Action Learning: Research and Practice

Publication details, including instructions for authors and
subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/calr20

Differences and impacts through action learning

Joanna Kozubska [a] & Bob MacKenzie [a]

[a] IMCA Business School, Auckland, New Zealand

Version of record first published: 18 Jul 2012

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Differences and impacts through action learning

Joanna Kozubska and Bob MacKenzie*

IMCA Business School, Auckland, New Zealand

Here, we argue that action learning (AL) has been evolving into different variations, whose respective advocates appear to concentrate on one of the several components inherent in Revans' formulation of AL as $L = P + Q$. They do this – sometimes inappropriately – to the virtual or relative exclusion of other aspects, and this has consequences for the outcomes and impact of the AL process. In an attempt to delimit the boundaries between various versions and indeed to identify what Johnson [2010. A framework for the ethical practice of action learning. *Action Learning: Research and Practice* 7, no. 3: 267–283] called 'inauthentic' AL, we have been developing our ideas for a scanning device or framework. We refer briefly to some of the theoretical underpinnings of this framework. We then introduce a fresh taxonomy to explain and illustrate features of five principal variations of emphasis in AL that we have identified. The aim of this framework is to help stakeholders to work towards selecting and co-creating the most appropriate variation of 'authentic' AL to suit their unique set of circumstances at any given time. We outline the likely outcomes of each respective variation if taken to extremes and conjecture about their implications. This taxonomy should also help one to reduce the mystique and confusion that often surround AL while acknowledging its complexity. We suggest that by taking advantage of insights provided by this framework, purchasers and potential AL set members in particular are more likely to participate in learning conversations that lead to more informed decisions and actions to address or adjust their respective interests and needs. In conclusion, we identify some areas for further research and development.

Keywords: action learning; umbrella framework; stakeholder theory; network theory; conversations

Introduction

Action Learning seems very much alive and evolving, a fertile idea spawning new forms and vivifying old ones. ... Different interpretations of Action Learning may have their roots in the broader idea of learning itself. (Pedler 1997, 61)

*Corresponding author. Email: bob_mackenzie@btopenworld.com

As a community of practice, one of the differences that we are making in the world is that we are producing – and reproducing – different approaches to action learning (AL), each with discernible variations of emphasis and outcomes. Although there is considerable interest in, and take up of, AL, we have been wondering why its use is not even more widespread. Critical AL theory (e.g. Vince 2008, derived from Willmott's (1994, 1997) formulation from emancipatory Critical Management Studies) may go some way to explaining the smaller incidence of take-up or effectiveness than might have been expected. Given the emotions and politics involved, there may well be a counter-force of 'learning inaction' to offset or negate 'learning in action'.

This paper summarises our current thinking about the potential usefulness of our 'umbrella framework' of AL – so called because of its shape and span. The framework identifies several variations – differences – in the interpretation and application of Revans' (1984) formulation of AL,[1] expressed as L = P + Q. In this project, we take our cue from the observation quoted above and locate this discussion within the context of experiential learning as detailed in Reynolds and Vince (2007). The framework also embraces the four definitions of AL listed by O'Neil and Marsick (2007, 7) and the four 'schools' of AL identified by Marsick and O'Neil (1999, 159–63). It is also mindful of theories of 'critical action learning' and of the version called 'business-driven' AL (Boshyk 2000). We imagine that it might be usefully applied within Burgoyne's (2010) conception of a critical realist network theory approach.

While diversity of AL approaches is broadly to be welcomed, this proliferation can cause confusion and uncertainty about what it is and about which approach works best. As a result, AL's take-up and success rates – and therefore its impact – are probably more limited than they might be. Our goals in developing this framework are, therefore, to help stakeholders – in particular, prospective and actual commissioners and participants – to achieve greater clarity and appreciation of its possibilities and potential relevance or otherwise to their unique circumstances by distinguishing different schools of thinking and practice about AL. To this end, we have been experimenting with visual metaphors in an attempt to clarify our arguments and claims.

We suggest that the variations in AL that we identify in the framework (Figure 1) have developed – and are likely to continue to develop – as a natural process of experimentation or because individual practitioners quite naturally emphasise their own tacit or explicit personal preferences for certain aspects of the process, sometimes to the knowing (i.e. deliberate) or unknowing exclusion or neglect of other elements.

In the next section, we trace the genesis of the umbrella framework.

