

Q'ing action learning: more on minding our Ps and Qs

P.A.C. Smith

XEC Development International Ltd, Holland Landing, Ontario, Canada

Explores the question "How can we gain a deeper understanding of the contribution of P and Q?", together with a version in which the following proviso is added "...while maintaining the simplicity and power of action learning as originally conceived by Professor Revans". It is concluded that programmed knowledge P has little or no place in action learning when we accept that the programme goal is confined to personal development. Further, by emphasizing problem solving and embracing P another significant complicating issue is introduced related to "learning" versus "adaption". Identifies the expression $L = P + Q$ itself as a confusing expression, and proposes other simple functions emphasizing the need for vigilant Q on introduction of P. Also explores the contribution of P and Q when action learning is simply the means to becoming better action oriented under conditions of turbulence and ambiguity.

I am pleased to acknowledge that the initial stimulus for this article was provided by Dr John Morris when he requested that I comment on his paper (Morris, 1991). I am also indebted to Dr Morris, Dr Alan Mumford, Dr John Peters, and Dr David Botham for insightful discussions as various drafts were progressed.

Introduction

In a very insightful article Professor John Morris (1991) explored the balance between questioning insight (Q) and programmed knowledge (P) which is optimal for action learning. His deliberations were focused around the following theme: "So the question arises: How can we gain a deeper understanding of the contribution of P and Q?" In this paper I further explore this question, plus a version in which I add the proviso: "...while maintaining the simplicity and power of action learning as originally conceived by Professor Revans (1982a)". Morris (1996) has made the point that this amended version is a "tall order"; the reader will see that I reach a somewhat more gloomy conclusion.

Although these questions involve theoretical considerations, they have significant practical implications. They highlight the dilemma that all individuals ought to contemplate and resolve, whenever they undertake action learning. That is: whether to employ the methodology as originated by Revans (shunning P), or the form in which it is often currently recommended (embracing all P), or the approach described by Morris (balancing P and Q through understanding).

So, is Revans' view too narrow? Are current authorities too liberal? Or is there, as Morris implies, some way to reconcile these various approaches by understanding and considering the manner in which both P and Q contribute to action learning? My intent in this article is to try to clarify features related to these action learning variants in order to better understand their merits and shortcomings, and encourage and facilitate informed decision making by practitioners. I am aware of only a limited number of other references specifically exploring the nature and importance of P and Q (Smith, 1988; Sutton, 1989, 1990).

In this article I have largely confined my consideration of P to programmed knowledge related specifically to the problem which is being tackled through action learning. This approach has still given rise to a lengthy piece. I have justified giving priority to "problem-related P" on the grounds that, in spite of the large amount that has been written about

action learning, programmed knowledge related to the process itself is by and large variations on a theme. Furthermore, these variations arise largely for reasons of praxiology (Smith, 1988; Smith, 1997). Future work may challenge this assumption, but it will nevertheless have to be published separately.

Background

Revans' exquisitely simple doctrine of "Fellows in adversity learning through fresh experience and reflective insight" is as cogent and practical today as it was when he applied it in 1945. However, its exquisite simplicity masks a rich practical complexity providing potential for many interpretations, particularly with respect to P and Q.

The position that Revans adopted in his seminal work on action learning was very clear – P has no place in action learning. For example he wrote "In true action learning, it is not what a man already knows and tells that sharpens the countenance of his friend, but what he does not know and what his friend does not know either. It is recognized ignorance not programmed knowledge, that is the key to action learning: men start to learn with and from each other only when they discover that no one knows the answer but all are obliged to find it" (Revans 1991).

In fact Revans had such a dislike for programmed knowledge that he remained opposed to even any detailed description of action learning itself "... the day it is accurately described in words will be the day to stop having anything to do with it" (Revans, 1983). This did not stem the tide as Honey and Mumford have pointed out: "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" (Honey and Mumford, 1992). Revans himself foresaw this: "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). As recently as January 1995 Revans is quoted as saying "There are too

many bogus action learning programmes around”.

