

Shepherd, Gary (2023) Humanistic Person-Centred Set Facilitation. *Action Learning: Research and Practice*, 21 (1). pp. 30-42.

Downloaded from: <https://ray.yorks.ac.uk/id/eprint/7922/>

The version presented here may differ from the published version or version of record. If you intend to cite from the work you are advised to consult the publisher's version:

<https://doi.org/10.1080/14767333.2023.2262403>

Research at York St John (RaY) is an institutional repository. It supports the principles of open access by making the research outputs of the University available in digital form. Copyright of the items stored in RaY reside with the authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may access full text items free of charge, and may download a copy for private study or non-commercial research. For further reuse terms, see licence terms governing individual outputs. [Institutional Repositories Policy Statement](#)

# RaY

Research at the University of York St John

For more information please contact RaY at  
[ray@yorks.ac.uk](mailto:ray@yorks.ac.uk)

# Humanistic person-centred set facilitation

Gary Shepherd

To cite this article: Gary Shepherd (11 Oct 2023): Humanistic person-centred set facilitation, Action Learning: Research and Practice, DOI: [10.1080/14767333.2023.2262403](https://doi.org/10.1080/14767333.2023.2262403)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767333.2023.2262403>



© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 11 Oct 2023.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 21



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

## Humanistic person-centred set facilitation

Gary Shepherd 

Department of Counselling, York St John University, York, UK

### ABSTRACT

This paper poses the question ‘What can we learn from the person-centred counselling literature which could be used by the action learning facilitator to help benefit the set?’. This question may be particularly important to facilitators seeking new ways to run their sets and to facilitators who would like to introduce a more humanistic and less mechanistic way of working with set members. Person-centred counselling is an approach to helping which aims to foster human growth and wellbeing. The person-centred approach was developed by Carl Rogers in the 1950s and has a number of similarities with Revans’s original ideas. Although Revans was insistent that action learning was not counselling there are several facets of person-centred theory which align with Revans underlying ideas and philosophy. The paper concludes with suggestions of how to incorporate Rogerian ideas into facilitation, namely those of empathy, congruence and Unconditional Positive Regard.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 30 April 2023  
Accepted 19 September 2023

### KEYWORDS

Facilitation; humanistic; person centred; Rogers; Revans

## Introduction

Over the past 50 years, several practitioners and researchers have described the mechanisms of action learning (AL) and its variations (Brook, Pedler, and Burgoyne 2012; Revans 1982; Revans 2011; Vince 2008; Weinstein 1999). Many theorists have concentrated their attention on the practicalities of the action learning set or a particular ‘flavour’ or variation within the overall approach (Pedler, Burgoyne, and Brook 2005). Such writers include Brook, Pedler, and Burgoyne (2012) who describe the lynchpin of action learning as the experiential learning cycle and Vince (2008) who through his critical lens, explores the emotions and politics enacted within action learning routines.

Within AL literature little consideration has been given to the links between action learning and person-centred theory. In this paper I pose the question ‘What can we learn from the person-centred counselling literature which could be used by the action learning facilitator to help benefit the set?’. My approach to this question is to critically review the action learning theory of Reg Revans and the person-centred theory of Carl Rogers in order to propose how a humanistic person-centred approach to set facilitation may be developed. After reviewing each author’s work, I go on to present practical

**CONTACT** Gary Shepherd  g.shepherd@yorks.ac.uk

© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group  
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

suggestions of how to incorporate Rogerian ideas into set facilitation. My over-riding aim throughout this paper is to provide a different focus for set facilitation, from one viewing problems through a purely mechanistic lens (Lakoff and Johnson 2008) towards one which appreciates organisational problems through a more phenomenological and idiographic frame.

## Rogers in the action learning literature

AL researchers have only briefly mentioned Rogers' work over the past 20 years, most commonly in the context of the human potential in terms of learning. Marquardt and Waddill (2004), for instance, refer to Rogers (1995) when exploring the theoretical basis of AL and its relationship to adult learning. The authors describe the basic humanistic tenet that each individual has the potential to become self-actualised with the support and caring actions of others. In their paper, the authors develop this idea by suggesting that the responsibility for learning rests wholly with the individual. This notion is echoed by Csillag (2013) when explaining the roots of co-operative enquiry, attesting learning derives from an individual's ability to be self-directive and to take ownership of their own human potential.

Simpson and Bourner (2007) also refer to Rogers' work on learning by noting how AL sets offer a kind of safety and support which encourages participants to gauge if they could adopt often 'risky' behaviours. This point is also made by Leitch, McMullan, and Harrison (2009) in their study of leadership development programmes within Small to Medium Sized Enterprises (SMEs). In terms of leadership development Gibb (2009, 211) cites Rogers (1995) when making the distinction between team leader and 'learning facilitator'. In Gibb's paper Rogerian attributes are described such as empathy, respect for the individual learner and taking responsibility of one's own learning.

