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# A review of action learning literature 1994-2000: Part 1 – bibliography and comments

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## Keywords

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## Abstract

Many organizations now utilize action learning, and it is applied increasingly throughout the world. Action learning appears in numerous variants, but generically it is a form of learning through experience, "by doing", where the task environment is the classroom, and the task the vehicle. Two previous reviews of the action learning literature by Alan Mumford respectively covered the field prior to 1985 and the period 1985-94. Both reviews included books as well as journal articles. This current review covers the period 1994-2000 and is limited to publicly available journal articles.

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## Introduction

As individuals, and in clusters and organizations, we are awash in assumptions. We presume validity at our peril in contexts that are increasingly complex and ambiguous. If we wish to learn to address this multitude of issues successfully it is critical that we continually explore and question our suppositions by surfacing our insights, and evolving fresh questions leading from our ignorance. The ability to think things through and de-brief experiences at non-trivial personal and contextual levels is increasingly recognized as essential to effective learning and performance. Action learning is a well-proven individual, collective and organizational development philosophy that provides a sound setting for such reflective inquiry.

Professor Reg Revans originated action learning in its traditional generic form in the 1940s as a means to improve UK coal production (Revans, R.W., *Plans for Recruitment, Education and Training for the Coalmining Industry*, Mining Association of Great Britain, London, 1945), and he later proposed the relationship  $L = P + Q$  to help better define action learning (Revans, R.W., *The Origin and Growth of Action Learning*, Chartwell Bratt, London, 1982). In this relationship, L represents learning attained through engagement in action; P represents learning gained from accepted authorities; and Q represents learning initiated as people question their own direct experience. Revans believed that far too much emphasis was placed on P and far too little on Q; the process of action learning is intended to redress this imbalance.

A very wide variety of organizations now utilize action learning, and it gains ever widening application throughout the world. Action learning appears in numerous variants, much like the automobile is available in all manner of makes and styles whilst still being recognizable as an automobile. Generically action learning is a form of learning through experience, "by doing", where the task environment is the classroom, and the task the vehicle. Action learning programs are typically based on the following tenets:

- participants tackle real problems (no "right" answer) in real time;
- participants meet in small stable learning groups (called "Sets");



- each Set holds intermittent meetings over a fixed program cycle;
- problems are relevant to a participant's own workplace realities;
- a supportive collaborative learning process is followed in a Set;
- process is based on reflection, questioning, conjecture and refutation; and
- participants take action between Set meetings to resolve their problem.

Action learning has a flexible “elicitive” framework designed to draw out, capture and build on what is, rather than operate in a pure, detached, analytical and rational world of what should be. It is well known that experience itself is a very slippery teacher; most of the time we have experiences from which we never learn. Action learning seeks to throw a net around slippery experiences, and capture them as learning, i.e. as replicable behavior in similar contexts and as a source of questions in differing contexts. By forcing reflection and promoting insightful inquiry with perceptive partners in situations where solutions are not always obvious, and by leaving responsibility for implementation of the solution in the participant's hands, the individual makes sense of an experience by conceptualizing it and generalizing the replicable points; and plans for future actions based on the learning gathered. In this way the action learning set provides a “safe practice field” where the participants' mental models and future actions are shaped and reshaped in continual developmental cycles.

As interest in action learning continues to grow among practitioners, theorists and researchers, in both the academic and organizational fields, a significant number of articles are published addressing its various facets. This review proposes to provide some organization and understanding of these articles to facilitate access and appreciation.

Two previous reviews of the action learning literature by Alan Mumford (*Management Bibliographies & Reviews*, Vol. 11 No. 2, 1985; *Management Bibliographies & Reviews*, Vol. 20 No. 6/7, 1994) respectively covered the field prior to 1985 and the period 1985-94. Both reviews included books as well as journal articles. This current review covers the period 1994-2000 and is limited to publicly available journal articles. In preparing this review, we have attempted to

be as inclusive as possible, gathering articles from and through a number of sources. We have included articles that deal specifically with action learning (highlighted as a keyword or used in the text) as well as some related articles focusing on action technologies. Articles included are listed in the Bibliography section. The Bibliography is intended to be comprehensive; any relevant articles not included were an oversight and not intended as a critique of their usefulness.

