

## Exploring the Many Meanings of Action Learning and ARL

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As have many, I accidentally found out that there is a name for the experience-based learning activities I have always liked to design and facilitate — Action Learning. I encountered educational change programs in India, Nepal, the Philippines, and Bangladesh that shared these characteristics, but I never knew that it had a name. All I knew was that such programs centered around a belief that learning is most powerful when people are helped to learn from one another as they work through real-life challenges. Questions abound more than do answers in this kind of learning, but guides or learning coaches are also available to both stimulate discomfort with the status quo and help learners work through issues that arise as they learn.

As is also true for many, the discovery that there was a name and a body of practice for this kind of work changed my life! Early in my academic career, Lars Cederholm and Ernie Turner brought together in Brooklyn a group of organization development and learning practitioners who shared common core beliefs about learning that also underlie Action Learning. As Lars described in recent email correspondence, he and Ernie were seeking ways in their own work to “save U.S. companies from the bondage of traditional classroom training.” Lennart Rohlin had brought a group of MiL staff to an OD Network meeting. The excitement that was stirred in some who heard them speak provided the stimulus for this meeting. Lars invited a few others who were not at the OD Network who he thought would be interested in learning more about MiL’s work.

We met at Lars' apartment. It was 1986. Over meals, story telling, knowledge sharing and brainstorming, we spent a day talking about whether we wanted to work together in some ways to do similar work in the United States. It was a pleasant day as days go. And I very much liked the people whom I met. But I was not aware at the time that this day would have direction-setting implications for my work and life. Looking back over the past fifteen + years, it is easy to pick out that day as a turning point in my work and life, but at the time, it seemed like one of many very pleasant, fulfilling days. The relationships I developed at the time, both in Sweden and the United States, bloomed into several core personal friendships, many more colleagues, a research line, a consulting practice, and the foundation for the research-based J.M. Huber Institute for Learning in Organizations at Columbia University that I helped to found and co-direct.

My journey with Action Learning holds many experiences in carrying out programs with “comrades in adversity”, as Reg Revans (1978, 1980, 1982) – often identified as a founding father of Action Learning – describes it. It also includes the perils and promise involved in setting up an Action Learning consulting practice along with many warm, lasting friendships with colleagues, program participants and researchers. I can also call to mind much learning from mistakes. And I have been fortunate enough to read about, work with, and study very different kinds of Action Learning initiatives. In this chapter, I will pick out a few highlights of my journey that might shed light on theory, practice, and directions in Action Learning work. As I do, I will speak to insights I gained about different ways to understand and practice Action Learning (Marsick and O'Neil, 1999).

### EARLY STORIES FROM THE SWEDISH BATTLEFRONT

Armed with enthusiasm, a band of Action Learning advocates, including myself, began to talk with companies in the United States about the benefits of developing their leaders in this way. Inspired by MiL and led by Lars and Ernie, we founded Leadership in International Management (LIM)<sup>1</sup>. We held “tasters” for company management development

gatekeepers, often from Organization Development or Human Resource Development, so that they could experience what might now be called a “byte” of project learning, talk to graduates of programs, hear “lessons learned”, and talk through practical steps of design and program implementation. In order to make MiL’s work more visible in the business community, Lars and I wrote an article (Marsick and Cederholm, 1988) about MiL’s learning philosophy and program designs that was published in the *Columbia Journal of World Business*.

### *The research on MiL experiences*

Questions kept coming up as we talked to businesses about what it was really like to go through an Action Learning program. And, of course, we had millions of questions as budding architects and learning coaches about how to best design and run such programs. I talked with Lennart Rohlin about doing some research in MiL to answer some of these questions. Lennart talked to his staff, who agreed with my proposal. A small research grant from the Kellogg Foundation’s Faculty Seminar in New Directions for Continuing Education and the generous help of MiL staff made it possible to do a first round of interviews and observation in 1987; some follow-up interviews at MiL Day in 1988; and with the interview assistance of Camilla Sternberg, who works with MiL, a further round of interviews later in 1988.

