# Critical action learning

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The aim of this Special section on Critical action learning is to make a contribution to advancing the theory and practice of critical action learning (CAL) and in so doing, to produce useful theory that enables critical action learning to develop as a promising practice in management learning. Our focus is related to *conceptualisation* of the field and the *dynamics* of implementation, which all too often remains implicit within extant studies. The emerging varieties of Critical Action Learning (Anderson and Thorpe, 2004; Ram and Trehan, 2009, 2010; Trehan and Rigg, 2015; Vince, 2011) demonstrate the momentum that is developing behind a critical perspective on action learning, as well as the potential pedagogic and analytical benefits of adopting such an approach. In addition to educators, CAL has shown the potential to act as a resource for researchers, policy-makers and practitioners (Ram & Trehan, 2010).

The current interest in CAL and its application in organizations have brought to the surface a range of important questions for scholars and practitioners. In particular, these relate to the articulation of philosophical assumptions that underpin CAL theoretically and empirically so so that its practice can be laid open to careful scrutiny that is informed by rigorously developed principles that become the foundation for future theoretical and practical development.

Establishing a conceptual view on the meaning and significance of ‘critical action learning’ is not a simple undertaking. The enactment of CAL requires not so much a template of technique, but a genuine commitment to engage with, surface and learn from the emotional and political dynamics of the collaborative, problem or challenge-focused context. To realise the potential of critical action learning, we need to show greater sensitivity to the assumptions that inform our research and practice in this area, demonstrate how the core concerns of CAL influence policy implementation, and engage more closely with oft-neglected communities of practice within mainstream management, organisation studies and small business firms (Ram and Trehan 2010)

These two papers that follow both draw on empirical work to offer new contributions to our thinking about critical action learning.

Farooq Mughal, Caroline Gatrell and Val Stead base their article on action learning work undertaken with MBA students from three business schools in Pakistan. Employing Bourdieu’s theory of practice, particularly his notion of ‘habitus’ (or the way in which people embody, interpret and respond to their social world), they offer a more nuanced understanding of the culture, gender and power relations which complicate both facilitative and participatory processes in action learning. Following Bourdieu, they argue that the creation of a field of opinion, or heterodoxy, invites both participants and facilitator, to explore together the ‘unthought categories of thought that delimit the thinkable and predetermine the thought’ (Bourdieu, 1990:178). Their contribution is to highlight implications for facilitator agency in managing relational politics in action learning, particularly gendered relations and asymmetries in relations between participants and facilitator. Further, they highlight the political implications for encouraging self-directed reflective practice within action learning sets in a cultural context where participants have been accustomed to exclusively teacher-led classroom experiences.

Russ Vince, Graham Abbey, Diane Bell, and Melissause Langenhan employ the lens of paradox theory (Smith and Lewis, 2011) to reframe what has previously been described as the problem of critical reflection in the workplace (Rigg & Trehan, 2008). They develop a conceptual framework that draws on ideas of organisation paradox (persistent co-existence of contradictory elements) in combination with action learning, critical action learning and critical reflection. Drawing from empirical action learning work with managers, they highlight how attempts to tackle organizational challenges and learn from attempts to improve things are likely to mobilize paradoxical tensions. They illustrate how action learning can act to both suppress and stimulate critical reflection, in the sense that though the action learning ideal may talk of people working together in action learning groups as ‘comrades in adversity’, they are also just as likely to be ‘adversaries with commonality’ or ‘accomplices in compliance’ (Vince, 2012). Their contribution is to highlight implications of acknowledging potential paradox for the design, delivery and facilitation of action learning. These include connecting individual learning with critical reflection aimed at organizational change; encouraging action learning applications to focus on organisational/ shared rather than just individual issues, and facilitating in a way that encourages the generation, acknowledgement and working through of contradictions in individual and organisational learning.

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