

# **ACTION LEARNING WITHIN A BRITISH BUSINESS SCHOOL MEETING THE CHALLENGE AND GRASPING THE OPPORTUNITY**

**KEYWORDS:** Connected knowing, Action Learning; Methodological, Community of Practice

**ABSTRACT:** In the current climate of risk, insecurity and increasing complexity, the ability to recognise our ignorance so that we might learn, through fresh questions how to maximise current opportunities and learn from the ‘...comfortable experiences of the past’ (Revans, 1982) has become an operational imperative.

Within this paper, I propose that Action Learning provides an opportunity for Business Schools and Universities to respond to this imperative through the provision of a pedagogical framework based on partnership and engagement and the sharing of multiple perspectives to arrive at ‘connected knowing’ (Belenky et al, 1973).

As with all paradigm shifts, this opportunity is accompanied by challenges and within this paper I seek to illustrate these challenges through an account of practice. This practice is as a student of Action Learning within a Business School, as a practitioner using Action Learning in practice and as an academic, researching and lecturing within an Action Learning framework within a British Business School. Drawing on this tri-focal experience, I seek to share my reflections on some of the key challenges and many opportunities of Action Learning and to inspire others to utilise this approach within their own realm of practice.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

*“How, in conditions of ignorance, risk and confusion, do managers (and experts) ask those fresh questions otherwise inhibited by their lucrative and comfortable experiences of the past?”* Revans, 1982: 714

In the current climate of risk, insecurity and increasing complexity, the ability to recognise our ignorance so that we might learn, through fresh questions how to maximise current opportunities and learn from the ‘...comfortable experiences of the past’ (above) has become an operational imperative.

Within today’s businesses, the traditional structures and security of tenure which previously enabled a feeling of solidarity and predictability, are vanishing. They are being replaced by fluid and permeable organisational boundaries, so that there is a resultant emphasis upon building networks of relationships which are able to cross and transcend margins and facilitate sustainable learning.

The demands of this high system complexity pose an enormous challenge to the managers of today, creating the risk of vulnerability and isolation within a diminishing space for reflection. With a decreasing space for reflection, the opportunity to question existing modes of action, systems, processes and the assumptions which underlie them, can be lost, leading to an over reliance on the past and inhibiting learning and innovation, just when these are needed most.

Success within this rapidly changing market, demands new modes of enquiry and learning, new epistemological and pedagogical frameworks. There is a need to learn, not just the technical and technological aspects of business, but the skills to enable individuals to negotiate the social and interpersonal aspects of organizational and inter-organizational life, a skill which can be framed as the need to ‘**learn to listen**’. This need is accompanied by the need to ‘**learn to learn**’, in order to negotiate changing roles, relationships and boundaries. This in turn can be framed as the need for a ‘connected knowing’ (Belenky et al, 1973).

All of these demands are positioned within the need for a paradigm which connects academic and workplace domains to create relevant, needs led education and to facilitate greater learner involvement. This issue of involvement can also be extended to business and public enterprise, where traditional formal training methods provide little opportunity for employee inquiry, ownership or creative expression.

Within this paper, I propose that Action Learning provides an opportunity for Business Schools and Universities to employ a framework based on partnership and engagement and the sharing of multiple perspectives to arrive at ‘connected knowing’ (Belenky et al, 1973). As with all paradigm shifts, this opportunity is accompanied by challenges.

Within this paper I seek to illustrate these challenges through an account of practice; practice as a student of Action Learning within a Business School, as a practitioner using Action Learning and as an academic, researching and lecturing within an Action Learning framework within the University. Drawing on this tri-focal experience, I seek to share my reflections on some of the key challenges and many opportunities of Action

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Learning and to inspire others to utilise this approach within their own realm of practice.

## **2. BACKGROUND**

Action Learning is not new to academia. Revans, credited as the founder of Action Learning, had a Chair at the University of Manchester in the 1960s and Casey and Pearce (1977) describe Action Learning as a recognised innovation within the field of management education since 1975.