It is true that Revans in his later work softened his stance somewhat towards P; however, it is clear that P is still not seen as having significant relevance to the aims of action learning. For example, in 1991 Revans wrote: “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” (Revans, 1991).

The case for shunning P

In my opinion there can be little motivation to embrace P unless significant importance is attached to the solution to the problem that the action learning participant is tackling, as opposed to simply using the problem as a throw-away vehicle to facilitate personal development. Also, in my opinion, P contributes little to the kind of personal development process envisaged by Revans, or typically anticipated by action learning participants. Therefore, whether or not to shun P depends on the extent to which one believes action learning is an effective and efficient problem-solving methodology, or that the problem-solution has important intrinsic value. In this section I examine these contentions.

First, current literature advises that problem solving is a very complex process, and that there are many methods seemingly more appropriate than action learning for addressing the “wicked” problems (Checkland, 1990; Rosenhead, 1989) embodied in today’s business situations.

Ackoff (1981) goes further, saying that business problems (which he calls “messes”) cannot be solved because of their complicated systemic inter-related nature, and must be dissolved, i.e. designed out of existence. The poor record of problem-solving methodologies based on learning and prediction supports Ackoff’s contention (Rosenhead, 1989). On this basis, the narrow nature of many of the problems capable of being addressed by typical action-learning participants seems to preclude use of action learning purely as a problem-solving approach.

Second, although it is sometimes suggested that Revans intended action learning as a problem-solving process, 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 sketched out a process which could be followed by action learning practitioners called “system beta” (Revans, 1982b); System beta appears on the surface to be a problem-solving process. But, as Revans 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” (Revans, 1984a). System beta was intended as a framework for development and learning, not as a blueprint for problem solving.

Now we turn to my contention that P contributes little to the developmental aspects of action learning. First, note that Revans seems to have had in mind a very special kind of developmental outcome, writing (Revans, 1982c):

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, 1982c).

He also seems to have seen this self-development as self-enlightenment rather than simply behavioural improvement, for he wrote (Revans, 1983b): “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”.

In other words, the developmental aims that Revans was striving for are essentially the same as those most action learning practitioners claim to be aiming for, i.e. personal

development as opposed to skill or technology, etc. This kind of development has been described by Ackoff (1981) as leading to acquisition of personal wisdom, the highest form of knowledge. Sutton (1989) stops just short of saying the same thing. These kinds of self-analysis and betterment are not facilitated by insinuating more problem-related P into the participant's comprehension.

Finally, it can be argued that the less the action learning participant knows of P, the more questioning (s)he will be required to undertake, and in so doing will the more soundly develop the ways of Q. Revans certainly had this in mind, for he defined action learning as follows: "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, 1982d).

On the basis of the above discussion it is clear that programmed knowledge P has little or no place in action learning as Revans has so often said, as long as we accept that the programme goal is essentially confined to personal development. In the next sections I will examine alternative views.

The case for embracing P

The case for embracing P is somewhat more convoluted since the degree to which P is embraced may be a variable. However, as noted in the previous section, there can be little motivation to embrace P unless importance is attached to the solution to the problem that the action learning participant is tackling, as opposed to simply using the problem as a throw-away vehicle to facilitate personal development. For example P might be embraced in "framing" a problem (Smith, 1988) or as part of Revans' system alpha (Revans, 1971).

In other words, it seems to me that our dilemma often arises because we "Want to have our cake and eat it". Indeed, development agendas utilizing action learning are typically sold on the win/win proposition that participants will themselves develop while the organization will at the same time leverage the participants' expertise in overcoming workplace problems. At completion of an action-learning cycle presentations are often made to senior management regarding problem solutions, thus justifying continued efforts. The more subtle personal development benefits, though real if developed, would be less persuasive, and are often not detailed.

One view advanced by those designing action learning programmes is that without

P, the Q involved in grappling with typical business problems would overwhelm the participants, and that developmental aims could not be achieved under these conditions. In this sense, the capabilities of participating managers are belittled; one is reminded of the attitude to women's capabilities in (hopefully) days gone by.

Another view is that P can be embraced because action learning does provide practical problem resolution even though it does not operate through an efficient or perhaps effective problem-solving process.