Finally, Rogers' work is cited in quite a different way by Sell (2017) who explores how intuitive forms of knowing can assist leadership and organisational change efforts. Sell suggests that human potential can be increased through work on the self, leading to self-actualisation.

## Overview

Reg Revans (1907–2003) has influenced management education through his development of a group approach to work-based problem-solving known as Action Learning (Revans 2011). In an action learning 'set' individuals with organisational problems meet regularly together in a spirit of enquiry and support to facilitate problem solving, reflection and learning. Individuals in the set move through a structured process of reflection on their problem, taking action in order to influence the problem and reporting back the results of their actions to set members. This simple, yet powerful process helps transform problems, stimulates individual learning and promotes organisational development (Pedler 2017).

Similarly, in the world of humanistic psychology and counselling Carl Rogers (1902–1987) stands out as extremely influential (Joseph and Murphy 2013). As the leader of the humanistic psychology movement from the 1960s to the 1980s and the developer of Person-Centred therapy, Rogers was both an academic and practitioner who wrote

16 books and more than 200 articles. Rogers' research studies aimed to help human beings lead fuller, more meaningful lives. Rogers' influence on society can still be felt today through the development of professional counselling, an area which continues to challenge the paradigms of psychiatry and psychoanalysis (Sanders 2012).

In terms of Rogers' international reach, Cooper et al. (2013, 496) explain there are:

[a]round 200 national organisations and training centres ... dedicated to researching and applying the principles developed by Rogers and the person-centred approach.

Revans' action learning is equally regarded as global within its reach, with an International Foundation for Action Learning which has been instrumental in the spread of AL for over 45 years (IFAL.org 2023) and the World Institute for Action Learning which is a global body that provides training and certification programmes through a network of AL affiliates (WIAL.org 2023). AL contributions from writers around the globe including China, South Africa and Korea are often published in this journal and serve as a testament to the international impact of AL (Kahts-Kramer and Wood 2023; Li et al. 2022; Park, Cho, and Bong 2020; Wang and Bloodworth 2016).

## The philosophical positions of Rogers and Revans

In this section, I aim to discuss a number of philosophical ideas I consider important to both writers and which I believe form the basis of their approaches and practice. It would be too onerous here to define all of the terms I use within this section and so I invite interested readers to explore introductory texts for a more in-depth discussion of these terms (Burgoyne 2016; Coghlan and Coughlan 2010; Scotland 2012).

According to Brook, Pedler, and Burgoyne (2012), the ontology most appropriate to describe action learning is critical realism as this approach concedes an external reality, agreed by all and where real problems arise for the organisational manager to tackle. Considering that Revans developed the action learning approach whilst working as a consultant to the UK Coal Board where managers experienced hard, practical problems with plant, productions and manpower it is a very appropriate way of seeing the world. Another significant ontology informing Revans worldview was that of American pragmatism, which he espoused through the writings of Dewey (Burgoyne 2016; Pedler 2015). This approach helps to contextualise AL as a way to establish practice through experience and reflection. Revans epistemological focus seems to be that of a pragmatic interpretivist. This particular philosophy describes the creation of knowledge and learning through the manipulation of external reality through a process of experiential learning where action and reflection is used to help solve real-world problems (Kolb 1984; Revans 2011).

Rogerian person-centred theory on the other hand is firmly rooted in the ontology of phenomenology, an approach which sees reality to be a highly personalised socially constructed worldview, experienced slightly differently between each person based on their early childhood experiences (Denscombe 2017; Kirschenbaum and Land Henderson 1989). Subsequently, person-centred theory regards interpretivism as the epistemological tool of choice. Within this paradigm, the counsellor generates understanding of the clients view of the world through a process of questioning and the use of specific behaviours (described as core conditions). A key part of this process is the technique of

'bracketing off' the counsellor's own interpretation of the world to help them understand the client's world more fully. As this process is extremely difficult to achieve, Rogers developed a number of tools with which to help the counsellor navigate this idiographic terrain (Cooper et al. 2013; Rogers 1957).

Although the ontology and epistemology of each approach differ, Rogers and Revans share a similar philosophical position. Both writers view people through a humanistic lens, based on a Judeo-Christian belief in the value of the human condition. Rogers and Revans also value treating the individual with respect and reverence as they were regarded by each author as the creation of a higher power.

Revans considered an individual's attitude to be shaped by their early childhood experiences which is very much in correspondence with Rogerian ideas (Boshyk and Dilworth 2010). Whilst Rogers' humanistic position is well documented by Kirschenbaum and Land Henderson (1989) the roots of Revans' humanistic philosophy are less well known but suggested by Boshyk (2011) as originating from a closeness to his mother and influenced by her humanistic valuing system.

