Action Learning in Public Administration Education: Learning (evidence) from an action research case study

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to explore the effectiveness of action learning (AL) in PA education through the action research (AR). Public administration (PA) requires training paths for its officials aimed at developing managerial skills. Training designers must construct pathways that identify goals and results to be obtained. Most importantly, they should adopt techniques that engage all stakeholders and measure training performance. This study uses the action research (AR) method to explore the effectiveness of action learning (AL) in PA education. It shows how a training project for officials of the PAcan be designed and managed in a participatory and engaging manner.

Design/methodology/approach – The AR approach is particularly suited to long-term training interventions in PA because it offers a means of taking shared responsibility. AR aids in building a bridge between academia and practice and solving real problems with stakeholders, students and end-clients
through cyclical interactions of construction, intervention and evaluation. It focuses on AL as an innovative educational tool that links knowledge and action and theory and practice.

Findings – The involvement of different stakeholders, such as teachers, students, administrators and politicians, in the design, management and evaluation process facilitates the identification of educational objectives and monitoring of outcomes in a changing public organizational context. AL is effective because it involves students as individuals and as a team, often as an organization, while trying to solve real problems.

Originality/value – AL through the AR approach has not been widely used in education, especially in PA, where teaching legal and administrative content combines traditional teaching methods. The case study shows the innovative potential of AL in a traditional context such as the PA.

Keywords Action learning, Action research, Public administration, Managerial competence, Workplace learning

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Public Administration (PA), if managed according to a managerial approach, can be an irreplaceable driver for the development of the national production system. Some studies show a high correlation between PA efficiency and GDP growth (OECD, 2021).

Given the complexity of today's historical context and the disproportionate growth of social problems, countries need administrations that, thanks also to the skills and competencies of their managers, can make management processes and the use of resources fast, effective, and efficient.

The transition from a bureaucratic to a managerial model requires an organizational leap supported by training activities. Training should be a key element in this restructuring and preparation of new skills and competencies (Reichard and Schröter, 2018). If training is effective, it positively influences the organization's productivity, encourages greater stakeholder involvement, increases the motivation of the entire work group, develops problem-solving skills, and improves the management of errors and the unexpected to prevent the company from incurring unnecessary expenditure (Grossman and Salas, 2011).The literature highlights some peculiarities concerning the management of long-term training in PA organizations, aiming to requalify the public managers' skills in a complex context of digitalization, e-government, and resource shortage: the focus on the involvement of stakeholders in the training and the activation of evaluation paths for the achievement of training objectives. Capaldo et al. (2017) noted that the supervisor must take steps to design *ad hoc* evaluation tools that involve the direct and active involvement of all stakeholders to integrate real workplace needs into the design of training courses and provide feedback on the impact that training programs have had on individual and organizational performance. Burke and Hutchins (2007) noted that the design and implementation of training are factors influencing the transfer of learning. The transfer of training is facilitated when the participant perceives a direct link between the topics covered during the training and their application in the work environment.

In this respect, the action research (AR) approach is particularly suited to the design and management of long-term training interventions in PA, because educational AR offers teachers, students and administrators a means to take "collaborative responsibility for the development and reform of education" (Carr and Kemmis, 1986). Sein et al. (2011) highlighted that the philosophy of AR aids in build a bridge between academia and practice, solving real-world problems with stakeholders, students and end-clients through cyclical interactions of teaching construction, intervention, and evaluation. Haj-Bolouri et al. (2021) stated that, in a workplace learning setting, AR is a design method that facilitates the continuous transfer of knowledge among students, faculty and stakeholders. In spite of this, the adoption of AR is limited in both universities and PA. As Brook and Pedler (2020) reported, the self-referential characteristic of faculty, the need to finish set programs, and the increased workload for faculty are obstacles to participatory systems. As a result, in the public sector, a centralized and bureaucratic decision-sharing system still prevails. Thus, the gap in training experiences with AR motivated the presentation of an experience gained and its implications.

This paper explores the effectiveness of action learning (AL) in PA education. It shows how a long-term managerial training project can be designed and managed in a participatory and engaging manner, through the AR lens. In particular, reference is made to the experience for a master's degree in "managerial practices" organized by the University
of the Republic of San Marino from2020 to 2022.

