Critical Debates and Challenges in Action Learning: implications for academics and practitioners

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Abstract
Action learning has been a feature of human resource development practice for over 50 years, yet the focus of literature reviews has been less on exploring these emergent debates and challenges in the field than it has been on gathering and exploring accounts of practice and examples of application, often in case study form (Mumford, 1994; Smith and O’Neil, 2003a, 2003b). One exception is a recent review (Cho and Egan, 2009) which has attempted to distinguish between action-oriented, learning-oriented and balanced action learning practices (2009:446). There would appear to be a gap exploring the range of recent literature on these issues, some of which go to the heart of what action learning exists for and what form action learning should take. This article will attempt to address this apparent gap, and highlight some of the key implications for HRD practitioners and academics in the field.
Introduction

In the last 20 years, the literature on action learning has focused on a range of questions, including, inter alia, the need to inject more criticality into the practice of action learning (Fenwick, 2003; Rigg and Trehan, 2004; Reynolds and Vince, 2004; Nicolini et al, 2004; Pedler, 2005; Vince, 2008; Lawless, 2008; Ram and Trehan, 2010) and the allied question of the need to address and engage with emotion and politics in action learning practice (Vince and Martin, 1993; Vince, 2004, 2008) the question of what is meant by “action” in the context of practice (Park, Dickens, Marsick and O’Neil, 1999; Pedler, 2004; Ashton, 2006; Rooke et al, 2007; Fox, 2009) the variety of practice and the issue of whether or not Revans’ original principles have been compromised, and if they have in what way this matters (Willis, 2004; Pedler, Burgoyne and Brook, 2005; Bourner and Simpson, 2007; Dilworth, 2010) and the extent to which action learning focuses on individual or collective problems and the implications of this choice for organisations (Donnenberg and De Loo, 2004; Vince, 2004; Pedler, Burgoyne and Brook, 2005; Rigg, 2006; Brook, 2009).

Why do these questions and challenges matter? Three reasons may be advanced. Firstly because action learning is now widely accepted as a powerful learning and development approach, used across the world, and in nearly every sector, including business, the third sector, education, healthcare and government, confusions in practice may cause difficulties, especially for “novice” action learners (Dilworth and Boshyk 2010; Waddill, Banks and Marsh, 2010; Johnson, 2010). Secondly, in order to talk meaningfully to each other about the practice we need to be clear as to what it is and is not, and the criteria essential to action learning (Revans, 1998; Willis, 2004; Pedler, Burgoyne and Brook, 2005; Johnson, 2010).
Thirdly, action learning in all organisations, but especially perhaps in publicly funded organisations needs to prove its worth and to have organisational as well as individual impact (Rigg, 2006).

The remaining sections of this paper are structured in the following way. Firstly, the paper will address the definitional dispute in action learning and the question of the variety of practice in action learning. Secondly, the question of what is meant by “action” in the context of practice is considered, for example, the extent to which action learning focuses on individual or collective problems, and the implications of these choices for both organisations and individuals. Thirdly, this paper will explore some of the literature on critical action learning and its practice, and consider the contrary position of those who uphold the conventional or classical approach to action learning, which links back to the problems associated with definition and Revans’ original conceptualisation of the practice.

Definition and variants in action learning

The problem of what is meant by the term “action learning” persists, remains a challenge and is still evident in recent literature. Pedler (1997) remarks that “Action learning may be a simple idea, but only at the philosophical level” (1997:248). Marsick and O’Neil’s (1999) observation remains accurate: “The very simplicity of its core ideas leaves it open to many interpretations. Revans, often considered the ‘father’ of Action Learning, typically decries models that stray too far from his conceptualization, but healthy experimentation and critique help it grow” (1999:160). Johnson (2010) alluded to the practice of action learning being shrouded in obscurity even from its earliest beginnings.

