
Action learning: praxiology of variants

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Abstract

Aims to clarify the logic on which current action learning variants are based in order to better inform practitioners and aid them in making methodological choices appropriate to need rather than faddishness. First attempts to identify what it is Revans and other practitioners are trying to achieve through their action learning variants. Then examines these variants from a praxiological point of view, exploring the extent to which the efficiency, effectiveness, ethics, and economy of these various action learning approaches seem to justify, or otherwise, their usage.

Introduction

Reg Revans' exquisitely simple doctrine of "Comrades in adversity learning from and with each other through discriminating questioning, fresh experience and reflective insight" is as cogent and practical today as it was 50 years or so ago when he first applied it. In fact action learning continues to be suggested as the engine to power emerging modern organizational forms, such as the "autonomous learning system" (Revans, 1982a), the "learning organization" (Dixon, 1994), and the "action learning organization" (Limerick *et al.*, 1994).

The library of the International Foundation for Action Learning currently holds over 900 articles on action learning (*Action Learning News*, 1996). To judge from this mountain of information, the exquisite simplicity that Revans envisaged must mask an overpowering complexity. All and sundry practitioners are seemingly forced to redefine and redesign action learning lest modern-day managers prove incapable of understanding action learning, undertaking it, or benefiting from the experience. Revans certainly thought otherwise. In 1985 he wrote, "Only if managers themselves take a major role in developing action learning, rather than hire experts to run 'action learning projects' within their enterprises, will any lasting benefits be recorded" (Revans, 1985).

Over the years Revans has consistently spoken out against action learning becoming all things to all people. In 1983 he wrote "... (action learning) may surprise us all in the fresh forms it will take, no less than the further disguises in which it will masquerade for packaged – and pyramid sale" (Revans, 1983a). As recently as January 1995 he is quoted as saying, "There are too many bogus action learning programs around" (*Action Learning News*, 1995); Honey and Mumford (1992) sum up the situation with traditional understatement, noting that "action learning has become a generic title for a number of activities not all of which would be recognized or accepted by Reg Revans as being genuine examples of his major contribution".

Should we then sympathize with Professor Revans when he laments the ever more diverse ways action learning has evolved over the years, its lack of resemblance to his brainchild, and his impression that it is of questionable usefulness when redefined

according to some current theory. The action learning literature seems to say “No! Professor Revans started something and we modern practitioners know how to make a good thing better”. Well, are the practitioners right?

Unfortunately, in the past, efforts to answer this question have led to further polarization. In this article, I’d like to try a fresh approach which I hope will contribute to a win/win resolution of such dilemmas. By heightening practitioner awareness of the purpose and praxiology of these various approaches I hope to better inform practitioners’ choices. Although this exploration will be informal and based on my own perceptions, I also hope that this approach will chart the way for a more rigorous formal examination by those better equipped than I in the application of praxiology.

First, I will attempt to identify what it is Revans and the other practitioners are trying to achieve through their action learning variants. I will then examine these variants from a praxiological point of view, exploring the extent to which the efficiency, effectiveness, ethics, and I would add the economy, of these various action learning approaches seem to justify, or otherwise, their usage. We will begin, as all good action learning begins, with analysis.

Revans and his stated intentions: general discussion

Putting aside all the rhetoric which has surfaced since Professor Revans introduced his then novel approach in the 1940s (Revans, 1945), we can assume that at its inception, Revans knew quite clearly what it was he wanted action learning to achieve. Based on his own writings from these early periods we are led to suppose that he was trying to achieve two different ends; these ends are not mutually exclusive.

On the one hand, action learning was intended to provide its practitioners with the opportunity to learn to take action; no small achievement under the conditions of minute by minute “out of the blue” change envisaged by Revans (1983b). On the other hand, Revans visualized action learning as a developmental intervention, where action itself was not only an end, but also a means to an end – personal development.

