# Action Learning and Action Research – Revisiting Similarities, Differences, Complementarities and whether it matters

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**Action Learning – Making a ‘Research Turn’**

A colloquium at the recent 2016 conference of Action Learning: Research & Practice brought participants together in a forum that explored similarities, differences, and complementarities between action learning and action research. Offering this space was prompted by our experience of editing the journal to which increasing numbers of papers submitted in recent years have been coming from people working with action research. Although choosing to submit to this action learning journal they often are written without reference to the action learning literature, and do not explicitly consider what they can offer the action learning community. Equally action learners writing for publication are more familiar with the field of action learning than they are with the action research literature. This seems another lost opportunity given that in choosing to write for a wider community such authors are taking a ‘research turn’ and will often be encountering similar ethical and methodological challenges that confront those who are researching and writing about organisational issues from other inquiring traditions such as action research.

In this colloquium we explored questions such as:

* Why are the literatures of action learning and action research apparently so siloed?
* What are the distinctive origins of each?
* Is it simply splitting hairs to keep emphasizing distinctions between action learning and action research?
* Or does it depend on who you are working with or who the audience is?
* How much difference is there really between Revans’ philosophy of learning as captured in his System *alpha*, *beta* and *gamma* (where *System alpha* is investigation of the organisational issue in its context; *System beta* is inquiry into resolution, through cycles of trial and error, action and reflection; and *System gamma* is the learning, framing and self-awareness of the participants) and the first, second and third person inquiry of AR (Reason & Torbert, 2007) (first person - enquiring into my own practice; second – investigating with others; third – engaging with or contribution to a wider audience such as policy and debates in the world at large).

Commonalities and comparisons between action learning (AL) and action research (AR) have been much discussed (Raelin, 2009; Coghlan, 2010). Each has differing origins and forebears (Revans for AL (Revans, 1998); Lewin for AR (Coghlan and Brydon-Miller, 2014). Yet ironically and confusingly for those coming new to the field, the literatures are fairly siloed, with Raelin and Coghlan being relatively rare in straddling and contributing to both, a notable exception being the Australian Action Learning, Action Research Association (Zuber-Skerritt and Passfield, 2016). Typically the key difference highlighted between AR and AL is to say that while both are grounded in tackling real organisational or societal issues, AL is principally committed beyond this to learning for those directly involved and is not particularly interested in whether such learning goes beyond the specific group or organisation, whereas, AR is concerned that wider knowledge be distilled from the specific issue, to be shared with a wider (third person) audience. There is a central difference between Revans’ systems *alpha,* *beta* and *gamma* and Torbert’s first-, second- and third-person inquiry/practice. Revans’ emphasis in *system alpha* on elaborating the context of the problem and the barriers to addressing it is not explicit for Torbert. The latter’s third-person practice is about contributing to a wider impersonal audience, an activity that does not feature as significant for Revans. *Systems beta* and *gamma* in Revans’ encompass Torbert’s first- and second person practice.

Yet even while we debate the similarities and distinctions there are times when the worlds of action learning and action research overlap. At times action learning makes a ‘research turn’. For example, in the journal of *Action Learning: Research and Practice*, when action learners write up their experiences or systematically evaluate and theorise from their practice, isn’t that now a sharing to a third person audience and a concern to generate wider, useable knowledge for others? Arguably the research turn of action learning is captured by the hybrid term ‘action learning research’ (Coghlan and Coughlan, 2010) introduced to describe activity that has a threefold commitment to learning, to action and to the generation of ‘actionable knowledge’ (Argyris, 2003), what Coghlan and Coughlan refer to as the ‘action turn’ of research.

This colloquium brought together some new to both action learning and action research, a few who work explicitly with both, and others steeped more in one or the other. People’s spheres of work also varied, with some employing action learning and/or action research within organisations, as an internal or external change agent. Others worked principally in academia supporting professional practitioners to engage in action learning and/or action research as part of management/leadership education. One point emerging from this variation when we discussed whether it was no more than splitting hairs to emphasize distinctions, was that it depends on to whom you are talking and what you are trying to achieve. Further, that when working with industry practitioners it may not be necessary or useful to ever talk the language of action learning or action research if you find a practice akin to these that is already adopted. David for example, recounted working with purchasing managers who were already familiar with Demings’ ‘plan, do, check’ cycle of action and reflection in the quality field. In this context, there was no benefit if bringing in new terminology of action learning.

Our conclusion to our reflection on this colloquium is that it depends on to whom you are talking to and what you are trying to achieve. What might that mean? For us it suggests that if a practitioner, researcher or author is working within an action learning perspective or wishing to contribute to an action learning publication outlet then it would be expected they draw on and explore the experience/research data in terms of the rich action leaning heritage of theory and practice.

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