Theoretical underpinnings of the umbrella framework

In developing this framework, our inquiry has been essentially exploratory, conjectural, theoretical and qualitative. We have drawn upon aspects of
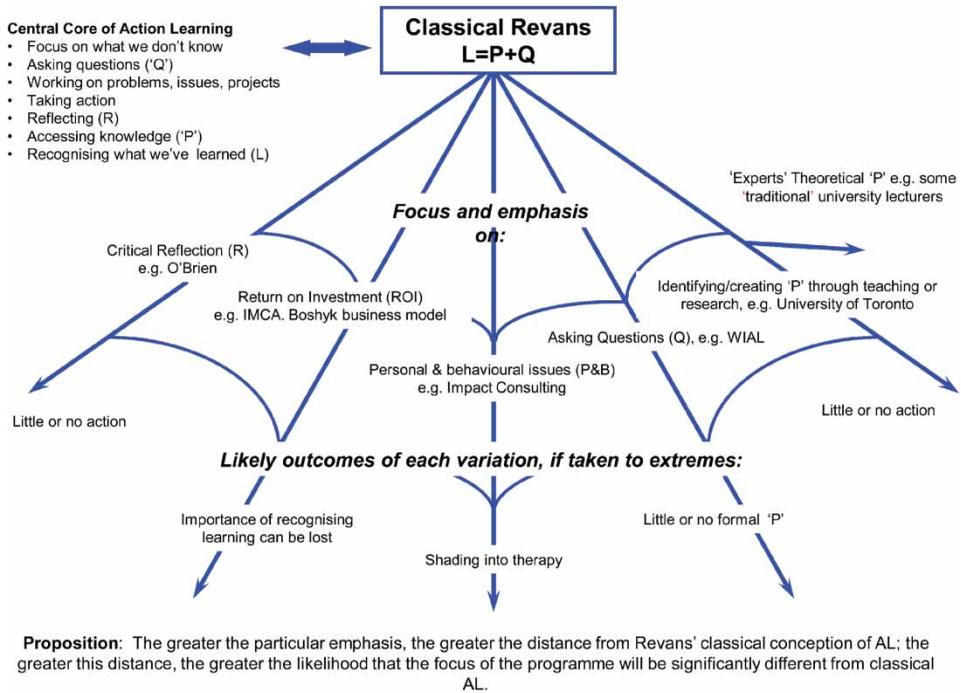
Figure 1.   Variations on a theme of AL: from central core to emphasis.

stakeholder and network theory and upon theories of conceptual framework development. The presentation of this conference paper and its associated workshop is an important aspect of the method, based on dialogue and narrative (e.g. Chivers and Yates 2010), that we are adopting to refine our ideas.

Some theories of AL

Determined by different perspectives and contexts, the theory and practice of AL have been variously interpreted over time. The design of any AL initiative is contingent upon understandings of factors such as philosophy, purpose, time frame, degree of change and epistemology (e.g. Marsick and O'Neil 1999, 172). Several taxonomies and variations of emphasis of what we might call post-classical (post-Revans) AL have been developed. For example, Marsick and O'Neil (1999, 159–63) identified four different 'schools' of AL, which they called the scientific, the experiential, the critical reflection and the tacit schools. The practice of adherents to these and other schools is distinguished and determined by their respective dominant beliefs about learning and change.

That said, our starting point is Revans' urging that we focus primarily on what we *do not* know, and we frame this project in the context of what we infer from his writings and utterances are five key components as set out in Table 1.[2]

Table 1. Five key components of the AL process.

A set – A small group of managers (or others) who are committed voluntarily to working together, freely to question, discuss, give feedback and share openly

Projects/tasks – Real problems in a real time frame, addressing issues that really matter and leading to implementation and an observable outcome. Personal development was important for Revans, but not at the expense of a deliverable outcome

A client – The real owner of the problem, someone who desperately needs the problem to be solved

A set adviser – An individual whose principal role (if so designated) is to help participants to learn through their actions, rather than teaching them. This has significant implications for how this facilitator conceives and practises their role

A time frame – Tasks and problems are considered within a defined period of time. This necessarily gives rise to programmes with a beginning, middle and an end

---

Source: Revans (1998, 2011).

Inherent in this process are the notions of voluntary engagement, comradeship in adversity, resilience, commitment and perseverance – an ability to cope with the frustration of not knowing.

Building on Revans' ideas, and in recognition of the importance of reflection within the AL process, MiL (USA) and LIM (Sweden) (1996), Rimanoczy (2009), and Rimanoczy and Turner (2008) have formulated a variation called action reflection learning and the International Management Centres Association (IMCA 2010) has adopted the variation of 'L = P + Q + (R)', where R = reflection.[3] There is also a growing body of literature on 'self-managed action learning' (O'Hara, Bourner, and Webber 2004; Shurville and Rospigliosi 2009), virtual or online AL (e.g. Gray 2001; Pauleen 2004) and critical AL (e.g. Vince 2008; Willmott 1994, 1997). However, whatever be their different emphases, all forms or variations of 'authentic' AL (Johnson 2010) appear to share certain commonalities.

There are many global and local stakeholders in, and networks of, AL, including commissioners, providers, facilitators, accrediting or awarding bodies, participants and subsets of such groupings. Not surprisingly, therefore, in developing our framework, we have been influenced by aspects of stakeholder and network theory, to which we refer briefly in the following section.

Stakeholder and network theory

There are different variations of stakeholder and network theory. For the purposes of this paper, we take stakeholders to be groups, individuals and other phenomena with a stake or share in a particular AL issue, policy, decision, action or system. Positively or negatively, they can influence, or be influenced by, that phenomenon, and, physically or otherwise, they can be closer to or more distant from that issue. This seems congruent with Burgoyne and Jackson's (1997, 61–5) 'arena thesis', which regards management development

as 'an arena in which different values and interpretations can be negotiated'. Granovetter (1973, 1983) outlined the characteristics of networks in great detail. Burgoyne (2010, 247) proposed that organisations might be regarded as complex networks within a critical realist paradigm. The fundamental constituents of networks are human and non-human nodes and links (mutual influences), and – within the field of management studies – Burgoyne reminds us that networks can implode or explode, depending on whether their internal links are stronger or weaker than their external links (2010, 248).

