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Abstract *Action Learning draws its roots from different philosophies of learning and change, which in turn, influence its design and practice. This article identifies common factors and differences among three different 'schools' of practice (Scientific, Experiential and Critical Reflection). It then distinguishes Action Learning from the other action approaches in this volume.*

A colleague who participated in a recent conference—advertised as a showcase of Action Learning—commented that 'the term itself is in danger of becoming a buzz word that means everything and thus nothing' (Yorks, 1997). The programs presented bore little resemblance to one another, or to Action Learning as defined by its originators, as we demonstrate in this article. For example, in one program a bank involved learners actively in their training through role plays, simulations and other experiential learning activities. In a utility, staff of a reorganized training department did performance consulting, coaching and problem solving instead of offering courses, and called this Action Learning. In a third example, an oil company ran a workshop for intact teams in which participants applied Senge's (1990) five disciplines (personal mastery, shared vision, systems thinking, mental models and team learning) to back-home problems. A fourth example involved several companies that designed training around physical activities, commonly called outward bound experiences, such as white water rafting. Finally, an executive education course included a project component that it then called Action Learning.

Scholars might not agree fully on the nature of Action Learning, but they probably would be united in their judgment that none of the above programs truly qualifies as such if these descriptions are fully accurate. There are commonalities in Action Learning, as illustrated in Table 1 of this issue's Preface. None the less, we also find important differences in the way in which Action Learning is implemented. In this article, we set out a definition that seems common to most people who espouse it. We then describe three somewhat different faces of Action Learning in practice (O'Neil,

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1999). We discuss differences in the approach each school might take to the common case that has been laid out on p. 122 of the Preface to this volume. We compare Action Learning to other action technologies, and conclude with some perspectives on its value in relationship to them.

Defining Action Learning: Three Schools of Practice

'One of the problems of describing Action Learning is that it means different things to different people' (Weinstein, 1995: 32). 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. None the less, without some consensus on key features, it is difficult to compare it to other action technologies. What is its essence?

Revans (1982), Pedler (1997) and Mumford (1997) have compiled volumes that speak authoritatively to cumulative experience with Action Learning. Revans defined it as follows:

> Action learning is a means of development, intellectual, emotional or physical that requires its subjects, through responsible involvement in some real, complex and stressful problem, to achieve intended change to improve their observable behavior henceforth in the problem field. (Revans, 1982: 626–7)

Pedler's (1991) definition is often referenced:

> Action learning is an approach to the development of people in organizations which takes the task as the vehicle for learning. It is based on the premise that there is no learning without action and no sober and deliberate action without learning . . . The method . . . has three main components—people, who accept the responsibility for taking action on a particular issue; problems, or the tasks that people set themselves; and a set of six or so colleagues who support and challenge each other to make progress on problems. (Pedler, 1991: xxii–xxiii)

Despite agreement about core features, we find that there are different schools of thought on the practice of Action Learning. One way of explaining these variations is through a look at the theoretical underpinnings that are either explicitly advocated or implicitly reflected in implementation. O'Neil (1999) proposes four such schools of thought based on her review of the literature, and on interviews with practitioners in the United States, England and Sweden: Scientific, Experiential, Critical Reflection and Tacit. In this article, we discuss three of these schools that we find relevant to the common case laid out on p. 122 of the Preface.

We have eliminated the Tacit School in our discussion of responses to the common case. In the Tacit School, people are expected to learn incidentally when they work on real problems. GE's programs are representative of this school of thought (Dotlich and Noel, 1998). Learning from experience is not as intentionally designed into the program, as is the case for the other three schools. By contrast, the other three schools typically advocate the use of a Learning Coach and intentional use of strategies to help people to learn from their project work.

We use the typology in this chapter (Table 1) to describe alternative perspectives

Table 1 Theoretical schools of Action Learning

Category of analysis	Scientific School	Experiential School	Critical Reflection School
Theory	Scientific method	Experiential learning	Critical reflection
Interpreters/ advocates	Revans (1978, 1981, 1982)	McGill & Beaty (1992); Mumford (1989)	Marsick (1990); Pedler (1991)
Learning Coach	(1)	X	X
Reflection	X	X	X
Critical reflection	Not as evident	Not as evident	X
Teams	X	X	X
Real work for project	X	X	X
Focus on team process	(2)	X	X
Questioning insight	X	X	X
Programmed knowledge	(3)	X	X
Just in time learning	X	X	X
Individual problem	X	X	(4)
Team problem	Not as evident	X	X

Notes

(1) 'there is a role for a supernumerary (set advisor) in the early days of the set, to help the five or so fellows find their feet in this somewhat artificial venture, by encouraging them to exchange their experiences at the periodic meetings in accordance with an intelligible programme' (Revans, 1978).