The closure of the Revans Academy for Action Learning, University of Salford in 2005, left a community of action learners, academics and students without a 'home'. Some of these students and academics were 'adopted' by the newly formed University of Manchester, created through the merger of UMIST and Manchester Victoria University and together with practitioners and additional academics with an interest in action learning, formed an Action Learning community.

In November 2008, this Action Learning Community launched the Revans Academy for Action Learning and Research at Manchester Business School, the University of Manchester. The Academy has evolved to oversee the development of Action Learning as a framework for innovative teaching, pioneering research and the development of workplace learning and organisational improvement.

## **3. CHALLENGES**

### **3.1 Defining action learning**

*“Action learning is a means of development, intellectual, emotional or physical, that requires its subject, through responsible involvement in some real, complex and stressful problem, to achieve intended change sufficient to improve his observable behaviour henceforth in the problem field...  
'Learning-by-doing' may be, perhaps, a simpler description of this process...”*  
(Revans, 1982: 626).

Action learning consistently defies definition in any abbreviated or condensed way and I have observed several of those who ask me what Action Learning is glazing over, long before I have come anywhere near to capturing its essence.

Revans (1982) stated that the day he had to define action learning in words would be the day he would have nothing more to do with it and whilst citing many principles of action learning, preferred to focus upon 'what action learning is not' (Revans, 1998:87).

This lack of definition provides the opportunity for action learning to appeal to a multitude of individuals and situations and in its capacity to 'mean different things to different people' (Weinstein, 1995:32) it has the potential to be sensitive to both the context and the individual. This in turn enables Action Learning to have an extensive and diverse range of application. Its lack of succinct definition provides the opportunity for action learning to be expansive and inclusive, enabling each participant to engage with the process and to arrive at their own interpretations of its significance. Hence, its

meaning can emerge and re-emerge from the intersection of practice, theory and meaning, where meaning is a product of both the individual and the context.

Hence Action Learning provides a method for engagement and change which can be shaped to fit business needed and is sufficiently open ended to allow space for innovation and the emergence of the unexpected.

Furthermore the lack of definition, invites questions about Action Learning itself, applying the principle of the development of ‘questioning insight’ (Revans, 1982) to the very framework.

However, there is also an inherent challenge within this opportunity. Marsick and O’Neil (1999) warn us that Action Learning is a ‘...term itself in danger of becoming a buzz word that means everything and thus nothing’. In its proclivity for diverse interpretation does Action Learning run the risk of generating “...monstrous hybrids” (Jacobs, 1992). Furthermore, without a shared understanding and areas of congruence, how can debate and critique progress?

This is a particular challenge for a Business School such as Manchester, which is positioned within a large University. In this multi-faceted environment of diverse methodological and philosophical paradigms, the wide range of disciplines, interests and contexts can be hard to co-ordinate, and connection and communication across these silos, is itself a challenge. Such contextual complexity places a pressure upon the organisation to differentiate and delineate in order to clarify responsibilities. Yet this quest for clarity can limit the potential for ambiguity and exploration whilst also conflicting with the ethos of action learning and its emphasis upon the dissolution of boundaries (Clark, 2007).

### **3.2 Connecting Communities of Practice**

A key challenge therefore is to find a way of connecting these various communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), in order to enable shared learning and an exploration of boundaries so that they might be extended and spanned.

At Manchester Business School we are seeking to embrace this challenge through a series of exploratory seminars. These seminars have been posed to explore how Action Learning sits alongside other related approaches to development and inquiry, in order to identify areas of congruence, ambiguity and disparity and thereby enhance mutual understanding and shared learning. For our first series of seminars we have chosen to explore how Action Learning resonates with Action Research, Critical Management studies and Appreciative Inquiry.