The focus of our project is primarily on internal and external human stakeholders within complex networks. Human stakeholders can be found at any level or position in a social system or other systems, whether local, regional or global (Hawkins 2011, 1).

Hence, any AL initiative can be regarded as 'a network of interactions between different stakeholders' (Hawkins 2011, 4). Such interventions often fail because the interests, perspectives and biases of particular stakeholders are not sufficiently taken into consideration in the various phases of AL. Of course, not all stakeholders have the same degree of power, influence or interest in a particular enterprise. This has inevitable consequences for outcomes. We propose that working with our framework is a means for all key stakeholders to better understand and facilitate the complex AL process. This is because during the different stages or phases of an AL project, it pays due attention to their multiple and often conflicting perspectives and to the dynamics of their interaction. It offers a means to decide on a particular variation and focus of an AL intervention in a way that is agreed, understood or rejected by principal stakeholders, following cycles of questioning, discussion, action and reflection. The provisional checklist of questions given in Table 2 is designed to help any AL stakeholder to elicit who the other key stakeholders are, in an endeavour to maximise the potential for programme success.

In developing the umbrella framework of AL, we were also influenced by ideas about what constitutes a conceptual framework. The following section summarises some general features of a conceptual framework.

Characteristics of a conceptual framework

essentially, all models are wrong, but some are useful. (Box and Draper 1987, 424)

All models and frameworks have inherent limitations as well as potential benefits. They are imperfect and incomplete representations of 'reality'. In their imprecision, they are open to multiple interpretations and critique. And they must always be located within a specific context. In presenting this paper, we are merely continuing a process of holding our emerging conceptual framework open to critical scrutiny and review.

We see this AL umbrella framework as a means to support a constructivist and conversational approach to understanding and acting upon the dynamic

Table 2. Checklist: some useful questions for stakeholders about the purchase or provision of AL.

Learning
- What is the commissioning client's previous experience of AL?
- Does the client understand that there are several variations of AL?
- Is it AL, action research or another form of learning and development that is required?
- Is the development of individual personal and behavioural (P&B) aspects a priority?
- Does the business require and encourage continuous learning and learners?

Critical reflection
- Is the process of (critical) reflection typically encouraged in this setting?
- Do potential stakeholders in this AL programme value critical reflection?
- Do stakeholders have any previous experience of (critical) reflection in management, leadership or organisational development?

Return on investment (ROI)
- What ROI criteria are proposed or could be developed?
- How important is it to commissioners to demonstrate a financial or other measurable ROI?
- Do those responsible for the AL programme believe that evidence of ROI can be demonstrated?
- Is the achievement of a measurable ROI important to people running the programme?
- Do programme providers and set advisers have the requisite skills and expertise to focus on ROI, however it is formulated?

Questioning
- Is 'questioning' acceptable within the host organisation?
- Do senior managers welcome 'fresh questions'?
- Is 'questioning' culturally and socially acceptable within this particular context?
- What kinds of questions are seen as acceptable?
- Will potential AL set members be comfortable questioning senior managers and other powerful stakeholders?
- Will potential participants be comfortable with situations in which questions can create emotionally charged situations: long silences, personal disclosure, displays of distress and emotion?
- Will potential participants be prepared to share personal feelings on a regular basis?

Programmed learning
- How ingrained is 'traditional' learning within the host organisation?
- Do programme commissioners have a preference for 'traditional' forms of learning?
- Are their qualifications from 'traditional' institutions and learning programmes?
- Does this particular business community prefer to recruit people who have 'traditional' qualifications?
- Is there sufficient openness to engage with different forms of P?

interplay of stakeholders' learning and actions, decisions, negotiations and contracting within and about the micro-world of an AL set and its internal and external nodes and links. We see it as a process by which stakeholders can 'share understandings and do so in agreed ways' (Scott 2001, 343). In the context of academic learning, this conversational model is characterised by its discursive, adaptive, interactive and reflective qualities (Britain and Liber 1999; Laurillard 1993, 94–5). Working with the umbrella framework is a move towards contributing to the development of 'co-creating actionable knowledge' in the process of constantly negotiating shifts and emphases in an approach to AL throughout any given programme (Trehan and Pedler 2010, 237).

A conceptual framework for AL would be 'some apparatus that will be able to capture the very essence of [AL][4]' (Le Boeuf 2006, 1–2). It would also aim to convey this essence in a simplified, frequently visual or diagrammatic format and include both abstract and physical references. Such frameworks are created and refined through a process of negotiation with key stakeholders (Le Boeuf 2006).

Having outlined these underpinning theories, the next section describes an umbrella framework of AL.

An umbrella framework of AL

Johnson's (2010, 267) framework identifies six core principles of 'authentic' AL from an ethical perspective. Our framework is constructed around the criteria of emphasis and outcomes. Figure 1 is a distillation of our current understanding of other taxonomies of AL, combined with certain assumptions about a few other practices beyond our direct experience. This framework identifies different weightings that we propose are tacitly or explicitly assigned by different stakeholders to each of the following seven factors that are inherent in 'classical' AL. It also includes a 'critical strand' that enables stakeholders to critique and reframe predetermined programme aims and purposes, if necessary (after Burgoyne 2010, 249).