(2) Revans (1978) explicitly says that Action Learning 'is not group dynamics', but also refers to a need for participants to be involved in the 'collective social process of the set'.

(3) 'this does not imply that Action Learning rejects all formal instruction; it merely recognises that, however necessary such instruction may be, it is by no means sufficient' (Revans, 1978).

(4) Participants may have individual projects, but group or team projects is the norm (O'Neil and Marsick, 1994; Pedler, 1996).

on Action Learning, but it is wise to keep in mind that these schools do not 'officially' exist in practice. O'Neil (in progress) has created this typology to contrast similarities and differences among the 'faces' of Action Learning, and to build theory about its implementation.

'Scientific' School of Action Learning

O'Neil identifies those whose work is based on Revans (1982) as the Scientific School of Action Learning. Probably because Revans began his professional career as a physicist, he based his thinking on the scientific method. He conceptualized Action Learning as a model of problem solving in three stages which he called Systems Alpha, Beta and Gamma (Sutton, 1997). System Alpha is analogous to a situation analysis. The learners must understand the system within which the problem resides, which involves examining: the nature of the value system of the person and system as a whole; the external system which affects the decision being made; and the internal system in which the manager works.

System Alpha involves the structured interplay of these three components in

problem definition (Revans, 1970, 1981, 1982; MacNamara and Weekes, 1982). System Alpha overlaps with System Beta, which entails the negotiation and implementation of a solution. System Beta involves the following stages: survey, hypothesis, experiment, audit, and review (Revans, 1970, 1982, 1987). Revans (1978) equates the steps of System Beta with the learning process—'recognition, prima facie acceptance, rehearsal, verification, conviction' (p. 14).

System Gamma refers to the mental pre-disposition that the manager brings to the situation. The manager is continually checking his expectations of what should be happening against what is actually happening. Insofar as he is able to identify the discrepancies between what he first took to be the condition and what experience suggests that the condition actually was, and insofar as he is able to change his perception accordingly, we may say that the manager is learning (Revans, 1970: 161).

In practice, this form of Action Learning shares many features in common with action research, but it is intentionally biased toward learning. Questioning is central to Revans' (1982, 1989) learning theory, which he formulates as Learning = Programmed knowledge from the past + Questioning insight (L = P + Q). Questioning insight occurs when people question their direct experience (Morris, 1991). Revans (1989) describes it as 'intuition, things crossing the mind, insight' (p. 102). Programmed knowledge is 'expert knowledge, knowledge in books, what we are told to do because that is how it has been done for decades' (Weinstein, 1995: 44). Revans holds that the key to learning is in finding the right question to ask. Questions that help people get started along this path include the following: 'What are we trying to do? What is stopping us from doing it? What can we do about it?' (Revans, 1978: 17).

'Experiential' School of Action Learning

Many proponents of Action Learning see Kolb's experiential learning cycle as its theoretical base (Lessem, 1991; McGill and Beaty, 1992; McLaughlin and Thorpe, 1993; Mumford, 1994). O'Neil identifies these advocates as the Experiential School of Action Learning. Despite the views held by the proponents of this school of thought, Revans disagrees with the choice of Kolb as a theory base. When asked, 'Does the ubiquitous Kolbian cycle accurately reflect your view on Action Learning?', Revans (1995) replied, 'No, it most certainly does not' and went on to speak about his adaptation of Roger Bacon's work to produce System Beta (p. 7).

In Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle, action, reflection, theory and practice are of equal importance. In Action Learning, for proponents of this school, the starting point for learning is action (McLaughlin and Thorpe, 1993). Members reflect on experience with the support of others, followed by further action, in order to change—rather than simply repeat—previous patterns. Action Learning enables learning in each stage of the experiential learning cycle (Bunning, 1992; McGill and Beaty, 1992).

Members in the Experiential School typically use a design that 'ensure[s] that the amount of attention given to learning is higher than it is in the normal accidental and informal task and learning experience' (Mumford, 1991: 9). Learning is the reason for the Action Learning meeting. Legitimacy and formalization of events over an extended period of time with consistent team membership—as well as explicit

discussion of learning processes and achievements—serve to reinforce the learning intention (McGill and Beaty, 1992; Mumford, 1991). Action Learning programs help create the ability to learn how to learn in a number of ways. For example, time is scheduled for learning reviews at each meeting. Members review the projects, their own learning process, and relevant issues that emerge from group dynamics and the work of others. Members might keep learning logs, or negotiate personal development plans and learning agreements (Mumford, 1996).