In his critique of action learning, Pedler (2017) describes action learning a tool to help unleash the human potential in helping solve organisational and societal issues.

Action learning is a pragmatic but moral philosophy with a strongly humanistic view of human potential that commits us, via experiential learning, to address the intractable problems of organisations and societies. (Pedler 2017, 2)

Interestingly, both approaches share an epistemological view based on interpretivism, whereas Rogers' interpretivism is grounded in phenomenological tenets and the counsellor's interpretation of the mind of their client (Coulson and Rogers 1968), Revans' interpretivism is much more pragmatic and aimed at being useful to the manager and their organisational problems.

It is recognised ignorance, not programmed knowledge, that is the key to action learning: men start to learn with and from each other only when they discover that none among them knows but all are obliged to find out. (Revans 1982, 21)

### Some practical differences with each approach

There are a number of basic practical differences between the person-centred and action learning approaches of each writer (see Table 1). From a practical level, Rogerian counselling sessions typically engage single clients in a 50-minute one-to-one weekly meeting, where the client is free to direct the session as they see fit based on the therapeutic problems they have come to explore. The aim of Rogerian counselling is to help the client both understand and overcome the issues affecting their mental wellbeing. This is achieved through the support and tacit acceptance of the individual by the counsellor who acknowledges the client as a unique human being experiencing problems which seem overwhelming (Cooper et al. 2013).

An action learning set on the other hand often begins with a pre-group meeting run by a facilitator who introduces the reflective learning model and the group structure. The facilitator describes how the set will operate and provides instructions on how individuals and the group should engage with the cycle of reflection (Revans 2011). Although all AL sets are different, they typically comprise around five or six individuals with organisational

**Table 1.** The differences between the action learning and person-centred approach.

Elements of theory	Revans' action learning approach	Rogers' person-centred approach
Ontology	Critical realism (Brook, Pedler, and Burgoyne 2012)	Phenomenology (Rogers 1966)
Epistemology	Pragmatic interpretivism (Bourner and Rospigliosi 2019)	Interpretivism (Coulson and Rogers 1968)
Philosophical position	Humanistic (Pedler 2017)	Humanistic (Bugental 1964)
How is each method enacted	Groupwork (Revans 2011)	One to one or in groupwork (Cooper et al. 2013)
How often do people meet	Typically monthly or bi-monthly (Brockbank and McGill 2003)	Typically, weekly (Cooper et al. 2013)
How long does the process take	Six months to a year (Brockbank and McGill 2003)	A minimum of 12 weeks (Cooper et al. 2013)
Who is regarded as expert of the problem or issue	The client and set members (Revans 1982)	The client (Kirschenbaum and Land Henderson 1989)
How are 'advice giving experts' viewed	Distrusted (Pedler 2017)	Counterproductive to therapeutic change (Sanders 2012)
Is the counsellor/facilitator directive or non-directive	Facilitator is non-directive throughout (Brockbank and McGill 2003)	Counsellor is non-directive throughout (Rogers 1942)
Who uses active listening and uses open ended questions	The set members (Brockbank and McGill 2003)	The counsellor (Rogers 1957)
Who holds wisdom, displays congruence and unconditional positive regard	The facilitator (Boshyk and Dilworth 2010; Brockbank and McGill 2003)	The counsellor (Rogers 1957)
Who displays empathy and reframes client problems	The facilitator and set members (Brockbank and McGill 2003)	The counsellor (Rogers 1957)
How does learning/change occur	The facilitator and set members questioning within a humanistic environment helps the client engage in a process of reflection, action taking and learning (Pedler 2017)	Through the counsellor's adherence to the Core Conditions and the clients growing connection with their real self (Sanders 2012)
What change process does the individual go through	By reflecting on and taking action on the problem, the problem diminishes or changes (Kolb 1984)	Through closer contact with their valuing system, the issue diminishes (Rogers 1964)

problems, who meet for around two hours each month for about a year. In actual fact there seems to be no such thing as a 'typical' set, as different organisations in different business and educational sectors shape their sets to suit their unique project needs (Brook, Pedler, and Burgoyne 2012).

Another clear difference in both approaches is that Rogerian counselling is a talking therapy, a therapeutic approach to assisting people in psychological distress whereas action learning on the other hand, is an approach formerly termed 'learning by doing' with its links to John Dewey (1916) and the pragmatic school of experiential learning. Action learning derives from management education and is concerned with helping managers solve organisational problems through the power of structured reflection and individual action taking, helping resolve the problem or change the problem's structure (Boshyk and Dilworth 2010).