These seven factors are as follows:

- ROI – return on investment
- L – learning
- P&B – personal and behavioural attributes
- R – (critical) reflection
- P – programmed learning
- Q – questioning
- AR – action (research); taking action.

In developing this taxonomy, we have scanned the known 'universe' of AL, which consists of a diverse range of providers and practices, and asked ourselves (and other stakeholders) the following questions:

- What are the major differences in AL programmes?
- Can these differences be explained?
- How does anyone know what is on offer?
- How can people decide whether AL might be relevant for their purposes?
- How do people know which variation of AL is best for them at any given point?
- How might practitioners explain their particular 'brand' of AL to their clients?

How can these differences in emphasis be explained?

Differences of emphasis (variations) that are indicated in Figure 1 have probably arisen because different practitioners – overtly or tacitly – quite naturally prefer particular aspects of AL and consequently 'flavour' programmes with their own specific interests and expertise. For example, an academic might be inclined to flavour 'P', by including what he or she regards as significant amounts of relevant theory.

We see the usefulness of the framework in Figure 1 as a scanning device. It assumes that, by placing a greater emphasis on any one of these seven listed elements, any 'planet' moves further away from the Revans' 'sun' at the centre of the AL universe. Undue emphasis placed on one particular element changes the nature of any AL programme and its outcomes. The challenge is, therefore, for practitioners, purchasers and other stakeholders to understand the process and outcomes that are likely to be available to them from each iteration or permutation.

Figure 1 illustrates a number of very different types of programmes offered by different providers. For example, the World Institute of Action Learing emphasises 'Q' – the ability to pose questions. 'P' does not appear at all, at least explicitly. Impact Consulting, who are consultant psychologists, concentrate on 'Q' and the personal and behavioural ('P&B') aspects of AL. Their contention is that 'ROI' is only achieved through the changes in personal behaviour. The IMCA designs all its programmes around real business issues and looks for measurable ROI through implemented project work ('ROI'). Yet all three bodies explicitly purport to offer AL programmes.

In each variation of AL, we identify a different emphasis and likely outcome or impact *when it is taken to the extremes*. The challenge in the search for relevance, authenticity and optimum impact lies in all stakeholders knowing how to work within this framework to interpret, choose and apply a particular version or permutation relevantly and sensitively at different stages in a given context.

How stakeholders might use this framework

We propose that, by introducing and explaining this umbrella framework – especially during the earlier phases of bidding, pre-contracting, briefing and

initial set meetings – this framework can help stakeholders to arrive at appropriate choices. To illustrate the potential application of this umbrella framework, we have developed worked examples of two matrices. The first (Table 3) concerns the relationship between respective emphases and elements of AL. The second (Table 4) suggests some potential problems arising from over-emphasis upon a particular variation of AL. We should stress, however, that what appears in each coordinate is open to interpretation and debate. For us, it is the *process* of stakeholders working through the framework and arriving at a more informed outcome which is the value and purpose of this exercise.

Two ways of making sense of this complexity

Derived from the umbrella framework and these two sets of matrices, we developed the following checklist of questions and a set of variations on Revans' original $L = P + Q$ formulation to help stimulate discussion and decision-making among stakeholders. On the basis of the insights derived from our inquiry, it should be particularly useful to AL clients, commissioners, providers and practitioners in helping them to determine how best to tailor an AL intervention to maximise its potential for having the greatest desired impact.

Some variations on $L = P + Q$

Revans developed the ideas which he came to call AL as a result of his experiences as a scientist at the Cavendish Laboratories and his work with the National Coal Board in the UK after the nationalisation of the coal pits in 1946. The driver for his AL concept was the achievement of results. The sponsors of his work and participating managers had real problems to solve:

> First we notice that it (action learning), was intended not as an educational instrument, but as an approach to the resolution of management difficulties; the principal motivation to Action Learning was not a desire to teach anybody, nor even the hope that somebody else might learn: it was to do something about the tasks that the colliery managers were under contract to master. (Revans 1983, 9)

Revans represented AL as $L = P + Q$. We found this interesting in the light of his intention for AL! Why did he focus on 'L' for learning rather than, say, on A (for action) in a format that might read $A = Q + P + L$ (where Q = *fresh* questions – Revans' term[5])? We raise this question here to illustrate what we see as a problem associated with Revans' original formulation, in which action is not explicitly identified as a key factor.

If we accept the concept of variations on a theme of AL, how can we best represent these variations in a practical and helpful way? Developing Revans' original formulation, we suggest that the following expressions might be useful in distinguishing one form of AL from another. Each uses a capital letter to highlight its particular emphasis and lower case letters for

Table 3. The relationship between the emphasis and the elements of AL.