The results of our study show the effectiveness of AL in training projects, thanks to the creation of cooperation groups composed by teachers, students, administrators and politicians. The active involvement of all stakeholders is essential at every stage of the project.
Success depends on combining theory and practice in frontal teaching and work projects, along with the exchange of interdisciplinary competencies of teachers and participants, in a situated context and anchored in the specific reality.

The paper is structured as follows: in Section 2, the reference literature on PA education and

the new competencies and skills that civil servants need to acquire through training and AL are presented; in Section 3, the research methodology is outlined; in Section 4, the AR methodology adopted by the researchers is explained; in Section 5, the survey results are presented, and finally the conclusions.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Trends in Public Administration Education

PA is a major player in modern societies, and its ability to provide new, good-quality and low-cost services is essential for economic growth. If managed according to criteria of efficiency and effectiveness, the PA can represent an irreplaceable driving force for the development of the national production system. A study by the OECD (2021) demonstrates a high correlation between the efficiency of the PA and GDP growth. From some simulations carried out, it would appear that if the degree of efficiency of the Italian PA were aligned with the average of France, Spain, Germany and the UK, an additional GDP of e146bn would be generated, i.e. half of all Italian public investments of 2018 (9.1% of GDP). The COVID-19 crisis added urgency to the need for Italy to increase the effectiveness of its public sector.

Many public services, such as education and training, are suffering, and many issues, such as the burden on organizations from regulations and their enforcement, are long-standing (Bulman, 2021). Low levels of efficiency and effectiveness in PA management are the leading causes of high public debts, limited attractiveness of investments and fewer services provided to the population. Countries need PA able to manage the processes, make decisions efficiently and creatively and leverage the skills and competencies of their managers.

Since the early 1980s, many countries have taken steps to change the management of the public sector in response to the call to increase the quality of services and reduce costs. In those years, the PA saw the spread of a current of thought called New Public Management (NPM), which provides public sector downsizing strategies to reorganize procedures and structure conforming to the principles of efficiency and effectiveness (Arnaboldi et al., 2004).

The NPM is a managerial theory developed on the idea that private-sector management is better than public management, and for this reason, the public sector must adopt privatesector management methodologies (Brunet and Aubry, 2016). NPM suggests the adoption of project management techniques and resource reduction behaviors (Crawford and Helm, 2009). In addition, the creation of a managerial culture based on innovation, problemsolving, and collaboration values, the introduction of performance evaluation systems, the reduction of bureaucracy and the development of competitive strategies are also referable to NPM principles (Pitsis et al., 2014).

Starting at the end of the 1990s and the beginning of 2000, the NPM began to be questioned mainly by scholars who saw it as a generic, reductive and obsolete managerial approach, which does not fully take into consideration the peculiarities of the public sector and the growing complexity of society (Klakegg et al., 2008; Dunleavy, 2005). The new approaches, called post-NPM, focus on cultural integration, horizontal coordination, the involvement of private sector organizations, cooperation and the training of public officials (Christensen, 2012). Efficiency remains a focal point even if, in this case, the State is seen as pluralistic, and greater emphasis is given to negotiation, networking and contractual relations to create collaborations beyond organizational barriers (Osborne, 2010). Furthermore, citizens are key stakeholders in producing and organizing public services and providing their vision through political processes (Karatas, 2019).

According to Wal et al. (2008), the values that characterize public and private sectors are divergent. Responsibility, legitimacy, incorruptibility and reliability are the most important values for the PA, while profitability, effectiveness, efficiency and innovation are important for the private sector. PA differs from the private sector in terms of ownership. Private businesses are owned by single entrepreneurs, while PAs belong to community members. Furthermore, public organizations

are complex organizations as they interface with a multiplicity of stakeholders: they are open systems and influenced by external events; they are unstable mainly due to frequent policy changes and the short-term time horizon of public managers; finally, they are not subjected to competitive pressures (Boyne, 2002).

PA are characterized by what Donna (2011) calls "individualistic ballast," i.e. a lack of skills such as management of resources and activities, leadership and delegation, planning and accomplishment of objectives. In PA, managers are selected more based on legislation knowledge than on organizational and economic competence (Donna, 2011). Political, economic and technological changes are required for the strengthening of public managers' managerial and leadership capabilities (Sinervo et al., 2021; Wessels, 2020).