### The operation of an action learning set

Most action learning sets use a specially trained leader/facilitator with the responsibility to manage the group and its reflective cycles. It is well known that Revans had a critical view of set facilitation, seeing a facilitator who persisted in the group as an unwelcome expert. Revans much preferred to have sets become self-facilitatory as soon as they were able (Brook, Pedler, and Burgoyne 2012), however many modern action learning sets use

trained facilitators throughout the lifetime of the set as a matter of course (Pedler and Abbott 2008).

The set facilitator helps guide set members through the action learning process; each person is given around 15 minutes to present the organisational problem to the set, set members ask specific questions about the problem as a way to help the presenter see the problem from a different viewpoint, the presenter then reflects on the different viewpoints and develops a plan of action to be used on the problem when they return to their organisation. Each set member takes turns to go through this cycle by being either the presenter of their problem or as part of the group, listening and responding to their colleagues' problems (Revans 2011).

Once the individual is back within their own organisation, they go about taking action on the problem in hand (Weinstein 1999). Typically, managers discover either the problem is resolved, new problems have arisen or unexpected outcomes have appeared due to the action they have taken on the problem. When the set meet again (typically, but not always after around four weeks) individuals go through the same cycle of presenting (either a new problem or the new unexpected outcome), group questioning on the problem and reflecting on alternative approaches to the problem (Revans 2011).

### Action learning and change

In action learning, change is initiated within set meetings as the facilitator and set members question the client on the problem in hand. The aim of such questioning is to allow the presenter to feel comfortable enough to engage in a process of reflection, action taking and learning (Kolb 1984). If this is done consistently over the lifetime of the action learning set, the problem changes or diminishes and the individual learns how to overcome similar problems in the future (Brockbank and McGill 2003).

### Rogerian learning and change

Although both of these approaches aim to develop learning and precipitate change, Rogerian counsellors consider learning and change to emerge from their ability to adhere to the core conditions of empathy, congruence and Unconditional Positive Regard in the counselling space. These behaviours help strengthen the client's connection with their real self and encourage change behaviours which are less adaptive which Rogers describes as described as 'fully functioning' (Rogers 1956, 183).

Cooper et al. (2013) suggest distinct parallels between Rogers' notion of his fully functioning person with that of an experiential learner, using action learning principles of reflection on their experience. According to Rogers, a fully functional person seems to be someone open to learning from their experiences, with the ability to transition from a static, cold and impersonal experience of themselves to a person who experiences feelings of fluidity, warmth and connectedness between themselves and others.

Values are not held rigidly, but are continually changing. The painting which last year seemed meaningful now seems uninteresting, the way of working with individuals which was formerly experienced as good, now seems inadequate, the belief which then seemed true is now experienced as only part true, or perhaps false. (Rogers 1964, 163–164)

## Similarities in set behaviour and Rogerian counselling

One of the most striking similarities between action learning and person-centred counselling is their shared use of ways of relating to set members and clients. In Rogerian counselling, it is up to the counsellor to personify the core conditions of congruence, empathy and Unconditional Positive Regard whilst utilising related behaviours such as active listening, asking open ended questions and reframing the client's problems (Rogers 1964).

Within the action learning set many similar behaviours are adopted but in seemingly slightly different ways (see Table 1). As the set comprises of both facilitator and set members, the behaviours that support the presenter are shared between the facilitator (who may display empathy for the presenter, for instance) and the set members (who ask open ended questions, employ active listening and reframe the presenter's problem). The facilitator has a further role in that they seem to hold the wisdom of the group, display congruence and provide the whole set with Unconditional Positive Regard (Brockbank and McGill 2003).

## The individual's development

Alongside these similarities, Rogers and Revans share a common interest with the individual's personal development. For Rogers, individual development was one of the key tenets of the humanistic philosophy which through the person-centred approach offered an opportunity for self-actualisation (Rogers 1957). Revans also held a deep interest of supporting the individual to develop as a human being. Revans had a strong intuition that the act of working on organisational problems was the key to unlocking an individual's innate potential. This notion was tested in a practical setting by Revans in one of his early 'experiments' in the GEC programme. This experiment explicitly emphasised the opportunity for personal development as 'the cutting edge' of action learning (Bourner and Rospigliosi 2019, 240).

## The role of experts

In both person-centred counselling and action learning, the role of experts and expertise are important. In person-centred counselling the client is deemed to be expert in their own life, who experiences events through their idiographic, socially constructed worldview (Rogers 1995). In action learning, the client is also seen as expert in the problem they present whilst set members are credited with expertise of organisational knowledge. This expert knowledge may be useful for the presenter to access through the process of listening to questions and reflecting on their answers (Pedler 2017).

