an introduction

Over the last decade, several forms of virtual learning have emerged starting with web-based learning platforms, where delegates can learn in asynchronous mode (content is shared at different points of time; everybody enters the virtual learning space in his/her own time) or synchronous mode (all share and interact at the same time—like in an internet chatroom). More recently blogging and podcasting has added to the range of options available.

Meanwhile, the more traditional video and teleconferencing media have also been developing, albeit at a slower pace. Videoconferencing is not always readily available (one needs either to have the right equipment on site or find somewhere that does) and for many it has yet to deliver the expected benefits. As to teleconferencing, we will explore the nature of its development in more detail below.

Audio Action Learning as an example of Virtual Peer Consultation

We have chosen to focus our discourse on one example of Virtual Peer Consultation, namely Audio Action Learning.

In any Audio Action Learning initiative (which contrary to web-based Action Learning
always takes place in a synchronous mode\(^1\), it is important to have a proper dedicated contracting session before the actual work starts. We usually ask for a one-hour session where we combine contracting with a briefing about the Audio Action Learning work, process and technology involved.

The rules that we would typically contract about are:

- Be in a quiet room and alone.
- All participants should use the same virtual communication channel, namely the telephone, even if some of them happen to be in the same location and could in fact meet face-to-face.
- Use technology that is as stable as possible: bad connections are frustrating when careful reflection is required.
- Don't work, drive or read during the session.
- Take sufficient time for the session and do not squeeze it in between other activities. Some journaling after the session is recommended, in order to capitalise on the learning.
- Confidentiality (as in face-to-face).
- Commitment to the dates.
- Punctuality (even more critical than in face-to-face).
- Clear time scheduling, particularly when different time zones are involved.
- Agreed format with a ‘focus exercise’ and a completion session (see details of this later on in this article).

We use a minimum of technology (a teleconferencing setting) and we largely retain the learning formats of face-to-face Action Learning (De Haan, 2005). In terms of process the key differences are at the beginning and end of the session as well as in the quality of connectivity that is developed in the session itself. Usually an Audio Action Learning session takes around four hours.

Paul Burns (2001) claims to have held the first Audio Action Learning session ever at BT in the autumn of 2000. Since then a few organisations have used Audio Action Learning in a sporadic way, most of the time as a substitute for face-to-face Action Learning. However, our experience shows that Audio Action Learning is a unique genre in its own right and if practiced well can bring many unexpected benefits.

Some authors argue that, as for virtual teams in general, it is essential that people have initially met face-to-face to establish trust and generate an open climate in the group. Our experience has taught us that an initial face-to-face meeting is in fact unnecessary. On the contrary, preserving a certain degree of anonymity can foster openness and paradoxically speed up the building of trust in the group.

### An Example

In one experiment with Audio Action Learning a participant declared: “In a sense it is better not to know the people at all and to be completely unconnected to them… Then it matters less if they judge you… You have nothing to lose… So I would love to join a fully anonymous Audio Action Learning group.”

The aspect of anonymity and how it helps groups become more open in virtual settings has also been recognised with respect to virtual team work (McFadzean & McKenzie, 2001). Many people are apprehensive about Audio Action Learning because they associate it with teleconferencing, an experience that has negative associations for most. However by the end of the first or second session, participants are frequently surprised at how well it works for them.

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\(^1\) Alongside with Audio Action Learning there is web-based Action Learning. Web-based Action Learning groups have formed in a project-based environment where peers meet mostly in asynchronous mode. This approach is being developed and used by the International Foundation for Action Learning.
Examples
Here are a few quotes from people reviewing their first session:

- “It was a very good experience. I have got out of it more than I expected. It was a most positive surprise to me that it works.”
- “It is really powerful. I definitely would like to integrate this way of working into our practice.”
- “I had concerns before we started and it was better than I expected. You take the time to go in-depth. It felt really close and open.”