The transition from a bureaucratic organization to a managerial one, in which competencies, responsibility and result orientation are priorities, requires an organizational leap supported by training activities (Grandis, 2011). According to Wessels (2020), the greatest "challenge" within the curricula of training programs in PA lies precisely in the development of skills to respond in an innovative and democratic way to social problems.
Educational programs should train public managers to adapt to their contexts, and strike the right balance between planning, policy analysis and management and administrative design (Averch and Dluhy, 1992). To achieve this challenge more easily, training designers need to choose more engaging training techniques such as AR.

2.2. Action Learning

Learning is "a very complex process involving both biological and social elements which follow different sets of logic and work together in a complex interaction" (Illeris, 2003).

AL could be defined as "a process that involves a small group working on real problems, taking action, and learning as individuals, a team, and an organization while doing so" (Marquardt, 2007, p. 9). Marquardt (2007) defines AL as a process in which a small team learns through the implementation of problem-solving actions. The problem is usually new and unstructured, and they have little experience with it. As Nufrio and Tietje (2008) pointed out, in the AL process, no work plan prescriptions or guidelines define how team members should work together on problems and solutions.

The components of AL include examining a problem in the organization, creating a heterogeneous group with a problem solver who asks rigorous questions in the context of the group by stimulating the use of listening and reflection skills, assigning a coach to facilitate the group in learning, exploring alternatives and acting on solutions (Marquardt, 2004).

According to Marquardt (2004), the six components of AL are shown below in Figure 1. Revans (1980, 1998) proposed an equation for his theory of learning: L (learning) ¼ P (programmed knowledge) þ Q (questioning insight). The "P" is assimilated through textbooks, case studies, computer-based simulations, etc. This source of learning is relevant, but often it is all based on the past. It is, therefore, unlikely to meet today's needs.

There are many types of AL, but all of them have four common principles (Pedler et al., 2005; Raelin, 2021):
  (1) Learning occurs during action and is focused on the task at hand.
  (2) Participants work on problems aimed at both organizational and personal development and the intersection between them.
  (3) Learners work in peer learning teams to support and challenge each other.
  (4) Participants demonstrate a learning-to-learn attitude involving seeking new questions rather than expert knowledge.
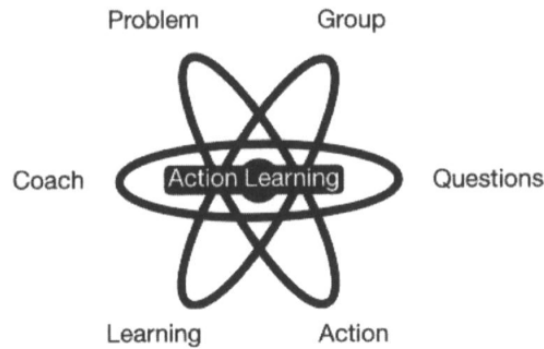
Figure 1. Components of action learning

As Cunningham (1997) noted, experiential learning values discussion, shared experience, joint planning and comparison with real, practical situations. Participants are engaged through passion and pragmatism. Experiential learning encourages thinking from different perspectives, looks for systemic relationships rather than emphasizing individual parts, creates new information by exploring novelty and combining the old and the new and emphasizes direct contact with the phenomenon being studied. The AL process thus leads to context awareness through information, documents, and physical knowledge and reflection, i.e. the transformation of lived experience into theories, models and principles of action, just as a manager would do.

Scholars have emphasized that AL is an effective tool for project management and innovation skills (Olsson et al., 2010) because it promotes a chain reaction in which learning takes place at multiple levels, creates an experiential learning habit that combines theory and practice, allows the development of important management skills such as research perspective, consulting and networking, stimulates continuous reflection on problems and best practices for solving them and finally allows the use of a systematic approach (Krogh, 2001; Rowley, 2003; Cardno and Piggot-Irvine, 1996).

When learners participating in a training program belong to the same organizational context or similar contexts, they have had similar work experiences, problems and difficulties, which could facilitate learning and the transfer of knowledge and skills in the workplace. Developing employees' skills to create a learning environment in the workplace is an essential goal of training programs for public employees. Using projects in the learning process allows students to reconstruct real contexts in which they can become active participants and learn new skills that are in demand in the labor market (Schuetz, 2018; Kovàcsné Pusztai, 2021). The link between learning and change is strong and widely accepted in the literature (Elliott, 2020). Therefore, change in the PA should be realized through a learning process involving the organization. Moreover, reciprocal learning between managers and employees should be activated to make advances in knowledge, skills, work performance and the quality of their relationship (Lyons and Bandura, 2023).