Proponents of the Experiential School also agree with Revans' L = P + Q equation (Inglis, 1994; McGill and Beaty, 1992; Mumford, 1995; Weinstein, 1995) and, in some cases, have developed it further. 'Q' and 'P' are mutually dependent parts of an Action Learning program. Inglis (1994) adds 'Implementation' (I) to Revans' equation (L = P + Q + I) because action must be taken, not just recommended. Mumford sees more than one opportunity for questioning, and therefore, has revised the equation: Q(1) + P + Q(2) = L. Mumford (1995) explains his thinking as follows: 'The most effective learning is driven by the need to resolve a managerial problem Q(1). This leads to the acquisition of relevant knowledge (P)—which then stimulates the identification of further management opportunities Q(2)' (p. 40).

'Critical Reflection' School of Action Learning

The Critical Reflection School of Action Learning holds that the kind of reflection found in the Experiential School is useful, but not sufficient. They believe that participants also need to reflect on the assumptions and beliefs that shape practice. To explain critical reflection, we draw on a definition proposed by Jack Mezirow (1990, 1991), that is, 'assessment of the validity of the presuppositions of one's meaning perspectives, and examination of their sources and consequences' (1990: xvi).

Taking time to reflect can be powerful, and critical reflection can be more powerful because attention is directed to the root of the problem (O'Neil and Marsick, 1994). Although it takes place less frequently, Mezirow points out that critical reflection can transform perspectives. People recognize that their perceptions may be flawed because they are filtered through unexamined views, beliefs, attitudes and feelings inherited from one's family, school and society. Flawed perceptions distort one's understanding of problems and situations.

Practitioners in this school describe the process and results of critical thinking in different ways. Weinstein (1995) talks about participants examining what they believe and value, and how they are changing and moving, and gaining a better understanding of their own insights. She feels that, when critical reflection occurs, the process may be deeply disturbing for those who do not want to change existing structures, status or beliefs. Rohlin (1993) and Marsick (1990) speak of bringing real issues to the fore and subjecting them to scrutiny—allowing participants to call into question the rationale underlying their actions and to examine problems from multiple perspectives. Re-formulation of the presenting problem commonly occurs when people uncover misperceptions, norms and expectations that were often hidden (Marsick and Watkins, 1992; Pedler, 1996; Weinstein, 1995). Critical reflection can also go beyond the individual participant's underlying assumptions and can lead specifically to the examination of organizational norms.

Similarities and Differences across Different Schools of Action Learning

There appear to be two consistent elements in all three schools of thought on Action Learning, despite their differences. First, participants work on real problems that do not have clear solutions. A range of acceptable strategies might emerge, but there is no one right answer to the presenting problem. Second, participants meet, on equal terms, to report to one another and discuss their problem and progress (Revans, 1984).

Participants meet in small teams, also called sets, that typically consist of four to six members. Through social interaction, team members surface and take advantage of alternative views on their problem. Because the problem is difficult to resolve, Revans (1982) refers to group members as 'comrades in adversity'; Mumford (1996) calls them 'fellows in opportunity'. Teams always work on a problem that is based in real work. However, some programs have a significant amount of 'P' learning (Harrison and Miller, 1993); while others, considered more 'classical', have very little formal instruction (Mumford, 1989; Weinstein, 1995).

Similarities and differences in program design are identified in Table 1 of this article. Despite common features, Action Learning programs look different in their format and duration. Participants might meet one day at a time over the course of several months (McGill and Beaty, 1992; Weinstein, 1995). They might meet for several days at a time, spread out over several months (Dennis, Cederholm and Yorks, 1996; O'Neil, Arnell and Turner, 1996). And sometimes, they meet only once, but for an extended duration of several days or weeks (Noel and Charan, 1988; Dotlich and Noel, 1998).

Two features in particular differentiate the response that a Learning Coach might have to the common case laid out on p. 122 of the Preface. They are: (1) the focus of the project on either individual challenges or a common group challenge; and (2) the role of group dynamics in the life of the teams. We discuss these two features below.

Project Focus: Individual vs Team Challenge

In some program designs, participants work on individual projects and, in others, the team works as a whole on one project. Our experience suggests that, with exceptions, programs designed around individual projects are more likely to appear in England than in the United States. Both designs show up in both countries, however; and both designs can be found in other countries around the world.

In the individual project design, members divide the time among themselves, and each person is helped by the others to think differently about the situation, the proposed solutions, and the results from any action that is taken. In the team project design, members work on one common problem that is owned by someone outside of the team, often a sponsor who is at a higher level in the organization. Teams often do not have the authority to themselves take action on the sponsor's problem. Members learn how to consult with their sponsors and others in the organization in order to effect change.

The choice of the right problem is critical to success in Action Learning (Lawrence, 1991). The design of the program is affected differently when the problem is a familiar or unfamiliar one, and when the team addresses the challenge

in a familiar or unfamiliar setting (Revans, 1978). Action Learning problems are always based on real work. Other selection criteria often include (McGill and Beaty, 1992; McNulty, 1979; O'Neil and Marsick, 1994; Weinstein, 1995):

- being complex, overarching, and often cross-functional;
- involving problems for which 'different reasonable, experienced and honest men would wish to pursue different courses of action' (Revans, 1978: 11);
- being meaningful to participants.

