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Dear Reader,

Days have fewer and fewer hours, it seems. The demands placed on us, those obligations we accept and those that we choose ourselves make our daily to-do lists grow. Doesn't it happen to you that you don't even read all emails anymore, that you browse through your inbox and leave many for later (not sure if "later" is a real time or a metaphor for "I-don't-know-when, -if-ever, I-just-know-that-not-now")? With this overload and days getting progressively shorter, going to conferences means a real challenge. I appreciate the fact that you're even reading this paragraph, and so in this issue we wanted to bring a conference closer to you.

We're featuring an extract of the first International Action Learning Conference, held at the Henley Management College, in the UK, a few weeks ago.

Enjoy the reading!

Isabel Rimanoczy  
Editor

Quote of the Month

*"Time flies like an arrow, fruit flies like a banana"*

Groucho Marx  
American Comedian (1890 - 1977)

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# LIM NEWS

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# **ACTION LEARNING: PRACTICES, PROBLEMS & PROSPECTS**

## **International Conference – Henley Management College March 2008**

A few weeks ago, the Henley Management College in the UK hosted the international conference *Action Learning: Practices, Problems & Prospects*. The conference, the first of its kind, was organized by a group associated with the journal Action Learning: Research and Practice, and consisted of: Mike Pedler (Henley Management College); Kiran Trehan (University of Lancaster); Jeff Gold (Leeds Metropolitan University); Sue Pritchard (Bath Consultancy Group); Helen James (Henley Management College) with support from Joe Raelin (Northeastern University, USA).

The invitation brought together over 140 participants, representing practitioners and scholars from 9 different countries: USA, Canada, Germany, Italy, Finland, Ireland, the Netherlands, Australia and the UK. True to the Action Learning spirit, the conference was designed in the form of a learning community, welcoming everyone as contributors and participants, accepting all relevant submissions and asking everyone to encourage questioning and the sharing of inquiry, avoiding "telling", "selling" and "talking heads".

To build in relevance and ownership, participants had an opportunity to reflect what their main questions were, and what they wanted to explore during the conference. Daily debriefs in the form of a general session encouraged social learning, to share reflections and impressions gathered during the day.

The conference featured 44 different sessions, some as accounts of practice set up as action learning sets, where the presenter shared his questions and the participants provided input and inquiry, papers and workshops.

### **A Quarter of a Century learning about Action Learning**

Richard Thorpe: Professor of Management Development, Leeds University Business School offered a retrospective of the evolution of AL over a 25-year period. While it originated as a practice to stimulate growth in small firms, it later was used to bring about strategic change as well as a vehicle for management development, and then in a third phase, was employed as a means of developing critical reflection and of enabling change.

Several papers addressed the use of AL within MBA programs, as an alternative to

solving the shortcomings of MBA programs that fail to provide students "with useful skills, for not preparing them adequately for leadership roles and for not imbuing them with appropriate norms of ethical behavior". They argued that the main cause was a failure to ground the curriculum in actual business practice. But since AL has been applied in many different ways, some papers indicated that there is still a need for some clear ideas and/or principles to inform the practice. Furthermore, some presenters indicated that the use of a facilitator to make the most out of an AL set is a challenge since it required some specific contracting and skills.

### **Accounts of Practice**

Susan Turner, Director of an AL program at a health organization in Canada presented her two-year experience with an AL program that included over 1500 employees, and that had the purpose of changing an organizational culture where workplace bullying was rife, and where there were internal communication blockages and a reluctance to take responsibility among managerial ranks.

From the US, Dr. Deborah Cron, the superintendent of the Weatherford Independent School District in Weatherford, Texas, and her team shared their experiences with a program which uses action learning as a foundation for developing leadership in her staff. This project has been running since 2006, and has been yielding surprising results. The presentation referred to how AL can help creating engagement among employees, a topic that is also currently of concern in corporate environments.

ARL was also present. Carole Brown and I conducted an experiential workshop designed within the ARL principles, using "the medium as the message". The approach was rated as innovative by the participants, and we were able to share the 10 ARL principles that can enrich and optimize the designs of Action Learning programs. Since the need for some underpinning guidelines to inform the practice had been raised in other sessions, this workshop provided some answers and also addressed the various "hats" that an AL coach can wear to help participants maximize the learning: teacher, facilitator and team coach.

Ghislaine Caulat, from Ashridge Consulting, shared her experience facilitating virtual Action Learning sets, which she called Audio Action Learning. While some authors argue the importance of people having initial face-to-face meetings to establish trust and generate an open climate in the virtual group, her experience indicates that an initial face-to-face meeting is not necessary. On the contrary, "preserving a certain degree of anonymity can foster openness and paradoxically speed up the building of trust in the group". She recommended having an initial contracting session, to agree on norms, such as:

- Be in a quiet room and alone.