3. Research methodology

AR is an investigative process undertaken with a spirit of collaboration and co-investigation that integrates behavioral sciences applied to management knowledge to find solutions to real problems, produce changes in organizations, develop skills of collaboration and cooperation between organization members and fuel scientific research (Shani and Coghlan, 2021).

The term "action research" was introduced by Lewin (1946) to denote research that combines generation of theory with the action of the researcher aimed at changing the social system. The act itself is presented as the means of both changing the system and generating critical knowledge about it. For this reason, AR produces a different kind of knowledge – a knowledge that is contingent on the particular situation and which develops the capacity of members of the organization to solve their own problems (Susman and Evered, 1978).

The process of AR is conceived as "a spiral of steps, each of which is composed of a circle of planning, action, and fact-finding about the result of the action" (Lewin, 1946). Unlike traditional research in which theory serves to formulate future actions, in AC, action and theory proceed in parallel in a context in which all stakeholders are engaged in solving a problem and generating knowledge. The AR paradigm implies the participation of the entire organization in the study concerning it and thus it is collaborative (Denis and Lehoux, 2009), and a valuable vehicle for having greater stakeholder involvement in research objectives (Ivankova, 2017) and co-creation projects (Tossavainen, 2017). Dick et al. (2015) showed that AR is a useful process for project management because it allows the project to be managed collaboratively and achieve the desired outcomes for its external and internal stakeholders. In AR, researchers are actively involved in the design and introduction of some change and can intervene in policy or direction, using experience and knowledge of the context to monitor, evaluate and learn from the learning process (Henry et al., 2001). Through the AC, students are encouraged to put themself in researchers' shoes and adopt a critical evaluation approach to their practices (Zuber-Skerritt, 1992).

AR is a methodology particularly useful in learning activities. Carr and Kemmis (1986) recommended educational AR as an approach to improve educational programs, curriculum, professional development, system planning and policy development. Educational AR offers teachers, parents, students and administrators a means to take "collaborative responsibility for the development and reform of education." Sein et al. (2011) highlighted that the philosophy of AR allows the building of a bridge between academia and practice, solving real-world problems with stakeholders, students and end-clients through cyclical interactions of teaching construction, intervention and evaluation.

The Republic of San Marino is experiencing the same public management problems as the larger countries, with a disproportionate increase in social problems and a lack of resources. Following a GDP contraction of about 40% less than in 2008, public personnel spending has seen a contraction in hiring even among graduates, and a sharp decline in training expenses (Office of Information, Technology, Data and Statistics, 2019). The need to diversify the skills of its employees to cope with the complexity of today's world, led the PA of San Marino to ask its University to prepare a training project for civil servants. The University selected three lecturers who are experts in PA, project management, and innovation to form a project team to design the training course. The three lecturers are Venturini, Palazzi and Capaldo, all authors of this paper. The educational program was a second-level master's degree in managerial practices open to civil servants of the PA and the extended public sector (municipal companies, health services and university).

The project team adopted Susman and Evered's (1978) action cycle model, which considers five phases: (1) analysis and framing, (2) action planning, (3) action execution, (4) reflection and (5) learning and communication.

The key stakeholders were:
- the Minister for Internal Affairs, who is responsible for implementing the new civil service regulations;
- the Director of the Public Function Office, whose responsibilities include ensuring the optimization of administrative activities with particular reference to the employment relationship, the development and optimal management of human resources, and the organization of work;
- the staff of the academic research center in charge of the development of the training course;

- and the lecturers and students of the course identified as managers and officials of the PA of San Marino.

The schedule of activities relating to the design, execution and evaluation of the training course is shown in the Figure 2.

In 2020, the project team collected the following data for the design of the training program:
- The minutes of meetings held between the Minister of Internal Affairs, the Director of the Public Function Office, and the Director of the University held in 2018/2019 and dedicated to defining PA training needs and designing a training path.
- Interviews with the above authorities to gain an in-depth understanding of the PA's needs, goals and values pursued.