Elements	Emphasis					
	ROI (business model)	Personal and behavioural (P&B) attributes	Questioning (Q)	Action (research) (AR)	(Critical) Reflection (R)	Programmed learning (P)
Facilitation Set adviser – requires/ focus on	Business knowledge 'Well read', credibility	Counselling skills	Eliciting fresh questions and effective questioning techniques	Emphasis on effective implementation of action research methodology	Emphasis is on developing habits of critical reflection within the set members	Providing 'P' in response to the needs voiced by the participants
Developing questions (Q)	Business driven Focus on the project and initial identification of ROI criteria	To challenge individual behaviour	Development of questions is central to the process; dialogue is encouraged	Q relevant to AR methodology Refined through the AR cycle; inquiry	Q designed to stimulate personal reflection; challenges, tacit assumptions and practices	Q in order to determine 'P'
Projects/issues	'SMART'; maximise impact on the business; involve others beyond the AL set	Projects are personal to individuals rather than to the AL set or organisation	Projects can address both personal and organisational issues; rarely of significant size or complexity	Projects address a key issue of common interest arising from a shared 'problem'	Project focus is secondary to R	Projects determine what 'P' is required

Taking action (A?)	Vital to achieving measurable results (ROI); key deliverable; needs support from senior executives	Action is contained within the AL programme – normally on personal issues	Action happens outside the programme	Action is based on double/triple-loop learning	Action is relevant to the individual rather than to the group or organisation	Frequent use of case studies generates little real action
Recognising learning ('L')	Learning may or may not be recognised. May be stronger if it is an explicit ROI criterion	L may or may not be recognised	L may or may not be recognised	Double/triple-loop learning; integral to professional development	L may or may not be articulated	L is not normally assessed
Reflection (R)	R may be anecdotal only, unless specifically required	Substantial personal reflection is inevitable	R is recognised as a useful tool	R is part of the research process. Reflection on values, politics and ideologies	R is integral; can become 'critical'	Reflective anecdotes can contribute to 'P'
Programmed learning (P)	P significant; relevant to projects: may be provided by client organisation: new ideas and insights	P is minimal	P is minimal	P emphasises research methodology and method	P unlikely to feature prominently	P is the principal focus; frequently delivered by 'experts'; may not value the experience of the set members
Client organisation	Client 'owns' the project and may predetermine the ROI required	The client role is normally absent. set members are own clients	The client may or may not feature explicitly	The client does not play a major role	The client may or may not be identified	If identified, the client might be invited to contribute to 'P'

Table 4. Potential problems arising from specific AL programme emphases.

Emphasis	Problem					
	ROI	P&B (personal and behavioural attributes)	R (reflection)	P (programmed instruction)	Q (questioning)	Research (action research)
Facilitation	Can be directive	Very 'soft skills' oriented. Can shade into therapy. Occasional over-involvement of the set adviser	Very 'soft skills' oriented	Involves teaching rather than facilitation	Insists on questions only – precludes practical help from other set members or relevant P	Insists that the focus is on methodology Can shade into 'academic supervision'
Developing questions (Q)	Q is seen as getting in the way – 'we already know the answers'!	Over-reliance on questions can inhibit practical help potentially available from other set members	Q is confined primarily to facilitating reflection	Q is often paid 'lip service' only. 'We already know the answers!'	Questions for questions' sake?	Q is often geared to methodology only
Projects	A focus on ROI can eclipse the attention paid to other elements – e.g. recognising learning and reflection	Usually only personal issues are addressed in projects – can miss opportunities for business development	Project outcomes are secondary to shining the light on personal issues	Project outcomes can seem unconnected to the AL programme	Projects can seem unconnected to the AL programme – may feature in report-back only	Project outcomes become secondary in importance to methodology

|						
Taking action (AR)	Action is often implemented too fast – only one 'answer', instead of exploring a range of options	P&B rarely makes a major strategic impact on the business. Personal action only	Action is not seen as a fundamental part of process	Action is not directly associated with the AL programme	Action can seem unconnected to the AL programme	Action is seen essentially as generating material for further research and learning
Learning (L)	L can be neglected in the drive for action	Personal learning only. Opportunities for collective set learning missed	The focus is on personal learning	L focuses on the acquisition rather than on the application of P	L is sometimes overlooked	L can seem intangible and drawn-out
Programmed instruction (P)	Set members think that they already have all the P they need!	P is frequently omitted	P is often omitted	P is the dominant focus	P is often omitted or overshadowed	P can concentrate narrowly on developing research skills
Reflection (R)	R is not encouraged – action is preferred	R is a 'cuckoo' that pushes all other AL elements out of the nest	R is the central focus	R is frequently omitted	R can be verbal only, unless recorded in Reflective Journals	R is mainly confined to field notes?
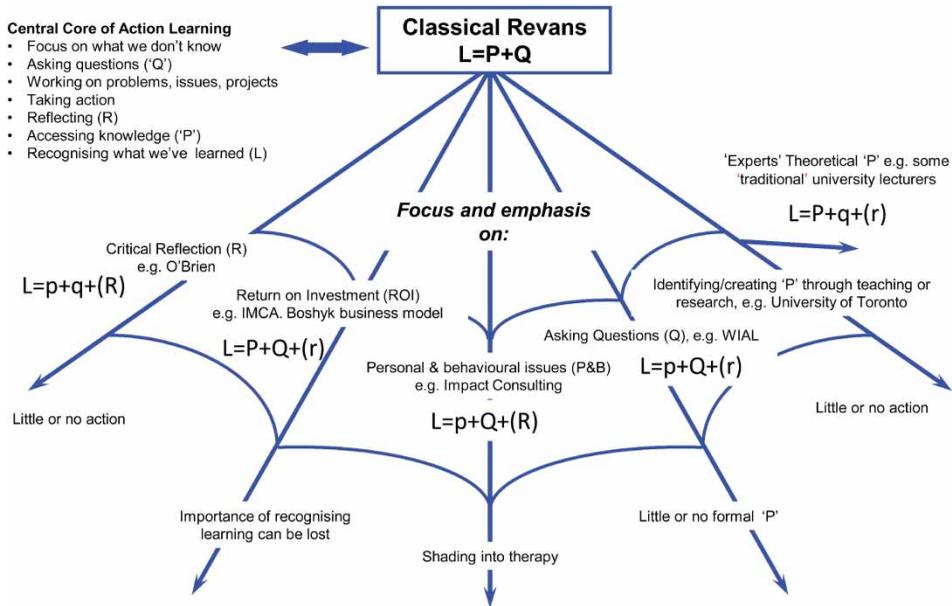
Figure 2.   Variations on Revans' formulation of AL.