All together, I sat in on an early seminar in the Swedish MiL 18’s program, the middle project revisions seminar of an internal company program, and the final session of the Senior Management MiL program. Lennart and MiL’s vice president, Sven Åke Nilsson, gave me access to staff meetings that took place during this time period. Since I stayed in the guest quarters of the MiL office, I had many informal conversations with staff. I conducted interviews in English and Camilla interviewed in Swedish and then translated her tapes into English for me. All together I talked with 21 managers, 15 staff (one of whom had also served as Contact Person at a MiL Member Company), and one additional Contact Person. I learned about differences and similarities in internal programs, open programs, joint company programs, and variations of the program for senior managers, the County Councils and others.

I looked back at these interviews and my notes as I began to write these reflections. Conversations and experiences flooded my memory that made me realize how much the flavor of those interviews resembled what I was finding out about what made MiL programs special. Action Learning in MiL is as much a way of thinking, feeling and being in the world as it is a “methodology” or program design. For me, MiL brings to mind terms like: challenging the status quo, deep questioning, play acting to get at real life dilemmas, going against the grain in order to always offer a fresh way of looking at the world, being aware of the fact that we are first and fundamentally human, and as such, we have a responsibility to bring out the best in ourselves, our families and friends, our colleagues, our companies, and even the world! MiL stands for high quality business success, but in an era when success might mean Enron-like deception of employees and the public in the name of profit, MiL also stands for high quality humanity!

### *The participants’ experiences of MiL programs*

Participating managers I talked with wondered at the way in which their experience often awakened a persona inside that had either been sleeping or restless or repressed. Staff told stories of how the projects were safe places for managers to explore parts of themselves and their corporate environment that would otherwise remain locked up in personal or organizational cells that, on being challenged, were not always as impermeable as they had imagined. In this way, the stories I was privileged to listen to gave me back so much more than I had anticipated. Yes, I was able to say to our business colleagues in the United States more about what it would be like to experience an Action Learning program. But in addition, I learned about a vision and commitment through Action Learning that I felt might not be as enthusiastically embraced by United States businesses. In retrospect, I would say my misgivings were accurate.

Perhaps sharing some excerpts from these interviews and from the ruminations I placed in my research journals will capture some of what I still think is unique about MiL’s approach to doing Action Learning. Early on, I was struck with stories of awakening and transformation in MiL graduates who reflected back on their experiences in the program. Many

of the lessons they learned turned on new ways of seeing themselves as leaders – oriented toward participation, empowerment, and more effective listening and interpersonal communication. Managers I interviewed talked about how the program had changed them personally, and how this in turn, had affected their work and their family lives.<sup>2</sup> For example:

“I think I can say my view turned more from a management specialist toward a leadership model. ... It’s more like a team leader really working on the personal motivation of every individual — that is the key to success.”

“And maybe two years ago, I would have demanded to have the cost analysis detailed and on my desk, and then I would have phoned down and told him that this is the price you are going to pay. And now, instead of doing that, ... I’m getting the cost analysis, but I’m getting it done by the one who’s going to have to deal with the business later on.”

“... and I see afterwards that this was probably the biggest milestone in my life. The change during this process was quite intensive!”

“Very often, more than before MiL, ... [I] put [why] questions to myself: Why am I working like that today? Why is my organization like this today? That is new for me. ... I have learned to put questions to myself.”

Of course, everyone did not feel uniformly transformed although facilitators and program designers often did infuse their activities with strategies and approaches that would help managers to question and change fundamental views. But even when change was incremental, the skills managers learned were and still are important for leading the kinds of lean, networked companies that continue to dominate our knowledge era. As it turns out, many of these lessons learned turned up in subsequent research that I and colleagues later carried out on Action Learning programs, for example, that:

- Managers gain what MiL calls “a helicopter view” that broadens their vision and helps them see the interconnections of the company as a system.
- Managers gain deeper insights into their own and others’ differences (in personality styles, learning styles, gender and culture differences), along with more tolerance and curiosity that led them to make better decisions because they could see so many more facets of the situation at hand.

