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Action Learning and Action Research: Paradigm, Praxis and Programs

Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt

Introduction

This chapter provides a brief introduction to and framework for Action Learning and Action Research (ALAR). It is informed by my personal perspective drawing on experience over 20 years, mainly within Australia, but also in other countries in Asia-Pacific, Africa and Europe.

Neither Action Learning nor Action Research are absolute or static terms. They emerged in the 1920s and have been developed since then constantly and in a dynamic way. Both gained eminence in times of crisis and enormous change, such as during and after World Wars I and II and in recent years in response to globalisation and rapid technological and socio-economic change.

In future, ALAR will continue to play an important role in R&D (Research and Development) programs in small and corporate businesses, communities and in the public sector. They have proven to be appropriate methodologies and processes for (re)creating change, innovation, leadership and personal, professional and organisational learning. This is because they are more enduring and sustainable than traditional ways of learning, training and research.

The first chapter in this book presents those aspects of philosophy (paradigm) and integrated theory and practice (praxis) which are generally accepted and shared by action learners and action researchers despite their wide-ranging differences in perspectives, processes and practices.

Action Learning and Action Research have been defined in many different ways, so it is useful here to briefly depict the common understanding of these concepts. 'Action' is almost an all-embracing term. In this book its scope includes past, present and future. This means it refers to something that happened in the past which has affected our present insight, learning and knowledge bases and enables and compels us to plan our future action accordingly.

Thus '*Action Learning*' means *learning from action or concrete experience, as well as taking action as a result of this learning*. Similarly, '*Action Research*' is a *cyclical iterative process of action and reflection on and in action*. Through reflection we conceptualise and generalise what happened (action). We can then investigate in new situations whether our conceptions were right; that is, we try to find confirming or disconfirming evidence (see Dick's and Swepson's chapters in this book).

The main difference between 'Action Learning' and 'Action Research' is the same as that between learning and research generally. Both include active learning, searching, problem solving and systematic inquiry. However, Action Research is more systematic, rigorous, scrutinisable, verifiable, and always made public (in publications, oral or written reports).

Figure 1.1 shows where Action Learning and Action Research overlap.

These shared areas provide the structure for this chapter:

- Paradigm
- Theoretical Framework
- Praxis of Action Learning and Action Research
- Programs and Projects.

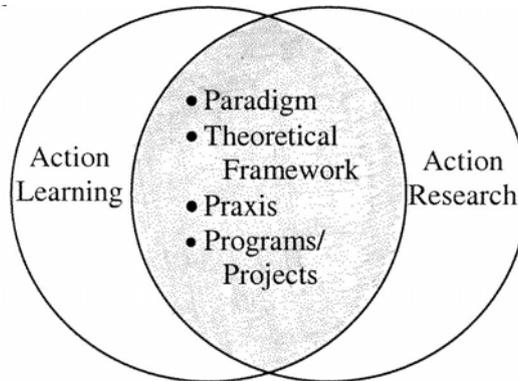


Figure 1.1: Commonalities of Action Learning and Action Research

Paradigm

Both Action Learning and Action Research are located in the social sciences, not the natural sciences. This is important to note, because we are not dealing with organic or inorganic matter, but with sentient human beings, groups of people, organisations or societies, whose characteristics, ideas, strategies and behaviour are complex and not easy to predict, if at all.

I recognise two main problems in the social sciences that can be overcome by adapting the ALAR paradigm. One arises from a lack of understanding of what underpins and influences our actions, behaviour and strategies for maintaining or improving our practice. These are, importantly, paradigms, philosophies, values and *Weltanschauungen* (worldviews). Therefore, this chapter outlines the salient characteristics of the two main competing paradigms in the social sciences, one leading to a technical, reductionist approach, the other to a more holistic, phenomenological approach to learning and knowledge creation (research).

Another problem in the social sciences is the separation between theory and practice, which are conceived as dichotomous. This chapter posits differently, explaining the dialectical relationship of theory and practice as *praxis* in Action Learning and Action Research.

Action researchers have often been criticised by other scientists for not producing ‘scientific’ research and theory, for producing only action and improved practice. Therefore, in this chapter I explain the difference between *a priori* ‘grand theory’ and ‘grounded theory’, and offer a possible theoretical framework for ALAR.

This framework consists of selected principles borrowed from certain theories and integrated into a new model. As mentioned above, within the social sciences, there are two main competing paradigms: the positivist, mainly quantitative paradigm and the phenomenological, interpretive, mainly qualitative paradigm of inquiry.

