

My introduction to action learning

In the last century I was a Director of a small computer Company and my colleagues felt I was in need of some management training. I was not sure what they were driving at, but it could have been something to do with communication skills. Anyway, I found myself on a five and a half day course at Henley Management College.

There were twenty five of us, split into three roughly equal groups. Each group had a facilitator, and one of them was Jean Lawrence, although not in my group. During the week each group worked individually for most of the time, and with the other two groups for the rest of the time. Several curious things happened. Each group bonded closely, but when we were all together it never quite worked. Some people became quite perturbed that the 'management training' had yet to start, and one person got so stressed with the interpersonal exchanges that he left the course midweek. Yet other people were convinced that the facilitators had engineered the outcomes of various activities and mini projects. In other words, twenty five people selected more or less at random would always come to the same decisions.

I learnt a useful lesson that it could not be assumed that a group of managers understood the same thing by the same word. In one exercise each group had to elect two people to observe one other group, and to receive two people from the third group. Our group's visitors wanted to participate not observe, and complained afterwards that we were being difficult in refusing this.

I found the week at Henley a powerful experience - my colleagues noticed a difference in me when I returned.

Jean Lawrence suggested that some people on the course might like to join an action learning set. Surprisingly to me there was little interest, but I joined a set that lasted for a year and a half. We met at the Victoria & Albert Museum courtesy of a set member, about three to four times a year. Other members came from the BBC Overseas Service and a bulk liquid transportation firm. A constant theme of the meetings was career development in a changing environment.

Knowing that I was considering moving to part-time work, Jean button-holed me for the IFAL Treasurer's job in 1997; and so for the last eight years I have tried to control the purse strings with the able assistance of Pam Wright at Lancaster. Now Chris Yates has taken on the task and I wish him well.

Roger Reissner



Editor's note: The Executive wishes to thank Roger for his many years of dedicated work as Treasurer of IFAL-UK and wish him a long and happy retirement.

Tribute to Professor John Morris

John Morris, who promoted action learning for a lifetime in management higher education, died on 5th February 2005 in Leeds General Infirmary. Ten days earlier, cancer of the oesophagus had been diagnosed. A year before his death at 81, John was still working actively with managers in action learning sets as Visiting Professor at The Revans Centre for Action Learning and Research at Salford University. The first professor in Britain of management development, he steadfastly believed throughout his long career in the power of managers' working and learning together outside the walls of academia. From the outset of his role as a founding academic of the Manchester Business School in the 1960s, he was keen to learn as much as he could from practising managers and then tell others what he had learned.

John Morris will always be remembered among the international community of action learning as a warm and creative colleague. The giant leap he pioneered at the young MBS in post-experience learning (of real 'life projects' called Joint Development Activities) became a small step in the 1980s to action learning. Then followed many hours with Reg Revans, these two mighty intellects in later years engaging philosophy, psychology, physics, astronomy – the universe – all in an atmosphere of gentle friendship and loving regard. The core to learning for both these men of gifted intelligence was living and working in fellowship, following the truth of personal and collective experience.

What intrigued John continuously was how challenged academia remained by the possibility that awareness of what could be learned might come *after* the experience of what was being managed – as distinct from that awareness having to precede the managing, as was required in the classroom. For both Reg and John, managing could never be divorced from learning, nor learning separated from managing. John in particular thought too much was made of the opposition of theory to practice: learning to him was robust and relevant when it enabled a switch from experience to awareness quickly, and a sure way to keep the awareness high was to keep the requirement full that managers – as Reg would put it – took real action on real problems in real time.

No contribution from John Morris could ever be confined – for those who knew him well – to simple headings of subjects or projects. He could be counted upon to contribute across a range of issues as confidante and collaborator in pursuit of progress rather than with a specific mission. Above all, he will be recalled as a friend to whom we could turn because he believed in people and brought the best out of them: the dozens of doctoral students he supervised (some now professors), the hundreds of practising managers with whom he met dutifully in action learning sets, the countless colleagues, some of whom he would engage by telephone for hours at a time!

It was his practice in his last years, as he came to embrace a spiritual community, to attribute insights to grace, and it was thoroughly in keeping with John Morris that he should seek and find that belovedness at the end of his life which he so deserved. We shall remember him as positively encouraging, as ever willing to share thoughts – and as making his transition smiling.