- Managers gain courage — the courage to change themselves, to challenge others, and to speak out when they would have otherwise remained silent.
- Managers empower themselves and others.
- Managers improve their interpersonal and communication skills.

### *Action Learning – the MiL way*

My journal lays out early impressions about the way staff design and carry out their work that are still part of MiL's unique stamp:

It does seem that there is a difference in what MiL does and what I read about Action Learning in the literature. In the first place, these programs emphasize personal and group development much more than learning from project content. Second, at least as an ideal, the staff want to set up situations where people learn in and through action, not just by doing a project that is an application or from doing something as practice. Many of the staff note that they don't consider a project a success when the primary output is a report. They want to set up a series of experiments, where people try things out and get people in companies to try things out.

It is clear that a good deal of focus is on problem reformulation. Problems often get redefined in terms of the people component of the situation — thinking strategically, yes, but not for grand business strategy as much as for people strategies. Problem redefinition also involves getting others in the company to mull over it and tear it apart. The staff stop their groups from coming to conclusions too quickly, and always want to look at the problem from another angle. They are always pushing at the end of the problem, continuing to expand their view of it.

I noted that the essence of what some learning coaches do is “challenge norms so people can choose more consciously. They often talk about ‘being naughty’ with participants.” I observed that facilitators step out of role and “play act” in order to cause people to think differently about the situation at hand. As I did my observations, one learning coach “wanted me to ask naughty questions to his project team”. I concluded that:

MiL staff provide / create experiences that jolt participants into seeing things from a different viewpoint, to understand the life experience and perspective of someone very different from themselves. They also broaden the person's viewpoint by immersing them in history, literature,

culture, art. But there's always an action component. It's not just learning about one of these things: it's doing it. Doing history, doing literature, doing drama, doing art. [Several programs bring in an artist] to talk to people about painting and then have them paint. [One program coordinator I interviewed] not only had people talk to an actor, but to be actors themselves putting on a drama in a theater. And then in the projects, they have them challenge the conventional viewpoint of the problem, even if that means confronting senior managers and confronting the project host in their programs.

### *Taking the research program one step further*

I and colleagues researched two Action Learning programs run by LIM under the name of ARL™ Inquiry.<sup>3</sup> – the first in a global foods company and the second in a global financial services company<sup>4</sup>. The first of these studies involved observation of program sessions for two Leadership Forums; a total of 71 formal interviews with participants as well as others in the organization who observed the program's impact; analysis of various program evaluation materials and documents; and a statistical analysis of the 360 degree feedback from the second Forum. The second study used a similar design but on only one round of a leadership development program. The studies looked at program outcomes and at the learning process. We found a number of characteristics in these programs that resonated with the earlier research I had done, for example:

- Key learning outcomes included the ability to think and act globally and/or systemically.
- Participating managers improved their ability to work in and lead teams; to communicate with one another and interact with greater ease and impact; to manage conflict; to innovate; and to lead others.
- The reflective strategies introduced by ARL™ were often resisted initially by participants, who were much more oriented to task accomplishment; but in the end, it was these reflective strategies that they both valued and took home to their companies to use with their own staff.
- Personal growth and development seemed to be more important to participants than the business outcomes of the projects, which were substantial; but the companies themselves were able to justify the program in part because of the quality and efficiencies of the new solutions proposed by project teams.

- These programs pushed for organization development and organization culture change. Although the programs did develop leaders who attempted to change aspects of the organization's culture, it was also clear that there were many impediments to maximizing the initiative's potential for systemic change. In short, the programs develop personal capacity to enable organizational transformation and fundamental change. But personal capacity is not enough. It needs to be joined sensitively, but powerfully, with internal change management strategies.