Both writers share a common agreement on the need for non-directiveness; the view that the client/presenter sets the agenda around the described problem as they are the only experts within that particular field of experience. For Rogers non-directiveness assumed the counsellor never interfered with the client's wishes to change. In practice, this means the counsellor works within the client's frame of reference and subjugates their own wishes of how best to solve the client's problems (Rogers 1942). For Revans, it was equally important for the manager working on their problem to have autonomy on how they understood, described, reflected and acted upon the problem they were tackling (Revans 1982).

These ideas lead to a further element of shared agreement between both writers, the deep scepticism of the expert. Rogers and Revans held similar critical views of the ‘professional’ who claimed expertise above the client/presenter’s problems by the imposition of their own worldview. The reason for this is that experts always carry with them an underlying assumption that their expertise can help solve problems without the need for the individual to embark upon a structured experiential learning process. This minimises the importance of the individuals experience and the work they do to overcome problems. Taken to its logical conclusion, relying on an expert in either counselling or action learning leads to reliance on the expert and the deskilling of the individual (Rogers 1995).

For Rogers, it was the expert counsellor who presumed to know what would benefit the client above the client’s own intuition who missed the point; for Revans it was the so-called ‘expert’ facilitator who took away the opportunity for managerial learning through their claimed ‘expert knowledge’ of the problem which robbed the client of valuable learning.

... it is the action learner who is important: the facilitator is dispensable. (Pedler 2017, 8)

## Discussion

In this section, I intend to discuss how a humanistic person-centred style of facilitation could be useful in action learning. From my analysis, it seems as though there are a number of similarities between Rogers person-centred and Revans action learning theories. In order to help visualise these similarities throughout my discussion, I have created a Venn diagram (Figure 1). From the Venn diagram, we can see similarities in both theories, such as the way in which a humanistic approach to working with people is valued, along with the importance of working for the common good for mankind.

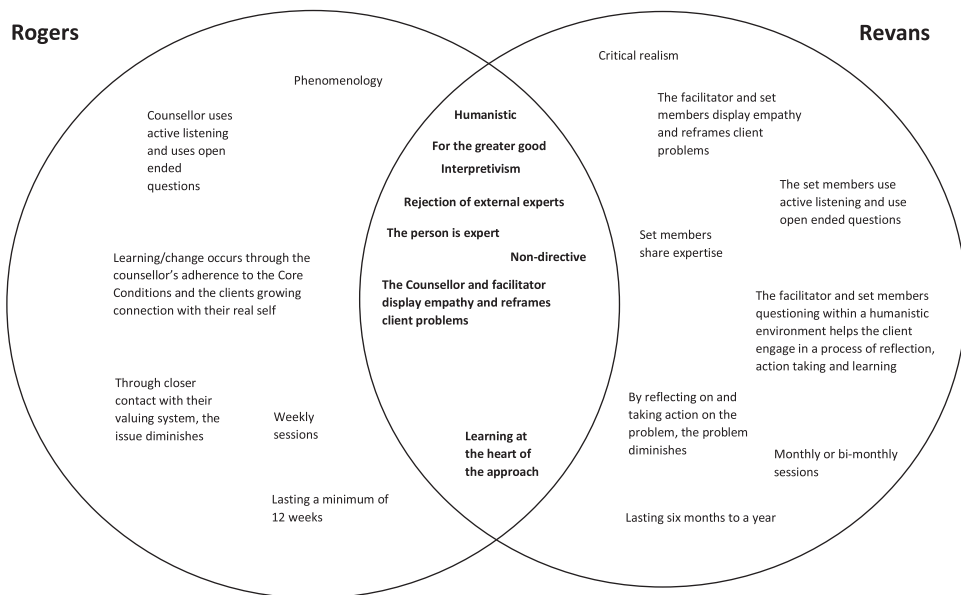


Figure 1. Venn diagram showing areas of commonality.

Rogers interpretivism stems from an idiographic understanding of the person and their inner problems, while Revans epistemology has the individual taking action in the outside world. In both approaches the human being is at the centre of their internal and external world, shaping and affecting it through the learning cycle of reflection and action.

As previously mentioned, both approaches reject the view of so-called experts who purport to know more about the issue being discussed than the individual themselves. In light of this, I would like to propose a new style of set facilitation, developed along humanistic lines and which Revans may have found more palatable. It is clear that Revans intended action learning to be utilised in a wide range of settings and to have an impact on improving the human condition (Bourner and Rospigliosi 2019). His arguments against set facilitation seem to be based on the fear of the set facilitator stifling learning through the imposition of their own will and perceived expertise. If we are to have set facilitation at all within action learning, I would suggest facilitation should not be concerned with the task of solving organisational problems or purporting expertise.