Part of the difficulty, as Pedler (1997) and others have observed is that Revans did not offer a single definition; he defined only “what action learning is not” (1998: 89 et seq). There are
differences in approach in different parts of the world. There is a US model, for example, which is much more structured than its European / UK counterpart, as evidenced in the work of Marquardt (2004) and Dilworth (2010).

Conventional or classical action learning adheres to certain key principles. These principles, derived from the consistencies in Revans’ writings, have been summarised as follows:

- The requirement for action as a basis for learning;
- Profound personal development resulting from reflection upon action;
- Working with problems (no right answers) not puzzles (susceptible to expert knowledge);
- Problems being sponsored and aimed at organisational as well as personal development;
- Action learners working in sets of peers (“comrades in adversity”) to support and challenge each other;
- The search for fresh questions and “q” (questioning insight) takes primacy over access to expert knowledge or “p”).

Pedler, Burgoyne and Brook, 2005:58-9

Simpson and Bourner (2007) updated Revans’ original list of “what action learning is not”, and to that list (which included such practices as job rotation, simulations and case studies) they added self-directed teams, coaching, action research, seminars, problem-based learning and experiential learning. A potential point of agreement in relation to the problem of the lack of an agreed definition of action learning would appear to be the need to have, in Simpson and Bourner’s words, “greater explicitness in articulating personal understandings of the term “action learning” (in order to) help clarify similarities and differences and the reasons for the differences” (2007:183). This suggests a solution to the problem Revans left us with by refusing to provide a once-and-for-all definition of his idea.

The question here for practitioners might be, does definition matter? Revans himself pointed to management development exercises “passed off” as action learning which he simply could not recognise as such (1991:14-15). Pedler (1991) suggests that it is not just apologists for
action learning who will lose out if the process is reduced to “an empty technique”; the implication clearly being that how action learning is practised matters (1991: xxii).

Variants of action learning have proliferated in the last 15 years. Pedler, Burgoyne and Brook (2005) and Cho and Egan (2009) have alluded to some of these variants. They include business-driven action learning, auto action learning, action coaching, self-managed action learning, virtual action learning, network action learning and critical action learning. Dilworth (2010) a staunch advocate of cleaving to Revans’ original precepts has, notwithstanding argued that “There are many expressions of action learning that have moved on and can represent an advance on Revans’ thinking in some areas” (2010:5). The example Dilworth draws on is simulations, which is one of the learning vehicles Revans originally lists as “not action learning”, but which Dilworth suggests is more acceptable now because of technological advancements which make modern simulations much more like real life. Gabrielsson, Tell, and Politis (2010) offer an example of a recent attempt to develop business simulation exercises using principles and ideas drawn from action learning.

Some of the variants listed above, such as, for example, auto action learning, appear to challenge the central tenets of Revans’ classical principles, and have been both discussed and defended in the literature (Learmonth and Pedler, 2004; Pedler, Burgoyne and Brook, 2005, Simpson and Bourner, 2007). Given that this is the case, the extent to which Revans’ classical principles (RCP) have been compromised persists as a key question for both practitioners and academics.

Harrison (2009) asserts that “…I found the concept to have a poorly tested evidence base and identified wide variations in the way it is interpreted and implemented” (2009:122-3). It may be argued that if we are not clear as to what action learning practice looks like we lose our ability to talk meaningfully about it and practise it as originally intended. Cunningham, for
example, argued that “if any tired old course puts in a bit of project work in it and calls itself “action learning”, and if we don’t challenge this, we are colluding with unacceptable practice” (Cunningham, 1996:43). Pedler, Burgoyne and Brook (2005) highlighted this continuing problem of definition in reporting on a piece of research designed to assess the growth and spread of the practice. We suggested that “If all variants and practices which are called “action learning” are accepted as such, then, although we can’t put numbers on it, the practice appears to be spreading and growing…But has the Revans’ concept become diluted in wider use? Has the spread of action learning been at the cost of eroding Revans’ classical principles?” (2005:58)

It may be reasonable to ask, therefore, to what extent must practitioners and academics be tied to Revans’ critical markers as advanced by Willis (2004). Is it in fact a strength to see such variations in interpretation and practice, or should action learners be “guardians of the flame”, ensuring that, for example, the set remains “at the cutting edge of every action learning programme” so that sets can provide “verifiable evidence of deliberated achievement” as Revans’ himself required (Revans, 1998:10). Conversely, it may be argued that action learning has spread, and become adaptable and flexible precisely because it is not tied to any particular syllabus.