The first seminar, “Action Learning and Action Research: Interlopers or ‘comrades in adversity’?” saw academics from areas as apparently disparate as astrophysics, aeronautics, nursing, languages, textiles and history, collaborating with members of the academic business community, practitioners utilising an action learning approach and interested lay people, to explore areas of congruence and disparity, between Action Learning and Action Research. Our next seminar seeks to explore the relationship between Action Learning and Critical Management studies by enquiring “Is all Action Learning Critical?”

There is an increasing response to these seminars, both in terms of the numbers of interested parties and the breadth of disciplines to respond. It appears that one of the great opportunities provided through utilising Action Learning, is the opportunity to connect ACROSS disciplinary boundaries, boundaries which are hazardous when seeking epistemological advance. Crossing the realms of science and art, practitioner and academic, Action Learning is emerging within the University as a unifying and connecting framework, capable of drawing together disparate interests to foster partnership and collaboration.

### **3.3 Action Learning as Ethos and Action Learning as Method**

Perhaps one of the reasons why a definition of Action Learning is so elusive is because of the distinction between Action Learning as ethos and Action Learning as method (Pedler, Burgoyne and Brook, 2005).

Whilst Action Learning as ethos - a framework with the values of friendship, participation and learner empowerment at its core - appears to be a widely shared understanding; action learning as an experiential and action focussed method, has multiple understandings and variations in practice.

An additional challenge exists when seeking to promote Action Learning to clients who, whilst espousing the desire for an Action Learning approach, also request clearly defined and predictable outcomes. Whilst many of these clients appear to be attracted to Action Learning as ethos, espousing the desire for emancipation and employee empowerment, they also articulate the need for Action Learning as a method; a method with clearly defined and describable procedures, which can then be taught to others in order to fulfil the promise of target related and sustainable outcomes.

In responding to bids for work underpinned by an Action Learning framework, it appears that procedure and product, are favoured over process and that method is elevated over ethos. In this sense, Action Learning might be viewed as a conflicting philosophy, with a focus which is very much upon the process and journey, rather than upon the destination. Revans highlights the challenge of meeting demands for pre-determined outcomes when he writes, (1983:16)

“...the allocation to each participant of a real-life exercise that is ill-structured and obscure from the outset must encourage in each of them an ability to seek for and to identify those fresh questions likely to open up promising avenues of enquiry...the essence of Action Learning is to pose increasingly insightful questions from an origin of ignorance, risk and confusion.”

With Action Learning, a delineation between ethos and method is not an easy one to make. Its method is informed by its ethos and includes learning from ‘comrades in adversity’, an exploration of the barriers to and opportunities for action, within a climate of equality and a space for reflection and learning.

At the core of Action Learning are what Revans called the three inter-related systems of alpha, beta and gamma (Revans, 1982: 345). Whilst alpha and beta are concerned with strategy, evaluation, audit and trial – the scientific method of Action Learning; system

gamma is the awareness of the ‘...the patterns of thought in the mind of the manager who is influencing events’ (Revans: 1982, 345). System gamma, however is not just self awareness in a therapeutic sense, but an awareness of how the self is influencing the perception and experience of systems alpha and beta, the ‘scientific method’ (ibid). Hence, self awareness, incorporating an awareness of values and motivations, is central to Action Learning, so that ethos and method are closely intertwined.

A key challenge in utilising action learning within a business school, lies in identifying the ‘essence’ of Action Learning sufficiently to identify areas of overlap between the approach and the articulated needs of interested clients, whilst also preserving its potential for an extended epistemology and cross-boundary connection. Its flexibility and context sensitivity creates the opportunity for a person and business centred approach, but this has to be balanced against clear expectations and openness around Action Learning as an approach, its benefits and boundaries.