### FROM ACTION LEARNING TO ACTION REFLECTION LEARNING

Action Reflection Learning was jointly developed by MiL and LIM as both sides of the ocean experimented with, and then shared, their experiences in a variety of ways. Ernie and Lars brought their ideas directly to MiL programs in which they worked. Lennart and Sven Åke participated in "tasters" and workshops in the United States, and brought with them managers and contact persons who could tell their stories first hand. Ernie met Bernice McCarthy (1987), who created tools and strategies for using David Kolb's theories of experiential learning, and invited her to work with LIM staff. Lennart subsequently invited her to present at a MiL Day. All LIM partners and associates participated as well in MiL Days, where we all met and shared stories of our practice. Two of my doctoral advisees were interested in researching Action Reflection Learning. Judy O'Neil interviewed MiL and LIM staff, along with other Action Learning practitioners in England for her dissertation (O'Neil, 1999). Sharon Lamm (2000) interviewed managers who went through five of the global programs run by Volvo Truck Corporation, MiL and LIM (see chapter 3).

Many features of Action Reflection Learning differentiate it from other forms of Action Learning. The name, Action Reflection Learning™, was coined and trademarked separately by LIM in the United States and MiL in the European Union. The differences between Action Reflection Learning and Action Learning do not lie in particular tools or techniques, many of which are shared by both version of this practice,



but in an underlying spirit or philosophy. As a result, this philosophy is not easy to capture in a slogan or phrase, but it is clearly evident in conversations with those who practice it and in their writing (Rohlin, Nilsson, and Skärvard, 1994).

Action Reflection Learning is one of several approaches that fall under the umbrella name of Action Learning. Action Learning has been implemented in different ways, but the heart of it is learning through work on real-life problems. The project is used as a laboratory for learning – about the task itself, about the way in which people work together in groups to solve problems, and about one’s own self as a problem-solver. Action Learning is task-oriented in that it centers on a problem, but it is also person-oriented in that people are helped to gain insight into themselves as individuals and group members.

All forms of Action Learning are built around question-driven learning from and through experience. But Action Reflection Learning advocates believe that, to get maximum benefit, learning coaches should actively help people reflect on what they do in order to draw out a deeper set of lessons learned. And, often, learning coaches find ways to startle their set members into deep questioning and reflection about why they see things the way they do. One way of understanding these differences is to look at four “schools” that Judy O’Neil (1999) identified when she began her dissertation research on the nature and practice of learning coaches.

### *The “Scientific” School*

O’Neil classifies programs that follow the work of Reg Revans (1978, 1980, 1982) as “scientific” in that they are rooted in the scientific method. Revans, originally a physicist, is often called the “father” of Action Learning, although various advocates have independently developed other approaches. Revans designed his management development programs around three interactive systems: system *alpha*, or the use of information for designing objectives; system *beta*, or the use of information for achieving objectives; and system *gamma*, or the use of information for adapting to experience and change. Revans noted there is an objective reality to a problem, but that it is filtered through the manager’s unique personality, previous practical experience, and a predisposing mental set.

Action Reflection Learning is like the “scientific” school in a number of ways. In both schools, participants work on real problems that they personally choose and own. In both schools, action to try out solutions is important, as is the use of questions to drive learning. However, Revans’ followers emphasize the ability of peers to learn on their own without help from learning coaches. Learning coaches are central to Action Reflection Learning. Revans believes that learning coaches inevitably either “teach” too much or otherwise induce dependence. However, MiL experimented with greater or less reliance on learning coaches and found that participants got more out of the experience when good learning coaches helped participants step outside of their taken-for-granted reality. Coaches “hold the space” for learning (although some coaches can inappropriately “steal the learning” from participants) by insisting on time for reflection, helping to design activities, and asking challenging questions that are easier for outsiders to raise.

Another difference between Action Reflection Learning and the “scientific” school – involves whether individual or group projects are used in the program. Individual projects are often used in the “scientific” school. When a single individual owns and works on his/her problem, peer groups are formed and members share the time among their projects. They work through alternate cycles of problem definition and experimentation with solutions to their challenge. In the ARL approach, the team as a whole work on one problem whose owner is often elsewhere in the organization. Revans decries this as a consulting model, yet the fact that members need to learn how to consult with a person outside of the team is often one of the reasons why organizations choose this approach to Action Learning. Both models, of course, have their merits and MiL is also working with individual projects – as a supplement or even as the main organizing principle.

