**Past, Present and Future - How do we know what we know in action learning?**

Problematising knowledge and knowing is integral to action learning. As is the issue of kinds of knowing. In the process of learning (L) or the formation of new knowledge, Revans allowed only a small part for expertise, or what he termed programmed knowledge (P). As has become an orthodoxy of action learning, questioning insight (Q) is the ‘difference that makes a difference’ (to quote Gregory Bateson, 1972) in the movement from P to L. But beyond the familiar equation of learning, L=P + Q, questions remain as to who learns what, who can lay claim to the knowledge that comes out of action learning, in the present or later, and even, as an action learning community, what do we encompass in what we come to know as ‘action learning’? To borrow from the related field of action research, we might term these first, second and third person questions of knowledge. First person research is enquiry done by ourselves on ourselves. Second person refers to joint action, conversation and enquiry undertaken with others into issues of mutual concern. Third person refers to wider communities of enquiry, amongst people who ‘do not have direct contact with each other’ (Gustaveson, 2014: 781) interpreted either as whole system, societal or organization.

In this issue, we have three articles that in distinct ways add to our richness of thinking about problematics of knowledge and knowing in action learning at first, second and third person levels. Chandana Sanyal takes a living theory approach (Whitehead and McNiff, 2006) using a first-person enquiry into her own practice to develop knowledge about facilitation of action learning. She carefully articulates a reflexive investigation into her own facilitation practice through personal observations and explanations of learning and action. The second article, by Tish Elliott and Mike Pedler, presents the conundrum of who owns knowledge that is generated collaboratively through an action learning process, but that could in future be used commercially. They write with a second person action research perspective, drawing on "insider" experience of incongruities within a knowledge economy. The paper ends with a thought-provoking quote from the artist Banksy: ‘*“For the sake of keeping all street art where it belongs I'd encourage people not to buy anything by anybody unless it was created for sale in the first place.”* [Banksy, Mail Online, February 23, 2013]’

The third article, by Tom Bourner, Cheryl Brook and Mike Pedler, can be seen as a piece of third person research writing. It focuses on the question of what we know of the history of action learning and how we know it. This question of the origins and scope of action learning has been of increasing interest in recent years, addressed by landmark publications such as Pedler et al’s (2005) ‘What has Action Learning Learned to Become’ and Boshyk’s (2010) biographical Action Learning: History and Evolution. The origins of a body of thought and practice like action learning is not easy to delineate, in that such a body emerges and crystallises rather than being designed, planned and defined from an outset. Its definition as a coherent body is inevitably retrospective with a degree of post-hoc rationalization by the originator(s), as well as interpretation by those who follow. This article by Bourner, Brook and Pedler is third person in the sense of being of interest to a wider community of people interested in the theory and practice of action learning, who do not have direct contact with each other. Not least because since 2003 we have not had Reg Revans around to ask directly what he meant. The piece concerns the origins of the idea of action learning, especially the retrospective claim by Revans that his Memorandum written in 1938 on ‘The Entry of Girls into the Nursing Profession’ in Essex hospitals was the first step in the development of action learning. Bourner et al examine the context for the production of the Memorandum to explore why, despite the absence of reference in this document to the term, action learning, Revans might have made this claim. This is akin to asking when did Revans himself come to the depth of knowledge of what action learning was and to formulate what he knew and we later came to know as ‘action learning’. Their conclusion suggests that it was through the process of preparing this memorandum that Revans’ crystallized his own knowledge and understanding about principles that later became the defining features of action learning, including “the importance of first-hand knowledge in tackling organisational problems; the limitations of expert knowledge in complex conditions; the impact of hierarchy on the flow of knowledge; the importance of problem ownership in bring about action for improvement and the primacy of learning in the processes of problem-solving and innovation”.

Between them, these three articles elucidate the challenges of how we can know the present or past of action learning, as well as potential conundrums between present and future. They further illustrate the value of first, second and third person contributions, and a sense that the field of action learning continues to grow through a combination of writing ‘the’ history, our history and an accumulation of my history/ies.

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