- All participants should use the same virtual communication channel, namely the telephone, even if some of them happen to be in the same location and could in fact meet face-to-face.
- Use technology that is as stable as possible: bad connections are frustrating when careful reflection is required.
- Don't work, drive or read during the session.
- Take sufficient time for the session and do not squeeze it in between other activities.
- Some journaling after the session is recommended, in order to capitalize on the learning.
- Confidentiality (just as in face-to-face meetings).
- Commitment to the dates.
- Punctuality (even more critical than in face to-face).
- Clear time scheduling, particularly when different time zones are involved.

### **Reflection for all?**

Bernhard Hauser, from Germany, presented the challenge and satisfaction that Action Learning participants experience in relation to the "reflection" part. Managers and students quite naturally immediately focus on working on what they define as their work—the project. Their willingness to engage in reflection, on the other hand, represents a much greater challenge to them. They are not used to instinctively use the "soft skill", and most of the participants we see in the sets have little or no experience in doing personal reflections in a group. Of course they have their opinions of what is happening and how it is happening, but they are not used to addressing these reflections openly or to putting their theory-of-action into question. So when beliefs are mentioned they are often expressed as a fact and not as an assumption. For many participants reflection does not seem to be a very pleasant or satisfying task, or something they even would regard as work at all.


### **Many varieties of "action" based approaches**

Joe Raelin, from Northeastern University, discussed the many modalities based on action: action research, action learning, action science, developmental action inquiry, cooperative inquiry and participatory research, plus other experiential programs such as cooperative education, internships, service learning, clinical practice, or study abroad. He introduced 10 elements that he found these diverse action modalities have in common.

### *Ten Unifying Elements*

1. They are practice-based rather than didactic or classroom-based.
2. They develop useful theory applicable to specific contexts
3. They invite learners to be active participants, leading often to change in the self and in the system in question.
4. They endorse reflection-in-action rather than reflection-on-action.
5. They emphasize meta-competence over competence, meaning it is not any particular skill which is critical but how to adapt to the changing environment.
6. Learning tends to be facilitated rather than taught.
7. They espouse the development of double-loop rather than just single-loop learning. In single-loop learning, when something doesn't go according to plan, most people look for another solution that will work but they tend to look within their portfolio of existing approaches. In double-loop learning, these approaches and even the values connected to them are questioned, resulting in new choices, more valid information, and high internal commitment to any new behavior attempted. People learn to question what might even be considered sacred.
8. They welcome the contribution of tacit knowledge to learning.
9. Their measured learning outcomes are more often practice-based rather than academic.
10. They are comfortable with tentativeness rather than certainty.

### **The Final Session**

The Conference ended with an unusual session for conferences, yet one very well-suited for the Action Learning setting. Participants gathered in a big room and were invited to share their thoughts, reflections, insights and collectively elaborate on the next steps they could envision as a result of the two days experience of practices, problems and possibilities. Organized in the AL spirit, I don't think the conference could have had a better closing. 

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### **From the organizer's perspective: A comment by Mike Pedler<sup>1</sup>**

We had a great first conference. I had no idea at the outset who would turn up and we were amazed at the enthusiasm of the response to our call for sessions and delighted by the variety of people who came and the places and institutions they represented. It is some time since there has been a truly international action learning gathering, and this conference left us in no doubt about the energy for the idea and the richness of its practice in the world.

How do we know it was a good conference? The reception staff at Henley commented on a "friendly and buzzy" group of people, which is a better sign for me than "happiness sheets". The variety of the conference revealed some interesting differences; "practitioners" and "academics" for example, an old theme in professional and management education that we might hear more of in this setting.

The sessions that most affirmed my faith were "heart" sessions—accounts of practice that got to the heart of action learning and to me; what made me think most were with the packed sessions of paper presentations—those ideas are still running round my head. Some of the great sessions I went to only had a few people at them; yet I noticed that the academic "big name" speaker sessions tended to be oversubscribed. The best sessions, whether workshops, accounts of practice or more formal papers shared the characteristic of presenting life in all its complexity and in not seeking to oversimplify. Some 160 action learning sets have been run in rural Wales for Welsh farmers, but they have all been different. They all started differently, the recruitment process being unique to each set of people and situations. In an engaging "academic" session, Joe Raelin from the USA, in looking at the "neighboring action modalities" of action research, action science, action inquiry etc expressed the view that Revans' eccentricity had been a factor in limiting the development of action learning, but an English participant disagreed and valued this eccentricity as central to what we mean by action learning.

These differences are what vitalizes this field of practice that, for some reasons, we characterize as action learning rather than action research etc. Why is action learning different? How is it different? Why is it worth maintaining the difference? (If it is) are what makes this such a vital—in the sense of living—field of practice and inquiry. These questions are not only the province of the researcher; for the

practitioner is always asking "Am I doing it right?" This living but unsettled state of affairs is perhaps what Revans would have most enjoyed about the Conference.

Mike Pedler

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<sup>1</sup> Mike Pedler is Editor of Action Learning: Research & Practice - The first international journal dedicated to the advancement of knowledge and practice through action learning. To receive contents alerts for every new issue, please visit <http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/titles/14767333.asp>

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