The former was first established at the beginning of the 20th century when social sciences were born and their methodology was adapted to the positivist thinking of the natural sciences. The phenomenological paradigm has gradually emerged since World War II. It is now well established and arguably the predominant paradigm for the new millennium. Evidence for this claim is provided by the many reference books on qualitative methods of inquiry published in recent years (e.g. Strauss and Corbin 1997; Denzin and Lincoln 1998; Dey 1999; Glesne 1999; Dick 1999; Gummesson 2000; and in German: Flick 1998; Mayring 1999; Moser 1995 and 1998; Lamnek 1995).

It is useful here to briefly outline the characteristics of and differences between the old and new paradigms.

I have argued elsewhere (Zuber-Skerritt, 1992: 124–42) that it is more appropriate to distinguish between two main research paradigms than to distinguish between quantitative and qualitative methods. Although it is true that in the traditional paradigm the methods used are predominately quantitative, and in the alternative paradigm they are predominately qualitative, both quantitative and qualitative methods may be – and indeed have been – used in both paradigms. However, it is the inquirer’s philosophical assumptions that mainly determine which methods s/he will choose, especially when the inquirer is conscious of his or her epistemological framework.

Thus, *methods play a secondary role; the paradigm or theoretical framework is of primary importance and must be made explicit*, so that the reader/examiner can evaluate the process, methods and outcomes, using relevant criteria from the inquirer's particular perspective.

In the literature, the old and new paradigms are often cast in opposition: traditional versus alternative; experimental vs naturalistic; prescriptive vs descriptive; reductionist (reducing phenomena to simplest elements) vs holistic (looking at the totality of the situation); external vs internal (regarding the inquirer's perspective); nomothetic (study of general laws and trends) vs ideographic (study of individual characteristics, case studies); normative vs interpretive; positivist vs non-positivist; using large numbers of 'subjects' and standardised methods to control selected variables vs using a small group of 'participants' and an open-ended communicative approach and multiple methods.

Several points need to be mentioned about this observation. First, there are other paradigms in the social sciences, e.g. the critical paradigm. Here I include them in the new paradigm for reasons of necessary brevity and simplicity.

Second, these are observations of paradigms in their pure forms. In practice, such purity does not exist. The oppositions discussed are nonetheless useful as models or mind maps for identifying and justifying our own philosophical position that underpins our R&D strategy.

In their discussion of the theoretical foundation for Action Research, Altrichter et al. (1993) have presented a model which is also relevant to Action Learning. They distinguish between a technical/rational view of problem solving and professionalism on the one hand, and a reflective view on the other. In reality most views are somewhere within these two extremes, mixing and using multiple methods (triangulation). Thus we have many choices, so it is important that we explain the rationale for our choice.

I summarise the basic assumptions underlying the two paradigms in Table 1.1 below.

Table 1.1: Basic Assumptions of Opposing Views of Problem Solving (after Altrichter et al. 1993)

	<i>Technical rationality</i>	<i>Reflective rationality</i>
Problem Solution	There are <i>general</i> solutions to practical problems	Complex practical problems demand <i>specific</i> solutions
Method	These solutions can be developed <i>outside</i> practical situations (in laboratories and research centres)	These solutions can be developed only <i>inside</i> the context in which the problem arises and in which the practitioner is a crucial and determining element
Application	The solutions can be translated into practitioners' actions by means of training, publications, etc.	The solutions cannot be successfully applied to other contexts but they can be made accessible to other practitioners as hypotheses to be tested
Credibility	<i>Hierarchy</i> in the institutional power structure: The closer a person is to policy making and theory development, the more credible and powerful s/he is. Separation of theory and practice	New types of communication: networking, <i>symmetry of communication</i> and collaboration. Integration of research and development, theory and practice

Action Learning and Action Research are located in the newer, non-positivist paradigm of reflective rationality. It is important to point out that 'validity' and 'rigour' have a different meaning in different paradigms.

Validity in the positivist paradigm is recognised as assured when knowledge is generalisable and when the study is conducted in controlled conditions, using rigorous methods of data collection, analysis and interpretation. The research design is experimental. It

starts with the inquirer's predetermined hypothesis which is to be tested and finally either confirmed or refuted. Selected 'subjects' must be recognised as representative of a large cross-section of the relevant population. The sample size must be proportionately large to be valid, and there are normally experimental groups and control groups. This kind of inquiry is useful for statistical purposes, such as population audits, and for predicting future trends, e.g. in economics, finance and politics.

On the other hand, phenomenologists believe that knowledge is socially constructed and created from within, and for, a particular group and context. The researcher's role is to describe and explain the situation or case as truthfully as possible. The aim is not to establish generalisable laws for multiple contexts, but to know, understand, improve or change a particular social situation or context for the benefit of the people who are also the 'participants' (not just 'subjects') in the inquiry and who are affected by the results and solutions. Variables are not predetermined and controlled, but are taken on board as they arise from the data. They are multiple and dynamic. Therefore, this kind of inquiry is more complex and difficult to conduct, if it is to be of high quality, systematic and valid to those involved.