With regard to learning to take effective action, Revans emphasized from the beginning that this was one of his principal intentions for action learning. For example, he wrote the following as a definition of action learning: “We are trying to encourage managers to discover how they can pose fresh questions in conditions of ignorance, risk and confusion; first to design a new course of action; second to implement the course of action” (Revans, 1984a). What could be clearer?

The initial sections of an article Revans (1983b) wrote are particularly relevant to “learning to take action”; here Revans clarifies the linkages between change, adaptation, learning, and the action learning method. Revans says: “Those responsible for handling change must therefore be able to formulate, *and support by personal example* (Revans’ italics), courses of future action along ill-lighted thoroughfares threatened by risk, ignorance and confusion. Such persons are generally known as ‘leaders’, and that term is employed here to discriminate between leaders and ‘experts’”. He goes on to associate leaders with action learning as follows: “Leaders must develop Q – an ability to ask fresh and useful questions ...”, and “The search for Q is the mission of action learning, and it is pursued in a *learning community*”. He then describes the action learning process as follows: “The members of this learning community are thus obliged to proceed by trial and error (conjecture and refutation)”. He sums it all up by suggesting that for its practitioners, action learning provides: “... an effective workshop for examining, sharpening, and testing their managerial weapons – above all their judgment of the unseen and of the unknown”.

We can infer from these selections that Revans believed that by simply taking action to produce a result, managers would come to understand the appropriateness of, and would become accustomed to, acting in conditions where there might well be no “right” answers. This approach is not the familiar “fire/aim” so often practiced by managers, but is rather a call to considered action.

Modern authorities still see this as a worthwhile end; for example Mumford (1991) says: “First, learning for managers means learning to take effective action. Acquiring information and becoming more capable in diagnosis has been overvalued in management learning”. Weick (1990)

recounts the anecdote of an army unit lost in the Alps which was about to give up when a map was found. Stimulated to action, they found their way back to camp, only to discover later that it was a map of the Pyrenees. Weick explains that in such uncertain situations, even a superficial plan, can reduce uncertainty if people think it has some value. When people act as if an uncertain situation has more structure, they are stimulated to action. As in action learning, it is animation that imposes order on the situation.

Mintzberg (1994) believes that as long as people prepare an approximate plan, a plan that will provide them with a sound broad orientation, they can feel secure in the belief that whatever occurs will be manageable. This, in turn, enables them to dismiss the uncertain future and get on with the present. This is consistent with the writings of Revans who presented this same view in terms of the manager's ability to ask questions (Revans, 1982b): "There is no general theory of search, because if you do not know what you are looking for you do not know how to sample your experience" and "... action learning may be one means of concentrating attention on the questions dying to be asked".

Revans and learning to take action: praxiological commentary

What can we say from a praxiological point of view regarding action learning as first set out by Revans, when the outcome sought is "learning to take action"? My view is that the native approach set out by Revans seems valid with respect to effectiveness and economy of means, but rather inefficient, and possibly less than ethical.

When the outcome sought is "learning to take action", the method is effective because there is no other way to provide the level of experience action learning affords to participants; actual experience is the best teacher. Revans (1983b) himself realized this uniqueness and listed many alternatives which he believed were less effective. We must bear in mind that Revans intended action learning to be applied in "... conditions of ignorance, risk and confusion, when nobody knows what to do next" (Revans, 1991) so that designing a workshop to replicate the manager's situation would be next to impossible.

When the outcome sought is "learning to take action", action learning is clearly economical of means since it relies only on those individuals originally charged with getting the job done, and any reasonable resources they employ to do the job. One can second guess the particular resources used but, as noted above, "in conditions of ignorance, risk and confusion" there can be no one "right" answer.