other elements which may not have the same weighting or indeed perhaps do not occur at all.

Thus,

- a variation on AL which concentrates on asking questions might be written as $l = p + Q + (r)$;
- a variation which focuses on personal development might be written as $L = p + Q + (R)$ and
- one which focuses on theory or programmed learning or instruction might be written as $L = P + q + (r)$.

This is illustrated in Figure 2.

There may well be other variants that could be usefully developed.

The next section summarises some initial feedback since we started developing our ideas in 2010.

Some 'glimpses' from working with the umbrella framework

Since our framework was originally introduced to IMCA's academic board in New Zealand in 2010, we have shared and explored the concept with client commissioners and practitioners at every opportunity, formally and informally, via conversations, e-mails and letters from some 40 practitioners and proponents of AL. Our inquiry question was 'Were you attracted to the umbrella

framework and its propositions?' We also sent our 2011 article to a number of prominent academics, consultants, practitioners and key clients in the field of AL. Several luminaries, such as Mike Pedler and Alan Mumford, have responded, and we have taken much of this feedback into account in preparing this paper.

Perhaps in view of the challenging implications of the umbrella framework, a number of our e-mails received no response. However, Table 5 contains a selection of some of the more affirmative responses that we received.

A vignette from a client's perspective

A major client, well versed in AL, had always held that the way they practised AL in-house was the only way and would not brook alternative views.

Table 5. A selection of individual responses to our 2011 paper.

1. 'I liked the thread of your article – make a considered choice – though I wonder how many AL facilitators would be prepared to be open about the strengths and weaknesses of what they are offering. An associated issue which I don't think you mention may be different wishes/needs of different clients in the purchasing organisation. Crudely and not always positive, HR people are turned on by soft outcomes, chief executives by ROI'. (Mumford, pers. comm. May 14, 2011)

2. '. . . as a general view, I agree with you that there are many interpretations, all with their upsides and downsides. I also agree that we all need to keep Revans in mind in developing our own views – if we are still to use that increasingly baggy term, action learning. On one particular aspect, many of these variations are of course brands and most put the facilitator in a strong role. As I think of Revans, he was scornful of brands and their "right answer" implications and in particular endorsed only the role of the *accoucheur* – or set initiator. Revans' action learning gets a lot of its point from being a set of peers without any experts present, including facilitators. Tom Bourner's espousal of self-managed action learning is perhaps closest to Revans' vision – so you might want to add that to your varieties'. (Pedler, pers. comm. May 12, 2011)

3. 'What a good article! The taxonomy that you have developed would certainly help me in considering what style or emphasis of AL (or, indeed, other tools or interventions) might be suitable in different circumstances, for different clients, e.g. facilitating Level 7 students in addressing a real problem whilst learning to co-consult, as against, say, a team-building intervention with a dysfunctional SMT. I'm sure that I shall refer to it, frequently!' (An AL practitioner-owner of an independent consultancy group)

4. 'But how would a consultant lead a client to the new taxonomy to help the client to inform their own decision making about and understanding of the most appropriate intervention? (other than by suggesting that they read your article!)' (An AL practitioner-owner of an independent consultancy group)

5. 'Once you reflect on the umbrella model it is very clear that the more the focus shifts down a particular path, the likely benefits of IMC Revans are less likely to occur'. (An academic)

However, recently, the same major client responded to a situation by saying to a manager on an AL programme that 'Yes, you have good experience of AL within the company, but we asked you to join the set facilitated by Professor Kozubska to give you a different experience of the process'.

Further research and development

The arguments that we present here are, of course, provisional and emerging. However, from the feedback received so far, we feel sufficiently encouraged that our framework and associated propositions have the potential to change some stakeholders' views and practices. We feel that it provides us with sufficiently promising 'glimpses' of the possible impact that working with the framework might have on AL stakeholders, and we intend to build on this to undertake more systematic research.