The question of “action” in action learning

The question of what exactly is meant by “action” in terms of the practice of action learning remains a key concern for practitioners and academics. Yeo and Nation (2010) have argued that “the distinctiveness of action learning can be evaluated at the level of action produced by organisational members” (2010:182). Revans (1998) required that action on “urgent problems” must carry with it “significant penalty for failure” (1998:8) so the action which

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1 See below for a consideration of Willis’s (2004) contribution to the debate.
occurs in the real world has to matter both to the individual and the organisation. How proponents of action learning themselves define action and what action learners do to realise more informed action was debated in 1999 in a series of letters between Park, Dickens and Marsick and O’Neil (1999). A key point at issue was whether it (action) was any kind of unmediated action, or even unintended experience (Park, 1999:236). Having defined three schools of action learning, the scientific (which is firmly based on Revans’ precepts and has a bias toward learning), the experiential (which is rooted in Kolb’s learning cycle) and the critical reflection school which argues for “Critical reflection which can also go beyond the individual participant’s underlying assumptions and can lead specifically to the examination of organizational norms” (Marsick & O’Neil: 1999: 163). Marsick and O’Neil sought to clarify their position regarding action as follows:

“In all three schools, people are encouraged to take action to investigate their thinking (action) may occur within the team as participants work toward problem solution…sometimes action involves repeated cycles of problem re-formulation, action, reflection, re-assessment and new action. Sometimes action is limited to a few steps…and sometimes action involves lengthy, extensive implementation steps” (1999:237).

In an attempt to articulate an understanding of the “action” in action learning, Ashton (2006) asserts that action lies “in the relationships between actors, actions, activities and systems; exploration of these compels us to understand the concept of action and activity more fully” (2006:25). However action is defined, a key concern, as Lawless (2008) points out is “the relationship between individual action and action at an organisational level” (2008:117).

Rooke et al (2007) are less interested in what action is taken than the question of why it is taken, although they do distinguish between action inside the set and action taken outside the set. They emphasise the point that action is the servant of learning; it serves as a motivator for
learning. Action is not the aim of action learning but is an input rather than an output (2007:122). Burgoyne (2002) had previously made the point that if we accept that learning is key in all of this, then consideration needs to be given to the nature of the world to be learnt about in action learning, and that it is ontological rather than epistemological questions which should come to the fore in developing the theory and practice of action learning (2002:1-15). Cho and Egan (2009) cite a number of authors in support of the view that striking a balance between action and learning is “one of the greatest challenges to participants in action learning” (2009:432). In their systematic review of the literature they explore the extent to which action and / or learning are emphasised or balanced in action learning literature published over a seven year period, and conclude that only 19 out of 50 studies could be classified as “balanced” action learning. Half of the studies they analysed were much more learning oriented, in which action learning is used much more for personal than for organisational development. This brings us to the question of where the focus of the “action” in action learning should lie – is it to be individually focused, organisationally focused or both?

