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# Reviews

edited by Philip Barker

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**P. Race, *500 Tips on Group Learning*, London: Kogan Page, 2000. ISBN: 0-7494-2884-8. Soft-back, vii + 135 pages, £15.99.**

This is another in the long list of '500 Tips' series, published by Kogan Page. Phil Race, the author, is a well-known name in learning and teaching and has published extensively. The presentation of advice in this way is clearly a well-tested formula and, judging by the copies from the series in my own institution's library, these are frequently borrowed books, but I wonder whether this format is now a little over-used? Advice from a guru can be very valuable, but in an era of evidence-based practice it is even better if the advice is backed up with references to facilitate the reader's further research in the area. Unfortunately in this book references are few and far between. There is a short list of suggested further reading but, for example, in the section on being a group member, where the work of Belbin is referred to, this is not referenced and Belbin does not appear in the subsequent reading list.

There are six chapters in the book. Each chapter starts with a general introduction and then gives a list of tips together with an explanation for each one.

The first three chapters, 'Learning with others', 'Getting groups going', and 'Particular group learning contexts', give very general advice covering what group work means, how to prepare learners for group work and different sorts of groups. Section 19 in Chapter 3 purports

to cover tutorials for adult distance learners, but only suggestions for tutorials when such distance learners attend the institution are given. Strategies for holding successful virtual tutorials, such as computer conferences or Web-based chat rooms, which are increasingly used in many programmes and courses, are not mentioned. Although this might have been beyond the scope of this book, an acknowledgement of this sort of development, with indications for further reading could have been helpful. On the whole the tips given in the first three chapters are entirely common sense – who could argue with, for example, in the section entitled 'group learning means learning by doing' that 'listening to each other has a lot to do with effective group learning'? The majority of tips are at this general level and not much new information is presented. The blurb on the outside back cover of the book states: 'Packed with expert advice guidance and support, this inspirational book will provide educators and trainers with the tools needed to move from instruction to facilitation.' I am sorry to say that I did not find much inspiration in these three chapters.

Chapter 4 explores exercises and processes for groups and finishes by giving a case study. Here the tips were more focused and the case study one of the most useful parts of the whole book. The author presents a case study he has used when running training workshops on chemical hazards. This might sound a somewhat esoteric topic, but the format of the workshop could

easily be translated to good effect into many other topic areas.

Chapter 5 considers groups behaving badly and gives tips for dealing with, among others, disruptive behaviour, the know-all, the dominator, the non-contributor and the group member who does not listen. There is also consideration of different behaviours of the group facilitator that can damage group work and this is also a relevant and helpful section. It is probably salutary for most of us to consider the sections on facilitators who talk too much and intimidate learners and those who favour clones of themselves! A section on institutional factors that can damage group work, including lack of provision of suitable spaces and timetable systems that militate against group learning will be familiar to most readers, I suspect. Many of us might well have tried solutions such as 'use coffee bars' or 'take the group to the nearest pub' and had an interesting time, but found it harder to fulfil our anticipated outcomes for those particular group sessions! The suggestion to do a room usage audit to identify rooms which are regularly underused might evoke an ironic 'huh' – who has time for that sort of task in our increasingly loaded timetables!

Chapter 6 is devoted to how group learning might be assessed. There are some helpful suggestions here that cover situations where not all members of a group might have contributed equally to a group assessment. Advantages and disadvantages for each method are given which makes this a very useful chapter.

The way in which the 500 tips are presented is somewhat confusing; it took me some time to work out that the sections in each chapter are numbered sequentially and cumulatively, but the actual tips in each section always start from one. This would make it harder to direct someone to a particularly useful tip. At the risk of seeming rather a sad person, I have to confess that I attempted to count the total number of tips presented – and could find only 473 – were we short-changed here?

Overall I am not sure that this topic area lends itself so readily to the '500 Tips' approach. Issues around group and collaborative learning merit a deeper and more considered presentation. A format that uses numbered statements to present suggestions and advice precludes the introduction of critical discussion and reasoning.