A study group was set up consisting of the project team members and two research fellows in law and management. The study group collected the following data from 2020 to 2022:
- An anonymous online questionnaire for students to monitor the degree of satisfaction and knowledge achieved. The questionnaire focused on the following investigative sections: evaluation of teaching, the overall progress of the master's program and the teachers. The satisfaction questionnaire is a standard questionnaire that is usually sent to all master's students and prepared by the university staff.
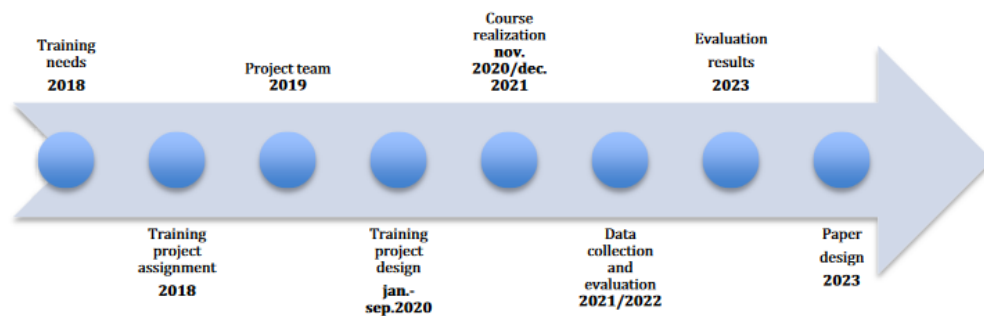
Figure 2. The schedule of activities

- An anonymous online questionnaire to self-assess students' acquired competencies after the training. The 11 competencies defined as learning objectives were translated into constructs using the reference literature (Table 1). The question posed to the students was: To what extent did the master's students improve the competencies learned in the theoretical and practical phases through the project work? For each competence, the respondents had to express their judgment using a seven-point Likert scale (1 being not at all to 7 being very much). The questionnaire was administered to the 19 master's students in September 2022. There were 13 responses.

4. The five stages of the educational project

The educational project will now be described according to the five phases of the Susman and

Evered (1978) model. The first phase involved identifying primary needs in terms of PA training and the study of the relevant scientific literature. The second stage specified the actions to be taken for the training proposal. The third phase is the executive one, where the actions to develop the training are implemented; the fourth phase is about the evaluation of the training; and finally, the last stage specifies what was learned during the AR project and how it was communicated to the community.

4.1 Analysis and framing

This stage was aimed at identifying a training proposal for public employees to develop managerial competencies. It was performed by the project team through an analysis of both the national context of San Marino and the scientific literature on public management and training design.

The recent reform of San Marino's PA is based on the new law on administrative management published in 2009. Rebora (1983), on the other hand, identified as levers for the improvement of PA, in addition to organizational models and political choices, the primary task of management. The key principles of San Marino legislation are firstly, the separation between political policymaking and administrative management, a principle that is often disregarded in the administrations of small States such as San Marino, and second, the introduction of the possibility that the manager may also be hired on a fixed-term basis with renewal of the office at the end of the term. The new law identifies the criteria on the basis of which the manager must base his/her actions and how his work must then be assessed. Once the role of the public leader was defined in the legislation, training courses had to be activated.

Competencies	References
Stakeholder relations	Yang et al. (2011)
Project scope definition	Khang and Moe (2008)
Using programming techniques	Conforto and Amaral (2010)
● Assessment of baseline reliability	Smith (2010)
● Collaborative relationship management	
● Negotiation	
Risk management	Henschel (2010)
Project monitoring and corrective actions implementation	Khang and Moe (2008)
● Managing conflicts	Fernandez et al. (2015)
● Leadership	
Creative problem-solving skills	Reiter-Palmon and Illies (2004)

Table 1. The competencies to develop

Source: Authors' own work

The document produced interactively at the end of this first phase is called the Project charter. It is useful for defining the motivations, project team, target, financial resources, drivers, stakeholders, timeline, benefits, risks and finally the other training experiences.

The project charter is based on the need to explicitly discuss the principles and policies of the project with people from different disciplines at the start of the project and to have a common agreement to refer to if necessary during the project (Ruecker and Radzikowska, 2008). Therefore, it is the output of the start-up process of a project's life cycle, in which a series of significant information is explicitly provided.

4.2 Project planning

The involvement of the stakeholders took place in this stage, through focus groups that defined training needs, objectives and the course contents.

At the same time, the key stakeholders validated training strategies, choosing those that allow for greater student involvement, high interaction with the teacher and the development of project work. To facilitate the translation of theoretical knowledge into practice, the working group decided to assign students a project work. The goal was to break down the rigid publicist conformation of the civil service and make a "space" for creativity and innovation. The project

work is also a tool for collaborating with one's colleagues and superiors, thus a tool for expanding stakeholder relationships.