### *The “Experiential” and “Critical Reflection” Schools*

Action Reflection Learning sometimes shares characteristics with what O’Neil calls the “experiential” school and sometimes with the “critical reflection” school of Action Learning.

A key theorist often drawn upon in the “experiential” school is David Kolb (1984), who proposed a model for how people learn from experience that is based on reflection and on action.<sup>5</sup> Practitioners in this school use questions to drive learning, but they also place more emphasis on personal development and on strategies for reflection in order to draw out lessons learned. LIM and MiL incorporate many such reflection and experiential learning strategies into their programs.

In the “critical reflection” school, there is an added dimension of ongoing challenge to personal and organizational assumptions. Judy named this school after the work of Jack Mezirow (1991), who writes about critical reflection as a way of transforming fundamental ways of understanding one’s world. Through critical reflection,

“people recognize that their perceptions are filtered through uncritically accepted views, beliefs, attitudes, and feelings inherited from their own family, school, and society. Such flawed perceptions often distort one’s understanding of problems and situations.” (Yorks, O’Neil, and Marsick, 1999, p. 10).

Chris Arygris and Don Schön (1974, 1978) describe this kind of deep critique of assumptions and beliefs as double-loop learning. And Peter Senge (1990) refers to such learning as examining mental models. My early research into MiL programs showed that the nurturing of critical reflection is a significant characteristic of MiL programs. ARL Inquiry™ shows this is a characteristic on which LIM has continued to build.

### *The “Tacit” School*

O’Neil identified a fourth “tacit” school of Action Learning which grew especially out of work done at GE and spearheaded by Noel Tichy (Noel and Charan, 1988). Examples of this school can also be found in Boshyk (2000). Judy called this school “tacit” because programs expect that learning will happen, without a lot of intervention, when managers are put into new, unfamiliar situations. Tacit learning occurs incidentally without conscious attention. As a result, it is hard to know if managers understand enough about their experience to adapt insights to future challenges (Marsick and Watkins, 1990). The “tacit” school is a highly popular approach to Action Learning in the United States. O’Neil describes this school as follows:

“In the tacit school, the program focuses primarily on the project itself. Practitioners believe that competencies ... are developed in action. The foundation for skills development is laid in the early phase of the program through structured team building and other designed activities in conjunction with information transfer and content learning. This occurs before the action learning teams start gathering data and working on their problems. The teams have logistical support from program administrators, but they do not have learning coaches. Teams do not engage in designed reflection while solving the problem. Accordingly, the tacit school more closely resembles a traditional executive development program linked to a subsequent action project.” (Yorks, O’Neil, and Marsick, 1999, pp. 12-13)

Clearly, Action Reflection Learning is least like the “tacit” school in that its designers and coaches take a strong interventionist role but not to lecture too much on existing knowledge. Instead, these coaches ask challenging questions and otherwise spur managers to develop their own way of understanding best practices in leadership. Managers typically receive a blank journal and are asked to note down, reflect on, and develop ideas about their own views of effective leadership practices. The title page of this blank book, since the early 1980s, illustrates how different Action Reflection Learning is from the tacit school. The book is called “Leadership and Management – Experience-based Theories and Practices” by (the participant’s name). This is followed by the sentence:

“No experience is more important than your own and no theory is more effective than the one you, yourself, create – as long as you reflect upon your experience and are open to continuous revision of your theories in dialogue with others.”

While some activities are designed and led by MiL or LIM staff, they are much more likely to be experiential activities, a journey (literal or otherwise), role plays, artistic explorations, or other mechanisms to enable a manager to reach inside himself or herself to draw out inner capabilities. Action Reflection Learning is designed to create a discomfort zone, whereas designers in the “tacit” school often tailor learning to an organization’s culture so that the program will not jar customary expectations and ways of working.

## CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

Action Reflection Learning has loomed ever larger in importance in my life since that first meeting in Lars's apartment. Its philosophy and principles often underlie my teaching, my scholarship, my research, and my consulting practice. I have added other "action technologies" (Brooks and Watkins, 1994) to my repertoire, for example, Action Science, Action Research, and Action Inquiry. But I have only grown fonder of the basic tools and strategies that I have helped to describe, shape and use through my practice.

