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## **Action learning aiding innovation**

As we have said on these pages before, action learning and innovation are linked processes, implicit in Revans' calls for action learning to produce fresh thinking, fresh questions, and questioning insight (Boak 2022; Pedler and Brook 2017). The 8th International Action Learning Conference took place in April 2023, with the theme of action learning and innovation. It was hosted by York St John University in York, England, and organised by this journal and York Business School, in association with the International Foundation for Action Learning, and support from the publisher, Taylor and Francis. It attracted 65 delegates from the UK, Ireland, Canada, the US, South Africa, Spain, Germany, Norway and France. There were 25 presentations of papers, a symposium with six speakers, and nine interactive workshops.

The theme of innovation was represented in papers featuring examples of action learning enabling new processes, practices, products and services in a wide variety of organisations and communities. Workshops explored the use of, and possibilities for, action learning for new purposes, and action learning conducted in new ways. Keynote speaker Professor Kiran Trehan challenged the delegates to imagine how action learning can bring about revolutions in thinking and practice within the next 10 years.

Fellow keynote speaker Yury Boshyk noted the many different varieties of action learning that are practised today and called for a global alliance of practitioners of these different varieties, to work together to tackle wicked problems and to bring about valued changes.

Complex innovation projects often require collaboration between different professional groups, different organisations and different communities, and these differences, whilst valuable, can give rise to barriers to communication. In the symposium, speakers presented five complex projects that called for joint working and communication across group boundaries, and explained how action learning processes had enabled successful collaboration.

Innovation was also evident in the conference in discussions of the development and use of new action learning practices, including virtual action learning, using Zoom or Teams or similar platforms, which has become so much more common in the past three years.

In this issue of the journal, the theme of action learning and innovation continues, with papers focusing on action learning in new contexts and on the practice of critical action learning, a relatively recent development of action learning.

A paper by Samantha Kahts-Kramer and Lesley Wood provides guidelines, based on their research, for how an action learning approach to continuing professional development can empower teachers to achieve their own learning and development within low-resource environments. The paper describes how teachers of physical education (PE) in two low-resourced schools in South Africa took part in a participative action learning and action research process to enable them to transform their teaching of PE. For early years schoolchildren, PE is particularly important, in that it facilitates their social, physical, cognitive and affective development, and aids in decreasing childhood obesity. The paper details the guidelines for teachers the participants in the project devised, such that they can be introduced into other low-resourced schools, to empower teachers to develop their own abilities and to improve their teaching.

Kahts-Kramer and Wood's paper describes how aspects of critical action learning were used in their project. A paper by Hauser, Rigg, Trehan and Vince focuses on the facilitation of critical action learning. Critical action learning (CAL) is a 21<sup>st</sup> century development of action learning; it takes a

particular interest in power relations and emotions within organisational and community environments, and within the action learning set itself. Emotions and power relations within the action learning set can encourage learning or inhibit it. CAL aims to help learning set members to recognise and act on emotions and power relations, and to develop abilities of critical reflection. The paper provides seven richly-described examples of CAL from the authors' own experiences, and proposes eight key elements of a practice guide for CAL facilitators.

Gold and Jones use three examples to illustrate how action learning can be used with Futures and Foresight Learning (FFL) to help small and medium-sized companies (SMEs) develop strategies for innovation. FFL is a process of imagining possible futures and generating ideas for potential innovations. Gold and Jones explain how they worked with action learning groups in three SMEs to help them generate ideas for strategic innovation, expressed first as questions, and then through discussion formulated as more tangible and detailed ideas. Further development led in each case to the basis for strategic business plans.

It is with sadness that members of the editorial board of the journal note the passing of Professor John Burgoyne in April. John made many contributions to practice and research in a wide range of work-based learning activities, not least to action learning. There is a short appreciation of his life and work by Cheryl Brook in this issue.

## References

- Boak, G. 2022. "Action learning and innovation." *Action Learning: Research & Practice* 19(3): 228-229
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