Revans always accepted that AL would develop. But we wonder if he would own all the variations that are called AL today. In view of the question of authenticity, we propose to continue our inquiry into *What is AL?* We will also continue to test and develop the umbrella framework as a useful tool for practitioners and clients to help determine the relevance of particular variations of AL.

Conclusion: how can this umbrella framework help us to make a difference in our AL worlds?

As we suggested at the outset, this framework could make a significant difference to the quality of conversations between various stakeholders of AL as they decide how best to address their respective interests and needs. In turn, this could improve the quality of outcomes from AL.

The nature and quality of the initial briefing and introduction for potential AL purchasers and participants are of utmost importance, for example, during pre-contracting, contracting and early set meetings. When properly done, this enables and empowers respective stakeholders to carry out some sort of self-audit regarding AL's relevance to them and to establish their personal emotional intelligence and political capacity to engage with the process. The framework and its associated matrices and checklist could facilitate better decision-making about purchasing, providing or rejecting AL.

We see a number of possible applications for an umbrella framework of AL. Above all, however, it is the quality of conversations – dialogue, narratives and discourse – about AL between various stakeholders which increases the probability of working with the most suitable variation(s) and therefore of achieving better outcomes and making a greater difference in the world.

The umbrella framework aims to clarify the complex worlds of AL. It challenges a number of taken-for-granteds and suggests that no one can claim that their interpretation of AL is the right and only one, no matter what the context is.

We are not arguing that by introducing our umbrella framework of AL, we have discovered a magic wand that automatically ensures a smooth and untroubled path for AL. Inevitably, in a complex social learning process such as AL that derives its dynamic from the workplace, many issues that require constant and skilful awareness, monitoring and adjustment on the part of all stakeholders will emerge. Moreover, while arguing for more pluralistic interpretation and recognition of variations of AL, we are not suggesting that 'anything goes'. Some learning and development practices lie beyond the pale of AL, as we imply in our proposals for further research.

Despite this search for greater clarity, AL experiences and outcomes are inherently unpredictable. So we end with a caveat:

> There can be no guarantees of completely predictable outcomes, because the AL experience inevitably involves surprise and discovery. That said, it's essential that providers, commissioners and potential participants of AL programmes understand that there are several variations of emphasis on the theme of AL. (Kozubska and MacKenzie 2011, 65).

We hope that others will join us in this project, and we welcome all feedback.

Notes

1. We distinguish this from what Nancy Dixon called its 'modified or perhaps Americanized version of action learning' (Boshyk, Barker, and Dilworth 2010, 164–5).
2. As far as we can tell, Revans was much more explicit about what he felt AL *is not* rather than about what it is or how an AL programme should be constituted.
3. It could be argued that R = reflection is already implicit or inherent in the 'factor' Q = questioning insight. However, by designating R as an explicit component, it could be argued that it becomes more helpfully self-conscious.
4. Our insert in square brackets.
5. Film: action learning for effective management: Reg Revans in conversation with Gordon Wills. Produced: Kozubska, J. Pub: IMCB 1984. See also Pedler 1983, 61–74.

Notes on contributors

Joanna Kozubska is an independent consultant, based in the UK. She is also Vice-President UK and Professor of Managerial Communications at the IMCA Business School www.imcassociation.edu/imcassociation/imca_business_school.html. Since its launch in 1981, IMCA has been offering Doctoral, Masters and corporate in-house programmes around the world that are grounded in action learning

principles. Joanna learned her Action Learning from Professor Revans himself in the early 1980s, then spent the next thirty years designing and implementing Action Learning programmes in a range of organisations around the world. She has also had the privilege of interviewing and filming Professor Revans in person about his ideas.

Bob MacKenzie is an independent consultant, based in the UK, and Professor of Management Learning at the IMCA Business School. Bob attained his doctorate as a Set Member on the IMCA's Senior Executive Action Learning (SEAL) programme, and now serves as Set Adviser for subsequent SEAL programmes. He has written about and practised the precepts of Action Learning from the perspective of both roles in different sectors for many years. He is also Convenor of the AMED Writers' Group www.amed.org.uk.

References

Boshyk, Y. 2000. *Business driven action learning: Global best practices*. London: MacMillan.

Boshyk, Y., A.E. Barker, and R.L. Dilworth. 2010. Chapter 6: Milestones on the history and worldwide evolution of action learning. In *Action learning: History and evolution*, ed. Y. Boshyk and R. Dilworth, 117–73. Basingstoke Palgrave Macmillan.

Box, G., and N. Draper. 1987. *Empirical model-building and response surfaces*. Oxford: John Wiley & Sons.

Britain, S., and Liber, O. 1999. A framework for pedagogical evaluation of virtual learning environments. JISC Technology Applications Programme. http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/documents/00001237.htm#_Toc463843837 (accessed November 20, 2011).

Burgoyne, J.G. 2010. Evaluating action learning: A critical realist complex network theory approach. *Action Learning: Research and Practice* 7, no. 3: 239–51.

Burgoyne, J., and B. Jackson. 1997. The arena thesis: Management development as a pluralistic meeting point. In *Management learning. Integrating perspectives in theory and practice*, ed. J. Burgoyne and M. Reynolds, 54–70. London: Sage.

Chivers, M., and A Yates. 2010. The narrative turn in action learning practices: From restitution to quest. *Action Learning: Research and Practice* 7, no. 3: 253–66.