### **3.4 Questioning the Establishment**

Pedler, Burgoyne and Brook (2005) observed that ‘It is useful to note that action learning emerged in opposition to traditional business school’ and there is an irony in the recent launch of the Revans Academy for Action Learning, given that Revans resigned his Chair at Manchester University amidst negotiations over the new ‘Manchester Business School’. In doing so, he referred to “the victory of the ‘book’ culture of Owens College over the ‘tool’ culture of the Manchester College of Technology, later UMIST (Pedler et al, 2005), expressing his commitment to practice and the practitioner.

With its empowerment of the Action learner and practitioner, over the ideas of experts and teachers, Action Learning has been controversial, challenging the hierarchy of the Academic institution. Bourner and Frost (1996), throw further light on this when they explain that ‘Higher education has traditionally been the home of programmed learning’, the very learning which is questioned by Action Learning.

These are not the only aspects of the Business School modus operandi which could be seen to conflict with the ethos of Action Learning. Whilst Action Learning places the responsibility for the learning and its outcomes with the participants, the traditional academic environment, with a focus upon the degree, is product orientated and requires that students meet pre-determined, externally moderated and validated standards.

Action Learning has a history of usage for practising managers, managers who are in full time employment and utilising Action Learning primarily to improve their performance in the workplace. Revans pioneered Action Learning within the British Coal Mines and NHS (Revans, 1980, 1982, 1998) and it has a tradition of wide utilisation within public services.

### **3.5 The Challenge Of Action Learning On Degree Bearing Programmes**

The utilisation of Action Learning on degree programmes, such as the MSc in Healthcare management, is a relatively new employment of the framework and presents challenges. Within this taught programme, the prime focus of the students is upon obtaining the degree, rather than on learning how to take action within a workplace.

Hence, whilst traditional Action Learning sets are able to focus upon the management concerns and development of their members, the Masters programme is faced with the challenge of academic and external concerns, superimposed upon the set.

However, despite this, these students are still faced with the challenge of learning and of learning how to learn. Furthermore, as students of business the application of their thinking is vital and creates the challenge of dissolving the boundary between work and practice. An action learning approach, through the provision of an action learning set, offers these students the opportunity to meet these challenges through:-

- i. a space for reflection
- ii. the opportunity to develop skills of critical evaluation through the development of questioning insight (q)
- iii. an explorative space in which to connect with peers in support and critique
- iv. the opportunity to discuss the application of theory and concepts to the workplace

Within this context, the course has become the work 'problem' and has provided a focus through which Action Learning can be utilised to improve the quality of students reflection, knowledge sharing and as a means of working to maximise the opportunities provided by the course.

Naftalin (1996) referred to the challenge of using an action learning set within the academic context as a consequence of pressure upon the set to act as a tutorial group and upon the set advisor to act as tutor.

Whilst, at Manchester Business School, we have observed this pressure within the Masters level sets, I would argue that in many ways it is no different from the pressure placed upon **every** set advisor, by set participants, to provide 'p' (programmed knowledge). As with all sets, the set advisor on an academic programme has to ensure that p serves q, either through being a response to questions from the set participants or through functioning to elicit further questions. Central within the role of the set advisor is the need to work to avoid dependency and to ensure that set members take responsibility for determining and maximising their own learning. The goal of avoiding dependency needs to be balanced with awareness that without some knowledge of 'p', it is hard to question or to recognise the need for further 'p': 'q' works in partnership with 'p', not alone. Without a pre-determined syllabus, something which would be anathema to the ethos of Action Learning, access to p can be random and without 'appropriate' and timely 'p', learning can be inhibited.

Perhaps where the tension becomes heightened in the academic context, is through an exaggeration of the power differential between set advisor and set member; this tension has to be carefully managed through seeking to minimise the advisor's positional authority. This needs to be facilitated through framing experience in a way conducive of equality, rather than through seeking to deny or withhold experience and knowledge, which could otherwise usefully serve the purpose of the set. Hence a key challenge of the role has been in aspiring to what Pedler has termed a 'co-equal, a co-educator' (Pedler, 1991: 295). I have been aided in this quest by being so new in my role; this has enabled me to bring my own challenge of working as an aspiring facilitative set advisor to the group and to seek their critique of my contribution and development.

