Action Learning in Practice

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GOWER
The State of the Art

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Action learning originates with Reginald Revans (1907–2003), Olympic athlete, student of nuclear physics, educational administrator and professor of management. Drawing on ancient sources of wisdom and more recent forbears such as Dewey and Lewin, Revans sought the improvement of human systems for the benefit of those who depend on them. Action learning is a pragmatic and moral philosophy based on a deeply humanistic view of human potential that commits us, via experiential learning, to address the intractable problems of organizations and societies.

Action learning emerged as a developmental innovation in the late 1960s, especially through initiatives undertaken in a consortium of London Hospitals (Clark 1972; Wieland and Leigh 1971; Wieland 1981), and in the UK’s GEC (Casey and Pearce 1977). Though not to be limited to organization development or management education, action learning has gained prominence here through its opposition to expert consultancy and traditional business school practice. In 1965, following negotiations over the new Manchester Business School, Revans resigned his Chair in protest at the victory of the Owens College ‘book’ culture over the ‘tool’ culture of the College of Technology (later UMIST), which he saw as being closer to the needs of managers (1980: 197).

So, What is Action Learning?

Revans never offered a single definition. Action learning is not:

... job rotation ... project work ... case studies, business games and other simulations ... group dynamics and other task-free exercises ... business consultancy and other expert missions ... operational research, industrial engineering, work study and related subjects ... simple commonsense

(2008: 89–103)

To which could be added many more recent enthusiasms. The refusal to define action learning is initially confusing, and has several consequences, not least that ‘it means different things to different people’ (Weinstein 1995: 32). Yet the lack of a final definition also maintains its vitality and longevity by making necessary a continual reinterpretation and reinvention. Action learning is an idea, a philosophy, a discipline and also a method, and never just one of those things.

The essence is to be found in Revans’ epithet: ‘There can be no learning without action, and no (sober and deliberate) action without learning.’ Learning is ‘cradled in the task’, and comes via reflection upon the experience of taking action. His change equation:

L ≥ C
argues that people and organizations flourish when their learning is equal to or greater than the rate of environmental change. His learning equation holds that:

\[ L = P + Q \]

where learning is a combination of \( P \) (Programmed knowledge, or the content of traditional instruction), and \( Q \) (Questioning insight, derived from fresh questions and critical reflection).

\( Q \) is the key to the distinction Revans made between puzzles and problems; whilst the former have ‘best’ solutions and can be solved by applying \( P \) with the help of experts, problems have no right answers and are best approached through questioning to provoke new lines of thinking, action and learning. Action learning is not for puzzles, which are ‘difficulties from which escapes are thought to be known’, but for situations where ‘no single course of action is to be justified ... so that different managers, all reasonable, experienced and sober, might set out by treating them in markedly different ways’ (Revans 2008: 6).

That is about as much as you need to know to get on with action learning: an injunction Revans made to everyone he met. However, doing action learning soon reveals what we do not know, together with a desire to understand more, especially in exchange with colleagues.

PRACTISING ACTION LEARNING...

Practice is a useful word because it holds together the doing and the learning. What we do, we can also learn from – if we reflect on our actions and their outcomes. We will ever be asking the questions ‘What is Action Learning?’ and ‘Am I doing it right?’ because, in the context of trying to do something for the first time, these are always fresh questions.

...ESPECIALLY FOR THE WICKED PROBLEMS

Keith Grint (2008: 11–18) proposes a leadership model (Figure I.1) in which the progression from ‘critical’ to ‘tame’ to ‘wicked’ problems is marked by an increase both in uncertainty about solutions and the need for collaboration. Critical problems are the domain of command: crisis situations such as heart attacks, train crashes or natural disasters demand swift action, leaving little time for procedure or uncertainty. Tame problems, though they can be very complex, such as timetabling a school, planning heart surgery or building a new hospital, are amenable to rational tools and constitute the natural domain of management. Wicked problems defy rational analysis and are the domain of leadership.