Validity in the new paradigm is more personal and interpersonal than methodological, and should be based on an interactive dialectic logic (Reason and Rowan 1981: 244) rather than a dichotomy of 'subjective' or 'objective' truth. This dichotomy can be overcome by the concept of 'perspective' i.e. taking a personal view from some distance and after an interactive dialectic using multiple data, respondents and co-inquirers. In brief, the action learner/researcher is interested in perspectives, rather than truth *per se*, and in giving an honest account of how the participants in the project view themselves and their experiences.

Action Learning and Action Research may be informed by many theories of learning and creating new knowledge. Given the length limitations of this chapter, I identify below four important areas of theory which I believe are acceptable to most action learners/researchers in the new paradigm.

Theoretical Framework

I have long maintained that all people – consciously or unconsciously – develop through their life experience a personal theoretical framework or lens through which they see the world. It is determined by their personal values and worldviews (*Weltanschauungen*) and it determines and guides their strategies and behaviour. Therefore it is important for us personally, professionally, and as members of collective bodies to identify, understand and consciously develop our individual theoretical framework. This can be aided through reflection on practice, personal and organisational learning, and through critical discourse.

I have explained in detail my theoretical framework for Action Research (Zuber-Skerritt 1992), which was confirmed to be relevant and useful in other countries such as Singapore (Murphy 2000), China (Chan 1993), Europe (Zuber-Skerritt 1997), South Africa (Zuber-Skerritt 2000) and New Zealand (Melrose 1993). My short postgraduate business management courses held annually in Innsbruck (since 1995), Vienna (since 1998) and South Africa (since 1995) yield similar responses. Here I present a revised and briefer version with reference to:

- Grounded Theory
- Personal Construct Theory
- Critical Theory
- Systems Theory

Grounded Theory

One of the first influential books providing a theoretical framework for ALAR and other methodologies within the non-positivist paradigm was Glaser and Strauss (1967) on *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*. This theory established the notion that theoretical knowledge can be generated from specific contextual information and data collected from people within a certain context (e.g. an organisation) by a process of alternating and interacting the phases of discovery and subsequent testing or ‘sampling of grounded theory’, i.e. an iterative process illustrated in Figure 1.2.

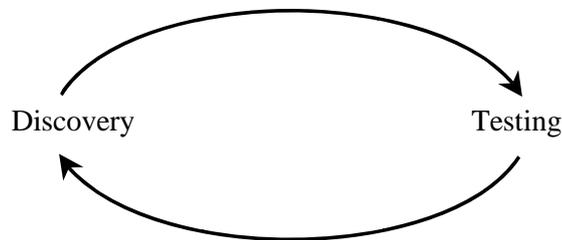


Figure 1.2: Testing of Grounded Theory

Unlike scientific empirical research aiming at verification of ‘grand theories’ and placing little value on their discovery, ‘grounded theory’ emphasises the process of discovery and places value on generating meaningful theories. While empirical research produces ‘etic’ theory by an outsider who is uninvolved and removed from the object of inquiry, grounded theory is ‘emic’ with an insider view of the people, groups, organisations or cultures being studied.

The former inquirer tries to establish generalisable (nomothetic) laws; the latter wants to provide knowledge and understanding of a particular, individual (ideographic) case. For the former, generalisations might be statistically purposeful and significant (e.g. in population audits, causes of illness and health, national trends), but they often are not applicable or irrelevant to the individual case and specific group.

Personal Construct Theory (PCT)

George Kelly published one of the first books on this topic in 1955. His main message was that everyone is a ‘personal scientist’. This means that it is not the privilege of experts and professional scientists to advance knowledge (theories, rules and principles), which we may then accept and apply, but rather that all of us in normal mental health are capable of creating knowledge at various levels. We are not passive receivers of knowledge, but active constructors (or self-instructors) and interpreters of our

experiences. Thus, knowledge and theory become personalised, relevant to, and fully integrated into our practice.

Based on this epistemology, Kelly developed his personal construct theory in terms of a fundamental postulate elaborated by eleven corollaries which I have explained in relation to ALAR in Higher Education (Zuber-Skerritt 1992: 56–66). In particular, I state:

Kelly's epistemological position is 'constructive alternativism', that is, the assumption that our present constructs or interpretations of the universe are subject to revision or replacement. This means that people understand themselves and their environment, and anticipate future events, by constructing tentative models or personal theories and by evaluating these theories against personal criteria as to whether the prediction and control of events (based upon the models) have been successful or not. All theories are hypotheses created by people; they may be valid at any particular time, but may suddenly be invalid in some unforeseeable respect and replaced by a better theory (p. 57). ...