These are no doubt subjective matters, but I contend that introduction of a significant amount of P places unacceptable emphasis on the problem-solving aspects of action learning, altering the balance to the detriment of development. In the extreme, one can envisage participants covering up failures, and developing habits of defensive thinking which will be very hard to eliminate (Argyris, 1990).

In my opinion it seems unlikely that we can have both P and Q without sacrificing some or all of the power and simplicity of the original methodology (Revans, 1982a). Morris (1996) in reviewing an earlier draft of this article agreed with this conclusion to the extent that he believed it would be a "tall order". So, the amended question I posed at the beginning of this article raises a dilemma that cannot easily be resolved. However, to throw away the solution to the problem at completion of an action-learning cycle does seem illogical. I concur with Morris (1991) that it should be possible to introduce P with sufficient care that developmental aims are not undermined, and a good deal of the power of the original method (Revans, 1982a) is retained. I do not believe that the simplicity of the original method can be retained as will be shown in the following sections.

Once set members embrace P to any degree, then I agree with Morris (1991) that "...P as *one of the objects for Q* has great relevance" (my italics) and "Fearless questioning is at the heart of action learning..." It is critical, with respect to P, that Q be considered what Morris calls "the senior partner". Only in this circumstance is there hope that participants will develop the insightful questioning that is one of the principal goals of action learning. But the process is no longer straightforward; for example P will be introduced almost as soon as the set begins its journey, and skills in Q appear therefore to be needed before they can be developed. Likewise, if set members are concentrating on learning Q skills and applying them to P, one must question whether the desired inward-directed personal development will also take

place. This is not to say that these aims cannot be addressed successfully. For instance, Mumford (1991) writes: “One of the fundamental things we have learned is to put Q before P”. Rather it is that action learning has become that much more complicated.

Morris (1991) points to a number of important lessons from the practice of successful sets. It is not clear from his account to what extent these are mature practitioners of action learning. In any event, I believe that all participants embracing P must take to heart the following two points which Morris identified, and which seem to me to be particularly relevant:

- 1 Successful sets completely commit to a questioning approach. Not necessarily as deeply reflective as Q but a good base for development of Q.
- 2 Successful sets have the capacity to balance the Ps and Qs that constantly arise in practice.

On the basis of the above discussion it is clear that embracing P without thought will be at best ineffective, and at worst misleading. Following a balanced approach as suggested by Morris militates against a number of shortcomings associated with embracing P, but introduces complexities which vitiate the simplicity of the original method (shunning P). Mumford (1991) writes that: “..in most circumstances P and Q are two mutually dependent parts of a total *development* process; they are loving brother and sister, not Cain and Abel” (my italics). This is an excellent analogy, but we do well to remember that family relationships are among the most complex of all. Furthermore, great care will have to be exercised by set members to ensure that inward-directed personal development still receives priority. One can see that one small step for P is a giant step for set advisers.

Unfortunately, by emphasizing problem solving and embracing P we will also introduce a further significant complication. This will be explored in the next section.

A question of learning

“Learning” is a word treated indiscriminately as noun and verb, and seldom if ever formally defined even by authorities that use it frequently. This is not a trivial omission. For example, by selling action learning on the basis of its problem-solving potential, what kind of learning are we promoting? Won’t the pressures to succeed limit learning to circumstances which result in business improvements? What about action learning which results in business disadvantage, or no effect on business at all? After all, some

authorities suggest that learning from mistakes is more important than learning from successes (Marsick, 1990). And there are other aspects of learning associated with action learning which are unclear and which might impact on the choice of variant. For example, does the individual learn or does the set learn or both?

But, most importantly with respect to gaining “a deeper understanding of the contribution of P and Q”, are we talking about learning in an invariant context or in a changing context?

Revans at least seems to have been clear that he intended action learning to be put to use when we are dealing with a changing context, saying for example that action learning operates only under conditions where a general theory of search is infeasible (Revans, 1982d), and where learning must be picked up “...minute by minute, as the changes and their risks come out of the blue.” (Revans, 1983a).