Who is the book for? If it is aimed at trainee teachers or new entrants to higher education, then I am sure they will find much to help them. However, for the more experienced facilitators I do not think they will find this book offers very much that they do not already know.

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**David Kember, *Action Learning and Action Research: Improving the Quality of Teaching and Learning*, London: Kogan Page, 2000. ISBN: 0-7494-3113-X. Softback, ix + 243 pages, £19.99.**

Several large-scale programmes to enhance the quality of teaching and learning in higher education have featured within the UK, for example TLTP and FDTL. This book describes a similar programme, the Action Learning Project (ALP), which took place in Hong Kong between 1994 and 1998 with funding from the Hong Kong University Grants Commission. From its inception, the project was set within a framework of using action learning and action research to demonstrate that, as a quality assurance mechanism, this approach could be energizing for those involved and could lead to enhanced quality in teaching and learning in a cost-effective manner. The main aim of the book is to contribute to the quality assurance and enhancement literature rather than the research methodology literature, so it is not for those looking for a detailed, theoretical review of action research methodology. It will be of interest to those responsible for introducing or managing institution-wide teaching and learning schemes, and who are looking for an effective way of engaging participants and evaluating the outcomes within a research framework.

The book is divided into five sections. Part A sets the work within a framework of approaches to quality assurance; Part B describes the projects and participants; Part C describes the experiences of the participants, including their perceptions of the action research framework; Part D describes the support provided for the projects; and Part E provides concluding remarks on the effectiveness of the action research approach. The structure of the book reflects the cyclical stages of the action research approach. It also contains three appendices, a reference list and an index.

In Part A, the first three chapters set out the framework within which action research may be considered as a scheme for assuring the quality of

teaching and learning. In Chapter 1 there is an introduction to higher education quality schemes in general. A distinction is made between quality assurance and quality enhancement schemes and these are mapped against three research paradigms, positivist, interpretive and critical epistemologies. The case is made for locating the project-based method of quality enhancement within the critical paradigm, which includes action research. Chapter 2 continues to explore the rationale for considering quality enhancement schemes within an action research and action learning framework. The three key characteristics of action research are defined through a reference from Carr and Kemmis. It is concerned with improving social practice, there is a systematic, cyclical process of enquiry, and it is participative. Action research is then compared with action learning, drawing on a definition from McGill and Beaty for the latter. Action learning, rather than action research, was the preferred term for the project name because the funding body specifically excluded research. The chapter ends pragmatically by suggesting that the two terms will be used interchangeably throughout the rest of the book. Chapter 3 provides more detail about methods of observation and evaluation that can be used by project teams to monitor and report on their work. Overall, the treatment of so many complex research concepts in this short section is inevitably generalized but there are references to other more specific sources.

Part B contains Chapters 4 to 7 and through describing the context of the ALP, it addresses the steps necessary for implementing and managing a large project which itself is composed of fifty smaller sub-projects, spread across seven universities. Chapter 4 discusses the ways in which academics can be persuaded to participate in projects, and Chapter 5 describes the project management structure that had to involve all seven universities. Chapter 6 gives an indication of the range of projects funded and Chapter 7 outlines the methods used to disseminate the project outcomes, including a Web site, <http://alp.polyu.edu.hk>.

In parts C and D, the author's associates contribute to Chapters 8 to 15 and describe the perceptions and experiences of the participants. They draw on material from their own evaluation of the project. It is in these two parts of the book that the key characteristics of action research and action learning are most clearly illustrated in practice. Chapter 8 focuses on the evaluation design and methods of data

collection. Chapter 9 considers the reasons why participants became involved in the project, the main one being a desire to improve the quality of their teaching and their students' learning. Chapter 10 focuses on the importance of effective teamwork in the projects and highlights the collaborative nature of action research. Chapter 11 describes how the project teams adopted the action research cycle. Chapter 12 reports the participants' views on the outcomes of their projects.