The present writer found that in the context of the NHS 85 per cent of respondents to a survey were working on an individually determined problem; a finding which confirmed earlier research into action learning practice across a variety of sectors (Pedler, Burgoyne and Brook, 2005)2. Rigg (2007) has stated that in the past twenty years a lot of action learning attention has shifted in the direction of individual development and professional practice, especially, though not exclusively, in public sector organisations. Rigg (2007) states: “With notable exceptions (see examples in Pedler et al, 2005 and Edmonstone and Flanagan’s account of Stoke City’s multi-agency development, 2007) investment has predominantly focused on potential for individual development…the tendency has been to invest in

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2 Respondents were either commissioners, designers or facilitators of action learning programmes in the NHS. There were 95 respondents in total. 21 of these were interviewed in greater depth about their practice.
individual development and hope for a “sum of the parts” effect on organisational performance” (2008:106-7). Elsewhere she argues that a major problem with action learning as presently practised is that it is “often presented as a dichotomous choice between benefit for the collective “we” or the individual “I” – either it can be used to enhance organisation capacity and further organisation performance or its purpose is for the benefit of the individual participants” (2007:105).

But some issues are difficult to categorise, and the divide between personal development and organisational development can sometimes appear to be very grey. Where, for example, would one place the issue of dealing with gender or race issues in the workplace? Rigg and Trehan (2004) describe the tackling of a race discrimination issue in a set meeting which might be categorised as a personal development issue, but the tackling of this issue may be said to have implications for equality and diversity awareness on a much larger, possibly organisation-wide, scale. The question then becomes how can this learning be organisationally shared and understood, a point which Vince (2004) stresses with his emphasis on the value of interconnectivity and networking between sets. Moreover, Revans himself understood that personal development – the work of the self – was part of the organisational development endeavour, but this was itself an evolved position. Do we lose something important in action learning by focusing solely on personal or self-development issues? Boydell and Blantern (2007) and Rigg (2007) place an emphasis on the potential for action learning to advance organisational development in the public services (and elsewhere) through individual stakeholding in collectively determined problems that affect all, and it may be suggested that personal development need not be diminished by this re-focusing, though the effort of riding these two horses at once can be extremely challenging (Pedler 1997). The heart of the argument is expressed in Revans’ principle of insufficient mandate, “those unable to change themselves cannot change what goes on around them” (1998: 85).
But again, as Rigg (2007) rightly asserts, in a public sector beset with wicked problems which cross boundaries: “Action learning sets provide an opportunity to examine legitimate differences and the limitations as well as the possibilities for effective partnership working” (2007:107).

Rigg (2007) argues that the separation between the “we” and “I” is not helpful, particularly if we are involved in action learning to build organisational capability and capacity. Moreover, it is hard to “sell” individualised, personal development in the NHS or any other part of the public sector, not least because, as Rigg contends, it becomes hard to defend. She concludes therefore that: “In a public services context, and particularly when public money is being spent, it is hard to argue that there is any point to action learning if there are not results for citizens’ lives. Individual development for its own sake is a luxury. The focus has to be on the organisation, if not the wider system” (2007:107).

The question as to whether or not action learning should focus on the individual or the collective is not a new issue, but it persists as practice (especially in the public sector) and challenges the idea that personal development should flow from engagement with organisational problems (Pedler, 1997; Flowers & Reeve, 2002; Vince and Martin, 1993; Willmott, 1994; Coughlan & Coughlan, 2004; Vince, 2004; Donnenberg and De Loo, 2004; Rigg, 2007; Cho and Egan, 2009). Donnenberg and De Loo (2004) observed that such a finding may not be so surprising given that only successful programmes discussed from the viewpoint of the set adviser seem to be evident in much action learning literature (2004:181). Pedler (1997) drew attention to the dilemma in refuting the criticism that action learning is too centred on the individual manager operating as “‘heroic change agent’ in the face of an organized conspiracy of inaction” (1997:251). He asserts that: “An individualistic focus… limits the growth of collective understanding and competence in organizations” (1997:251).
Despite a repeated emphasis in the literature on the benefits of interconnectivity, networking and focusing on the collective there is evidence of a considerable amount of action learning in the public sector which does have a strongly individualistic focus (Rigg, 2007; Pedler, Burgoyne and Brook, 2005; Brook, 2009). Yet Revans was clear that action learning should have an outward facing approach without necessarily neglecting the personal development needs of those individuals engaged with it (1983, 1998:80-83). Flowers and Reeve (2002) observed that managers on their masters programme who were engaging in action learning missed the excitement of large group learning experiences; they therefore created what they termed the knowledge fusion method. This was a “whole group” action learning approach; “a combination of traditional action learning and open space technology but extended beyond traditional constraints by the addition of web based virtual communities” (2002:31). Donnenberg and De Loo (2004) suggest that organizational development outcomes from action learning “can be negligible”, and that the reasons for this, may include, inter alia, the “mindsets” that are brought to it (for example, the view that action learning is for single managers for the improvement of skills); that despite instances of network action learning, the connections with the wider organisation are limited or even non-existent; that there is too little discussion of (and learning from) action learning “failures” and that action learning is not repeated enough in organizations to become “embedded” (2004: 167-184). Moreover, there are practical difficulties in focusing upon individual problems. As Dilworth (2010) remarks, they can be “uneven in their difficulty” and more importantly other members of the set do not have a vested interest in them; they are ultimately “someone else’s concern” (2010:14).