Examples of benefits of Audio Action Learning

INTIMACY AND TRUST CAN DEVELOP FAST

Most audio action learners underline their surprise at how quickly they begin to feel close to each other, even while being geographically remote. One manager of an automotive manufacturer declared already after the first session: “I was surprised by how close I felt to each of you. I had completely forgotten that I was not in the same room as all of you. It felt so intimate.” In fact, we believe the audio environment can create greater levels of trust than face-to-face meetings. As Bird (2002) points out, trust is related to self-disclosure and disclosure may be easier in a virtual setting. One participant described the quality of trust in an audio relationship as stronger than in a face-to-face relationship: “It’s like whispering into someone’s ear,” he said. It is as if the flow of words enters the mind of the listener directly through the acoustic nerve with no intermediary. When asked how he knew when a dialogue was invested with trust he explained, “It is about honesty and I feel it because I am being trustful myself.”

AUDIO FREES UP FROM CONVENTIONS AND ENCOURAGES MOVEMENT

Because of its audio-only nature, participants are free of the need to comply with the behavioural norms and visual ‘rules of engagement’, as shown in the example below.

An Example
One Finnish manager told us that because of the guidelines that we had sent beforehand (inviting them not to sit in front of a computer, only with a notepad in front of them) she had decided to sit on her bed (she was working from home). She said that at times she was getting really caught up into the conversation and kept on jumping off the bed: “I was really involved physically in the conversation and kept on jumping off the bed: ‘I was really involved physically in the conversation. If somebody would have been watching me, they would have thought that I am mad.” She went on explaining that in the session she felt freed up from all conventions and rules that exist in the Finnish meeting culture where people feel that they should have a very limited body movement and facial expression: “The Finnish culture really restricts one’s face-to-face behaviour. Our body movements and facial expressions become limited.” She felt that she could do what she wanted without infringing the rules. She carried on saying: “This format gives me the permission, the freedom to express my thoughts and feelings in a different way.”

This example underlines two key elements: audio frees up from having to attend visual conversational demands, and enables you to move your body, which may help to release thoughts

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1 This aspect has been confirmed in the context of asynchronous computer mediated communication, (Walther 1996).
and feelings. Some of us might recognise this: we prefer to walk around the room and gesticulate when having intensive conversations on the phone. This seems to help balancing intellectual intensity with physical movement intensity.

**AUDIO ACTION LEARNING INTENSIFIES LISTENING**

Again, due to the freedom from visual conventions and the lack of visual distracters many participants report that they listen more carefully and deeply than in a face-to-face environment. As one audio action learner commented: “It’s much easier to focus in such an intense way with only a notepad in front of me.” For her it was easier to concentrate on what was being said and to make notes without the need to maintain eye contact: “It was easier to get into the key areas...it felt more intense and led to deep insights.”

Furthermore participants learn to work with the voice as a unique source of data alongside the content of what is being said. The voice becomes a world in itself and all its components become more ‘visible’: intonation, tone, inflection, speed, silences, etc. According to Heron (1999) the voice is central to the way we participate: “The voice has direct access to this original being.” The voice is a key channel in the communication for true rapport: the voice ‘is pregnant with who you really are’ (Heron, 1999). When they focus on the voice, action learners learn to tune into their colleagues in a deep way and develop a close connection.

**THE SLOW HEAR MORE**

Our experience shows that Audio Action Learning is generally slower than face-to-face Action Learning, and may reveal more of the richness of what is being said. Some participants also experience Audio Action Learning as more measured than face-to-face. One participant noticed: “It gets slower. We have more time to notice the questions being asked, to think, and to write down.”

In our world of frenetic activities and transitory connections Audio Action Learning serves as a healthy reminder that ‘slow is fast’ when it comes to listening and learning.

**Challenges of Audio Action Learning**

**ESTABLISHING A ROBUST PROCESS AROUND THE SESSIONS**

Because of its virtual nature, participants might be tempted to drop out of Audio Action Learning. It is therefore very important that the group agrees a strong contract at the beginning of the series of sessions. This will cover conditions of attendance, clear scheduling milestones, regular reminders and clear information as to timings and duration, with precise information regarding start and end times especially when different time zones are involved. The steadier and more systematic this process, the higher the commitment and attendance will be.

**WORKING AGAINST THE TELECONFERENCING ETIQUETTE**

We have already discussed the power of Audio Action Learning when it comes to quickly establishing intimate and trusting connections between participants. In part this is linked to the very nature of the connection (the direct and exclusive contact with the auditory nerve), however there are some other aspects that need careful facilitation and awareness.