I would like to suggest set facilitation to be a more humanistic, person-centred process which concerns itself with helping set members discover the idiographic and phenomenological constructions which contribute a large part of an individual's problems. Put simply I am advocating facilitation to be a tool to help the human being explore the deeper connections between themselves and the problems they are tackling. This approach invites the facilitator down from their 'organisational expert' pedestal and establishes them as true facilitators in the set with a role based on humanistic tenets where they are able to help co-create the experience of group learning.

### **Facilitation based on person-centred values**

In this new role, it may be helpful for the facilitator to adopt and embody Rogers' three core conditions of empathy, congruence and Unconditional Positive Regard (Rogers 1957). In order to adopt the first core condition- empathy, the facilitator would be required to develop the capacity to be able to stand in the shoes of another individual. Empathic facilitation requires the facilitator to try to understand the presenter's particular way of experiencing the world and the problems this creates for them. Empathy is not the same as sympathy, which is a process of feeling sorry for the individual's plight and attempting to console them in their suffering. Developing empathy as a facilitator will be important for the presenter as this will help them feel more understood. Empathy also underscores the way in which problems have a uniqueness to individuals through their phenomenological experience.

A second Rogerian core condition facilitators may find useful is that of congruence. The notion of congruence or genuineness relies on the facilitator having spent time in understanding themselves, their value system and underlying ethics (Rogers 1995). By understanding themselves in such depth, facilitators will be able to work with individual set members in non-bias ways. A congruent facilitator will respond to the group based on their own humanistic values and offer consistent support to individuals without favouritism, prejudice or bias. Congruence is a powerful and prized person-centred behaviour which takes time and energy to develop. A benefit of a congruent facilitator is that the set feels fairly treated, honestly managed and genuinely valued.

The third core condition facilitators using a person-centred approach would benefit from is the capacity to give set members Unconditional Positive Regard (Rogers 1995). Providing UPR requires the facilitator to phenomenologically 'bracket off' their ways of seeing the world and its problems, whilst entering into the set members description of the world as they experience it. Facilitators adopting UPR will begin to realise the size of the problems set members bring to the group and the scale magnitude of solutions often needed. UPR recognises that anxieties around problems stem from the way in which the individual constructs them and naturally, a problem for one presenter may not be problematic for another. The benefit of using UPR as a set facilitator is that the set member develops a sense that they are not alone in their problems and feel both understood, accepted and supported by the set. UPR is probably the most difficult core condition to adopt as it requires skill in separating out our usual ways of seeing the world, whilst actively adopting the viewpoint of another.

## A humanistic role for set membership

In this section, I would like to describe some practical steps facilitators can take in order to prepare their set for a more humanistic facilitation experience. Before an action learning set convenes as a formal set, there is always an event where the full group meets under the direction of the facilitator. In this session set members are introduced to action learning and the workings of the set and how to conduct themselves in terms of being presenters and listeners.

A facilitator who wishes the set to become less mechanistic and more person-centred should take time to teach the group seven skills to aid them in becoming co-creators of learning: (1) questioning; (2) active listening; (3) paraphrasing; (4) working within the speaker's frame of reference; (5) questioning power relations; (6) exploring language

**Table 2.** Person-centred techniques for set members.

Techniques for set members	Benefit for set members and presenters
Questioning	This technique is already widely used within action learning and helps the presenter explore their issues in some depth
Active listening	Active listening helps set members to focus on the problem being described. Active listening is a skill in itself and helps listeners learn to recognise nuance, subtlety and intention within speech
Paraphrasing	Used in conjunction with active listening, paraphrasing seeks to clarify and confirm set members understanding of the problem the presenter describes
Working within the speakers frame of reference	This is an empathic skill and invites set members to employ deeper questioning and paraphrasing to help further their appreciation of the problem. The benefit of this to the presenter is they begin to feel a sense of being understood
Questioning power relations	This is another idea which is familiar to critical action learners and which attempts to uncover the hidden organisational dynamics which makes the problem more difficult to tackle
Exploring language	Language exploration helps presenters gain appreciation of how their problems are socially constructed and the unconscious ways presenters view their problems within this construction
Exploring body language	This technique invites set members to explore possible mismatches between how the presenter describes the problem and the way in which presenters use their physicality to explain them. An example of such incongruencies may be the presenter describing a problem to do with working with another member of their team in a more relational way and using strong and aggressive body movements whilst describing a team member

and (7) exploring body language. These skills are described in more detail in [Table 2](#). The seven person-centred skills aim to help set members appreciate the phenomenological and idiographic elements of problems and teach individuals how to support one another within the cycle of experience and action.