For those who see action learning as merely a tool for organisational problem solving Raelin issues a clear refutation. He argues that “solving the problem is fine, but it isn’t as crucial that
there be problem resolution as much that there be learning from experience” (2008:85).

Revans’ exchange options included the prospect of a participant “examin(ing) afresh some aspect of his or her own job” (1998:21-2). He did not regard collectively determined problems as the only source of problems suitable for action learning.

**Critical versus classical action learning?**

One of the most interesting and potentially far-reaching debates to have arisen in the literature concerns the value of injecting criticality into action learning practice. Different meanings attach to the term “critical”, but in describing critical action learning, Rigg and Trehan (2004) argue that “critical thinking is intertwined with the use and generation of critical theory” (2004:151). The kind of critical thinking which critical action learners wish to promote requires the application of critical theory, the better to “help the action learner stand outside the prevailing social or organisational situation in order to see how it could be different and changed for the better” (Pedler, 2005:3). The debate has its origins in articles published nearly 20 years ago which called for the establishment of a form of critical action learning (a term coined by Willmott) which could harness critical theory in order to challenge organisational norms, values and practices (Thorpe and McLaughlin, 1993; Willmott, 1997). These authors had noted the differences between traditional management education and action learning and Willmott had observed that in engaging with the struggles of individual learners, action learning had the capacity to “open up to inspection the darker aspects of organisational life” (1997:170).

In terms of practice, critical action learning stresses the idea of critical questioning and offering up challenges to existing power relations. Vince (2008) describes a number of distinguishing features of critical action learning, including the linking of questioning insight

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3 Revans argued that there were four principal exchange options for designing action learning programmes, including a familiar problem in a familiar setting (1998:21)
to complex emotions, unconscious processes and relations and a more active facilitation role than that required by conventional action learning. This latter is a key distinction; the idea that critical action learning lays much more emphasis upon the role of an expert facilitator in stark contrast to Revans’ expressed scepticism toward experts of all sorts, and the notion of a long-term facilitator for action learning in particular (Revans, 1998). Rigg (2006) makes the case for what she terms “bilingualism” in executing the role of facilitator (2006:199). In essence, she takes the position that there is value to be had in shifting the balance between process and expert facilitation “in the sense that facilitators, especially in a public sector context, speak both a public policy language as well as that of learning and development” (2006:200). For Rigg, the ultimate value is a facilitator who is skilled enough to combine these twin capabilities and who becomes able, potentially at any rate, “to generate knowledge about the wider organisation or wider system they are working with” (2006:op cit).