The main challenge for the participants and the facilitator in Audio Action Learning is to...
learn to work against traditional teleconferencing etiquette. This means that participants need to be encouraged to become spontaneous online, and not to be afraid of interrupting each other. In traditional teleconferences we have learned to work according to a clear agenda and to let the person speak before speaking oneself, one at a time. There is the expectation of a rather rigid and agenda-based process, which does not allow for the spontaneity of communication and real conversations that are so critical to establishing trust and intimacy.

Often during the first sessions of Audio Action Learning participants can become irritated by the lack of visual cues. Some don’t know when to intervene. Others prefer to remain silent or ‘sit on their hands’, which may increase their frustration. For the facilitator it is essential to help those missing the visual cues to move from a ‘deficit-oriented’ position (where they focus on what they don’t have in the audio setting) to a positive mindset where they learn to discover what they do have, such as the voices, silences and intimate connections, and to encourage experimentation. By making it acceptable for participants to interrupt each other, the work setting becomes lighter and more natural. More importantly, the ‘client’ or the person sharing the issue feels a constant contact with the others, which is absolutely essential. In this context we would like to relate the following case.

An Example
Tim brought a rather comprehensive issue and the group helped him in some in-depth reflection on his role, values and beliefs. The work became intense and Tim went into some confusion and discomfort when deep insights emerged. The feedback from Tim, however, was that he was obtaining useful insights from the session but that the work at times felt ‘very hard’. He said that he was ‘feeling grilled’ by the questioning and that he ‘felt quite alone’. We explored some of the questions that were asked, which in face-to-face Action Learning would have qualified as excellent enabling questions but in the audio context became sharp because not tempered by the eye contact or facial expressions. In addition Tim explained that he was concerned with the silences where others were only listening (“I felt that I had been exposing myself a lot, I did not get any feedback…. Am I interesting anybody? Am I making myself ridiculous?”). Tim explained that because he did not have anybody in front of him to reflect what he had said, through body language, eye contact or even a simple nod, he ‘reflected it back’ on himself. We realised that while in face-to-face Action Learning there should, at least in the first phase, be a good portion of work focused on listening and asking questions, in Audio Action Learning the balance should be modified: more feeding back with reassuring and supporting interventions should occur alongside questioning. When this balance is struck the questions become less sharp if combined with reassuring statements such as “I understand, it makes sense, OK, I see, etc.” We encouraged the participants to become more spontaneous and to express the ‘nodding’ vocally, by saying Mm-mm, Yes, etc. The other participants immediately related to this and expressed their frustration at feeling unable to reassure Tim with their nodding. We invited them to try to forget the etiquette for the next rounds and to nod vocally whenever they felt like it. This turned out to be very reassuring without being disturbing.

It is clearly critical to foster the right atmosphere for learning. Here is what the facilitator might do:

1. Invite participants to pay attention to the silence emerging and to explore it by
sharing what is happening for them in this moment and the sense they are making of it.

2. Help participants to hang on into the silence, not to interrupt it too soon. Sense making usually takes longer in an audio setting and it is important to give enough time to the client and the other participants to think. In addition, silences become amplified in an audio setting because of the lack of 'ornaments' such as visual distracters. Ten seconds silence in an audio setting may feel like half a minute in a face-to-face.

3. Enable participants to explore the silence by sharing the sense they make of it and how they feel about it.

4. Actively promote learning on two sides by shifting the attention away from the client towards the group process, long enough to let the useful data it may entail for the group emerge and short enough not to lose focus on the client.

In summary, the power of letting the silence speak is particularly critical in audio work.

SHIFTING FROM ADVOCACY TO INQUIRY

Ordinary business meetings and traditional teleconferencing is not very compatible with the discovery and exploration styles integral to effective learning interventions. In teleconferences participants often feel that they have to make a point, have an opinion and defend it; or remain quiet during the conversation. As we know Action Learning is mainly about asking questions, playing back what one has heard and giving feedback, which is somewhat at odds with teleconferencing etiquette. It is therefore important that the facilitator helps the group find ways
to let go of these advocacy patterns and move into an inquiry mode.