Once the training idea is accepted, the activities must be planned before moving on to the execution phase. The project planning phase involved the definition of the scope, activities and their duration, the estimated cost and budgeting, as well as the procurement of resources and management of risks associated with the project.

The results of the stakeholder consultations, together with the analysis of the available documents, enabled the working group to define the "Scope Statement" (Table 2). The literature on project management shows how, especially in the case of projects within PA organizations, the scope statement is essential for translating stakeholder needs into measurable requirements and orienting project activities to these requirements. The description of the project scope is necessary to identify when the project "starts" and when it "ends," which deliverables have to be realized, what the criteria for acceptance of the deliverables by their users will be, and what activities have to be planned and realized to complete the project (Capaldo and Capone, 2022; Sampietro, 2018).

The project team and the faculty also defined the learning objectives and the course (Table 3), the teaching staff, and the choice of teaching methodologies.

4.3 Action execution

In the third phase, the course was implemented as designed. For the first edition of the master, the lectures were held online, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the online mode, the participants showed high interest and participated actively, recounting their experiences and trying to communicate, in the specific context in which they work, the theoretical tools described during the lectures. They enthusiastically took part in group activities, such as in-class discussions on thematic articles and case studies. AL was chosen as an educational practice. In particular, the network consisting of teachers, students, and external professionals made it possible to strengthen the students' motivation and interest.

The part dedicated to the project work lasted about six months and was coordinated by the two faculty members (problem solvers/valuators) who are experts in project management and business planning.

To make the project experience less abstract, students were asked to propose, in consultation with their superiors or colleagues, a project idea to be implemented in their respective work setting. Being able to work in a real-world setting, with a higher likelihood that the project will come to fruition, increases motivation and the degree of involvement in education and training. The thematic proposals for the project work were:
- implementation of a new evaluation system for public workers;
- digitization and reorganization of procedures;
- the development of a new public service or a marketing campaign for a new service;
- the fundraising activities for a social service; and
- the implementation of smart working.

The groups started working intensively on the project at the end of the master's lessons, particularly during the summer period. This allowed the students to work on the project with intensity and greater involvement. Over three months, periodic reviews of the PWs were scheduled. At the end of each phase, the evaluator reported a summary judgment of the work done by the group, including the ability to interpret theoretical lessons and adapt to practical work, creativity in problem-solving, the group climate and completeness and style of work.

Motivation	Developing managerial competencies and innovation management skills
Deliverables	Definition of training objectives
	Selection of teachers and participants
	Training course design
	Completion and discussion of project work
	Self-assessment of participants' skills after 6 months from the end of the course
Requirements	Interactive teaching strategies: brainstorming, presentation of case studies, exit slips and working groups
	Development of project works (PW) of interest to the public office in which the students work
	Lecturers: ability to engage and interact with learners, involvement of professional witnesses
	Learners: motivation, ability to interact with teachers
	Learning assessment: through the final discussion of the project work
	Knowledge transfer assessment: through skills self-assessment questionnaire
Criteria for measuring success	Number of participants who completed the course/number of enrolled participants
	Results of customer satisfaction
	Results of skills self-assessment after seven months from the end of the course
Constraints	Availability of faculty and learners who can meet the requirements outlined above
	Identification of project works' topics in light of both the PA innovation needs of the learners and the issues addressed in the different modules

Table 2.
Scope statement   **Source:** Authors' own work

Competencies required	Master's topics
• Project management	• Project management
• Leadership	• Leadership
• Stakeholder management	• Communication
• Communication with stakeholders	• Employee management
• Managing collaborative relationships within and outside the organization	• Individual performance appraisal
• Ability to cooperate and share knowledge	• Organizational performance appraisal
• Creativity and entrepreneurial spirit	• Effectiveness, efficiency, resource allocation
• Resource allocation (efficiency)	• Planning, scheduling and control
• Results orientation (effectiveness)	• Results orientation
• Knowing how to evaluate individual and organizational performance	• Risk assessment
• Negotiation skills	• Quality and user satisfaction
• Problem solving	• Organizational change management
• Quality management	• Project and process-oriented organizational culture
• Measuring and managing customer satisfaction	• Soft skills
• Change management	• Technological innovation
	• Negotiation and conflict resolution

Table 3.
Competencies to be
achieved and
contents of the
master   **Source:** Authors' own work

4.4 Reflection

The evaluation phase of the project consists of assessing its success or failure. Participants completed anonymous online questionnaires self-assessing the following skills acquired in the course:

- Stakeholders management: identifying stakeholders appropriately, exploring stakeholder needs, understanding the stakeholder's interest in the project, communicating and engaging with stakeholders frequently.
- Project scope: defining the objectives with stakeholders, identifying project constraints and procedures to ensure compliance, determining key resource needs.
- Appropriate use of scheduling techniques: project budget, work breakdown structure, resource management plan.

