

Adaptive Action Learning: A Refusal to Define

Editorial

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The idea for this special issue was shaped via numerous conversations, where we shared our passion for, and belief in, action learning. As 'comrades in adversity' we questioned each other on the various approaches we had adapted and surfaced a shared view that Revans' classic principles (RCP) were just that, principles; not a how-to list. However, it also emerged that we shared a belief (based on experience), that action learning worked best when thoughtfully adapted to 'fit' the context and the learners involved.

The term 'adaptive action learning' captured our imagination and stimulated a debate which resonates with definitional debates in our field. For example, in a seminal article Pedler, Burgoyne and Brook (2005) ask the question, 'what has action learning learned to become?' They suggest that adaptations in action learning can be viewed either as dilutions of RCP or as evolutions, with each new iteration constituting a fresh interpretation; a context-sensitive newly minted performance. Indeed, as action learning has spread globally, a variety of practices have emerged. This has resulted in action learning being viewed as an 'ethos' which informs a variety of approaches (Brook, Pedler & Burgoyne, 2012).

Bourner and Rospigliosi (2019) contribute to our understanding of this 'ethos'. They examine Revans' early life and identify seven underpinning 'values' and eight 'guiding beliefs' that have found their way into action learning practice. To what extent are these values and guiding beliefs relevant to action learning practitioners today? In what ways, if any, have they been adapted?

Adaptations in action learning are not new. For example, Lawless (2008) argues that adaptations of action learning within Higher Education (HE) are an evolution, rather than a dilution of RCP. Sanyal (2019) advocates a central role for effective facilitation and questions Revans' views on the facilitator's role within HE programmes. However, a cautionary tale is provided by Milano, Lawless, and Eades (2015), as they reflect on 'learning lost' during a HE programme, when core values of action learning were put under performative pressures.

Brook and Pedler (2020) remind us that action learning is a voluntary activity and suggest that variety in practice is influenced by personal and professional preferences; they agree that action learning can be interpreted in variety of ways but assert that it is only 'properly practised' by those who understand and embrace its core values. However, who decides what is 'proper practice'? Is it the Editors of this or other journals; reviewers; readers; contributors, or the participants in action learning interventions?

Papers in this special issue:

We are delighted with the response to this special issue and have selected four refereed papers and two accounts of practice. All papers reveal 'thoughtful adaptations' of Revans' work and illustrate an 'ethos' of action learning.

Hannah Wilson and colleagues:

Develop a framework / model of: '*integrated action learning*'. They adopt the lens of socio-technical systems (STS) theory to explore how Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) students can be supported to learn together and learn apart. They utilise a self-ethnographic approach to examine the case of a DBA programme and emphasise the critical importance of

creating spaces for students to embark on collaborative questioning when together and also whilst apart.

David Callaghan and Helen Collins:

Propose a model of action learning: '*Massive Action Learning Set*' (MAL). Their pedagogical research draws on data from an on-line supervision project of 60 undergraduates. They argue that their approach is both a return to (no limit on group size, a reduced role for the facilitator) and departure from (asynchronous) some of Revans' classic principles. They argue that MAL has the potential to better fit needs of 21st century students and educators.

Sara Csillag and Anna Hidegh:

Discuss how a '*flexible framework of action learning*' enabled inexperienced undergraduate students to solve problems related to underprivileged roles. Sara and Anna position themselves as insider-researchers to explore an adaption of action learning within a traditional educational environment in Budapest, Hungary. They also reflect on the adaption of action learning to a digital learning environment and argue that their flexible framework has enabled staff and students to cope with the wicked problems of Covid-19.

Erin Kraft and Diane Culver:

Argue that '*coupling action learning*' with deliberate social learning opportunities enhances leadership development. They adopt an interpretive qualitative methodology to examine a Women in Sport Leadership Impact Program in Alberta, Canada. They focus on four social learning leaders (SLL) and draw on community of practice theory to gain insight into SLL's experiences of building facilitator capabilities. They highlight the importance of coupling to create networks and spaces where SLL can safely feel vulnerable and develop leadership capabilities.

The first account of practice is by:

Bernadette McDonald and is situated within professional-legal practice. Bernadette reflects on participants' engagement with her adaptation of action learning. Participants were provided with a problem, which represented a 'shared experience of practice'. They engaged in collective reflective practice in the form of critical reflective questioning (CRQ). Bernadette reformulates the classic action learning equation to $L = P$ (Shared Experience of Practice) + (C)RQ (Critical Reflective Questioning).

Joni Rhodes and Cheryl Brook reflect on Joni's (a novice action learner on an undergraduate degree programme) innovative use of reflective journaling and WhatsApping. Joni and Cheryl offer practical examples and commend reflective journaling and WhatsApping; arguing that they can help learners make sense of their experience both within and without the set. However, they caution, that like action learning itself, these 'learning tools' cannot be pressed upon unwilling individuals.

Our final contribution is a commissioned book review of Kevin Flinn's '*Leadership Development: A Complexity Approach*' by **Ian Lovegrove**. Ian has extensive leadership experience and a PhD in leadership. His initial reaction to our request was: "... *not another book on leadership*". However, Ian found the book engaging and relevant to our action learning community. Flinn has 'adapted' Revan's notion of 'comrades in adversity' and offers a vision of the 'agile' manager who is capable of making practical judgements and addressing how things are, rather than how they ought to be.

In summary

This special issue provides a fresh perspective on 'how things are' and reveals thoughtful adaptations of action learning. As co-editors we refuse to define 'adaptive action learning' and argue that action learning is, and always has been, an emergent field of practice. Revans' work has shaped our practice and continues to inspire. The formula $L=P+Q$ remains robust, with there being some variation in the focus and balance between P and Q, depending on the context and learners are involved. Isn't this sufficient definition? We argue that attempts to strictly define the field merely give the appearance of being in control; thereby misrepresenting action learning as a thing of 'being' rather than a process of 'becoming'. We view action learning as a field of practice spanning the academic and the practitioner worlds. We assert that a focus on the 'ethos' of action learning and thoughtful adaptations (rather than strict definitions) can enable action learning to claim 'legitimacy' in both worlds.

An invitation

As we write this Editorial, Covid-19 continues to have an impact on us all. It is unfortunate that we had to cancel our planned bi-annual conference although, this special issue has created an opportunity for us to reflect on our passion for, and belief in, action learning.

We plan to extend this discussion and invite you to contribute to a free one-day symposium: ***Making a Contribution in a Practice Field: Action learning in a changing world*** on 21st April 2021, via zoom. For fuller details, please follow this link: <https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/action-learning-symposium-tickets-128735879481>

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