Psychologists have traditionally associated learning with an invariant context (Weick, 1991), and epistemologically, learning has typically been equated with the detection and correction of error. This seems to me to be entirely logical given that the criteria for learning are the same as those of the rational experimental model; this situation does not exist when the context changes to any reasonable extent.

In contrast, the term “adaption” has typically been used by social scientists in situations where the context changes and the organization accordingly adapts itself or its environment (Ackoff, 1972). Adaption presumably is based on instinct, intuition, positional sense, insight. If these are learned (verb), I do feel they constitute a very different kind of learning (noun).

Revans (Revans, 1982d, 1984b) himself seems to have foreseen this confusion but chose simply to interpret “adapting” as “learning”; he says “Our ability to adapt to change with such readiness that we are seen to benefit may be defined as ‘learning’” [Revans own punctuation].

In this paper I adopt the following definitions:

- learning is the acquisition of knowledge under unchanging context;
- adapting is the acquisition of knowledge under changing context.

Note that since the internal processes of the set can be considered essentially invariant, the set can be said to be “learning to adapt” when its members tackle problems in a changing business environment.

As was noted in the previous section, there can be little motivation to embrace P unless

importance is attached to the potential of action learning to solve problems and help participants and others learn about the business. Unfortunately, very rapid and large scale contextual change could be considered the norm in today's business world. Under these conditions it seems implausible that "learning" about the business is occurring; participants are more likely involved with "adaption". Not realizing this distinction can lead to serious consequences.

Such consequences arise when Q is associated with the *solution* to a problem, and then without much thought, this solution is labelled "learning" rather than "adaption". The practical significance is that the Q *resulting* from set activity will be reapplied as P in the future when the action learners in question face a similar problem. Over time, mind-sets become fixed and yesterday's Q becomes today's P.

As Sutton (1989) says: "Experience is only of value if it is directly relevant (which is seldom the case)" (author's parenthesis). It is essential that action-learning practitioners who embrace P have a clear idea of the conditions under which P was generated. In other words, action learners embracing P to whatever extent are still obliged to shine the light of learning-Q on P. In particular they must question the origin of P and the circumstances under which P will be re-applied. This is consistent with the view put forward so eloquently by Morris (1991) and by Mumford (1991). I would only add that I believe this message should be emphasized most strongly at every opportunity by those responsible for action learning programmes, and particularly by set advisers. So by adopting P and attaching significance to the problem solution we have again introduced complications.

One can argue that business change is sufficiently slow that for all intents and purposes, the context is invariant (Peters, 1996). The above discussion would have little practical import if this were true. This line of reasoning does not fit the current business climate with which I am familiar, but does not vitiate my point that this is a matter for careful consideration by set members with respect to their own problems.

Deliberations concerning the impact of a changing turbulent context on action learning thinking are formalized in the next two sections.

$$L = P + Q$$

Given that most current action-learning programmes give considerable weight to problem solutions and embrace P to some extent, I believe a further barrier to "...a deeper understanding of the contribution of P

and Q?" results during interpretation of the much quoted equation $L = P + Q$.

Professor Revans (1982d) originally formulated this as a "function" which I feel was more appropriate. Even Revans (1984c) adds so many words to explain the equation that the power and simplicity of action learning gets lost in the telling, and the door is opened for interpretation by what Revans calls "endless authorities". For example, I often see the equation interpreted as "The whole body of Learning = What is known + What is unknown". This is clearly unassailable but redundant. Revans himself has added to the confusion with interpretations such as "Learning equals programmed plus questioned changes (Revans, 1982b)", "L is the rate of learning" (Revans, 1982d), and "This power of *adaption* to the unknown is the capacity to learn, which we call L" (Revans, 1984b) [my italic]. Others have attempted to adapt the equation (Mumford, 1991; Sutton, 1989) but to the best of my knowledge the power of returning to the functional form has not been tapped.