- Reliability assessment of baselines: project time and cost estimates.
- Risk management plan.
- Project monitoring and implementation of corrective actions: measuring project performance, taking timely corrective actions, evaluating the effectiveness of corrective actions.
- Managing collaborative relationships.
- Negotiation activities.
- Conflict management activities.
- Creative problem-solving.
- Leadership: self-awareness, innovation, visioning and imagination of future trends.

Three items stand out with an average score higher: two are attributable to the creative problem-solving competence, and one to the leadership competence regarding self-awareness.

The self-assessment of competencies was accompanied by a request to assess the elements that contributed to the improvement of skills (Table 4). The factors that contributed most to the improvement of participants' skills were the collaboration among the project work group's members, the interaction between faculty and participants, and the opportunity to engage in multidisciplinary discussions. Respondents highlighted suggestions to increase the effectiveness of the training program.

The degree of satisfaction of the master's participants, as reflected in the questionnaire, was very high, even though the issues addressed are not of immediate use for the day-to-day activities in the public offices that the participants carry out. Although the self-assessment in terms of skill improvement was mostly positive, some specific topics covered in the master's program received slightly lower scores, which supports the choice to change, in the new edition, the program to meet the participants' requests.

The project work was widely appreciated because each project allowed participants to get involved and put what they learned during the lessons into practice. The collaboration among project work team members in multidisciplinary settings and the interaction between lecturers and learners should be considered the elements that contributed most to the improvement of skills.

Regarding the project work, the evaluation process concerned: project executive summary, project report, practical development and project presentation. Once the project work was completed, the students were asked to present it in front of an audience consisting of public managers and colleagues. After this presentation, the two evaluators assessed the PW, scoring the training objectives with a Likert scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much). The lecturers' evaluation of the participants' PW was very positive.

Evaluation of educational tools	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
Illustration of case studies	13	4	7	6.154	0.9871
Discussion of case studies in groups	13	3	7	6.000	1.2910
Focus on work contexts similar to those of the participants	13	4	7	5.846	1.1435
Teachers' reference to their own professional experience	13	4	7	6.385	0.9608
Interaction between lecturers and participants	13	4	7	6.538	0.9674
Realization of the project work	13	4	7	6.385	0.8697
Collaboration between the members of the project work team	13	4	7	6.615	0.8697
Interaction between the project work team and the tutor	13	3	7	6.462	1.1983
Possibility of confrontation in a multidisciplinary context	13	4	7	6.538	0.9674

Table 4.
Self-assessment of competencies

Source: Authors' own work

4.5 Learning and communication
The last phase specified what was learned during the AR project. During this phase, deviations between predefined objectives and the results of the evaluation are identified. The results of this analysis allow appropriate changes in the project development. It was considered appropriate to strengthen the development of skills in scheduling activities, time, costs and resource requirements,

monitoring and risk management, negotiation and conflict management, as well as the ability to examine current trends for forward-looking activities. The project work was a learning method very appreciated both by students and teachers that allowed them to develop soft skills (team building, problem-solving and leadership).

The student groups presented their projects to experts in the field, emphasizing the project idea, motivation, operational methodology and benefits for the sector. The PW was appreciated by the audience and public leaders present. It is absolutely worth mentioning that two proposals from the PW have become operational for the new fiscal year. Therefore, the next edition of the master's program should devote more space to project work as they are to be considered effective learning tools through which to apply the knowledge acquired and bring innovative ideas to San Marino's PA.