We are in somewhat deeper waters when we consider the efficiency and ethics of action learning run in the manner sketched out by Revans with the intention to take action. First, although action learning is about learning to ask questions, participants in a set tend to look inwards rather than outwards, which leads to "groupthink". Further, until pressed in later years, Revans refused to describe the method in any great detail, other than through the simple System Beta (Revans, 1982c); in fact he went so far as to say "... action learning ... the day it is accurately described in words will be the day to stop having anything to do with it" (Revans, 1983b).

Revans also proposed, nay insisted, that action learning be run without benefit of ex-group facilitation, and with essentially no regard for existing knowledge (which Revans called "programmed knowledge P") unless participants themselves saw the need for such knowledge (Revans, 1991): "If, as will at times occur, any particular member of an action learning set recognizes that he has need of technical instruction programmed knowledge, he may make such arrangements as he can to acquire it. But his quest need no longer be seen as cardinal to action learning, even if his further success in treating his problems must depend on the accuracy of his newly to-be-acquired techniques; action learning will soon make clear the value of his latest lessons, ...". Since there is no evidence to suggest that Revans intended to create or identify a "super-manager" through a "survival of the fittest" exercise, this "chicken and egg" proposition seems to me to be manipulative and perhaps less than ethical. Revans, in an attempt to avoid exploitation by "experts", goes to extremes and action learning participants are forced to thrash around, sinking or swimming in their own pool of ignorance.

Revans and developmental objectives: praxiological commentary

When we turn our attention to action learning as a developmental intervention, there can again be no doubt that Revans intended this to be a principal outcome of his approach. For example (Revans, 1982d): “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”. He goes further to claim “It is this aspect of self-development that action learning may claim as its own” (Revans, 1982d). Revans seems to have seen this self-development as self-enlightenment rather than simply behavioural improvement, for he wrote (Revans, 1983a): “In whatsoever fashion each participant takes advantage of his set discussion ... in the final analysis his greatest need – and the quality of which his set can help him most – is to understand himself: his beliefs, his values and his ambitions”.

What can we say from a praxiological point of view regarding Revans’ original action learning approach when the outcome sought is personal development? My view is that it is only partially effective, efficient, or economic, but that it is probably ethical.

The idea that managers of their own volition will draw developmental insights of a personal nature from taking action, or through action, is somewhat far-fetched; managers are in the main well-known for firing before aiming. Outside of action learning, the importance of trying to enhance managers’ reflective capabilities and learning have been explored at length by a number of authorities (Marsick and Watkins, 1990; Mumford, 1995). The defensive reasoning routines employed by managers to justify their actions have also been amply explored and documented (Argyris, 1990).

The self-motivated aspects of action learning also pose problems, since in my experience management communities break down into approximately 15 percent continually active self-motivated learners, about 60 percent individuals who can be drawn to some kind of learning, and another 25 percent who are blocked altogether from learning for some reason or another. In other

words, native action learning may well be effective only when undertaken with a particular class of managers, whom we might term “natural learners”. This is the class often known as “high-potentials” or “fast-trackers”. It should be noted that action learning has been highly recommended for such high achieving individuals, although in one of action learning’s variant forms (Peters and Smith, 1996).

From the above discussion, effectiveness and efficiency are all deemed suspect when the target for action learning is developmental. However, by eliminating such exercises as “needs analysis”, action learning avoids the emphasis on theoretical capability models, and focuses the individual practitioner on those elements of management-related behaviours that “comrades in adversity” through their commentary indicate need development. To this extent the approach is ethical and perhaps economical for development purposes.

Revans and problem solving: praxiological commentary

It is sometimes suggested that Revans intended action learning as a problem-solving process. However, we can quickly dispense with this notion. Revans has made it abundantly clear that this was not his intention. For example, he says: “Action learning as such, requires questions to be posed in conditions of ignorance, risk and confusion, when nobody knows what to do next; it is only marginally interested in finding the answers once those questions have been posed. For identifying the questions is the task of the leader, or of the wise man; finding the answers to them is the business of the expert. It is a grave mistake to confuse these two roles, even if the same individual may, from time to time, occupy them both” (Revans, 1991).