Kelly also believes that people construe reality in an infinite number of different ways. Although he does not deny the importance of childhood experiences or present environmental constraints, he suggests that it is more important to explore people's thinking about their present situation (i.e. their current hypotheses structure). He believes that people need not be trapped by their early experiences or be impotent in the face of present environmental constraints, but that change can occur if they see their personal theories as open to refutation and not as 'objective truth' (p. 58).

Relating this to ALAR, I largely agree with PCT that action learners/researchers are personal scientists, each with an individual system of constructs (individuality corollary) which can be explored by him/herself and by others (sociality corollary). A group of action learners/researchers may be similar in terms of their construction and interpretation of experience (commonality corollary), but their development and conceptual change depends on the 'permeability' corollary, i.e. their openness to change and their willingness to search for disconfirming as well as confirming evidence in their research.

However, my constructivist view also acknowledges human feelings, beliefs and values, rather than only a rational construct

system in the human mind. Therefore, I refer to ‘concepts’ and ‘conceptions’, rather than ‘constructs’.

Critical Theory

So far we have established that everyone can be a personal scientist and create contextual knowledge (grounded theory) in an organisation or in any group of people by conducting ALAR projects. Ideally, this kind of problem-solving inquiry is conducted critically and collaboratively in a supportive, non-hierarchical environment.

If, however, an organisation is structured and led in a hierarchical manner, it is essential to (1) obtain the approval and support for the program or project(s) from top management and (2) establish team spirit and ‘symmetrical communication’ among all project team members.

In my experience, it is futile to try to achieve a significant improvement or change in an organisation unless it is fully backed by the chief executive officer and senior management. They must understand and agree with the basic assumptions of ALAR, accept a critical analysis of the problem or ‘thematic concern’ under investigation and be open for the suggested change(s) resulting from the inquiry.

The Frankfurt School of Critical Theory and its followers have provided useful principles for ALAR, e.g. Carr and Kemmis (1986). I mention here just two of these principles: ‘symmetrical communication’ and ‘becoming critical’.

Symmetrical communication demands that everyone in the project team is considered equal – no matter what rank/position – and contributes equally, albeit differently, to solving the research problem at hand. The assumption is that *each member has knowledge, skills, capabilities or talents in a particular area which need to be identified and used effectively.*

Various instruments can be used to identify people’s strengths and weaknesses, as well as their work preferences. A good example is the Team Management Systems (TMS) developed by Margerison and McCann (1985, 1992; www.tms.com.au). Team members learn which management types are needed for a ‘winning team’, how to

recognise all types, and to value those who are quite different or even opposite to their own type and work preferences. My experience has led me to believe that this recognition and acceptance of work preferences in a team by means of TMS leads to mutual respect, synergy and symmetrical communication. As such, it is conducive to collaborative inquiry and problem solving.

The second principle of 'becoming critical' was argued and discussed in detail by Carr and Kemmis (1986). They distinguished between technical, practical and critical Action Research. I would add: and Action Learning. I have summarised the characteristics of each type of inquiry in Table 1.2 below with regard to the aims, the facilitator's role and the relationship between facilitator and participants.

Carr and Kemmis maintained that only critical, emancipatory inquiry is true Action Research. However, my experience tells me that emancipatory Action Learning and Action Research are both developmental processes from technical to critical inquiry. Most of us as critical action learners/researchers started with technical, then proceeded to practical, and finally understood and practised critical modes of inquiry. The latter is definitely what we should aim at, in order to achieve far-reaching transformational change, rather than functional or transactional change.

For personal and organisational change to be truly transformational, it is essential that all members of an ALAR group adopt a critical and self-critical attitude. This means critique is never taken as a personal attack (destructive), but accepted as a necessary condition for organisational change, innovation or recreation (constructive). In Action Learning programs, actions and thoughts are submitted to the constructive scrutiny of supportive colleagues as 'critical friends'. We learn from our mistakes and failures as well as successes. We are not merely interested in changing people and organisations; we want them to grow and learn, and we want to learn ourselves within this process.

Table 1.2: Types of Inquiry (after Carr and Kemmis 1986)

<i>Type of inquiry</i>	<i>Aims</i>	<i>Facilitator's role</i>	<i>Relationship between facilitator and participants</i>
1. Technical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - effectiveness/ efficiency of practice - professional development 	outside 'expert'	co-option (practitioners depend on facilitator)
2. Practical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - as (1) above - practitioners' understanding - transformation of their consciousness 	Socratic role, encouraging participation and self-reflection	co-operation (process-consultancy)
3. Emancipatory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - as (1) and (2) above - participants' emancipation from the dictates of tradition, self-deception, coercion - their critique of bureaucratic systematisation - transformation of the organisation or system 	process moderator (responsibility shared equally by participants)	collaboration

Systems Theory

Again, recognising the brevity required of this chapter, I refer to the two major concepts in systems theory that are important for ALAR: 'interrelatedness' and 'systemic thinking'.