When the focus is on individually generated problems, participants are highly motivated because they have voluntarily selected their challenges and must resolve them. In the team design, participants may not initially be that interested in the problem. However, if the project has high visibility and is strategic in nature, members can become interested in it. It also helps when members are given some choice about which team they wish to join, within a set of criteria posed to them. The criteria ensure that members have different perspectives and backgrounds, that no one who is an expert on the problem is a part of the team, and that specific business needs are met. The expert role interferes with a person's ability to think differently and with a team's ability to seek fresh solutions, given the potential for deference to an expert. When members are given choices, Coaches in the program talk with members about their decisions and may adjust the mix of people within a given team to ensure that the team meets the given criteria. Alternatively, the sponsor of the project may select team members using these criteria.

The focus on individual vs team projects also influences the relative degree of emphasis on personal development or on organizational change. Team projects often focus more on the achievement of organizational goals, although the program may also foster individual growth. By contrast, when participants have their own project, there is a greater intent of learning from the implementation for personal development (Mumford, 1989, 1991).

Role of Group Process

All schools recognize that group process is important to learning, but the schools approach its value and facilitation in different ways. The Scientific School, as represented by Revans, recognizes that learning takes place through the collective social processes of the set. Revans (1978) also speaks of the need for a 'supernumerary to help the set develop an initial trustworthy cohesion through orderly debate' (p. 13). He also says, however, that focus on group process is less important than the focus on the problem. Revans' view of group process work appears to be similar to his view of programmed knowledge, that is, at times necessary, but not sufficient.

Practitioners in the Experiential and Critical Reflection Schools speak more explicitly about group process issues, for example communication, conflict, consensus building, or leadership. Groups need to work together effectively in order to be able to learn together. Learning Coaches thus help the team to develop good process skills (McGill and Beaty, 1992; Pedler, 1996; Weinstein, 1995). Their role is not the same as a process consultant, however, because they help others learn these skills as well as playing this role themselves.

Differences in the way in which group process is treated depend, as well, on whether the focus is on one team challenge or on individual problems. When working on individual problems, group dynamics show up when they affect the process of interaction and learning. In team designs, by contrast, group dynamics are not just a means to an end. Often, acquiring facility with these skills is one of the learning objectives for the program. Group dynamics are valuable outcomes because participants need skills in running meetings and in collaborative decision making.

Action Learning Responses to the Common Case

How would the different schools of Action Learning respond to the common case? In this section, we discuss these responses, which we summarize here in Table 2 by school of thought that a Learning Coach might espouse. We start this section by describing similarities and differences in the framing that Learning Coaches might bring to their interpretation of the meeting depicted on p. 122 of the Preface to this volume. We follow by looking at the possible actions that Learning Coaches might take with an Action Learning team before, during, or after a meeting such as this one. In the common case, the team meets for the first time with the manager who

Table 2 Responses to the hypothetical case by different schools of Action Learning

Point of comparison	Scientific school	Experiential School	Critical Reflection School
Framing of the encounter by Learning Coach	Grist for the mill of situation analysis	Opportunity to learn from a mistake and grow personally in choices and skills	Focus on deep values and beliefs in individuals and system
Interventions with the team before the team meeting	Reflect on steps he saw team take and suggest they look at gaps or needed data	Reflect on situation; encourage action to test understanding with manager; plan and role play	Help probe organizational assumptions; encourage questions regarding empowerment; plan and role play
Interventions with the team during the team meeting	(1) No intervention (2) Ask the manager to join team in situation analysis	(1) No intervention (2) Ask everyone to think together about situation so they can learn from this	(1) No intervention (2) Put difficult issues on table; raise questions about system; share views
Interventions with the team and/or system after the team meeting	Re-frame the problem and consider next steps for data collection in light of what was learned	Examine behavior and implications for personal growth and for understanding system; re-frame the problem, next steps	Analyze data from team analysis of forces shaping own behavior and system's culture; re-frame problem, next steps

gave them their mandate to achieve quality and cost improvement through empowerment and self-directed teams. It has been six months since they began their work. The manager and team leader have strong differences about the team's work to date.

In this section, we describe what we think are typical responses of Learning Coaches in each school, but the reader should keep in mind that there is no standard protocol for becoming a Learning Coach. The mindsets and skills of those who take on the role of Coach are based on personal background, experience and philosophy (O'Neil, 1996). Their assumptions about learning help to determine the approach they take (Casey, 1991). Further, although training is available, there is no certification or standardized training for Learning Coaches. In fact, all schools of Action Learning resist certification. Despite differences, all proponents of Action Learning strongly believe that individuals need to develop their own theory of practice which they continually test and refine over time.