Confusion sometimes arises with respect to the problem-solving capabilities of action learning because Revans (1982c) sketched out a process which could be followed by action learning practitioners called “System Beta”; System Beta appears on the surface to be a problem-solving process. But as Revans (1984b) has noted, the bare list of System Beta stages (analysis, development, procurement, assembly, implementation) is interpreted in action learning as typifying questions to

be found in “intelligent conversation between persons joined in a common exploration of what is yet unexplained”. System Beta was intended as a framework for development and learning, not as a blueprint for problem solving.

The position of Revans on this issue has been proven correct by the emergence of many problem-solving processes highly appropriate for “wicked” situations (Checkland and Scholes, 1990; Rosenhead, 1989) and which display desirable praxiological characteristics.

Revans, learning and adaption: praxiological considerations

Another way to examine the native action learning approach of Revans is to define, in a somewhat more formal way, the kinds of learning that are taking place, and then to apply praxiology to the various learning processes.

Generically, three types or levels of learning are distinguished by most authorities, based on the work of Bateson (1972). The first type is “Learning to do things right”, the second type is “Learning to do the right thing”, and the third type is a second order process, called by Bateson “Learning to learn”. The meaning of this third type has become somewhat debased; Bateson (1979) meant it as a contextual learning process, i.e. learning to assess the context in which the type 1 and 2 learnings take place and ensure that these two processes are appropriate for that context. This meaning is adopted in this paper.

From a praxiological point of view, we can equate type 1 learning with efficiency, and type 2 learning with effectiveness; type 3 learning does not readily form part of the praxiological schema, although it can perhaps be related to some overall sense of effectiveness. The arguments applied in preceding sections then apply to the validity or not of the native Revans approach with respect to learning. Except that I would emphasize that action learning suffers from a lack of type 3 learning.

This shortfall with respect to type 3 learning is not an issue confined to action learning, but is perhaps its Achilles’ heel. Revans intended action learning to “address the mess at field level”; however, its greatest drawback with respect to these “wicked” situations

(Rittel and Webber, 1973) is its inability to address the broader systemic problems of which many actionable problems are only a part. That is, practitioners are not learning to action the overarching problems; they are learning to action parts of the problem, which in systemic situations, leads to even more problems (Rapoport, 1986; Senge, 1990). There are only a few published accounts in which the person charged with designing an action learning program involves participants in the actual design of the program in an attempt to address this issue (Morris, 1987).

Although type 3 learning does not readily fit the praxiology schema, the question of contextual stability has significant implications for the praxiological conclusions we have reached so far. The issue here is whether the context in which the action learning has been carried out has been essentially changing or fluctuating.

As noted above, Revans certainly foresaw the current business environment where change is “minute-by-minute”, and changes come “out of the blue”. Psychologists have traditionally associated “learning” with an invariant context (Weick, 1991), and learning has typically been equated with the detection and correction of error. This is only possible in a relatively invariant context. This is logical given that the criteria for knowledge are the same as those of the rational experimental model; this situation does not exist when the context changes to any significant extent.

In contrast, the term “adaption” has typically been used by social scientists in situations where the context changes and the organization adapts itself, or its environment, accordingly (Ackoff and Emery, 1972). What then are we to make of the use by Revans of the word “learning” in action learning?

Revans (1982b; 1984a) himself realized the confusion involved in the use of these terms and chose simply to interpret “adapting” as “learning”; he wrote “Our ability to adapt to change with such readiness that we are seen to benefit may be defined as ‘learning’” (Revans’ own punctuation). Revans’ writings in general are somewhat ambivalent regarding context, but in the main he favors action learning as a technique for use in rapidly changing contexts as noted above. This certainly makes native action learning highly relevant to the typical

current business situation, but puts the word “learning” into question.