The literature on critical action learning has more recently focused on issues of practice. Vince (2004) has argued that there is much to be gained from advancing action based approaches which are social, situated in work and which challenge existing power relations by subjecting current practice to critical questioning. One of his key arguments is that action learning can become too inward facing and can therefore lack a wider impact; one of the reasons for this is a failure to “fully explore the organisational dynamics that surrounds (the set) and particularly the emotions and politics that are mobilised both inside and outside the set” (2004:64). His argument is for interconnectivity; a wider and deeper engagement with other sets, and the development of connections “into projects that have a widely agreed organizational currency and legitimacy” (2004:66). In developing this argument, he draws upon the work of Nicolini et al whose efforts in developing reflection action learning sets (RALS) in the NHS “builds in the ability to mobilize dialogue between sets” (2004:72) though the authors acknowledged the difficulties (and indeed failures) in so doing. As
indicated above, one of Vince’s most significant contributions is in focusing attention upon
the impact of emotion and politics on organizational learning and action learning. His concept
of the “politics of imagined stability” illuminates the problem of having to deal with real-
world and real-organisation “diverse, contradictory and / or confused identities” (2004:66).
More recently, Vince has developed a model (based on case studies of NHS based
participants) of ‘learning inaction’ wherein participants in action learning sets also have
(conscious and unconscious) knowledge, fantasies and perceptions about when it is
emotionally and politically expedient to refrain from action and when to avoid collective
action (2008: 63-78). Lawless (2008) draws attention to this practice of “learning inaction”
and explores the relationship between the organisation and the individual in her practice of
critical action learning. She also points out the common concern which conventional and
critical action learning both share, which is with emancipatory action within the organisation,
though critical action learning is more explicitly concerned with exploring the power
relations which influence sets (Lawless, 2008:119).

Fenwick (2003) argues that this emancipatory potential could be “better realised by deriving
issues from workers’ interests and daily learning experiences, and using more critically
oriented, democratic “power with” facilitation that critically views its own role” (2003:630).
Fenwick is arguing that facilitators should not lead the set (a point of agreement with Revans)
and that they should “work alongside learners for mutual growth” (2003:629).

Rigg and Trehan (2004) added convincing illustrations of critical action learning practice to
the literature and argued that critical theory could be “mobilized and applied in the process of
understanding and changing interpersonal and institutional practices” (2004:149). The
practice of critical action learning poses difficulties in the workplace, most of which are
acknowledged by critical management educators. Once a manager begins to question their
taken-for-granted beliefs and theories-in-use they can, as Lawless (2008) points out “begin to
feel isolated from his or her community” (2008:127). The practice can potentially be career limiting. However the same criticism may be levelled against conventional action learning. As Pedler (1996) pointed out the practice of questioning and challenging which goes on in sets can prove a step too far for some organisations. He quoted a manager who re-framed Revans’ original quotation thus: “In my company, doubt ascending speeds retribution from above” (1996:23).

Ram and Trehan (2010) have presented a conceptual and empirical synthesis of critical action learning and have shown how critical action learning has the potential to deal with the emotions, power relations and tensions in business and organisational life. Their article focused on critical action learning with a group of African-Caribbean entrepreneurs. Ram and Trehan (2010) suggest that “Critical action learning is a development of conventional action learning (my italics) because it aims to promote a deepening of critical thinking on the daily realities of participants; key to this process is an emphasis on collective as well as individual reflection” (2010:417). However in an earlier paper, Ram and Trehan (2009) acknowledge that it is “not clear whether critical action learning constitutes an incremental development of, or a radical departure from, its Revanseque predecessors” (2009:305).

The views of those who might see key features of critical action learning practice as a radical departure are perhaps best exemplified by Willis (2004) who argues that action learning practice needs to be firmly rooted in the Revans’ classical principles summarised above (Pedler, Burgoyne & Brook, 2005).

It is proposed by Willis (2004) in her now classic article, that action learners need to uphold a Revans’ “gold standard” which is based on that author’s distillation of 23 critical markers of action learning also derived from Revans’ writings. She posits a continuum of action learning

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4 The original quotation is “Doubt ascending speeds wisdom from above”
practice, with practices which are “less like” action learning and which include some of the practices developed by critical action learners, such as ongoing facilitation and expert input and argues for practices which are “more like” action learning on the basis that they are self-organising and evolutionary in their features and practice and in terms of their adherence to Willis’s critical markers. (2004:15-18).