At the risk of being labelled one of the "endless authorities", I offer here alternative functions based on the notion of learning and adaption explored above. Once the set has assumed problem solving as an important outcome of its activities, this revision is intended to put the decision making regarding P back in the hands of set members where I believe it rightly belongs:

- 1 When the problem to be explored occurs in what the set member(s) consider(s) a relatively invariant context
 $L = f\{Q_P, Q_E, Q_L\}$
Learning (verb) is *some function, to be defined by the set*, of questioning insightful action regarding: what is believed, what is eventuating, and the overall learning activity itself.
- 2 When the problem to be explored occurs in what the set member(s) consider(s) a changing context
 $A = f\{Q_P, Q_E, Q_A\}$
Adaption (verb) is *some function, to be defined by the set*, of questioning insightful action regarding: what is believed, what is eventuating, and the overall adaption activity itself.

It is not suggested that set members articulate a mathematical function for the above expressions, but that they give thought to which expression is the more relevant to their situation, and explore the importance and "seniority" of the terms.

Action as an end in itself

In this section I turn to the question of simply taking action as a means of making progress

under conditions of turbulence, and the extent to which embracing P under these circumstances impacts on the power and simplicity of the original action learning method.

There can be no doubt that Revans anticipated that action would result from action learning undertaken in turbulent conditions. For example, he wrote that he envisaged action learning being applied under conditions of minute by minute “out of the blue” change (Revans, 1983a).

In a 1984 article, Revans (1984c) provided even more graphic descriptions of the exaggerated turbulence and change he believed loomed before us in the twentieth century.

In this article he likens change to an ever steeper precipice on which we are forced to climb and live. What we need to know according to Revans is: “How do I ask myself questions about the future? ... how do I guess the things *most likely* to happen? Nothing, of course, is absolutely predictable. All the same, it would be reassuring to define what is most probable. .. This raises the idea of Q, or questioning insight.”

Revans also 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, 1984b). He goes on to suggest 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” (Revans, 1983a).

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

Modern authorities 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”. Ramirez (1983) recommends action learning as an approach for organizations facing turbulent conditions because it “... facilitates the ongoing creation and invention of *means* ... ” (my italics). This is consistent with Revans’ view: “The issue now before us is to *identify the means* whereby, in practice,

some managerial quality, proper to them all, of improving the capacity to judge more accurately what might next happen, can be developed. If this is possible, such quality must be one product of action learning ...” (Revans, 1984c) (my italics).

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.

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, 1982d): “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” but “... action learning may be one means of concentrating attention upon the questions *dying* to be asked.”

I infer from this discussion that if we agree that action learning is about taking action even in turbulent business conditions, then introduction of some P enables set participants to ignore the uncertain nature of their situation, plan to put one foot in front of another, and “get on with the present”. This does not mean that Q no longer has a place, but rather that a little P as the initial focus for Q is “no bad thing”. Revans himself seems to have come to this same conclusion (Revans, 1984c): “We may therefore assert that learning to adapt to the real and changing world around us demands both the acquisition of relevant programmed knowledge *and* the freeing of the imagination to look more widely around and to re-read the messages received in doing so ... the proper choice aims at the most useful balance in whatsoever circumstances” (Revans’ italics).

This “action as an end in itself” is the only circumstance I have met where the power and simplicity of the original approach seem not to be lost on introduction of P. Nevertheless, points raised in previous sections are still relevant; the overall result will be the loss of the simplicity and possibly the power of the original method (shunning P).

Summary

In this article I explore the question posed by Morris (1991) “How can we gain a deeper understanding of the contribution of P and Q?”. I also explore an amended version where I added the stipulation: “...while maintaining the simplicity and power of action learning as originally conceived by Professor Revans (1982a)”. These questions involve theoretical considerations but have significant practical implications. In particular, I examine the methodology as originated by Revans (shunning P), the form in which it is often currently recommended (embracing all P), and the approach described by Morris (balanced P and Q through understanding). In all of this I largely confine my consideration of P to programmed knowledge related strictly to the problem which is being tackled through action learning.

My first conclusion is that programmed knowledge P has little or no place in action learning as Revans has so often said, as long as we accept that the programme goal is essentially confined to personal development.