We have chosen to follow Mumford in categorizing articles; however we have revised Mumford's categories, as shown below:

(A) Collections:

1. Special issues.
2. Proceedings, reports.

(B) Action learning fundamentals:

1. Definition, description.
2. Process variant.
3. Action research, work-based learning, project-based learning, action science.
4. P Vs. Q.
5. Set advisor, learning coach.
6. Problem vs. puzzle.
7. Learning, adaptation, reflection.
8. On-line, technology assisted, distance.

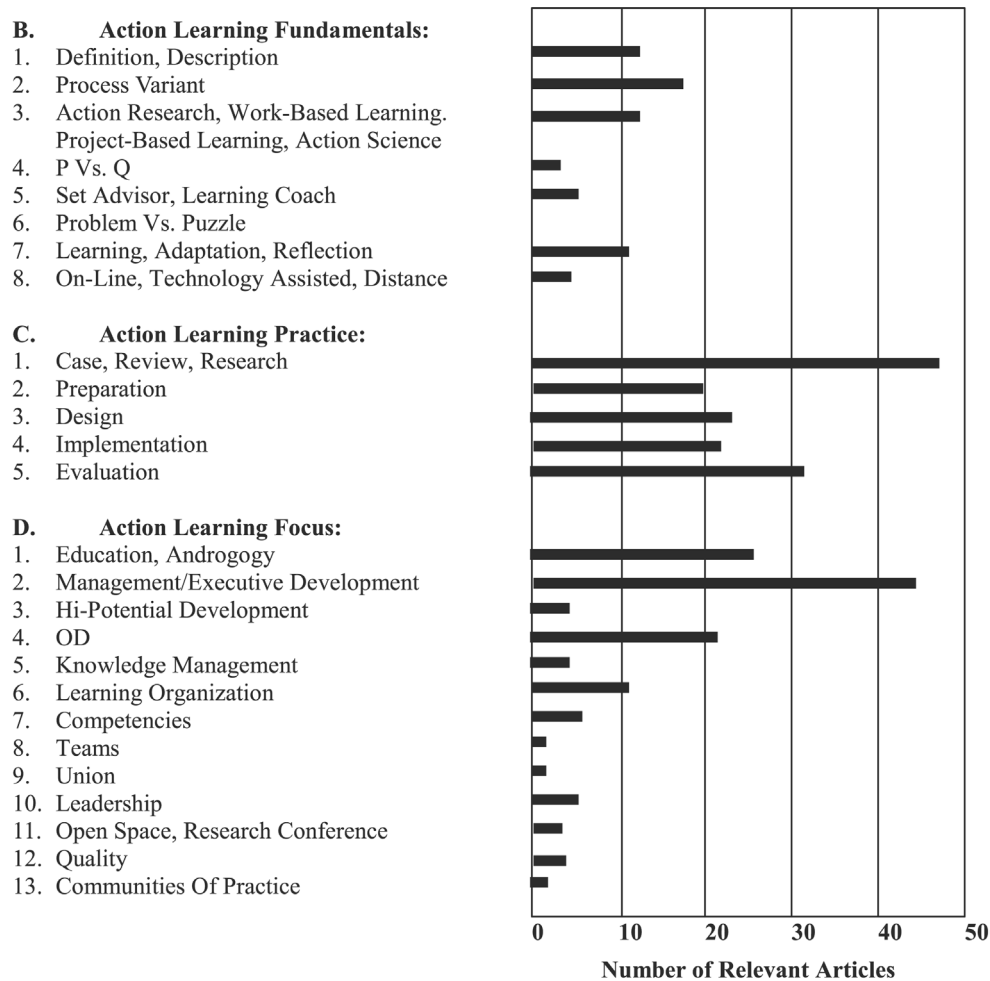
(C) Action learning practice:

1. Case, review, research.
2. Preparation.
3. Design.
4. Implementation.
5. Evaluation.

(D) Action learning focus:

1. Education, androgogy.
2. Management/executive development.
3. Hi-potential development.
4. OD.
5. Knowledge management.
6. Learning organization.
7. Competencies.
8. Teams.
9. Union.
10. Leadership.
11. Open space, research conference.
12. Quality.
13. Communities of practice.