In this age of global interdependence, systems thinkers understand that everything is interrelated with everything else. As Marquardt (2000) and others before him have pointed out, our worldview has changed from a Newtonian perspective – studying the parts in order to understand the whole – to a Quantum Physics view where the whole organises and even partly defines its parts.

Marquardt (2000: 234–35) claims that Action Learning builds leaders to be systems thinkers.

Effective problem solving requires the ability to be a systems thinker ... Systems thinkers have the ability to see connections between issues, events and data points – the whole rather than parts (p. 234). ...

During action learning sessions, participants learn how to think in a systemic way and how to handle complex, seemingly unconnected aspects of organizational challenges (p. 235).

In ALAR sets, members develop system-oriented, holistic resolutions to complex problems in an organisation or other social settings. In this process, participants develop and grow as persons, managers and leaders.

To conclude, within the new paradigm in the social sciences, our theoretical framework for ALAR comprises theories and principles derived from certain aspects of

- *grounded theory*: enabling action learners/researchers to create knowledge, inductively developed from ‘raw data’ that has been systematically obtained
- *personal construct theory*: regarding action researchers as personal scientists who share and negotiate meaning to arrive at their individual and group concepts
- *critical theory*: requiring a critical and self-critical attitude in order to achieve real transformational change
- *systems theory*: developing system-oriented, holistic resolutions to complex problems through ALAR.

This framework is by no means complete or static. It is designed to provide a starting point for other people interested and engaged

in ALAR to critically reflect and develop their own conceptual framework.

An important point to make is that *established theories may inform us, but we as systems thinkers, personal scientists and critical action learners/researchers develop our own theories as grounded theory* based on our own action and on our data that is systematically collected, analysed and interpreted in the course of our inquiry which is collaborative more often than not. It is this dialectical relationship between action and research that we consider in the next section.

Praxis

There are abundant definitions and ill-defined uses of ‘praxis’ to be found in the literature. I define praxis as the interdependence and integration – not separation – of theory and practice, research and development, thought and action. I have explained this dialectic relationship between theory and practice and its underpinning philosophy in more detail elsewhere (Zuber-Skerritt 1990).

Here it is important to state that the concepts of both Action Learning and Action Research are conceived as a dialectical relationship between ‘action’ – activities, concrete experiences, practical trials, explorations, or applications – and ‘learning’ or ‘research’ – understanding, creating and advancing knowledge through reflection, inquiry and critical evaluation.

As Figure 1.3 shows, in ALAR we come to know and learn from our action/experience, but whatever we have conceptualised and learnt must lead to action, improvement, development or change. *There is no learning/research without action to follow, and no action without a knowledge foundation based on prior learning/research.* This is the main difference between Action Learning and Action Research on the one hand, and traditional learning/research on the other. The latter may be pursued in its own right (*per se*), in isolation from concrete situations, and not necessarily be of practical use.

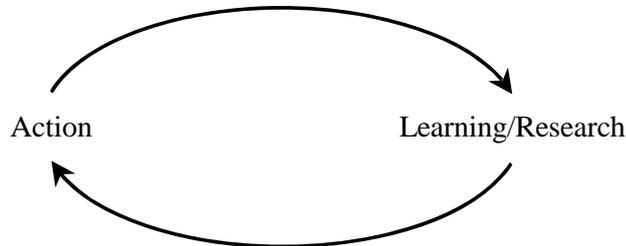


Figure 1.3: The Praxis of Action Learning and Action Research

In the following, we consider first the praxis of Action Learning and then of Action Research in more detail.

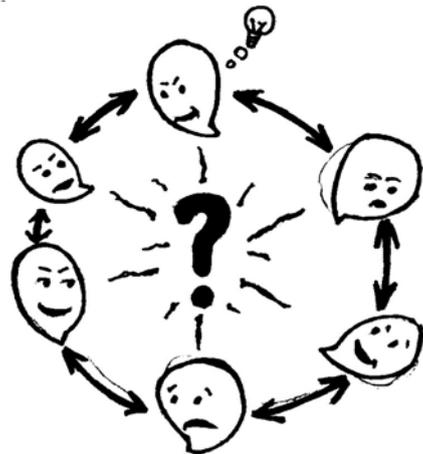
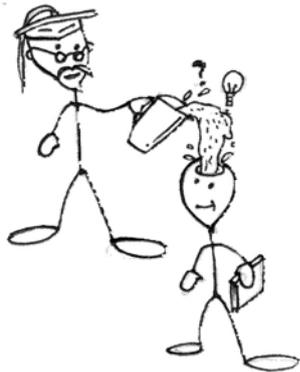
The praxis of Action Learning is really as old as humankind, but it was first conceptualised as such by Reg Revans in the 1930s and 1940s. Here I discuss two of his concepts, the first relating to ‘learning’, the second to ‘action’.