Framing the Encounter

What sense would a Learning Coach make of the hypothetical case we are analyzing? Given that everyone on this team is working on a common problem, Coaches in all schools of Action Learning are likely to look both at the task and at group process in their interpretation of the encounter. The team needs group process skills in order to develop common recommendations that they all support, and in order to support one another in their interactions with the manager who gave them their mandate. In addition, the team's mandate—exploring the value of self-directed teams—suggests that members function well as a team. Their recommendations are not likely to appear very credible if the team cannot itself function in an empowered, self-directed manner.

Learning Coaches in all Action Learning schools would suggest that team members take the lead in requesting some 'programmed knowledge' to carry out their task. For example, the team might need to learn about the nature of empowerment and self-directed work teams. They might have to gain skills to work together effectively as a team, and to function well as a task force in their organization. They might need to gain competencies as organizational change agents. Designs might vary in the degree to which the Learning Coach would actively offer to provide for this learning as opposed to allowing the team to find ways on their own to satisfy these needs.

Finally, all schools would frame this encounter as grist for the mill of learning. However, if the Scientific School was true to the Revans approach described earlier, this Coach might encourage the participants to also think of this encounter as the interaction of Systems Alpha, Beta, and Gamma.

The Experiential School might be more concerned with personal development because of a strong interest in Kolb's individual learning cycle. This Coach might focus on what individuals can learn about themselves and about how they handled themselves in the project thus far in their interactions with the manager.

The Critical Reflection School would echo the Experiential School. In addition, this Coach would help the team explore aspects of the culture that might influence the team's mandate and the likely political issues that arise, given existing patterns of authority, hierarchy and power distribution. This Coach would help team members

to identify, surface and challenge the existing assumptions of the team and the organization.

Pre-meeting Interventions

Action Learning subscribes to the notion that people learn best when they come face to face with their limitations. Learning Coaches would typically hold back on intervening until team members had struggled with their own interpretation of their manager's attitude and what this might mean for their mandate. The Coach would certainly act as a mirror in all schools in order to help the team review and interpret the experiences that they are having. However, Learning Coaches who subscribe to different schools might vary in the degree to which they asked questions of the team, and in the type of questions they raised.

Coaches in the Scientific School might go back to their starting questions. What are we really trying to do on this team? What is stopping us from reaching our goal? In what way do we think our manager is part of the problem? How does the past history of empowerment and self-direction in the organization contribute to the problem? How can we develop a better understanding of what else is going on that might bear upon the nature of the mandate we were given?

Coaches in the Experiential School might help individuals and the team reflect upon their understanding of the situation, and then find ways to inquire into the viewpoints of their manager. They would encourage the team to undertake action that would help to test their understanding in some way, then bring their experiences back to the team for further discussion, look at these in light of what they know about their mandate, and formulate proposals for next steps that they would take. Based on new insights, they would plan for the meeting with the manager and would perhaps role play ways of speaking with him or her.

Coaches in the Critical Reflection School might also take on any of the above-discussed actions. If the Coach thought that the team could handle it, he or she would also probe deeply around assumptions underlying the history and culture of the organization. Ironically, the team's mandate speaks of empowerment and self-direction, yet it is probable that few of the participants are used to bottom-up initiatives such as this one and may hold differing assumptions themselves about what is required of them. The dynamics that this team might experience in addressing this question can provide a laboratory for exploring wider issues. The Coach might encourage the team to ask questions about the organization's dynamics around empowerment, and how these are reflected within the life of the team. This Coach might also help the team plan for the meeting and role play various ways of raising questions and issues with the manager.

Interventions During the Meeting

No matter what the school of thought, Learning Coaches are not likely to intervene within the actual meeting. In this hypothetical case, the team is meeting for the first time with the manager. Hence, Coaches are more likely to observe the team's interaction and debrief it following the meeting. However, Coaches might decide to take a more active role, particularly if they think that team members and the manager could benefit from a real-time intervention. There is a political risk associated with real-time confrontation of issues. Action Learning programs help

people to learn from risk taking and errors. More learning might be gained from reflection after the meeting if risk is heightened, as long as the intervention does not do irreparable damage to the team's reputation in the manager's eyes.

If interventions are undertaken during the meeting, they might vary if this confrontation was unforeseen; or if it had been anticipated but intentionally allowed or even encouraged. Responses are likely to be highly contextualized. In general, however, the Learning Coach in the Scientific School might help members to involve the manager in some joint analysis of the situation. If the Coach did speak up in the meeting, he or she would frame the intervention in terms of direct observations, and how he or she interpreted these events. The Coach might then inquire as to whether or not others saw the situation in the same way. This would pave the way for a discussion of the different perspectives of team members and the manager in order to make sense of what had occurred in light of the team's history and mandate.