Pete Mann

Information overload

Information overload has become a feature of our everyday life, be it as consumers, citizens, managers or learners. The sheer amount of choice we have – on the internet, in the Sunday papers, in bookstores – rather than giving a sense of exhilaration frequently create a sensation of drowning. At an open space conference I attended in 1996 I was unexpectedly given the opportunity to explore the notion of ‘permission to not know’. I say unexpectedly, for I had no idea what open space conferencing was about. But within a few hours it dawned on me that, unlike other conferences, open space conferencing was not a venue for telling others what you know, and how successful you have been; it is a place to explore what you are working on, thinking about, struggling with. It offers you a space – gives you permission to not know. This notion of ‘not knowing’ felt very liberating, and I wondered if many people, worried by information overload, had ever considered the option of ‘not knowing’.

Exploring the notion

In a session of an hour and a half, I and others explored this idea of ‘permission to not know’. Our discussion ranged over several important questions, without necessarily providing answers. Some of the questions we pondered were:

- What do we need to know, as opposed to what do we want to know?
- Who needs/wants to know, and what is the range of needing. Do some people have a greater need than others?
- Is information the same as knowledge? Is there a continuum: beginning with data (which are all around us) to information (something we identify as having value to us) to knowledge (which relates directly to our needs and wants) and so on to understanding and learning.
- What are we missing by all this knowing? Are we missing something intuitive?
- What would happen if we did not have the information or knowledge?

We talked about the education system and our society which creates in us a need to know, and to become experts, keeping up with the latest idea or event in our field. This puts pressure on us, and makes us feel guilty or fearful if we do not know. The guilt is often because we’re not living up to standards and expectations. The fears are well

founded in the current marketplace of disappearing jobs. He or she who knows will be rewarded and kept in a job! But we also wondered if our need to know was a form of security blanket. Is gathering information a substitute for thinking?

Since most of us at the conference were in the field of management development, we discussed the latest books and articles, and felt that a great deal of what was being published was focused on fads, or was a recycling of old ideas in new guises. I, and others, admitted to not keeping up with all this reading, to having made a conscious decision not to read it all, and to having to learn to say at times ‘I don’t know...’ or ‘no, I haven’t read that...’ and feel comfortable saying so. Someone quoted Eysenck’s statement that if we wait long enough, the idea will go away.

Developing the ideas.

Following the conference, I captured the issues raised for a forthcoming workshop I was running for some engineers on ‘coping with information overload’. I had had no plans to discuss how technology – which, having given us the ability to circulate ever more information, is responsible for creating information overload – is also being applied to solve the problem in its own way. But since none of us is capable of absorbing all the information we have access to, let alone processing it into knowledge and using it, my interest was in exploring other non-technical ways of tackling it, and one in particular: permission to not know.

I searched for relevant and thought-provoking (for me, anyway!) quotations on this theme. I found several, and two that I particularly liked. One was a short quotation from Cicero: ‘There are three sorts of people: those who know, those who don’t know, and those who know where to look’.



The other is a Zen story. An intellectual pays a visit to a Zen master, to test his theories. The master serves tea. As he pours the tea slowly from the urn, the cup fills to the brim. The master seems not to have noticed, continues pouring, and tea spills everywhere. ‘Stop, stop’, cries the guest. ‘It’s full, no more will go in.’ The master stops and says. ‘Yes. A

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cup is like the mind. When it is already full, no more will go in. If we are going to learn anything, we must first empty our minds.' The visitor realises that he has come with a mind too full to learn anything new.

I thus focussed my energy on looking at the elements that go to make up what has been called the 'socio-technical' system. My ideas fell into five categories:

1. distinguishing between knowledge and information;
2. exploring the work culture;
3. examining tracking stages;
4. building support and collaboration;
5. focussing on the individual

Distinguishing between knowledge and information

I quickly realised that information and knowledge were not the same. Neither was the concept of knowledge straightforward. What do we mean by data, information, knowledge? I drew up the schema shown in Table 1. What interested me was: could this schema help to identify where stress arises? Might it also help to examine Cicero's notion of 'knowing where to look'?