Revans says on video (1991a) and in his writing (1982, 1991b, 1998) that we learn best by asking fresh questions. This idea is not new and can be traced back to ancient Greek philosophers. For example, Socrates (about 470–399 BC) used to ask his disciples probing questions that motivated them to find the answers themselves. He also equated knowledge with ethically correct action and virtue.

I think that one reason why Action Learning has become important, relevant and topical since World War II is the increasingly rapid technological and socio-economic change in our increasingly complex world. *We need to learn faster, more actively and creatively, but also ethically to be sustainable in a global world.*

Another reason might be reaction against the positivist notion of knowledge creation and transmission. According to this view, knowledge is created by scientists using scientific methods. This knowledge is then applied and transmitted from expert to novice in a funnel fashion (*Nürnberger Trichter* in German), as depicted in Figure 1.4 below.

Revans and his followers maintain that such knowledge – established and traditionally taught in universities and schools – is necessary, but not sufficient. What we also need, he termed ‘questioning insight’.



Traditional learning

Learning through discussion
and questioning insight

Figure 1.4: Traditional Learning Versus Learning Through Discussion and Questioning Insight

Questioning insight develops from asking ourselves fresh and deep-seated questions, including questions of epistemology (e.g. how do we come to know?), education (e.g. what/how did I learn?), ontology (e.g. who am I? and who would I like to be?) and ethics (e.g. what is right, fair, sustainable?).

Some of the most important educational principles developed from this holistic philosophy are ‘learning through discussion’, ‘learning by doing’ and ‘reflective practice’, all of which also relate to the second of Revans’ concepts of Action Learning: ‘action’.

The philosophical assumption underlying this concept of action is that not just the so-called experts, but all of us can create knowledge on the basis of our action and concrete experience by

- reflecting on and in action
- conceptualising, theorising and generalising this action/experience
- testing these concepts in new situations, and thus
- engaging in a new cycle of gaining knowledge through new concrete experience, reflection, conceptualisation, testing, etc.

On the basis of this philosophical assumption, learning is life long and ongoing in cycles of action and reflection, in response to fresh questions that are new and unknown to us and that we seek to resolve. See Figure 1.5 below.

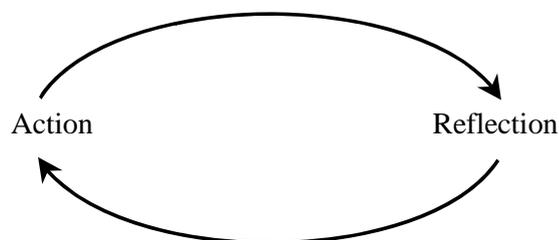


Figure 1.5: The Action Learning Cycle

The terms ‘Action Learning’ and ‘Action Research’ are often used interchangeably. Indeed, Action Research is based on the same philosophical assumptions and includes Action Learning. However, as mentioned above, the main difference between Action Learning and Action Research is the same as that between learning and research generally. Action Research is more systematic, rigorous in its methodology and use of methods so that it can be

scrutinised, and it is always made public (e.g. oral presentations, written reports, conference papers, publications in the form of refereed journal articles, book chapters, monographs, books).

It is interesting to note that both Action Learning and Action Research were first conceived by German Jews who started their work in the 1920s, 30s and 40s and migrated to English-speaking countries: Reg Revans to England and Kurt Lewin to America. Whilst Revans worked mainly with managers in industry and business to improve conditions, processes and productivity (e.g. in coal mines, banks and hospitals) through Action Learning, Lewin (1926, 1948, 1952) focussed mainly on improving social conditions through Action Research in funded research institutions. Therefore, it is understandable that there has been more literature available on educational Action Research than on Action Learning, but this trend is changing, mainly because of the publications on Action Learning in all areas and sectors produced by MCB University Press (<http://www.mcb.co.uk>) and the International Management Centres (<http://www.imc.org.uk/imc/harvest/>).

I have already mentioned the three types of Action Research: technical, practical and critical or emancipatory. In brief and in line with our theoretical framework outlined above, emancipatory Action Research is collaborative, critical and self-critical inquiry by practitioners (e.g. teachers, manager) into a major problem or issue of mutual concern in their organisation. They 'own the problem' and feel responsible and accountable for solving it through teamwork and a cyclical process of (1) strategic planning, (2) implementing the plan (action), (3) observation, evaluation and self-evaluation, (4) critical and self-critical reflection on the results of (1)–(3), and making decisions for the next cycle of action research – that is, a revised plan, followed by action, observation and reflection, and so on, as shown in the classic spiral of Action Research cycles in Figure 1.6 below.