Learning Coaches in the Experiential and Critical Reflection Schools might use a similar approach to intervention, that is, use their observations as a jumping off point for discussion. However, in the Experiential School, the question for the team might be phrased more in terms of what they might all learn from the experience they had just had. This question might be offered to the team during a specific reflection period. Responses would be publicly shared in order to draw the most learning from the experience and to plan for future action.

In the Critical Reflection School, the Coach might identify what he or she felt was a potentially undiscussable issue, for example, something that no one wanted to surface for fear of repercussions. The Coach would include the manager as well as the team members in this kind of intervention. People would be helped to probe the assumptions and beliefs that underlie the situation at hand; and to look at the way in which the system has influenced the interaction of both the team and their sponsors.

Interventions After the Meeting

No matter what the school of thought on Action Learning, it is unlikely that this meeting would be the final step of the project. If it were, then questions would have to be raised about how the team reached the end of the designated period of time without having anticipated this response and taken some action in regard to it. Action Learning is predicated on a number of cycles of framing, action, reflection on action, and re-framing. In all cases, this meeting would be followed by an opportunity to examine the experience and formulate next steps.

In the Scientific School, this debriefing meeting might be part of the situation analysis. Further data might be needed in order to re-think the nature of the mandate, process, and skill set of the team, as well as the influence that the external and internal environment might have on the formulation of the problem. Both the Experiential and the Critical Reflection Schools would look at behavior in the team meeting in light of the team's experience and mandate. However, the Learning Coach in the former school might focus more on implications for personal growth and for how team members might choose to function within, or attempt to change, the system. The Learning Coach in the latter school would focus the discussion more strongly on the way in which individual and systemic beliefs shape individual behavior, the project's trajectory, and the team's focus. This Coach would help

members to identify, surface, and question many of the underlying systemic assumptions that helped to create the situation.

Comparison of Action Learning and Other Action Technologies

This example helps to illustrate some of the commonalities and differences of different schools of Action Learning. We turn now to positioning Action Learning in relationship to action research, participatory research, action science, developmental action inquiry and collaborative inquiry, using the criteria proposed by Raelin in the Preface for comparison. To prepare for this comparison, we first developed an analysis of the different schools of Action Learning using these criteria. Table 3 displays this analysis. In this section of the article, however, we focus less on differences among these schools, and more on the way they collectively compare to other action technologies. This collective comparison is summarized in Table 1 of the Preface.

All Action Learning approaches are philosophically rooted in theories of learning from experience, as practiced collaboratively with others through some form of action research. These theories, in turn, are influenced by the assumption that human beings can shape their environment, and by a belief in the value of scientific method in the pursuit of improving the human condition. The underpinnings of Action Learning are reflected in the progressive educational theories of John Dewey; and in the principles of Kurt Lewin's social psychology that are centered on the interaction of the person and the environment. However, schools might not consciously trace their roots to these influences. Both Dewey and Lewin understood that individuals learn as individuals, but that their experience is shaped and understood within social contexts. Practitioners in the Experiential Schools often trace their roots to phenomenology and humanistic psychology, while proponents of Critical Reflection are influenced, more or less consciously, by critical theorists.

With the exception of a few proponents, however—namely Revans and strong advocates of Kolb—most Action Learning practitioners draw eclectically from a variety of philosophies. The overriding value that guides the Action Learning approach, and may differentiate it from other action technologies, is a pragmatic focus on learning for the sake of more effective instrumental problem-solving.

The primary purpose of Action Learning programs is understanding and change, generally for mid-term results. Unlike training, which is designed to address specific, short-term needs, Action Learning seeks to build the capacity of individuals and systems to learn how to learn. However, its focus is instrumental, and its epistemology centers on problem solving. Most schools of Action Learning do seek to develop individuals, but Learning Coaches seldom pursue deep changes to the human psyche through clinical counselling and advice. However, Coaches might introduce change through use of instruments that alert learners to preferences and interests, for example, Learning Style profiles, personality preferences (e.g. Myers-Briggs Typology), 360 degree multi-rater performance profiles, or values inventories. Coaches typically use educational means, rather than psychological means, to develop further awareness and capacity in the intra-personal and interpersonal domains.