These categories were initially determined by an overall examination of the articles and were refined to their final format based on more extensive reading. Figure 1 charts the number of articles cited per category/subcategory, bearing in mind that one article may be categorized in a number of ways – for example, an article may be a case study of an

**Figure 1** Relevant articles per category/subcategory

executive development program so would be categorized as C1, an action learning practice case study, and D2, an action learning focus on executive development. We believe that the resulting pattern is instructive, as it provides the reader with an overall view of the literature showing areas of emphasis, and forms the basis for the discussion in the next section.

Part 2 of this literature review will provide signposts into the 1994-2000 action learning articles via short summaries of articles that we feel represent the salient features of each category. Our hope is that this approach will serve the dual purpose of indicating sources of information (P) and further avenues for research (Q).

## General discussion

In the category of Collections, three special issue journals were devoted to action learning articles. Two (Bibliography, Nos 31-38; 59-

65) were general in nature and the third (Bibliography, Nos 79-83) dealt with educational themes. Articles of particular interest have been examined in Part 2 of this review. One report (Bibliography, Nos 2) was first displayed on-line by the American Society for Training and Development and has since been published in paper form. This report was also of a general nature but grounded in research, and has been considered in Part 2.

About 11 per cent of all articles categorized under Action Learning Fundamentals still deal with basic definitions and descriptions of action learning. One wonders what there is left to say. Based on his later comments (Revans, R.W., *The Origin and Growth of Action Learning*, Chartwell Bratt, London, 1982), we suspect that Reg Revans, the originator of action learning would echo this sentiment. Fortunately there is a healthy balance of articles focusing on "pushing the envelope" through process variants, and others dealing with various action

technologies. There are also a substantial number of articles dealing with learning, adaptation and reflection.

Since there are only three articles dealing with the once very thorny issue of how much programmed knowledge (P) action learning sets should accept, and no articles addressing puzzles versus problems, these topics seem to have been settled to the satisfaction of most practitioners. There were only a few articles dealing with facilitation and coaching, which is surprising given the number of programs that use coaches that are described in articles in the action learning practice category. Although only a trickle at this point, articles dealing with technology-assisted action learning seem destined to grow, given the current interest in e-learning. No articles were found covering all the subcategories in a single article.

By far the most active publication category is Action Learning Practice. Case reviews and research related pieces top the category, with preparation, design and implementation well covered. It is particularly gratifying to see that evaluation is covered in a very significant number of articles. In this category it is possible to find quite a few articles that cover all five subcategories.

The category covering action learning focus is by its nature populated by topics that are not typically inter-related, although there are clearly some overlaps. Perhaps the biggest surprise is the number of articles that address education and androgogy. Mumford in 1994 referred to a growing interest in academia in action learning (*Management Bibliographies & Reviews*, Vol. 20 No. 6/7, 1994, p. 4) and this has clearly continued. The original perceived "disconnect" between traditional academic teaching and action learning (Revans, R.W., *The Origin and Growth of Action Learning*, Chartwell Bratt, London, 1982) appears to be much less of an issue. Indeed, many now see a real compatibility between the two.

Since action learning was originally recommended as a management development tool, it is no surprise that its application in management and executive development still produces a substantial number of publications. The reluctance of organizations to devote special attention to high achievers is likely the reason why there are so few articles dealing with this subject. However, in a world where leadership is in very short supply, the

small number of articles dealing explicitly with its development is a mystery.

The OD category contains articles dealing with change, planning and culture, so it is to be expected that this category would be well populated. Because of its relevance to organizational learning, action learning has been reasonably well featured in articles on the learning organization, but it has been seemingly of only marginal interest to knowledge management practitioners. The use of action learning to develop competencies is featured in a few articles. Its application to team and unionized contexts is slight, which is also puzzling since many of the fundamentals of action learning – i.e. development of skills to work in groups and teams, and the fact that all participants engaging in the process act as equals – would work well in both contexts. There is also only little interest shown in its applications in open space and research conferences and in the quality arena. A disappointment is the number of articles in the communities of practice category; since in our experience as consultants this is a growing and important area.

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