If, as I have argued above, action learning is “learning to take action”, it could be classed as a “learning to learn” technique. Here the actual framework for learning within the group is largely invariant, e.g. System Beta, whereas the problem space itself could be changing. If this were the case, the method by which practitioners learn to take action might be better termed “action adaption” rather than “action learning”.

Ignoring these niceties of terminology, practitioners learn a stable process applicable to taking action under any circumstances. From this point of view native action learning is again effective and economical. If one argues that action learners often don’t know whether they are adapting or learning, then one might also argue that native action learning is as effective and ethical as you can expect under the circumstances.

Unfortunately, compared to all the attention paid to the facilitation of action learning sets, very little interest has been shown in how sets actually learn (Mumford, 1996). Given this lack of clarity about how the set members contribute learning or adaption to one another, there is again a difficulty in deciding praxiological questions with respect to the learning processes. Does the set learn or do individuals in the set learn, or both? If the set does learn, is individual learning necessary for the set to learn? And even if individual learning is necessary, the process of collective (set) learning itself is complex.

This is not a trivial theoretical question. For example, if learning is predicated on the sharing of the learnings of individuals, then the set can only learn at the pace of the least learned member (Stata, 1989), and we must try to facilitate such activity. On the other hand, if set learning is an emergent property (Checkland, 1991), as I believe, based on the synergistic interaction of members of the set, we would wish to put in place other kinds of supportive infrastructure.

Absent identification of a set’s theoretical learning mechanisms means it is difficult to be more precise with praxiological findings related to such learning or adaptive processes.

Action learning variants: praxiological considerations

From the previous discussion one can see why variations on “... genuine examples of his

(Reg Revans’) major contribution” would emerge, and these will be explored in this section.

Major variations of the action learning method are typified by introduction of the following elements in varying degrees: participant autonomy, facilitation, existing knowledge, structure, emphasized reflection, education, academic qualification, and problem solving. This section attempts to link praxiological shortcomings of the native approach to introduction of these variants.

Persuading action learning participants to explore their situations in more systemic ways, and encouraging them to exercise participant autonomy with regard to problem choice and set membership are activities one would wish to see included in the above list; unfortunately, these important concerns have been explored by very few authorities (Garratt, 1991; Lawrence, 1991; Morris, 1987; Smith, 1997). The most recent work in this regard (Smith, 1997) attempts to address many of the praxiological and other concerns highlighted in this article, while building on, and emphasizing, the strengths of action learning. However, the author is at pains to state (Smith, 1997) that this approach is not to be confused with action learning and calls it “performance learning”. Although such attempts as there have been intended to increase the effectiveness of action learning, they have not entered the mainstream of action learning practice, and will not be further discussed here.

The most identifiable and widespread difference between the approach of Revans and that of current practitioners is in the extent to which facilitation of a set is considered mandatory today. Facilitators in action learning are called “set advisers” and indeed their approach and skills do seem to be somewhat different from those of facilitation (O’Neil, 1996). The advisory aspect of the action learning process has grown to such importance that numerous articles on the skills of set advising have been published, including a recent book (Weinstein, 1995).

The requirement for set facilitation and access to existing knowledge (called by Revans programmed knowledge P) seem to be grounded in the need to address the inefficiency and possible unethical nature of the native approach, and to obviate the “pool of ignorance” criticism that has so often been

leveled at action learning. Facilitation is also said to overcome groupthink.

Unfortunately almost all published set advisory material is focused on the adviser's skills, rather than on what contributes to effectiveness, efficiency, economy and ethics from the participants' point of view. The irony is that in an action learning setting, participants are regarded as "incapable" and set advisers see themselves as the arbiters of what is praxiological. The following quote (Casey, 1987) will make this clear: "The dilemma facing any set adviser is no different than that facing every teacher; do you make the student work or do you cradle the student in love? Do learners have to suffer or can they get there on a surfboard of effortless exhilaration? And, most difficult decision of all, when do you push on them and when do you stand well back?"