More precisely, action research is emancipatory when it aims not only at technical and practical improvement, the participants' transformed consciousness, and change within their organisation's existing boundaries and conditions. It is also emancipatory when it aims to change the system itself or those conditions which impede

desired improvement in the organisation. Like critical Action Learning, emancipatory Action Research also aims at the participants' empowerment and self-confidence in their ability to create 'grounded theory' – that is, theory grounded in experience and practice – by solving complex problems in totally new situations, collaboratively as a team, with everyone in the team being a 'personal scientist' contributing in different ways but on an equal footing with everyone else. There is no hierarchy, but instead open and 'symmetrical communication'.

In the next section, I present a model and references to practical examples of ALAR programs and projects within organisations.

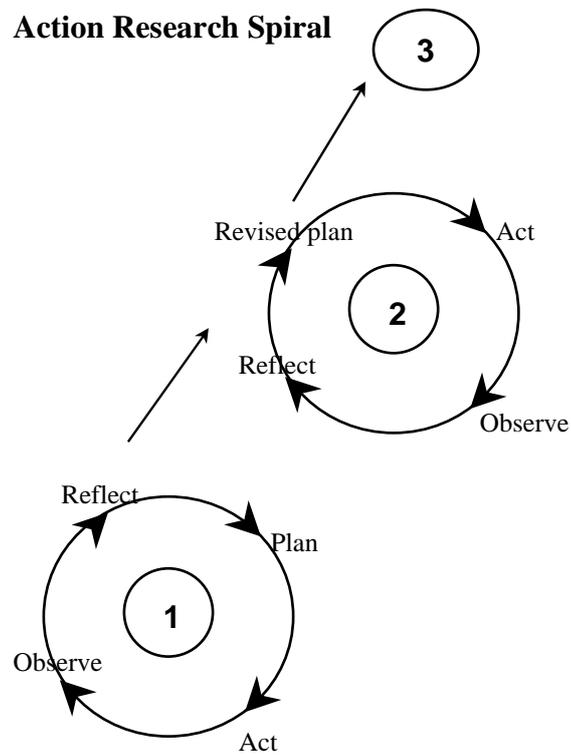


Figure 1.6: The Spiral of Action Research Cycles

Programs and Projects

There is no prescriptive recipe for conducting Action Learning programs and Action Research projects because of the open-ended nature of solving complex problems in complex situations. However, we have learnt from experience that there are certain processes which can be generalised. For example, I have presented and explained each component of a generic process model for Action Learning programs with Action Research projects conducted within organisations. I refer to my recent article (Zuber-Skerritt 2000) for a detailed discussion of the model reproduced in Figure 1.7 below.

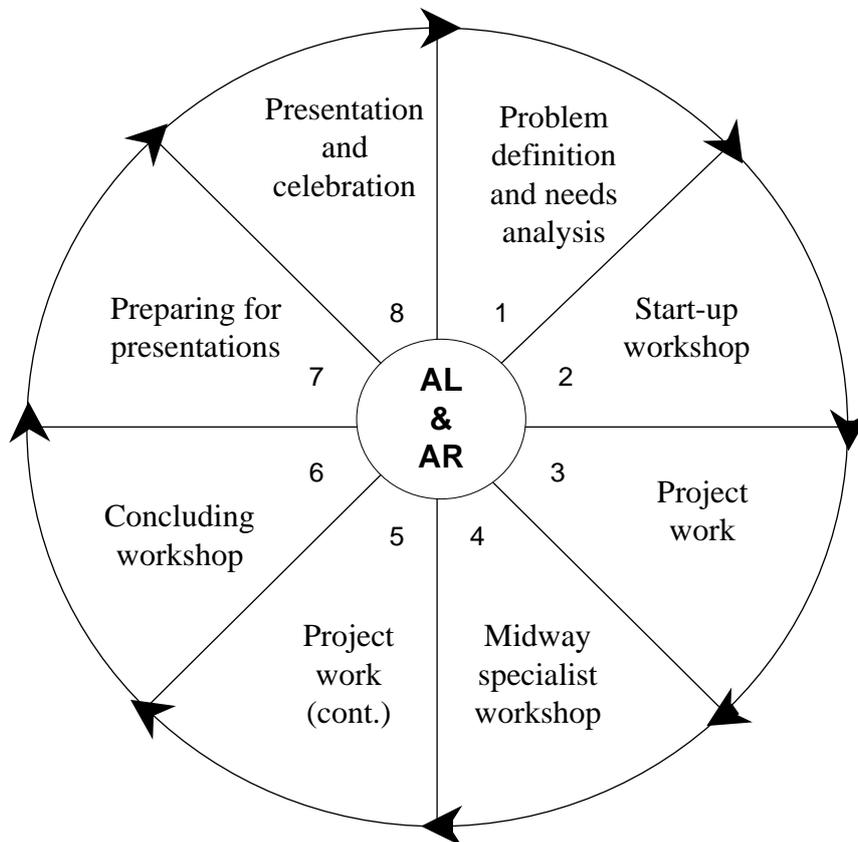


Figure 1.7: A Generic Process Model

In addition to the examples provided in this book as case studies, I believe it is also useful to refer to major Action Learning programs with Action Research projects in large organisations in industry and higher education, i.e. ALAR programs and projects which, in hindsight, followed this generic process model.