Coaches in the Critical Reflection School go somewhat further in that they often push for a deeper understanding of assumptions, values and beliefs that contribute

Table 3 Comparison of different schools of Action Learning

Criteria	Scientific	Experiential	Critical Reflection
Philosophical basis	Scientific method, which in turn is the basis for action research	Action research and Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory	Action research and 'critical' humanistic orientation
Purpose	Understanding and changing self and/or system through action and reflection on action	Understanding and changing self in system through action and reflection on action	Understanding and changing belief system to transform self and/or system through action, reflection on action, and critical reflection on assumptions
Time frame of change	Mid- and somewhat long-term	Mid- and somewhat long-term	Mid- and somewhat long-term
Depth of change	Instrumental, interpersonal and sometimes systemic	Instrumental, intrapersonal and interpersonal	Instrumental, intrapersonal, interpersonal and sometimes systemic
Epistemology	Problem solving: examine and change tacit practice	Problem solving: raise awareness and develop capacity to change tacit practice	Problem framing/re-framing: raise awareness of forces that shape tacit practice; develop capacity to change tacit practice
Nature of discourse	Rational: making meaning from experience	Rational: making meaning from experience	Rational and tending to emancipatory: making meaning from and critiquing experience
Ideology	Influenced by beliefs of participants and staff	Influenced by beliefs of participants and staff	Influenced by beliefs of participants and staff
Methodology	Cycles of problem framing, action, reflection on action, concluding, re-framing	Cycles of problem framing, action, reflection on action, concluding, re-framing	Cycles of problem framing, action, critical reflection on action, concluding, re-framing
Facilitator role	Varies, but is often passive; acts as mirror to help individuals and team look at learning	Varies, but is often passive, acts as mirror to help individuals and team look at learning	Varies, but is often more interventionist; combines passive role with active challenging
Level of inference	Medium	Medium	Medium–high
Personal risk	Depends on visibility of projects; political risk if poor individual or team performance	Depends on visibility of projects; political risk if poor individual or team performance	Depends on visibility of projects; political risk if poor individual or team performance; potential psychic risk
Organizational risk	Moderate, needs management support at various levels	Moderate, needs management support at various levels	Moderate to high, needs involvement of management
Assessment	Change at individual, team or system level depending on focus	Change at individual, team or system level depending on focus	Change at individual, team or system level depending on focus
Learning level	Second-order	Second-order	Second-order; edging into third-order in some designs and based on the interventions of the facilitator

to the way in which individuals and systems have come to understand themselves. They often consider themselves to be 'radical' learning coaches (O'Neil, 1996). However, as is so in other Action Learning schools, these advocates ultimately leave choices in the hands of learners. Without a mandate for radical reform, Action Learning practitioners hold that challenge to the system can lead to serious risks for learners. They would try to help learners understand these risks and make conscious, informed choices about how far to go in addressing change.

The design of Action Learning initiatives is influenced by the above understanding of philosophy, purpose, time frame, depth of change, and epistemology. Discourse in Action Learning tends to be rational and oriented toward helping people to better understand their experience. Designs in the Critical Reflection School tend to push the edges of the emancipatory domain. Because of the collective problem-solving focus, the methodology is learner-centered and problem-driven. The action research cycle (iterative problem identification, action, reflection, drawing conclusions, and re-framing) is employed, but in some schools it provides a loosely constructed framework within which to function. As is the case in action research, Action Learning engages learners in data gathering and analysis. However, with some exceptions (notably the Scientific School), Action Learning does not require that learners collect and analyze data in such a rigorous, formal way, as might be the case in action research.

With some exceptions—notably those with strong beliefs rooted in the Scientific and Kolb-based Experiential Schools—nuances of ideology behind Action Learning programs vary with those who embrace and design it. As O'Neil (1999) has found in the study she is currently conducting on the role of the Learning Coach, this variation in ideology shows up most prominently in the different views of coaches about their role. In general, Action Learning Coaches remain in the shadows and get out of the way of participants as they take increasing control of their own learning. Coaches are more active in the beginning of a program, but they build the ability of others to manage their own experience over time. In her research, Weinstein found that as the team begins to work more effectively, the Learning Coach becomes less necessary (1995). Their interventions are somewhat passive in that they act as a mirror to show participants what their experience is like, and to raise questions that will help learners think freshly and differently about this experience.

The Learning Coach is not typically a resource on research methods as is the case in action research. Nor does he or she possess a common repertoire of tools that aim at a deeper level of personal and systems-level change, as may be true for action science or action inquiry. However, Coaches in the Critical Reflection School do push in that direction and sometimes combine their Action Learning approach with elements of these other technologies. Unlike collaborative inquiry, the Action Learning teams seldom reach the same level of pure interest in their collective learning. Action Learning also differs from participatory action research in that its focus is more oriented to individual choice and action than to the collective action of a group on mutually defined needs. Action Learning may share features with participatory action research when, at times, Action Learning is used outside of organizations, for example in community development.

As with all of the action technologies, Action Learning brings with it some level of risk. Projects are used to create social laboratories in which real-time change occurs and, as such, one can never be fully prepared for what will emerge. None the less,

because of its highly instrumental focus, the risk is less to the psychological make-up of the individual than it is to the potential for stirring up the organizational waters regarding 'how things are done around here'. This is true whether the program is focused on individual or on team projects. The strong emphasis on 'Q' learning guarantees that questions will be asked throughout the program. This opens up new views that participants and systems might not have seen or considered and that might be disturbing. People may find change to be good when it involves others, but not when it means that they, too, must think and act differently.