However, the model is not without its difficulties and flaws. Action learning may be said to be a context sensitive, fluid approach, “each application…a new accomplishment and a fresh performance” (Pedler, 1997: 248). This being the case, why must it always take the same form? Are departures from some of Revans classical principles always to be treated as heretical? It could be argued that given that action learning has taken some new directions it should be considered an evolving practice. Willis’s rules cover engagement, operation and individual participation. Should action learning be thus codified? Moreover, are all these principles equal in weight and significance? For some critics, there will be a question mark over the assembling of Revans’ “characteristic assumptions” as he termed them and their translation by Willis into actual rules of practice (1998:3-et seq). Could it be that by recasting these assumptions as rules we run the risk of turning Revans’ work into some form of purist ideology? Revans eschewed the easy definition and the idea of codification, and was much more likely to refer people to “The ABC” if they wanted written guidance (1991:xxii)\(^5\). Moreover, the rules (and indeed some of the original “assumptions”) are not always easy to interpret. Even those rules which most practitioners would regard as clearly embodying action learning practice, such as the need to work in small, cohesive sets do not always fit with Revans own practice. The Hospital Internal Communication (HIC) project, which Revans led in late 1960’s did not apply this central principle (1998:36). Revans only makes this, and other “characteristic assumptions” explicit many years later.

\(^5\) Revans (1998) ABC of Action Learning, London: Lemos & Crane
These criticisms notwithstanding, Coghlan and Coughlan (2010) argue that Willis’s critical markers should be adopted in order to provide guidelines for assessing the quality of action learning research (2010:202). Johnson (2010) has proposed a framework for what he terms the ethical practice of action learning in order to “protect the reputation of action learning against predatory individuals” (2010:270). His framework sets out essential and desirable characteristics in its practice, nearly all of which are rooted in Revans’ original principles, such as the participation of a facilitator for novices to action learning (2010:268). But he acknowledges that “a wholesale adoption of Revans’ epistemology would create a solipsistic canon incapable of reinventing itself” (2010:271).

Conclusion
Some implications of the foregoing may be summarised as follows:

The lack of a single, agreed definition still causes difficulties, especially for those new to action learning, but it may also be considered a benefit: action learning becomes protean, flexible and context-sensitive; surely one of its author’s intentions. Revans wrote “Since it is less structured (than other approaches) like time and space themselves, it is available to all persons and may be all things to all people” (1998:103). Given that action learning has travelled in some new directions it should now be recognised as an evolving practice. But it is important for practitioners and others to take heed of Simpson and Bourner’s advice - that they be “explicit in their personal understandings of the term” and in so doing help practitioners to make informed choices about practice and assist academics in sense-making, especially in their research (2007:183).

The focus on individually determined, as opposed to collectively determined problems remains a point at issue, especially, though not exclusively, in the UK public sector. Much of the literature points practitioners toward a re-assertion of emphasis upon the collective,
including more interconnectivity and networking in action learning practice so as to aid organisation-wide learning.

Critical action learning is now a practice rather than a purely theoretical construct. In becoming a practice it raises practical and conceptual questions in terms of the implications for action learning practitioners of questioning and challenging organisational practices, power relations and norms, in addressing and dealing with politics and emotions within and without sets, in terms of making use of much more active expert facilitators and arguably in terms of balancing the ratio of P (programmed instruction) to QI (questioning insight).\(^6\)

Given the varieties of practice that are now in evidence, it will be interesting to see where and how action learning develops into the future. There is no reason to suppose the proliferation of forms will necessarily end with these particular formulations so there may be yet more expressions of action learning for practitioners to consider into the future.

\(^6\) As set out in Revans’ famous equation \(L = P + Q\) (1998:4)
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