Dotlich and Noel (1998) in their Action Research on Action Learning provide the best examples and evidence for success of their programs in large multi-national companies. These companies not only improved their productivity and bottom line, but they also became 'learning organisations', and their leaders and managers developed life-long learning skills which equipped them to deal with change and totally new problems in new situations on a continuing basis.

To the same effect, there are many examples of major Action Learning programs with Action Research team projects in higher education. They include those at Griffith University (Farquhar and McKay 1996; Zuber-Skerritt 1996); the University of Queensland (Passfield 1996; Ryan and Zuber-Skerritt 1994; Zuber-Skerritt 1994 and 1997); and Southern Cross University (Zuber-Skerritt 2000).

Conclusions

This chapter has tried to provide an introduction to and framework for Action Learning and Action Research. These are approaches that are particularly useful when seeking innovation, change, growth and transformation of organisations and their leaders and managers.

My argument can be summarised as the **3 Ps of ALAR**. By this I mean, Action Learning and Action Research (ALAR) have in common the phenomenological *Paradigm* and theoretical assumptions, *Praxis* (integration of action and thought) and a process model for *Programs/projects*.

I have explained the paradigm in terms of ontology (our assumptions about the nature of being/reality), epistemology (our assumptions about the nature of knowledge and knowing) and methodology (our consequent approach to problem solving and inquiry strategy).

I have explained the characteristics of the non-positivist, phenomenological paradigm of ALAR in juxtaposition to the older positivist research paradigm. I have noted that neither are used in their pure form, because they are human constructs. People usually draw selectively from both paradigms. Thus we need to explain and justify our choice so that our findings can be evaluated against our own criteria, rather than against external, positivist criteria.

My revised theoretical framework for ALAR is conceived as an overlap of selected aspects and principles from four existing theories, as shown in Figure 1.8.

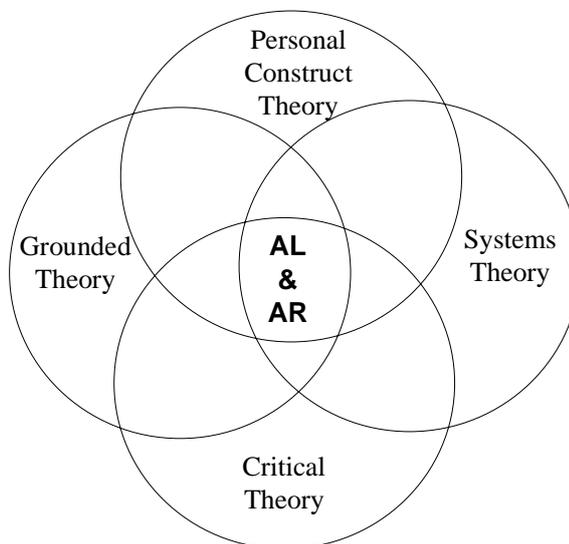


Figure 1.8: Theoretical Framework for Action Learning and Action Research

Action learners and action researchers may be informed by these theories, but they are also personal scientists themselves, able to create grounded theory based on their own inquiry. They are open to critique, refutation and change. Their inquiry is emancipatory and system-oriented. They are ‘comrades in adversity’ (Revans 1991b) or ‘critical friends’ who support one another in ‘symmetrical communication’, leading to mutual respect and

synergy. Synergy is “the value that comes when the whole adds up to more than the sum of its parts” (Kanter 1990: 58).

This is the main reason why collaborative Action Learning and Action Research are so powerful and successful in organisational change programs. Usually, the aim of these programs is to solve complex problems in unknown situations during times of rapid change. It is therefore not surprising that ALAR has much to offer as we seek to understand and maximise opportunities for growth and sustainability in the present time of rapid change and unpredictability.

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Clearly, both action research and action learning are about learning from experience. The experience is usually drawn from some task assumed by a person or team. Experiential learning is not just fieldwork or praxis (the connecting of learning to real life situations); although it is the basis for these approaches to learning, it is a theory that defines the cognitive processes of learning (Kelly 1997). Action Research as Action Learning in adult education provides a theoretical methodological framework for the practice of learning, teaching and professional. 2 development. The model of teachi