In part D, Chapters 13 to 15 return to the organization and management of the project and focus on the various ways in which support was provided to the project teams. This involved a small co-ordinating team of facilitators, each of whom supported ten to twelve projects. They aimed to do this in conjunction with the internal educational development units of the universities. The nature of the support varied, but much of it centred on support for research design, methodology, evaluation techniques and writing up research. The facilitators found themselves to be most comfortable in the role of 'critical friend' to the project teams and Chapter 14 describes in some detail the ways in which this role developed.

In the final two chapters in part E, the author returns to the issue of quality assurance as he reflects on the overall outcomes of the ALP. Chapter 16 reflects on the high cost of ensuring quality in higher education and suggests that promoting quality through action learning projects is cost-effective. Chapter 17 summarizes the overall outcomes of the project and concludes that action learning is an effective method of quality enhancement.

In conclusion, those looking for an in-depth understanding of the philosophy and methodology of action research should consult other sources, for example, Greenwood and Levin (1998), and the quality of the book would have been increased if clear distinctions had been maintained throughout between action research and action learning, rather than using them interchangeably. Nevertheless, the book is an easy read, and should be of interest to those involved in similar projects, both at the institutional as well as the national level. The frameworks and methods used will also be useful for individuals who wish to use action research and action learning as a framework for evaluating their own teaching activities.

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## References

- Carr, W. and Kemmis, S. (1986), *Becoming Critical: Education, Knowledge and Action Research*, Brighton: Falmer Press.
- McGill, I. and Beaty, L. (1995), *Action Learning: A Guide for Professional Management and Educational Development*, 2nd edn, London: Kogan Page.
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E. Parsloe and M. Wray, *Coaching and Mentoring – Practical Methods to Improve Learning*, London: Kogan Page, 2000. ISBN: 07494-3118-0. Softback, xiii +193 pages, £16.99.

During the last decade the increasing pace of developments in industry and commerce, stimulated by technology, have resulted in significant changes in management and working practices. There is a realization that prosperity and economic competitiveness require an educated and trained workforce, and this is influencing education, both in its content and methods, with a widening access under a vision of lifelong learning. Personal development of students in skills of communication, study methods, creativity, problem-solving and collaborative methods of learning, are becoming more prominent, and institutions are having to provide greater support for staff and students to achieve these wider objectives. It is here that coaching and mentoring are important, and this publication with its emphasis on practical methods is both useful and timely.

The orientation of the book is towards the workplace and community centres, but there is much that is relevant to educational institutions. With its direct approach and economical style, clear sectioning, summary points, checklists and charts, this book provides a useful and practical introduction to mentoring and coaching that is directed to improving learning.

The first chapter sets out the development of coaching/mentoring that moved it from a marginal activity to a recognized component of training. Although the links to sports coaching, workplace counselling, and professional training, are sketchy in their analyses within a relatively short chapter, they do illustrate the complexities in defining and circumscribing coaching/mentoring. A recurring comment is that these techniques are multi-faceted and have to adjust to differing institutional and cultural

environments. Both coaching and mentoring are directed at individual group members; coaching typically addresses performance goals, whereas mentoring takes a wider view of personal development and growth. The chapter ends with a useful set of tables distinguishing their purposes and orientations.

The second chapter, noting the global advances in information technology, sets out the concept of a learning organization in which coaching and mentoring are key components. The psychology on learning is selective and superficial, making few references to the research literature, but the authors make distinctions between the learning experience and reflection. These are loosely linked, without critical discussion, to learning styles and to development as 'the learning of new knowledge, understanding, skills and behaviours'. The authors' style is prescriptive but makes useful points on the perceptions and implementation of learning opportunities, and the motivation that is needed to exploit them. Having outlined this view of the learning/development process the next three chapters discuss the main theme of the book – that the aim of coaching/mentoring is 'helping people learn how to learn'.