When the set is fully operational, I would suggest the person-centred facilitator's role should be to use their core condition behaviour to help encourage set members to explore their problems as deeply as each feels the need to. I would also envisage facilitators spending some of their time helping the set master the seven person-centred skills, especially in the early phases of a set. In cases where the set are new to action learning, the facilitator could supply aide memoire to set members and model their own person-centred skills in the first few action learning sessions. Initially, presenters new to this approach may describe their problem pragmatically within a critical realist framework. This is quite natural as new techniques will take a number of sessions to 'bed in'. After around the third or fourth session, many set members will become familiar with using the seven person-centred skills and this will be evident in the way in which their support for the individual becomes more humanistic in practice.

## Conclusion

This paper highlights a number of similarities between the action learning theory of Revans and the person-centred approach of Carl Rogers. My assertion is that there is enough of an overlap between the two approaches to suggest action learning incorporate person-centred thinking into its facilitation model. Although this has been hinted at by other researchers, this paper is unique in the way in which it critically assesses both approaches before suggesting a new person-centred facilitation model.

The paper also suggests a movement away from a mechanistic understanding of problems into a broader and deeper idiographic and phenomenological view. This way of viewing problems recognises their socially constructed nature and the way in which human interpretation affects the way people tackle them. Finally, this paper recommends a range of new person-centred skills the facilitator and set members should adopt if they are to create more humanistic action learning sets. The benefits of this new type of AL set include the ability for the set to become empathic, deeply relational and to gain more of an appreciation of the individual, their problems and their efforts to enact change.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

*Gary Shepherd* is a Senior Lecturer and Research Lead in the Counselling Department at York St John University. He has used Action Learning within Anger Management groups for the past 10 years. Currently Dr Shepherd is developing humanistic person-centred set facilitation within Higher Education professional practice based sets.

## ORCID

Gary Shepherd  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8178-1141>

## References

- Boshyk, Y. 2011. "Ad Fontes – Reg Revans: Some Early Sources of His Personal Growth and Values." In *Action Learning in Practice*, edited by Mike Pedler, 109–120. Hants: Gower.
- Boshyk, Y., and L. Dilworth. 2010. *Action Learning: History and Evolution*, edited by Yury Boshyk and Robert L. Dilworth. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan UK. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230250734>.
- Bourner, Tom, and Asher Rospigliosi. 2019. "Origins of the Ethos of Action Learning." *Action Learning: Research and Practice* 16 (3): 238–253. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767333.2019.1619516>.
- Brockbank, A., and I. McGill. 2003. *The Action Learning Handbook: Powerful Techniques for Education, Professional Development and Training*. London: Routledge.
- Brook, Cheryl, Mike Pedler, and John Burgoyne. 2012. "Some Debates and Challenges in the Literature on Action Learning: The State of the Art Since Revans." *Human Resource Development International* 15 (3): 269–282. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13678868.2012.687926>.
- Bugental, J. F. T. 1964. "The Third Force in Psychology." *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 4 (1): 19–26. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002216786400400102>.
- Burgoyne, J. 2016. "Action Learning: A Pragmatic and Moral Philosophy." In *Action Learning in Practice*, edited by Mike Pedler. London: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315565521>.
- Coghlan, David, and Paul Coughlan. 2010. "Notes Toward a Philosophy of Action Learning Research." *Action Learning: Research and Practice* 7 (2): 193–203. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767333.2010.488330>.
- Cooper, M., M. O'Hara, P. F. Schmid, and A. Bohart. 2013. *The Handbook of Person-Centred Psychotherapy and Counselling*. Basingstoke: Macmillan International Higher Education.
- Coulson, W., and C. R. Rogers. 1968. *Man and the Science of Man*. Columbus, OH: Charles E Merrill.
- Csillag, Sára. 2013. "Walking a Thin Line? Connecting Ethical Theory and Practice: A Co-Operative Inquiry with Human Resource Management Practitioners." *Action Learning: Research and Practice* 10 (2): 124–147. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767333.2013.799453>.
- Denscombe, M. 2017. *The Good Research Guide: For Small-Scale Social Research Projects*. London: McGraw-Hill Education.
- Dewey, J. 1916. *Democracy and Education*. New York: MacMillan.
- Gibb, Allan. 2009. "Meeting the Development Needs of Owner Managed Small Enterprise: A Discussion of the Centrality of Action Learning." *Action Learning: Research and Practice* 6 (3): 209–227. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767330903299415>.
- IFAL.org. 2023. "International Foundation for Action Learning." <https://ifal.org.uk/events>.
- Joseph, Stephen, and David Murphy. 2013. "Person-Centered Approach, Positive Psychology, and Relational Helping." *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 53 (1): 26–51. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022167812436426>.
- Kahts-Kramer, Samantha A., and Lesley Wood. 2023. "Guidelines for Action Learning as Professional Development to Transform Physical Education in Low Resourced Primary Schools in South Africa." *Action Learning: Research and Practice* 20 (2): 100–115, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767333.2023.2211936>.
- Kirschenbaum, H., and V. Land Henderson. 1989. *The Carl Rogers Reader*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.
- Kolb, D. A. 1984. *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Lakoff, G., and M. Johnson. 2008. *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago press.
- Leitch, Claire M., Christel McMullan, and Richard T. Harrison. 2009. "Leadership Development in SMEs: An Action Learning Approach." *Action Learning: Research and Practice* 6 (3): 243–263. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767330903299464>.
- Li, Na, Qian Wang, Jiajun Liu, and Victoria J. Marsick. 2022. "Improving Interdisciplinary Online Course Design Through Action Learning: A Chinese Case Study." *Action Learning: Research and Practice* 19 (1): 49–64. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767333.2021.2002681>.