The personal risks in Action Learning programs depend on the visibility of the projects. Research, for example, on ARL™ programs has found that tensions increase 'because people work in real situations, and as a result, get real-time feedback from internal organizational clients and peers' (O'Neil et al., 1997: 342). This research identified tensions between expectations of learning and delivering tangible results; between time required for learning and task; and between team conflict and harmony. Participants fear—and sometimes encounter—consequences for risks they take in programs, even though many programs emphasize that the learning is more important than actual results, and that Action Learning provides a safe environment to learn from mistakes.

When the culture is not supportive of mistakes, there is more pressure to perform well than to learn. Despite what they espouse, top management could 'punish' those individuals or teams who question too much or who propose solutions that are not in sync with the dominant culture. Because projects are visible, and because the challenges are real, the strengths and weaknesses of participants are more apparent and more publicly available to others for evaluation. Action Learning programs in organizations may be used intentionally for assessment. In such cases, they could lead to job loss and job change.

These risks should not be minimized. With some exceptions, however, Action Learning does not incur the same kind of psychological risks that are possible in action science or action inquiry which require that participants probe more deeply their values, beliefs, and self concept. Action Learning programs also typically stop short of what can sometimes be serious risks in participatory action research, particularly when undertaken to act against an unpopular and perhaps tyrannical government.

The main organizational risks derive from the fact that, to address the problem effectively, participants might question practices elsewhere in the system. Sometimes, 'sacred cows' must be challenged. Sometimes, revision of people's staunchly held views about how things should be done turns out to be key to a solution. Therefore, even when the program is more focused on personal development than on organizational change, the projects tend to create waves and produce tensions that destabilize the status quo. Employees cannot undertake new behaviors if these are not understood, practiced, and rewarded by their supervisors. Risks can be managed to the degree to which they are truly supported by various levels of management. More than that, managers find that they, too, must change to achieve maximum results. In this, we believe that Action Learning is no different from the other action technologies. In some cases, it is even less threatening because it is less likely to demand radical change of the system. All of the action technologies, theoretically, can be undertaken by individuals; but individuals are members of complex systems. Change in one part of the system effects changes elsewhere.

Finally, proponents of Action Learning have often been missionary in their zeal, but

less able to, or interested in, assessing the true impact of their interventions. Assessment can be focused on the individual, team, or system level, depending on the nature of the intervention. Yorks et al. (1998) identify some transfer effects from an organizationally-focused program. Guidelines for assessment in Action Learning programs have only recently begun to emerge (see, for example, chapters in Mumford, 1997).

Conclusion

We conclude that people should not enter into Action Learning lightly. In comparison to other action technologies, Action Learning might be looked upon as relatively mild and unprovocative, yet our experience is that people can experience it as powerful and even frightening. We conclude that it is often the first step for participants in a journey toward greater self-insight, greater capacity to learn from experience, and greater awareness of the political and cultural dimensions of organizational change. For organizations, it is often a first step toward linking individual learning with systemic learning and change.

People can find it difficult to learn from their experience through a messy struggle with real challenges. Participants in some programs are surprised when they are expected to take charge of their own learning, and often find it disturbing that they cannot easily 'name' or describe what that learning looks like. Action Learning is meant to be a relatively safe laboratory for learning. But the visibility of these programs—combined with the uncertainty inherent in the learning process—make it likely that people will experience them as unsafe. The 'pressure cooker' that is created by combining the intensity of an Action Learning program with the intensity of their normal jobs makes it difficult for participants to take a neutral stance towards their learning.

On the organizational side, even when the program is clearly explained, the system is seldom ready for the repercussions that spill out from the projects. If many programs take place simultaneously, the work processes in the organization can become disrupted. Participants are disturbed by the discrepancy between what they are learning in the program and the way in which their organizations function. Learning Coaches often take on the role of coaching project sponsors as well as stakeholders in the system who find that participants begin to challenge the way in which the system functions.

In this article, we have attempted to lay out key features that Action Learning programs have in common, as well as to outline differences in some of the ways in which it is practiced. It is likely that many readers who also practice Action Learning will object to some of our categories, and speak authentically of a very different experience in the way in which they carry out their craft. Action Learning, in its many faces, can indeed be a many splendored thing—to borrow from a North American song about love! Yet despite differing approaches, Action Learning advocates would unite to defend some core beliefs around learning from experience in an intentional, sustained fashion within the context of real life challenges. The focus of Action Learning is on individuals who play an enhanced role in directing their own learning and, as such, achieve more control of their own destinies. Action Learning helps people to become more explicit about their intentions and their

strategies to achieve them. It often assists people to become more conscious, as well, of driving forces in themselves, in others, and in institutions that shape their action so that they can take more informed steps to influence future directions.

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