Implementing Action Learning Experiences in Higher Education Classrooms Using Human-Centered Design Processes

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Introduction

Career readiness and networking skills are of the utmost importance for college graduates, and job markets are increasingly competitive, seeking employees proficient in communication skills, problem-solving, and leadership (Crawford & Fink, 2020). Currently, a gap exists in the undergraduate curriculum at the University of Illinois, as there is no specific college-wide course, resource, or opportunity to gain networking skills and knowledge for career success. Our project aims to reduce the gap by implementing action-learning projects in undergraduate courses. Action learning is defined as faculty-facilitated, client-facing, authentic-problem, team-based instruction. Action learning is often viewed as a tool for connecting technical knowledge to real-world applications (Bourner & Rospigliosi, 2019).

Program Phases

To successfully implement action learning, we began with a human-centered design framework. Human-centered design (HCD) is a problem-solving approach that seeks to understand and solve the unmet needs of a community through collaboration (Brown, 2008). In this project, preliminary data from both instructors and partner organizations were collected and used to inform developers on how best to aid instructors in facilitating action learning. By starting with the needs of faculty who choose to implement action learning projects, we were better able to identify the challenges that may hinder instructors from using action learning projects in their courses.

Preliminary data were used to develop a faculty professional development training for interested instructors to explain action learning and its implementation steps, and to form a cohort of instructors to support each other through the process. The training was led by instructors who have already implemented action learning in college-level courses. As part of the training, the cohort decided on a set of career-readiness skills to focus on in their course, as students learn to work in teams on real-world problems, and narrowed the list to a few that could be covered during the course. After training, the instructors recruit external partner organizations to work with their students and include the action learning projects in their courses.

Table 1 below lists the data from the first three semesters of the project. As examples of partner projects, a Crop Sciences course worked with a local Arboretum to create a new landscape design; a Food Science course developed a food drive for a local food pantry; an Agricultural Communications course developed communication plans for agricultural industry partners; and a Human Development course worked with local nonprofits and community agencies to develop and meet needs for their programs. After the first cohort completed their courses, they served as mentors to the next group of faculty who implemented action learning.

All instructors were interviewed about their experiences both before and after the semester. One instructor who had students develop a landscape design for a local Arboretum said, “I'm very glad I did it and tried it. I have had more fun teaching this semester than I have in years. So for me personally, it was a ton of fun, and I don't want to not do this type of work, especially in this class moving forward.” An instructor who worked with food science students to develop new food products said the most impactful part of the project was “the opportunity to do the work closely in projects with products that are industry relevant, … and the ability to create like new goods that are kind of like on trend using goods and principles.”

Table 1

Data from Action Learning Experience Implementation to College Courses

Variable	Fall 2024	Spring 2025	Fall 2025
Number of Courses	2	5	2
Number of Students	14	118	51
Number of External Partners	2	48	27
Departments	Crop Sciences	Food Science, Animal Science, Agricultural Economics, Agricultural Communications	Agricultural Economics, Human Development
Workforce Readiness Skills	Communication, Teamwork, Problem Solving	Communication, Teamwork, Problem Solving	Communication, Problem Solving, Professionalism

Challenges

Implementing action learning in courses poses challenges at many levels. First, instructors reported that it takes more time to bring in external partners and build team projects into their courses. Instructors also needed assistance in finding partner organizations that could work with their students. There is also the challenge of balancing content knowledge with its application. As one Horticulture instructor said, “I think the challenge with action learning is balancing structured and structure-less projects. So, intentionally these are open-ended because the product that you produced …is based on your client's needs.”

Future Plans

To address some of the challenges from participating instructors, we have formed a Community of Practice that meets monthly to share insights on their teaching strategies. The group has drawn attention from the larger campus community, and other colleges are requesting information on its success. While data has been collected on the career-readiness skills students have learned, there is not yet sufficient data to demonstrate the growth in those skills. In addition, to assist with locating partner organizations, the college director of career development has created a database of organizations who have worked with courses in the past or who might be interested in the future.

Resources Needed

Many instructors who have joined the Action Learning project have said they would not have implemented Action Learning projects without a mentor to help them brainstorm both partner organizations and ways to integrate projects into the existing coursework. In addition, instructors who have more connections to organizations and businesses have been more willing to implement Action Learning. Providing resources or working with the college's Advancement staff to identify partners is a great way to build these connections.

References

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