Coaching is conceived as a process of analysis, agreeing a personal development plan with the learner, then implementing and evaluating that plan. Under this framework interesting comments are made on coaching style, that is, 'the manner in which coaching is performed' and which has to adapt to the experience and performance of the learner. Examples are taken from the workplace with a useful discussion on coaching inexperienced learners using a 'practice spiral' and a 'skills framework' technique. These comments reflect the experience of the authors and are practically orientated. For the more experienced learners, the GROW technique (Establish Goals, Examine Reality, Consider Options, and Confirm the Will to Act) is outlined and the chapter ends with a self-assessment exercise to 'establish your current levels of competence as a coach'.

In discussing mentoring, the authors point out that this one-to-one activity is employed in many different contexts, all with their varied demands and constraints. In consequence, an unambiguous definition of the mentoring process is hard to achieve, but four key stages are discussed which illustrate the principal features of mentoring, namely confirming the personal development

plan, encouraging self-management of learning, providing support and assisting in the evaluation of success. These stages are discussed using four examples to show the wide variations that exist in the theory and practice of mentoring. These examples are taken from business, institutes, social services and manufacturing, but all highlight the importance of preparation and training for mentors, agreeing a format for meetings, monitoring progress and evaluation. Again the chapter ends with a self-assessment exercise.

The third chapter in this section of the book addresses community mentoring. Much practical illustration and discussion are provided in contexts that can require mentors to be guidance providers, pseudo-parents, case-workers, as well as learning facilitators. The argument moves to the professional development of what are termed 'coach-mentors', notes recent government initiatives, but points to the care which will have to be exercised in designing training schemes which need to adapt to varying contexts. Overall the authors provide a perceptive discussion of the differing requirements of community mentors and the need for empathy, and establishing rapport and a sense of trust with the person who is being mentored.

In summary, readers wishing to know more of coaching/mentoring will find interesting topics for discussion, practical work schemes and checklists, and much sensible advice – all written in a direct and pointed style.

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S. Ryan, B. Scott, H. Freeman and D. Patel, *The Virtual University – The Internet and Resource-based Learning*, London: Kogan Page, 2000. ISBN: 0-7494-2508-3. Softback, xiii + 204 pages, £19.99.

In recent years there has been much talk about 'virtual organizations'; that is, the ability to create an entity that does not physically exist – other than in cyberspace and in people's minds. Virtual offices and virtual businesses, for example, have 'existed' for some considerable time. Now we are seeing the application of the 'virtuality' paradigm within educational organizations. We are therefore now hearing much talk about virtual classrooms, virtual communities of learners, virtual learning environments and virtual university systems. This book deals with the use of the Internet and Resource-Based Learning (RBL) in order to realize the

electronic delivery of courses. Naturally, the ultimate aim of this could be the realization of a virtual university facility.

The material contained within the book is organized into an introduction, ten 'semi-independent' chapters, a reference section (containing the bibliographic details for both the conventional references and the on-line citations) and a glossary. I describe the book's chapters as 'semi-independent' since the authors claim that each chapter could be read (in a stand-alone fashion) independently of any of the others. There is a Web site to accompany the book. This resides at <http://westworld.dmu.ac.uk/vu-rbl> and 'contains links to the Web pages mentioned in the book – as well as updates and new links'. This site is quite nicely designed – echoing the colour scheme and design of the book's front cover. Unfortunately, none of the Web pages contain any dates and so it is not possible to see when, if at all, the site has been updated.

The opening chapter of the book 'sets the scene' for the nine chapters that follow. It does this by describing many of the current developments that are taking place in higher education (HE) and the impact that the Internet and the Web are having. The primary focus of the chapter is on developments that are taking place in the United Kingdom, although some examples from other countries (such as America and Australia) are also included. A fundamental premiss made by the authors (p. 2) is that 'RBL can only be done well . . . if supported by appropriate models of learning and teaching and principles of course design'. This requirement is 'followed up' in Chapter 2, which deals with the various theories of teaching and learning that are 'particularly relevant for understanding how to do RBL well' (p. 5). Following the somewhat brief descriptions of learning theories (such as constructivism and conversationalism), types of learner and approaches to learning, the chapter concludes by presenting an outline framework for course design.