Granovetter, M. 1973. The strength of weak ties. *American Journal of Sociology* 78, no. 6: 1360–80. http://www.stanford.edu/dept/soc/people/mgranovetter/documents/granstrengthweakties.pdf (accessed November 5, 2011).

Granovetter, M. 1983. The strength of weak ties: A network theory revisited. *Sociological Theory (Blackwell)* 1: 201–33. http://www.citeulike.org/user/thepogoman/article/142465

Gray, D. 2001. Work-based learning, action learning and the virtual paradigm. *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 25, no. 3: 315–24.

Hawkins, R. 2011. ICRA. Stakeholders: Key concepts. http://www.icra-edu.org/objects/anglolearn/Stakeholders-Key_Concepts.pdf (accessed January 27, 2012).

Johnson, C. 2010. A framework for the ethical practice of action learning. *Action Learning: Research and Practice* 7, no. 3: 267–83.

Kozubska, J., and B. MacKenzie. 2011. Getting a purchase on action learning. *e-Organisations and People* 18, no. 1: 53–66, Association for Management Education and Development. www.amed.org.uk (accessed November 29, 2011).

Laurillard, D. 1993. *Rethinking university teaching – a framework for the effective use of educational technology*. London: Routledge.

Le Boeuf, P. 2006. '. . . That struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more . . .': The elements that should be accounted for in a conceptual model for performing arts and the information relating to their archives. Paper given at the workshop 'De la conception à la survie: comment documenter et conserver les productions du spectacle multimédia?' on Friday January 13, 2006 in Paris, Centre de documentation de la musique contemporaine, as part of the 'Rencontres itinérantes' 'Quelles noces de la musique et de l'image?'. Paris, CIDOC/ICOM. www.cidoc-crm.org/docs/2006_LeBoeuf_eng.pdf (accessed January 17, 2012).

Marsick, V., and J. O'Neil. 1999. The many faces of action learning. *Management Learning* 30, no. 2: 159–76.

MiL and LIM. 1996. *Introducing MiL International Newsletter and reporting from the efmd Annual Conference 1994.* 1st ed. Lund: MiL Concepts.

O'Hara, S., T. Bourner, and T. Webber. 2004. The practice of self-managed action learning. *Action Learning: Research and Practice* 1, no. 1: 29–42.

O'Neil, J., and V. Marsick. 2007. *Action learning. Theory into practice*. New York: AMACOM (American Management Association).

Pauleen, D. 2003. Leadership in a global virtual team: an action learning approach. *Leadership & Organization Development Journal* 24, no. 3: 153–62.

Pedler, M. 1983. What do we mean by Action Learning? A story and three interpretations. In *Action learning in practice*. ed. Pedler 3rd ed, 61–74 London: Gower.

Pedler, M. 1997. What do we mean by action learning? *Action learning in practice*. 3rd ed. London: Gower.

Revans, R. 1983. Action learning: Its origins and nature. In *Action learning in practice*. ed. M. Pedler, 3rd ed. London: Gower Publishing Ltd.

Revans, R.W. 1984. *The sequence of managerial achievement*, 15–18. Bradford MCB University Press.

Revans, R. 1998. *ABC of action learning: Empowering managers to act and to learn*. London: Lemos and Crane.

Revans, R. 2011. *The ABC of action learning*. Farnham: Gower.

Reynolds, M., and R. Vince. 2007. *The handbook of experiential learning and management education*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Rimanoczy, I. 2009. The LIM approach 2009. http://www.limglobal.net (accessed March 3, 2011).

Rimanoczy, I., and E Turner. 2008. *Action reflection learning: Solving real business problems by connecting learning with earning*. Mountain View, CA: Davies-Black Publishing.

Scott, B. 2001. Gordon Pask's conversation theory: A domain independent constructivist model of human knowing. *Foundations of Science, special issue on 'The Impact of Radical Constructivism on Science'*, ed. A. Riegler. Vol. 6, no. 4: 343–60. http://www.univie.ac.at/constructivism/pub/fos/pdf/scott.pdf (accessed November 2, 2011).

Shurville, S.J., and A. Rospigliosi. 2009. Implementing blended self-managed action learning for digital entrepreneurs in higher education. *Action Learning: Research and Practice* 6, no. 1: 53–61.

The International Management Centres Association (IMCA) Business School. 2010. http://www.imcassociation.edu/imcassociation (accessed May 7, 2010) (Prospectus).

Trehan, K., and M. Pedler. 2010. Evaluation, impact and actionable knowledge: Assessing the value? *Action Learning: Research and Practice* 7, no. 3: 237–8.

Vince, R. 2008. 'Learning-in-action' and 'learning inaction': Advancing the theory and practice of critical action learning. *Action Learning: Research and Practice. Conference Special Edition: Action learning: Practices, Problems and Prospects* 5, no. 2: 93–104.

Willmott, H. 1994. Management education: Provocations to a debate. *Management Learning* 25, no. 1: 105–36.

Willmott, H. 1997. Critical management learning. In *Management learning: integrating perspectives in theory and practice*, ed. J. Burgoyne and M. Reynolds, 161–76. London: Sage.