Wicked issues are messy, circular and aggressive, where action often provokes contradictions due to complex interdependencies on site. Eliminating drug abuse, homelessness or crime in a neighbourhood, motivating people, developing entrepreneurship or working across boundaries in organizations are all tricky in this way. Action learning is the process intended for such problems: proceeding by questions, by not rushing to solutions, by learning from making deliberate experiments and deliberated risks.
Revans’ action learning is also founded on an uncompromising moral philosophy about how to be, and how to act. Whilst the action learning ‘rules of engagement’ can be written down easily enough, they have to be enacted via:

- **starting from ignorance** – from acknowledging inadequacy and not knowing;
- **honesty about self** – ‘What is an honest man, and what do I need to do to become one?’ (Belgian manager quoted in Revans 1971: 132);
- **commitment to action, and not just not thought** – ‘Be ye doers of the word, and not only hearers of it’ (St. James quoted in Revans 2008: 6);
- **in a spirit of friendship** – ‘All meaningful knowledge is for the sake of action, and all meaningful action for the sake of friendship’ (John Macmurray quoted in Revans 2008: 6);
- **for the purpose of doing good in the world** – ‘To do a little good is better than to write difficult books’ (The Bhudda quoted in Revans 2008: 6).

Revans was passionate in encouraging people to help themselves, and to help those who cannot help themselves (1982: 467–492). In contrast to more cognitive and individualistic learning theories, heart and courage are as important as intelligence and insight in action learning. In challenging situations, the warmth and support of friends and colleagues is as vital as their knowledge and critique.

These values are held and symbolized in the set – ‘the cutting edge of every action learning programme’ (Revans 2008: 10). This small group meets regularly over time on the basis of voluntary commitment, peer relationship and self-management, to help one another to act and learn. The first difficulty in practising action learning is often that of finding and founding the right conditions for this self-direction and peer inquiry to flourish.
What has Action Learning Now Become?

Since its appearance in the 1960s and 1970s, action learning has been controversial in promoting learning over teaching, and championing practitioner knowledge over that of experts. Is it closer now to the ‘mainstream’ than at any other time in its history? Fourteen years after the last edition of this book, the state of the art is different. Since 1997 there has been a substantial growth of action learning activity in both corporate and academic contexts; and alongside this growth have come changes in how it is practised and perceived.

There are two main reasons for the growth of activity:

- **The use of action-based approaches in corporate leadership programmes**: Leadership development programmes are reported as increasingly using ‘context specific’ approaches such as coaching, work-based learning, problem-based learning and action learning (Mabey and Thomson 2000; Horne and Steadman Jones 2001; Bolden 2005). Michael Marquardt (2010) has suggested that 73 per cent of corporations in the USA now use action learning for leadership development, a trend also apparent in other developed and developing economies (see Marquardt, *Action Learning around the World* in this volume). As an example, Yonjoo Cho and Hyeon-Cheol Bong (in this book) detail the rapid adoption of action learning by large businesses in South Korea.

- **New interest from academics**: Increasing academic interest partly reflects corporate usage which creates opportunities for research and consulting and also demands for more practice-oriented postgraduate programmes. However, interest also comes from those questing for a more critical business and management education (McLaughlin and Thorpe 1993; Vince and Martin 1993; Wilmott 1994, 1997; Burgoyne and Reynolds 1997; Reynolds 1999; Rigg and Trehan 2004). Critical action learning (see Trehan in this volume) finds its voice in questioning the uncritical assumptions of much management and business development. A second front of academic interest is found in the turn by organizational researchers towards ‘practical’ and ‘actionable knowledge’ (See Coghlan in this volume). Action learning contributes here to the theorizing of organizations as activity systems through the practice of action learners as ‘actors-in-complex-contexts’ (Ashton 2006: 28).

Alongside this growth of use and interest, action learning itself is changing. This is evident in both how it is practised, and in how it is perceived:

- **As a family of approaches**: Arguably action learning has spread more as an ethos than as a specific method, and whilst there is agreement on the key features of the idea, there are wide variations in its practice (Pedler et al. 2005: 64–5). These variations can be construed either as departures or developments from ‘Revans Classical Principles’ or the action learning ‘Gold Standard’ (Willis in this volume). For example, much current practice focuses on ‘own job’ projects and personal development, rather than on intractable organizational problems. There are new practice developments not envisaged by Revans, such as Virtual Action Learning (VAL), and others that he both predicted and warned against, especially as in the now widespread use of ‘trained facilitators’. It is also now clear that different practice communities have developed their own versions of action learning (see the Varieties section in this volume). The
existence of these means that it is no longer sensible to think of action learning as a
unitary practice.
• As a member of the family of action-based approaches to research and learning: From a
broader perspective, action learning is also part of a wider growth of interest in action
approaches or modalities in management and organizational research (See Raelin in
this volume). In contrast to more positivist approaches that separate theory from
practice, action strategies focus instead on ‘knowledge (as) produced in service of, and
in the midst of, action’ (Raelin 1999: 117). As part of a wider family of action-based
approaches, action learning has been described as ‘non-directive’ (Clark 1972:119)
and can be distinguished by the sovereignty it accords to those actual facing the
difficult problems and challenges and its scepticism regarding experts of all kinds,
including academics.

