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Together in adversity

We have faced very challenging times all around the world since the emergence of Covid-19 two years ago. Individuals, communities, public organisations and businesses have suffered in ways that none of us can have imagined before 2020. Many people have lost their lives, many have had to cope with bereavement and loss, many have lost their livelihoods. Yet in among the damage and destruction there have also been positive examples of communities adapting to help their members, of businesses innovating and reshaping what they provide, of health and social care professionals going beyond normal expectations to help those in need.

Revans talked of action learning groups being composed of 'comrades in adversity', supporting and helping each other to understand and take action to tackle the problems that each member faced. I have experienced action learning sets where mutual emotional support has also been an important element of their function. Support in the recent and ongoing adversity of the pandemic is needed in many shapes and sizes, from family members and friends, professional carers, counsellors, advice services, and kindly volunteers. I think action learning sets can also play a part, and that action learning approaches can help us to work through some of the challenges that we face. As Brook (2020) wrote in the early months of the pandemic, 'As a context sensitive approach, action learning is well placed to meet the challenge of encouraging insightful questions and sharing critical learning in these challenging times'. However, it has been difficult for groups to meet in person over the past two years in those countries where periodic lockdowns have been enforced. Online communication has improved greatly since papers on virtual action learning first appeared in this journal (see, for example, Pedler, Hauser, and Caulat, 2014), but even recent research indicates that online communication in virtual groups lacks some of the richness and emotional engagement of communication in person (Dinh et al., 2021).

The future effects of the virus on the world are uncertain, with the possibility of further disruption, damage and instability to come. Among all the other sources of support, we should not overlook the contribution that action learning can make to helping us to tackle the challenges that face us. The journal would welcome refereed papers and accounts of practice about action learning over the past two years – and of course onwards from here – that have supported people and have helped them to understand and take action about the adverse changes that have threatened them.

In this edition of the journal, we have three refereed papers and, in this section, an invited essay. The first paper, by Venkat, Gupta, Banerjee and Chellapan, concerns research in India into learning in a co-working space, where established enterprises and start-up companies work alongside each other. The research found patterns of vicarious learning, experiential learning and emergent learning, aligned with Revans' systems of alpha, beta and gamma.

The second paper is by Ross, Nichol, Elliot, Sambrook and Stewart; it has been developed out of a paper delivered at the online symposium on 21st April 2021, *Making a Difference in a Practice Field: Action Learning in a Changing World*. It concerns an exploration of the likely impact of the UK Government's Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF) on the action learning and human resource development communities in the UK, based on an analysis of two key documents. The KEF is an approach to encouraging academia to contribute to practice.

The authors argue that action learning's 'exploratory and collaborative generation of knowledge' is somewhat at odds with the scholar-practitioner gap assumed in the two documents. However, they suggest there is some scope for individual members of action learning and HRD communities to

'challenge the scholarship – practice gap, and to maintain the diversity of AL and HRD agendas and approaches.'

The third paper, by Coghlan and Rigg, has also grown out of the symposium. It argues that accounts of practice, as published in this journal, offer a way of 'practical theorising in the sense of co-generating actionable knowledge', and it will be of interest and value to researchers and practitioners alike.

This section of the journal also includes a guest essay by Farooq Mughal, who delivered a provocative presentation at the symposium and who then kindly accepted our invitation to develop it as an essay for publication. Based on his experience of providing action learning in Pakistan, which he has written about elsewhere (Mughal, 2021; Mughal, Hauser and Caulat, 2018; Edmonstone, 2019) he offers a critical view of the potential of action learning to provide the emancipation of group members. We would welcome readers' views on this essay – please send any comments to alrp@gmail.com

Please note also the call for papers for a special edition of the journal to be published in November 2022, on action learning in healthcare systems, with guest editor John Edmonstone.

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