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Editorial 23.1

Dialogue and learning

A frequently-quoted aphorism of Reg Revans links action and learning: 'There is no learning without action and no (sober and deliberate) action without learning' (2016). Central to the practice of action learning, however, is also the relationship between productive communication and learning. Dialogue in the action learning set supports and stimulates learning, while good communication with stakeholders in the situation where change is being sought is almost always essential to enable thoughtful analysis and subsequent action.

In his influential book on the learning organisation, Peter Senge highlighted the importance of team learning. He said 'Team learning is vital because teams, not individuals, are the fundamental learning unit in modern organisations' (Senge 1993, 10). He argued that team learning requires dialogue, a process of suspending assumptions and communicating in such a way that the group achieve collective thinking. 'The purpose of a dialogue is to go beyond any one individual's understanding' (Senge 1993, 241). Drawing on publications by physicists, include David Bohm and Werner Heisenberg, Senge argued that thought – the production of ideas, insights and theories - is largely collective. He cites Bohm as proposing that, for dialogue to take place, all participants must suspend their assumptions, and must regard one another with respect as colleagues, and argues that reflection and inquiry skills provide a foundation for dialogue (249). Later publications on team learning also highlight the importance of open communication and testing assumptions (e.g Edmondson 1999) reflection and asking probing questions (e.g. Boak 2014; Harvey et al 2022) and reflexivity (e.g.Marlow and Lacerenza 2024).

These are ideas that are likely to resonate with practitioners and scholars of action learning. Marquardt et al. (2018), for example, prize dialogue, which enables a group to access 'the collective wisdom of its members and to see the situation more as a whole than as fragmented parts' (102). The importance of questions in dialogue in the action learning set is also emphasised by Marquardt et al. (2018, 85): 'Questions generate a dialogue in which people begin to leave their individual limitations to find a new wholeness'.

In this section, there are five refereed papers, all of which relate, in one way or another, to dialogue.

The paper by David Coghlan and colleagues presents career reflections by four very experienced action learning facilitators. The framing of the paper is Hansen and Madsen's (2018) proposition that scholarship takes place within a community including teachers, mentors, peers and colleagues, with whom a person engages and communicates. David engaged four long-serving action learning scholar-practitioners to share some of their history in the action learning field, and explain who had influenced them. This was the basis of a panel symposium at the International Action Learning Conference in April 2025, and it was then developed as a collaborative paper for the journal by all five participants. Questions the panel members were invited to answer included: How did you get involved in action learning? Who were your mentors – personally or through their writings? What has been the most exciting piece of action learning work in which you have engaged? The four narratives are presented as 'examples of different paths into action learning and different contexts of practice', each of which may resonate in different ways with different readers.

Jeanne Pelbois, Maxime Paquet and colleagues from the universities of Montréal and Québec à Montréal also focus on the action learning facilitator. Members of this group have authored a growing number of publications in English on a variation of action learning called Codevelopment Action Learning (CAL), which was first developed in Quebec, and over a period of almost 30 years has

also gained popularity and garnered publications in France and Belgium. Members of this group have published papers in English on CAL before (Paquet et al, 2022, 2023) and a book published by Routledge provides a practitioner guide to its use (Paquet et al, 2024). This paper explores the developmental effects for facilitators of taking part in a CAL group, particularly in relation to acquiring and enhancing the skills required for effective facilitation. Using a mixed-methods research approach, the authors gathered data from 58 new facilitators, from 15 different organisations, each working with a CAL group over 18 months. The research found that the new facilitators' skills deepened progressively through practice in the four facilitation functions and in behaviours important for stimulating dialoigue such as questioning, feedback, active listening, and emotional support.

The paper by Bert de Groot and Hanneke Gieske examines how action learning was used to develop a new approach to procurement, to be used by the executive agency of the Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management in the Netherlands and private companies contracting to deliver projects, to enable the parties to the procurement to be more collaborative and innovative and for the projects to be more sustainable. This involved multiple experiments in adding a new stage to the procurement process, where the agency and the private sector contractor collectively analysed uncertain or complex elements of a project and evaluated risks, before proceeding to agree a contract for the work. Sharing knowledge of these experiments across the organisations required a stimulation of organisational learning, which is particularly challenging in project-based organisations : project teams are temporary constructs with a short-term orientation towards task completion, which means that knowledge and learning are often not communicated to the wider organisation (De Groot et al., 2024; Finnestrand et al., 2023). The study found that, whilst improvements to the new process could be identified, the experimental use of action learning in these projects improved communications between the agency and the private sector contractors and did enhance the connection between project-based learning and organisational learning.

The paper by Yunong Li and Judy O'Neil provides an account of a detailed content analysis of papers on action learning programmes in Chinese organisations. The writers identified 12 peer-reviewed empirical papers, published in English or Chinese, and analysed them using the four schools or action learning originally proposed by O'Neil and Marsick (2007): The Tacit School (which emphasises project results); the Scientific School, (which grounds AL in scientific principles); the Experiential School (which applies Kolb's experiential learning theory, Kolb, 1984); and the Critical Reflection School (which encourages participants to critically examine their basic assumptions). The study also applied elements of the national culture framework developed by Hofstede et al. (2010) to contrast aspects of Chinese and Western national cultures. The research found that the Chinese organisations represented in the study were characterised by a large Power Distance, and high degrees of Collectivism and Uncertainty Avoidance. The research found five programmes aligning with the Tacit School and five with the Experiential School: the paper argues that the Experiential School programmes, using the cycle of learning, doing, and reflecting, most aligned with Chinese education philosophy. Communication within the action learning sets was thus influenced by national culture and the national approach to education.

Pooja Tomar's conceptual paper proposes that the integration of *Subhāṣitāni* into action learning processes can advance ethical reasoning, reflexivity, and collaborative problem-solving. Pooja's paper advocates using the *Subhāṣitāni* to bridge ancient wisdom and modern practice. *Subhāṣitāni* are rooted in classical Indian ethical thought, and may offer moral, social, and philosophical guidance in brief poetic sayings, advocating virtues such as integrity, compassion and truthfulness. Pooja notes that they play a sustained part in India's moral education, and that as they prompt reflection, dialogue, and self-inquiry, they are very suitable for integration within an experiential learning

process such as action learning. She argues that, in the light of its foundations in ethical inquiry, self-reflection, and collaborative learning, action learning provides a natural bridge between the ancient ethical insights of the *Subhāṣitāni* and professional development and organizational leadership. The paper persuasively aligns the values embodied in action learning with the values expressed by the *Subhāṣitāni*, and then proceeds to suggest how the sayings might be adopted to influence communication within action learning activities.

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