The aim of this book is to exhibit these changes and practice developments in the essential
context of Revans’ profound idea.

Contents

It is a pleasure to introduce a book which is 80 per cent newly commissioned, and for
which every invited contributor has delivered. Authors were encouraged to set out their
ideas, to give examples of their practice and also to reflect and theorize, so that each
chapter contains elements of the whole. Working as an editor with each author, often
over several drafts, has created for me an intimacy and coherence which is greater than
in the three previous assemblies. The book is in four parts:

• Origins
• Varieties
• Applications
• Questions

These parts variously illustrate the roots of action learning, the diversity that has flourished,
the uses to which it is being put and current questions of research and practice. If this
sounds suspiciously neat, it is true that the contents could have been otherwise ordered,
and that the final arrangement happened late in the day.

Origins presents the views of the early practitioners of action learning. Revans’ own
Action Learning: Its Origins and Nature comes first, as it has since the first edition in 1983,
which also included Bob Garratt and David Pearce’s chapters and the first part of the David
Casey’s as it appears here. David Pearce’s Getting Started: An Action Manual encapsulates
the learning from the GEC action learning programmes of the 1970s, where he was then
a management development adviser, and where several of these contributors first learned
their trade. The chapters by Morris, Lawrence, Casey (Part 2) and Revans’ The Enterprise
to this fourth edition are Verna Willis’ appreciative analysis of the 23 critical markers of
the ‘Revans’ Gold Standard’ for authentic action learning, and Yury Boshyk’s biographical
account of Revans’ early life and influences.
The seven chapters of Varieties represent rather than exhaust the seemingly endless ways in which action learning can be interpreted. These differing forms either did not exist or would not have been so clearly seen when this book was last compiled. Taken together they display a remarkable inventiveness in emphasizing and elaborating particular aspects of action learning. Take your pick of self-managed, reflection, business-driven or personal practice; each arising in different contexts and circumstances, each offering a distinctive flavour. CAL (Critical Action Learning) is a notable new arrival which proposes a corrective to the yoking of action learning to short-term ends, by acting as a reminder of its liberationist and democratic values. The infant VAL (Virtual Action Learning) is bound to thrive via advancing technologies in distributed enterprises and networked worlds. Underpinning this rich picture, Judy O’Neil and Victoria Marsick present five action learning schools of thought and show how the varieties are shaped by the pedagogical beliefs of their designers.

With 11 chapters, Applications reveals more yet variety. These cases of practice illuminate action learning as applied in the service of management, leadership and business development in small and large organizations, and in public and in private enterprises. Two chapters focus on the development of facilitators, an increasingly popular pursuit that parallels the growth of action learning in large organizations. Others chapters build on particular applications to develop broader findings and theories on facilitative leadership, organization development, network learning and social capital formation. Michael Marquardt completes this part with a survey of the rapid growth of action learning in Europe, Asia, the Middle East, Africa, Latin America, Australia and North America.

Questions of practice and theory make up the final part of the book. These contributions take on some of the knottier problems of action learning, many stemming from Revans’ unified theory, or ‘praxeology’, which seeks to connect actor and context through the three overlapping systems of Alpha, Beta and Gamma (1971: 33–67). John Burgoyne tops and tails, first by revealing Revans’ philosophy as simultaneously pragmatic and moral, and later by seeking to explain how this might be evaluated. Continuing philosophically, David Coghlan and Joe Raelin make the cases for action learning as ‘practical knowing’, and as one of the ‘action modalities’ aiming for collaborative and democratic social change. Complementing these holistic efforts, are four chapters tackling the constituent themes of action, inaction, reflective practice and learning, which, taken together, demonstrate how recent research has enriched and added to Revans’ legacy.

References