In addition, we have tried to pre-empt the challenge of a demand for the set advisor to act as tutor, by ensuring that the set advisor is a different person to the 'academic tutor'. The academic tutor is a clearly defined role, with responsibility for guiding, advising and supporting the student in achieving their academic goals. The role of the set advisor, is to work with the set to help them develop their questioning skills, reflection and autonomy and to create a positive learning environment which enables these skills to develop.

### **3.6 Efficiency and Effectiveness: Connecting Individual with Wider Systemic Learning**

The current pressure upon higher education is to expand student numbers taught within existing resources. This pressure is operating at a time when our students are demanding more individualised and person centred education. These conflicting pressures create a challenge for the Business School in its quest to provide education which is both needs led and impact maximising, both efficient and effective. Action learning, with its focus upon the individual within the context of their organisation and work related problems provides a means of facilitating person centred education, but it is relatively resource intensive, with the traditional focus of action learning the action learning set, a group of six – eight individuals.

Action learning has the potential for transformative learning across three dimensions:

I – personal learning

WE – learning of the team through the sharing, supporting and challenging of each others learning through the set and the wider workplace/organisational team

THEY – the wider system affected by enquiry, action and learning  
(Clark, 2007)

Within my own PhD study (Clark, 2007) and current evaluative studies of action learning (NHS Institute for Innovation and Improvement, 2008, Clark, 2009) the emergent transformation is, not surprisingly, found to be more prolific on the dimensions of 'I' and 'We'. A key challenge therefore, lies in working to extend the learning of 'I' and 'We' across the wider systemic dimension of They, so that the knowledge flow and sharing occurs across all three dimensions.

Hence a key challenge lies in optimising the energy as the learning spreads further away from the point of initial impact and in maximising and spreading that impact. The creation of a network of action learners is one way in which the energy may be extended and this has been recently initiated in the North West (Trehan, 2009). At the same time, a recent programme run by Ashridge Consulting for the NHS Institute for Innovation and Improvement and evaluated by Manchester Business School, has made progress with this challenge through linking action learners to an audience of National and regional policy makers and through facilitating an action learning network as the basis of a sustainable learning community.

Whilst Revans himself often articulated frustration with academics (Revans, 1982) it is perhaps in working to extend the impact of action learning across the system, that academics have a key role to play. Whilst the individual participants on action learning programmes may wish to maintain a focus upon their own sphere of immediate influence and have little desire to expend energy on the wider system, the academic has a role to play in maximising knowledge transfer. Through connecting with action



learning practitioners, academics can extract the learning and then position within the strategic management and organisational psychology literature to strengthen the linkages and flows between I, We and They. In Manchester Business School we have begun this process through giving Action Learning prominence within the Strategic Management and Leadership research centre, enabling easy linkages with, and exploration of, these themes.

### **3.7 The Challenge of Perspective**

There is a current pressure upon Business Schools to be global leaders in their field, providing world class and world leading education and research. Whilst this is an goal capable of inspiring innovation and excellence, it is perhaps, important to ensure that in fostering external comparisons, we do not omit to be critically self reflective, balancing the outward gaze with a perspective upon internal areas of excellence and areas for improvement.

Business schools which offer Action Learning can take the opportunity to apply its framework to their own modus operandi, fostering communication across silos to enable critique of and reflection upon internal processes and learning. Hence, the challenge lies in applying the learning equation to the learning organisation, questioning and reflection upon existing frameworks, assumptions and learning (p) in order to facilitate learning at a rate equal to, or in excess of the rate of change.

In metaphorically opening its doors to Action Learning, the Business School invites a challenge to established routines, methodologies and assumptions and in doing so invites both an exposure of its own limits to learning and a greater awareness of its own internal strengths.