I further contend that introduction of a significant amount of P places unacceptable emphasis on the problem-solving aspects of action learning, altering the balance to the detriment of development. With regard to the amended question “How can we gain a deeper understanding of the contribution of P and Q whilst maintaining the simplicity and power of action learning as originally conceived by Professor Revans?” I argue that it is unlikely we can have both P and Q without sacrificing some or all of the power and simplicity of the original methodology. On the other hand, to throw away the solution to the problem at completion of an action learning cycle seems illogical, and I agree with Morris (1991) that it should be possible to introduce P with sufficient care that developmental aims would not be undermined, and a good deal of the power of the original method retained; I do not believe that the simplicity of the original method can be retained under these circumstances.

I go on to assert that once set members embrace P to any degree, they should adopt the approach recommended by Morris (1991) including “...P as one of the objects for Q has great relevance” (my italics) and “Fearless questioning is at the heart of action learning...” It is critical with respect to P, that Q be considered what Morris calls “the senior partner”. Only in this circumstance is there hope that participants will develop the insightful questioning that is one of the principal goals of action learning.

It is further reasoned that by emphasizing problem solving and embracing P another

significant complication is introduced. This issue is related to “learning” versus “adaption”, where:

- learning is defined as the acquisition of knowledge under unchanging context
- adapting is defined as the acquisition of knowledge under changing context

Since rapid and large scale contextual change can be considered the norm in today’s business world, “learning” about the business environment by solving a business problem seems largely impossible in very many of the situations in which businesses find themselves applying action learning. So participants must be largely concerned with “adaption”. This leads to a serious practical problem when yesterday’s Q becomes today’s P. It is essential that action-learning practitioners who embrace P have a clear idea of the conditions under which P was generated, and are obliged to shine the light of learning-Q on these P with regard to the particular circumstance of their discovery.

I also assert that the expression $L = P + Q$ is itself a complicating factor; and I propose two other functions which I believe will better serve the purpose by emphasizing the need for vigilant Q on introduction of P:

- 1 When the problem to be explored occurs in what the set member(s) consider(s) a relatively invariant context

$$L = f\{Q_P, Q_E, Q_L\}$$
Learning (verb) is some function, to be defined by the set, of questioning insightful action regarding: what is believed, what is eventuating, and the overall learning activity itself.
- 2 When the problem to be explored occurs in what the set member(s) consider(s) a changing context

$$A = f\{Q_P, Q_E, Q_A\}$$
Adaption (verb) is some function, to be defined by the set, of questioning insight regarding: what is believed, what is eventuating, and the overall adaption activity itself.

Finally, I explore action learning simply as a means to better become action oriented under conditions of turbulence where there appear to be no “right” answers. Examples are given to show that a small amount of P, even corrupt P, provides the focus for Q which enables participants to “get on with the present”. From this point of view swallowing a small dose of P does not seem to reduce the power or the simplicity of the original method (shunning P); however, all the other points explored above are still relevant, and the overall outcome will be the loss of the simplicity and possibly the power of the original method.

I hope that I have been successful in clarifying features related to the three action-learning variants, resulting in better understanding of their merits and shortcomings, and more informed decision making by practitioners. In inquiries of this kind we are severely hampered by gaps and ambiguities in the literature, and a lack of objective research (Harrison, 1996; Wallace, 1990). It is my further hope that this article will encourage more healthy Q about P with respect to action learning itself, thus discouraging the maturation of action learning into a cult (Botham, 1995).