The real 'meat' of the book starts in Chapters 3, 4 and 5. The first of these examines the nature of the Internet and focuses on a number of issues relevant to the use of this medium for teaching and learning. Although some interesting concepts and examples are described, from a technical perspective the treatment presented in this chapter (and some of the ones that follow) is very superficial – but then, I suppose the book is

not really intended for 'technocrats'. Chapter 4 builds on the material that was presented in Chapters 2 and 3; it deals with using the Internet and the Web for course development and delivery. There are three main themes in this chapter: developing an online course (for which the authors advocate a team approach); tools for planning structuring and development; and delivery issues. As this chapter is quite a short one, the three topics (particularly, the last one) are only treated in a superficial way. Chapter 5 continues the trilogy with a discussion of 'Resources on the World Wide Web'. The discourse in this chapter covers a variety of different topics such as digital/on-line libraries, electronic publishing, discussion groups, newsgroups, museums and on-line laboratories. There is a 'page or two' on evaluation but the treatment given lacks depth and rigour. Unfortunately, despite the many different types of resource that are described, very little is said in this chapter about the pedagogic aspects of using these resources to support teaching and learning.

Chapters 6 and 7 are probably two of the most interesting ones in the book. They deal with computer-mediated communication (CMC) for collaborative learning and computer-assisted assessment, respectively. The CMC chapter covers a wide range of techniques, such as real-time chat, MUDs and MOOs, email, discussion lists, newsgroups (again!) and conferencing. Several types of conferencing technology are discussed. The discussion starts off with computer conferencing (using SoftArc's *FirstClass* system as an example) and then goes on to consider a number of audio, video and multimedia conferencing systems. The chapter on assessment covers a wide range of techniques to facilitate both the automated and the semi-automated measurement of students' skills, knowledge and on-task performances. Both formative and summative approaches to assessment are considered.

In many ways, the 'climax' of the book comes in Chapter 8. This is entitled 'Integrated Systems'. The overall theme of this chapter is the integration of electronic resources with a view to creating virtual learning environments. The three main topics that are addressed are: integrated course delivery systems (such as *TopClass* and *WebCT*); international standards to facilitate the exchange and integration of teaching and learning resources; and the integration and reuse of 'educational objects'. On the 'standards' theme, one of the interesting pieces of work

described in this chapter is the Instructional Management Systems project. This uses meta-data techniques in order to realize the exchange and inter-operability of pedagogic resources. Some mention is also made of the European Community's Ariadne project – which is also concerned with the reuse (and creation) of computer-based teaching and learning materials.

The final two chapters in the book each deal with various aspects of 'change'. In Chapter 9, the authors discuss 'Changing Cultures in HE'. Essentially, this chapter considers how conventional HE organizations (and their staff) may need to adapt in order to accommodate ongoing developments in RBL and the competition that they might face from 'real' virtual universities operating in a global, world-wide context. Chapter 10, similarly, looks at 'What's Around the Corner?'. Two potentially important issues that the authors identify include technological developments and the role of HE organizations in the information age in which we now exist. My own view is that no matter how much we automate our educational systems through the use of RBL, we will still need people (even though they may be virtual ones!).

I waited a long time to get a copy of this book to review. Having now read the book from cover to cover, I am disappointed that it did not live up to my expectations. I say this for two reasons. First, it does not really contain a great deal of information about virtual universities – despite its title. Second, I have the impression that the book was put together in a bit of a hurry. There are quite a few careless mistakes embedded within it and one or two factual errors too. Nevertheless, despite these shortcomings, many people will undoubtedly find this book a useful source of information. However, those who already have some experience in RBL will probably find that it lacks depth in most of the areas that it attempts to cover. According to the authors (p. 3), the book is intended 'chiefly for teaching staff . . . who wish to be informed about the changes happening around them and to reflect on their implications critically and deeply'. Bearing this in mind, the authors have done a fairly reasonable job in bringing together the diverse information sources that are contained within it.

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