**Editorial 16.1**

**What can action learning offer a troubled world?**

In a world of seemingly intensifying polarisation, fragmentation and friction, we surely, more than ever, need spaces and ways that encourage us to think, talk and act across and through potential division. This is much more than a requirement for techniques of problem-solving, with a necessity for a philosophy of open listening, sincere exchange and collaborative enquiring. It is worth remembering that for Revans (1982), action learning was both a moral philosophy based on a conviction of human potential, as well as a pragmatic approach for simultaneously effecting change and achieving profound learning. What evidence is there that action learning (AL) is being used to fulfil this potential in the 21st century?

The language and practice of AL can now be found in all continents and within multiple sectors and fields of activity. Almost fifteen years ago, Pedler et al, (2005) found that what is termed action learning shares certain core principles, but beyond this, a wide variety of practices have emerged and been adapted within different contexts. In 2019, we look forward to the findings from the updated survey by Brook, Pedler and Burgoyne of ‘what Action Learning has learned to become’. This edition of Action Learning: Research and Practice gives a foretaste of the variety, with three quite distinctive articles. Yonjoo Cho, Hyeon-Cheol Bong and Hyeong-Sook Kim explore what is distinctive about the development of AL practice in Korea and conclude that there are particular influences and features in the way action learning is understood and used. They suggest that a collectivist culture provides fertile territory for the teamwork of AL, but for a people educated in Confucian traditions, the primacy of questioning in AL can be challenging. Perhaps because of its introduction in a corporate context, AL in Korea has also developed with strong emphasis on short-term performance outcomes with less attention paid to participants’ individual learning or questioning of assumptions. The second article by Angela Carter, draws parallels between action learning principles and coaching through a study of action learning coaching employed to support novice human resource development practitioners who are in charge of others’ learning while themselves learning new roles. She draws particular attention to the potential learning from ambiguity. The third article, by John Edmonstone, is a provocation for us to be aware that action learning is in danger of being co-opted by the dominant world-view of neoliberalism. Edmonstone challenges that action learning may consequently not always be a cause for good: ‘*Action learning therefore runs the risk of capture by powerful corporate interests for use as a tool - a means of simply effecting incremental improvements in organisational performance while still maintaining a status quo of dominance and control*.’ (Edmonstone, this issue).

This small sample of papers illustrates how action learning can readily be employed with the primary intent of performance improvement and less with a wider moral philosophical intention for a better world. Conceivably, some might argue this latter is no longer a reasonable or feasible expectation. Perhaps it was a hope articulated by Revans, at a particular historical juncture in the mid-20th century and informed by a particular Westernised, Christian and north European vantage point. The increased diversity of applications of action learning in the 21st century offers new challenges that help keep the field revitalized and expanding. Nevertheless, Edmonstone’s advocation that action learning was originally articulated with a bigger mission, is a timely reminder to help us avoid complacency and to continue to ask critical questions of who is benefitting and who is losing out.

**References**

Pedler, M,. Burgoyne, J. & Brook, C. 2005. What has action learning learned to become? Action Learning Research and Practice, 2(1):49-68

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