Set advisers do claim to help set participants reflect more deeply by emphasizing the importance of reflection in enhancing the set's ability to learn. In fact there is a commercial organization which practices action learning built on this premise (Marsick *et al.*, 1992). There is also evidence that these advisers if sufficiently skilled, can detect when less motivated practitioners are about to "hit the wall"; this occurs when practitioners become frustrated with an action learning program and refuse to continue. Skilled advisers under these conditions can work with disaffected participants to better understand the group dynamics and in many cases help them move ahead to a successful outcome.

My own view is that set advising is probably justified at the inception of programs where practitioners have not been involved with action learning previously. In this sense one can believe that it increases efficiency and economy and ethics in "learning to take action" and in personal development. However, we must be very sensitive to the point that Revans has made more than once – facilitation may be more a matter of justifying fees than of praxiological need.

With regard to the structuring of set activity above and beyond the simple systems envisaged and articulated by Revans, such framing often seems to be introduced to address praxiological concerns. For example, sponsor orientation sessions are deemed necessary to address effectiveness and ethics; participant orientation sessions enhance

efficiency and economy. In spite of what Revans has written negatively on this subject, I believe he himself saw the need for an orientation session with the original coal mine sets which he ran in the 1940s. Linking sets in some manner, and ensuring that practitioners are "reshuffled" after each cycle of action learning activity, are actions meant to enhance organizational learning and the formation of networks (Smith and Peters, 1997); in this way organizational effectiveness and efficiency are enhanced.

My view again is that structuring, to the extent that is demanded by a particular situation, is justified since it can be designed to contribute to effectiveness, efficiency, economy and ethics (Smith, 1997).

The use of action learning in education, e.g. for the acquisition of a university degree, seems to be the extension of a useful practical technique to a new area. Whereas academic bodies have been under continual criticism for failing to produce individuals with both formal qualifications and practical know-how, the combination of real issues with theory possible in an action learning setting seem to produce the desired results (Thorpe and Taylor, 1991). This notion has been extended to the creation of in-house business schools (Wills, 1993). Here action learning has been introduced to increase effectiveness, efficiency, economics and ethics of education, which is not the focus of this paper.

With regard to the use of action learning for problem solving, I feel that a wrong turn has been taken. If the solution of a problem is taken as a bonus rather than an aim of the exercise, one can accept that action learning has been partially or wholly effective. However, action learning is a slow and ponderous process, overemphasizing the views of a very small group (the set), and compares poorly to more modern sophisticated approaches (Checkland and Scholes, 1990; Rosenhead, 1989). In general, action learning is not effective, efficient, economical nor ethical as a problem-solving approach.

Some final words

In this paper I have reviewed relevant writings of Professor Revans with respect to his brain child, action learning. I have contrasted those views with the opinions and practices of practitioners who seem to say

“Professor Revans started something and we modern practitioners know how to make a good thing better”. I have attempted to resolve opposing points of view by suggesting that in general variants on action learning have grown up to address praxiological shortcomings of the native approach as set out by Revans.

From the above discussions we can begin to appreciate the complexity that is brushed aside in much current writing about action learning. As Garvin (1993) puts it “Beyond high philosophy and grand themes lie the gritty details of practice”. Unfortunately, these “grand themes” often mystify and pain practitioners involved in the “gritty details of practice”. Too often, practitioners do not see the logic on which action learning variants are introduced; or worse, they introduce variants without logic.

The exploration presented here was informal and based on my own perceptions. By examining action learning and its variants from a praxiological point of view, I hope to have better informed practitioners’ choices. Further, it is my hope that the approach outlined here will chart the way for action learning practitioners to define more carefully the grounds on which their activities are based, document and reflect on their results (both good and bad), and publish their conclusions. I would also encourage a more rigorous formal examination of action learning by those better equipped than I in the application of praxiology.

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