## **4 OPPORTUNITIES**

So far, I have focussed upon the challenges of utilising Action Learning within the Business School and have mentioned opportunities where they emerge as the mirror image of these challenges. However, there are additional opportunities to emerge when using Action Learning, opportunities both in terms of what can be offered to the clients of the Business School and in terms of the opportunities that arise from applying an Action Learning framework to the Business School itself. In particular I will focus upon Action Learning as a paradigm able to procure learning to listen, learning to learn and listening to the learning/learner.

### **4.1 Learning to listen**

The centrality of the set places skills in listening at the heart of Action Learning. Set members must give each other time to share their experience of work based problems and to raise questions which will enable their colleagues to arrive at possible solutions. In "developing the self by the mutual support of equals" (Revans, 1982: 633) learners are encouraged to develop connection, inter-dependencies and mutuality.

*“It’s so different, it’s a hard thing questioning. Questioning, listening, action learning develops those”* (set member on action learning programme, 2007).

## **4.2 Learning to Learn**

Within the current context of turmoil, the auspices of the Action Learning set provides a welcome space for reflection, a safe space in which defences, and barriers to learning, can surface and be questioned.

The set thereby provides a route for the opening out of subjective experience to examination, comparison and critique, enabling reflection upon both the problem and the barriers to resolution.

Through encouraging reflection and an audit of learning through the study of its impact upon practice, action learning facilitates learning to learn and the provision of transferable, sustainable skills.

In addition through enabling connection with other learners and practitioners and the establishment of what Revans termed ‘comrades in adversity’ (Revans, 1982), Action Learning can create a sustainable community of learners and many sets maintain contact years after the original set has ceased to be a part of any programmed offering.

## **4.3 Listening to the Learner**

The egalitarian nature of the set provides a space in which the learner is empowered to have full responsibility for his/her learning. The learner’s experience is a vital component of the learning ‘syllabus’ and the learner is encouraged to identify their own ‘programmed knowledge’, need for programmed knowledge and questioning insight.

In Action Learning the learner is the expert and has access to the additional expertise of set members. The positioning of action learning within the Business School enables the expertise of a wide cadre of professionals to be available where required, so that the fresh questions which emerge from listening, learning and reflecting can be answered, but in response to the demands of the set and its individual members.

## **4.4 Listening to the Learning**

With the launch of the Revans’ Academy for Action Learning, Manchester Business School has gained a unifying framework for the growing utilisation of Action Learning within business education, postgraduate research and practitioner development.

In today’s current context,

*“...learning cannot be solely the acquisition of fresh programmed knowledge, such as is pursued by teaching institutions, since, in times of change, nobody can say what the morrow will bring forth in order to provide against it. Managers need also to improve their ability to search the unfamiliar!”*  
(Revans, 1982; 25).

Perhaps one of the greatest opportunities provided by Action Learning is the chance for Business Schools to continue to dissolve boundaries between theory and practice,

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connecting with the Businesses of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in order to listen to, and meet, their needs. This creates an opportunity for a reciprocal knowledge flow between the University and the Business World, enabling academics to learn from practitioners and an opening out of perspectives.

In addition, Action Learning provides a framework which can be applied to the University itself. There is nowhere to hide with Action Learning, our assumptions, our boundaries and our ignorance are exposed, providing the opportunity to discover, and listen to, the learning.

## **5. SUMMARY**

Action learning is no longer a simplistic challenge to the academic tradition but a challenging, invigorating and unifying framework, able to connect academics and practitioners in order to secure relevant, innovative and transformational learning for the organisations of today.

The time may be right therefore for a renewed appreciation of Action Learning's potential as a mechanism for connection, enabling reflection, reciprocity, multi-dimensional transformation and person centred learning.

There are many challenges for Action Learning within the Business School and University but the opportunities make meeting this challenge worthwhile.

I hope that this account of practice may have illuminated a few of these.

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