**An Example**

In one virtual group it became obvious that conversation was stilted and not free flowing. When asked to comment on this observation, one participant named the patterns of advocacy that she was noticing, explaining that another participant would tend to give an opposite view to hers on a specific aspect instead of both of them inquiring together into the topic in question. She added that he would generally use an inquiry approach, but that the conversational pattern of the teleconference seemed to be encouraging advocacy patterns (as with most of the other teleconferences she had experienced). He commented that because the facilitator was directing questions at people he felt that he could not allow himself to ‘listen in’ and felt that he had to answer and take a view on the subject under discussion. In addition when he was not asked to answer, he felt released and could ease off the inquiry and not take responsibility for what was happening.

What was the solution to the problem? Interestingly, it seemed that ‘naming’ the issue and the discussion around it was enough to alter behaviour. Within five minutes the patterns of conversation started to change. There was a spontaneous question, an intervention without being prompted, an interruption of one participant by another, etc. At some point the three participants began talking through each other. By the end of the session the patterns had changed completely and the discussion had become a real enquiry.

Here again encouraging spontaneity by allowing participants to interrupt each other helps them to move to more emergent communication patterns where there is space for discovery and curiosity alongside declarations and statements. One participant shared with us at the end of one session: “We were getting used to working virtually. We did not wait for each of us to end a sentence. We kept on talking on top of each other. This was comfortable and made an impact.”

**The risk of confluence in Audio Action Learning**

Precisely because of the lack of visual cues participants can easily lose the sense of their own physical separateness in an Audio Action Learning session. In the case of a strong shared experience, there is a risk of confluence with the client at the intellectual and feeling levels. In other words it can become difficult for members of the group to distinguish who is who and who is holding which thought and which feeling. This becomes particularly critical and evolves to an almost trance-like state when the facilitator becomes part of the ‘confluence’. A way of avoiding this phenomenon is to use what we call a ‘focus-exercise’. This is a guided visualisation exercise, approximately 10 minutes in duration, which invites participants to ground themselves in their bodies, their sensations, their emotions, and the present moment. We find that the more participants are grounded in themselves, the more they will be able to be with the ‘client’ and to help him/her. Another important benefit of the focus exercise is shown in the example below.

**An Example**

We recently worked with a group of managers from Cambodia, India, Russia and the UK. Given the time difference, while the working day was just about to finish for one participant, it was just about to start for another and it was mid day for another. Hence the
participants were in different phases of their bio-cycles and their minds were busy with very different things: the UK person had just left her small child at school, the Russian person was just coming back from a meeting in the office and was scheduled to have another one after our session, and the person in Cambodia had just left a full day of work. Here the focus exercise helped everybody to let go of the concerns and thoughts of the moment and become fully present.

The need for proper completion

Audio Action Learning work can be intensive and may be moving for some members. Hence it is important for the group to be given the time to complete well before moving on to entirely different tasks. In face-to-face Action Learning there is time for people to ‘switch off’ after the session as they say goodbye and depart. This gives them the opportunity to reflect and further process what happened in the session. In Audio Action Learning something similar is needed. Finishing in the same way as one would traditionally close a teleconference would be inappropriate in view of the deep connectivity and communion of hearts and minds. We have developed a completion process that has become a kind of ritual in our sessions and helps participants to gradually move on to the next activity.

To conclude

We have been working for over two years using Audio Action Learning with major global organisations and the results have been very encouraging. More and more of our clients want to adopt this new form of Virtual Peer Consultation because of the obvious advantages it offers as well as the results it brings. However it requires careful positioning, setting-up and specific facilitation skills and capabilities. If done well Audio Action Learning offers benefits beyond the sheer virtual learning opportunities: it is a new learning genre in itself that also helps managers to become more rounded leaders with sharpened listening capabilities and virtual leadership skills that have become critical in today’s business world.

REFERENCES


BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Ghislaine Caulat is a Business Director with Ashridge Consulting. For the last 4 years she has been specialising in the area of virtual consulting where she has done intensive research. For two and a half years now Ghislaine has been facilitating Audio Action Learning with several global organisations. In the context of her Doctorate in Organisation Consulting she is also researching on the topic of Virtual Leadership and, together with colleagues, she has created an innovative
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