5. Research results

In a pressurized environment such as the public sector, at the mercy of political and technological change, growing user needs, health and social crises, and wars, it is often difficult to identify educational strategies and resources. In such a complex context, AR proposes a model for managing education in a democratic and participatory way. The creation of a network and comparison groups with PA, teachers, students and external experts positively influenced all phases of the project – from objectives to methodological choices to evaluation – allowing the new management paradigm to be shared through a bottom-up process. In parallel, the adoption of an AL process also proved to be an effective tool:

- During the project planning phase, the project team conducted a series of stakeholder meetings using a problem-solving approach. Meetings with PA authorities helped to define the training objectives, while meetings with trainers and external experts helped to develop the training content and methodology.
- In the action execution phase, AL was an effective teaching method for student learning and skill development. The teaching activity of project work led the students to examine real problems of organizations and to simulate project development activities in a real context. Since the project work concerned their organizations, their sense of responsibility and involvement through a continuous exchange with the group participants increased. The teachers in charge of tutoring and evaluating the project stimulated the students' ability to listen and reflect, build alternative scenarios and take action. The intervention of external experts made it possible to consider new variables and evaluate the best strategies and business models.
- In the reflection phase, AL made it possible to collect evaluations of the training course, both from the participants through an anonymous questionnaire and from the two evaluators. The evaluation was largely positive in terms of the acquisition of project management and innovation skills at the end of the course.
- In the communication and learning phase, the project team opened a discussion with all stakeholders on a public day to present the project. Following an AL approach, the project team identified outstanding objectives, potential problems and changes to be made to the new training program.

6. Conclusions

The results of our study confirm the effectiveness of AL in PA education in an AR context. The study has shown that adopting an AR approach, based on the constant active participation of the stakeholders both in the definition of the training project and its management, facilitates the creation of collaborative, involved and active groups. The groups, formed with different stakeholders in the different phases of the AR, define the objectives, contents and teaching methods and promote the learning of knowledge and the development of skills.

Networking with teachers, students and external experts for project work on innovative

ideas of interest to their professional field created a context for the exchange of knowledge and experience. AL, in particular, is ideally suited to the development of innovative skills: the group development of a project to solve a real problem, and the exchange of ideas and knowledge through a creative process of scenario simulation stimulates the learning of skills (Marquardt, 2004). Furthermore, the prospect that the project may be useful for their own professional context and thus have a real application motivates students to participate directly. Its success depends on combining theory and practice in frontal teaching and work projects, together with the interdisciplinary competencies of teachers and participants, in a situated context and anchored in the specific reality (Olsson et al., 2010). In the final stages of the training, the groups share the results of the training project and learn about the limitations and problems to reformulate changes for the new training program.

Our experience shows how the AR approach is particularly useful when, as in the case of the project analyzed, the training needs are designed based on prospective changes in the administration, not yet fully defined, of which both the public managers and the officials, i.e. the participants in the training initiative, are the protagonists. The active involvement of all the stakeholders is essential, beginning with the definition of goals and expected results, followed by the programming of activities, the execution phase, and finally, the assessment and learning from the gaps between expected goals and effective aims, as highlighted in the findings section. Stakeholders were involved in every phase of the training project, with constant interactions from the beginning evaluations to the project's final assessment.

Consistent with the assumptions of AR, the experience illustrated in the previous sections constitutes an example of the effective construction of an educational program that combines theory and practice, thanks to the full engagement of stakeholders in solving real-world problems through cyclical interactions of teaching construction, intervention and evaluation.

Our experience also confirms that, in a workplace, learning the AL approach facilitates the continuous transfer of knowledge, the co-creation of value, and the empowerment of skills thanks to constant interactions, interdisciplinarity, ongoing evaluations and the final assessment by participants of the training program, stakeholders and the members of the organization.

This type of research produced knowledge that is contingent on the particular situation of San Marino's PA, where they have been trying to develop the capacity of members of the public organization to solve their own problems, as suggested by Susman and Evered (1978).

In addition, the experience was useful for the design of the second edition of the training initiative. The content of the second edition program was modified to incorporate the advice of the first edition's participants. The AR approach to training is helpful, as highlighted, but also rather onerous because it requires a strong involvement by the promoters of the initiative for a long period, and the capacity to interface with several stakeholders and satisfy different expectations.

From our experience, the challenge for "practitioners" is to skillfully combine theory and practice during the frontal lessons and work projects, together with interdisciplinary competencies of teachers and participants, in a situated context and anchored to the specific reality. The practical implications of this study are to provide a detailed model for the design of a training program for the public sector that will focus on an AL approach, combining theory and practice and actively involving participants.

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