- Marquardt, Michael, and Deborah Waddill. 2004. "The Power of Learning in Action Learning: A Conceptual Analysis of How the Five Schools of Adult Learning Theories Are Incorporated Within the Practice of Action Learning." *Action Learning: Research and Practice* 1 (2): 185–202. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1476733042000264146>.
- Park, Seung Hee, Yonjoo Cho, and Hyeon Cheol Bong. 2020. "Action Learning for Community Development in a Korean Context." *Action Learning: Research and Practice* 17 (3): 273–291. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767333.2020.1813086>.
- Pedler, Mike. 2015. "American Pragmatism and Organisation: Issues and Controversies." *Action Learning: Research and Practice* 12 (1): 106–112. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767333.2015.1006921>.
- Pedler, M. 2017. "Reginald Revans: The Pioneer of Action Learning." In *The Palgrave Handbook of Organisational Change Thinkers*, edited by D. B. Szabla, W. A. Pasmore, M. A. Barnes, and A. N. Gipson, 1109–1127. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Pedler, Mike, and Christine Abbott. 2008. "Am I Doing It Right? Facilitating Action Learning for Service Improvement." *Leadership in Health Services* 21 (3): 185–199. <https://doi.org/10.1108/17511870810893010>.
- Pedler, Mike, John Burgoyne, and Cheryl Brook. 2005. "What Has Action Learning Learned to Become?" *Action Learning: Research and Practice* 2 (1): 49–68. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767330500041251>.
- Revans, R. 1982. *The Origins and Growth of Action Learning*. Bromley: Chartwell-Bratt.
- Revans, R. 2011. *ABC of Action Learning*. Aldershot: Gower.
- Rogers, C. 1942. *Counselling and Psychotherapy*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.
- Rogers, C. R. 1956. *On Becoming a Person: A Therapist's View of Psychotherapy*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Rogers, C. 1957. "The Necessary and Sufficient Conditions of Therapeutic Personality Change." *Journal of Consulting Psychology* 21 (2): 95–103. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0045357>.
- Rogers, Carl R. 1964. "Toward a Modern Approach to Values: The Valuing Process in the Mature Person." *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 68 (2): 160–167. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0046419>.
- Rogers, C. 1966. *Client-Centered Therapy*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Rogers, C. 1995. *On Becoming a Person: A Therapist's View of Psychotherapy*. London: Constable.
- Sanders, P. 2012. *The Tribes of the Person-Centred Nation*. Monmouth: PCCS Books.
- Scotland, James. 2012. "Exploring the Philosophical Underpinnings of Research: Relating Ontology and Epistemology to the Methodology and Methods of the Scientific, Interpretive, and Critical Research Paradigms." *English Language Teaching* 5 (9): 9–16. <https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v5n9p9>.
- Sell, Katharina C. 2017. "Navigating with Inner Knowing and Awakened Presence: An Approach to Leading in a Complex World." *Action Learning: Research and Practice* 14 (3): 243–255. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767333.2017.1288080>.
- Simpson, Penny, and Tom Bourner. 2007. "What Action Learning Is Not in the Twenty-First Century." *Action Learning: Research and Practice* 4 (2): 173–187. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767330701592797>.
- Vince, Russ. 2008. "'Learning-in-Action' and 'Learning Inaction': Advancing the Theory and Practice of Critical Action Learning." *Action Learning: Research and Practice* 5 (2): 93–104. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767330802185582>.
- Wang, Jinshuai, and Mike Bloodworth. 2016. "First Time Facilitator's Experience: Designing and Facilitating an Action Learning Programme in China." *Action Learning: Research and Practice* 13 (2): 176–183. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767333.2016.1170979>.
- Weinstein, K. 1999. *Action Learning: A Practical Guide*. 2nd ed. Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Ltd.
- WIAL.org. 2023. "World Institute for Action Learning." <https://wial.org/about-wial/>.