I believe that Action Learning or Action Reflection Learning is a way of thinking about effective learning from experience. But there are many different ways to implement the program. What is important for me is that learners are supported in taking on increasing control for the goals and means by which they learn; that they are helped to learn through asking good, challenging questions<sup>6</sup>; that space is made for learning (typically, but not solely, through reflection); and that learners are appropriately challenged and supported to move enough beyond their comfort zone so that they can consider and try out new ways of thinking, acting, feeling, and being.

The "match" among objectives, organizational culture, and design in Action Learning is critical, as Yorks, O'Neil and I (1999) argue. We identify questions that people and organizations might use to decide which approach to program design is the best fit with the organization's focus and readiness for systemic change. We suggest that the further one moves along a continuum – from "tacit" to "scientific" to "experiential" to "critically reflective" – the more "noise" is kicked up in the organization. Advocates and internal consultants should be able to assess the amount of noise a program could generate and the degree to which such noise is warranted and desired.

Finally, Action Reflection Learning is quite compatible with trends I see today in leadership development, for example:

- Learning is increasingly integrated with work – through learning forums and other "laboratory activities" that bring people together around real challenges to share information, generate new ideas, and find solutions to complex problems.

- Leaders are asked to look inside themselves to set a vision and articulate values that motivate and empower employees, and that are fine tuned through dialogue and conversation with many people throughout the organization.
- Leaders are asked to surface and negotiate conflict among views and practices that inevitably arise when trying to align people around the pull of a future goal by meshing individual visions with goals of the larger system.
- Leaders must model learning – in part that comes by themselves asking good questions (of themselves and others) and by understanding how to combine experimentation with learning from these experiences.
- Leaders must demonstrate and use what is often called emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995) – which can be cultivated in part through self-insight and through honing intuition and judgment by reflection on one’s actions.
- Leaders must be organizational change artists who understand how change in one part of the organization affects other parts of the culture and system.

Action Reflection Learning can develop capabilities, such as those above, that can help leaders to transform themselves and their organizations – whether or not that was an original intention of the design. At the same time, there are no guarantees that changes in individual capacity of managers will automatically translate into learning and change at the organizational level. For that to happen, organizations have to engage in systemic changes and be willing to change their organizational culture.<sup>7</sup>

### *Notes*

<sup>1</sup> By the time that LIM incorporated, core founding members included Lars, Ernie, myself, Tony Pearson and Lennart Rohlin. Early “associates” included Judy O’Neil, Bob Kolodny, and Sue Lotz. Eventually, many early group members, including Lars and myself, left LIM to do other things. Of this founding group, Ernie and Tony remain LIM partners. LIM added new partners and associates, and changed its headquarters

from the New Jersey / New York area to Florida. Judy O'Neil and I joined Karen Watkins to form Partners for the Learning Organization.

<sup>2</sup> A report of these findings is available in Marsick and Watkins (1990).

<sup>3</sup> At various points in time, members of ARL™ Inquiry have included (in alphabetical order): Robert Kolodny, Sharon Lamm, Victoria J. Marsick, Judy O'Neil, Glenn Nilson, and Lyle Yorks.

<sup>4</sup> More can be read about these studies in the following conference papers and publications: ARL™ Inquiry, 1995a, 1995b, 1996, and 1997; Yorks, O'Neil, Marsick, Nilson and Kolodny, 1996; Yorks, O'Neil, Marsick, Lamm, Kolodny, and Nilson, 1998; and Yorks, O'Neil, and Marsick (Eds.), 1999.

<sup>5</sup> See also Bernice McCarthy, 1987.

<sup>6</sup> Some books on designing and implementing Action Learning give good advice on how questions can be used to drive learning. See for example, McGill and Beaty, 1992; and Weinstein, 1995. An especially good resource for understanding the power and practice of questions is Goldberg, 1998.

<sup>7</sup> See also Watkins and Marsick, 1993; and Marsick and Watkins, 1999.

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