References and further reading

- Ackoff, R.L. (1981), *Creating the Corporate Future*, John Wiley & Sons, New York, NY.
- Ackoff, R.L. and Emery, F. (1972), *On Purposeful Systems*, Aldine-Atherton, Chicago, IL.
- Action Learning News (1995), Newsletter of the International Foundation for Action Learning, Vol. 14 No. 1, January.
- Argyris, C. (1990), *Overcoming Organizational Defenses*, Allyn & Bacon, Toronto.
- Botham, D. (1995), "Is action learning a cult?", *Action Learning News*, Vol. 15 No. 3.
- Checkland, P. and Scholes, J. (1990), *Soft Systems Methodology in Action*, John Wiley, Chichester.
- Harrison, R. (1996), "Action learning: route or barrier to the learning organization?", *The Journal of Workplace Learning*, Vol. 8 No. 6.
- Honey, P. and Mumford, A. (1992), *The Manual of Learning Styles*, Peter Honey, London.
- Marsick, V.J. and Watkins, K.E. (1990), *Informal and Incidental Learning in the Workplace*, Routledge, New York, NY.
- Mintzberg, H. (1994), *The Rise and Fall of Strategic Planning*, Prentice-Hall, New York, NY.
- Morris, J. (1991), "Minding our Ps and Qs", in Pedler, M. (Ed.), *Action Learning in Practice*, 2nd ed., Gower, New York, NY.
- Morris, J. (1996), "Ps & Qs", *Private Communications*, March and August.
- Mumford, A. (1991), "Learning in action", *Personnel Management*, Vol. 23 No. 7.
- Peters, J. (1996), "Re: P&Q", *Private Communications*, August.
- Ramirez, R. (1983), "Action learning: a strategic approach for organizations facing turbulent conditions", *Human Relations*, Vol. 36 No. 8.
- Revans, R.W. (1971), *Developing Effective Managers*, Praeger, London.
- Revans, R.W. (1982a), *The Origins and Growth of Action Learning*, Chartwell-Bratt, London.
- Revans, R.W. (1982b), "The psychology of the deliberately random," in *The Origins and Growth of Action Learning*, Chartwell-Bratt, London.
- Revans, R.W. (1982c), "The nature of action learning", in *The Origins and Growth of Action Learning*, Chartwell-Bratt, London.
- Revans, R.W. (1982d), "Management, productivity and risk – the way ahead", in *The Origins and Growth of Action Learning*, Chartwell-Bratt, London.
- Revans, R.W. (1983a), "Action learning – its terms and character", *Management Decision*, Vol. 21 No. 1.
- Revans, R.W. (1983b), "Action learning – the skills of diagnosis", *Management Decision*, Vol. 21 No. 2.
- Revans, R.W. (1984a), "Action learning – are we getting there?", *Management Decision*, Vol. 22 No. 1.
- Revans, R.W. (1984b), *The Sequence of Managerial Achievement*, MCB University Press, Bradford.
- Revans, R.W. (1984c), "'Meadium' on the learning equation", *Management Education & Development*, Vol. 15 Part 3.
- Revans, R.W. (1985), "Action learning: an international contrast", *BE*, Vol. 6 No. 3.
- Revans, R.W. (1991), "Action learning – its origins & practice", in Pedler, M. (Ed.), *Action Learning in Practice*, 2nd ed., Gower, New York, NY.
- Rosenhead, J. (Ed.) (1989), *Rational Analysis for a Problematic World*, John Wiley, Chichester.
- Smith, P. (1988), "Second thoughts on action learning", *Journal of European Industrial Training*, Vol. 12 No. 6.
- Smith, P.A.C. (1997), "Action learning: praxiology and process variants", manuscript submitted for publication, *Journal of Praxiology*.
- Sutton, D. (1989), "Further thoughts on action learning", *Journal of European Industrial Training*, Vol. 13 No. 3.
- Sutton, D. (1990), "Action learning in search of P", *Industrial and Commercial Training*, Vol. 22 No. 1.
- Wallace, M. (1990), "Can action learning live up to its reputation?", *Management Education & Development*, Vol. 21 Part 2.
- Weick, K.E. (1990), "Cartographic myths in organizations", in Huff, A.S. (Ed.), *Mapping Strategic Thought*, Wiley, New York, NY.
- Weick, K.E. (1991), "The nontraditional quality of organizational learning", *Organization Science*, Vol. 2 No. 1.

Application questions

- 1 Do you agree with the author's evaluation of P with regard to achieving various action learning objectives? Are you deliberately structuring your action learning practices such that they are consistent with your answers?
- 2 Is the speed of change in your business environment sufficient in your opinion to justify exploring "learning" versus "adaptation" as the author has suggested here? What are the consequences if you are wrong?