Exploring the work culture

I am sure the culture of the workplace is a major reason why people feel overloaded with information and/or knowledge. They may feel they have to keep up to date for their professional integrity. The culture in the group may be competitive and individualistic. In the current atmosphere of fear over redundancies, information and knowledge may become a powerful individual weapon. On the other hand, asking the right questions may be even more powerful.

So, what is the name of the 'game' being played, and what are the rules? What is it alright to do or say, and what is taboo? If the game is competitive and individualistic, there is likely to be little sharing, either of knowledge or of feelings. If we are expected to be self-sufficient, we may not ask. If we are meant to be experts, questioning may be viewed as a sign of unacceptable ignorance. We may not be able to admit to feeling overloaded. We bear it in silence, stay on later at work, take work home, our evenings and weekends get whittled away, and we feel stressed.



At what point can we say 'I don't know'? There has to come a point, realistically, when we cannot know everything there is to know about our subject, no matter how much we narrow it down. The very technology that is giving us access to so much information is also creating the condition where we can no longer know everything. Is it not more important to know where and how to search it out? What or who is stopping us from saying 'I don't know, but I will find out'?

Is knowledge valued?

This is not a rhetorical question. It springs from listening to people who point out that increasingly thinking and reading, even talking to colleagues is something they have no time for, or is considered to be 'unproductive'. Action is more highly valued and rewarded. So, thinking and reading occur at times when doing is no longer possible - after office hours, when people are already tired, when thinking and assimilating are more difficult. If acquiring knowledge is valued, why is it relegated to out-of-work hours? Is permission to not know creeping in through the back door?

Examining the tracking stages

Distilling out knowledge from information is one key issue on which technology has many means of focussing. Pursuing my notion of permission to not know, however, I was more interested in working out how to create 'human' tracking systems for those who would not know, and who would need to know where to look. Maybe they need to look no further than within themselves?

The value of asking questions... and thinking

Knowing where to look means not only knowing literally where the information or knowledge is, and how to retrieve it. It means knowing what questions to explore. Each discipline will have a set of questions which will be more or less helpful. They will probably include among them: What are we trying to create, to achieve? What do we want to be happening? Who do we want this? Is something else more relevant? Has anyone else already tackled this? Can we talk to them? What steps do we need to take to achieve it? What else will be affected by what we are proposing?

In the British culture, asking questions is often seen as a sign of ignorance and stupidity. In the USA, by

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contrast, asking questions is usually taken to mean 'I need some clarification', 'Could you tell me more' or 'I'd like to check that I've understood you'. So we need to create a climate where asking questions is not a sign of stupidity but is an inquisitive intellectual exploration; where the person being asked sees questions as an opportunity to think and respond, rather than as a threat or inquisition; and where the possible arrogant responses of those being asked are replaced by a genuine agreement to share.

Maybe those who do not know – who are not crammed full of information – can play a useful role by being better able to focus on asking those pertinent questions? By playing the devil's advocate? Maybe both those who know and those who do not know could usefully take one step back and do more thinking even before questioning, and by delving into the crevices of their minds to discover ideas and notions that emerge only when the 'right' brain is 'silent'. Einstein, and other geniuses, comment on the value of 'daydreaming' and allowing their creativity to work for them when they are seemingly at rest.

The most important question in the end is: how, if at all, does a group learn collectively? Permission to not know does not mean creating an intellectual desert devoid of knowledge. Maybe we need to focus more on looking (in Cicero's terms) at how we evaluate and learn, rather than at how we absorb and use (see Table 1).

Building support and collaboration

It is useful – and exhilarating – to work with others to trigger off ideas and insights. We can create ways of living with 'not knowing' if we can create ways of tapping into others' knowledge through sharing and networking.

The more information there is available to us, the more selective we each have to be. And the more we make our individual, different, selections, the more different are the worlds that we each live in. This creates a paradox: that more information leads to less shared knowledge, rather than more. Perhaps this is why people talk of the need to create vehicles for sharing personal knowledge.

If permission to not know is to gain momentum, it needs a culture that permits it because there is actually some value in it; because it does not spell abandonment of professionalism, but opens the door to other, maybe more productive activities. We need to convince people that maybe cramming ourselves full of knowledge is less valuable than having the time to question what really adds value. But asking such questions requires a climate that encourages it: one where people can explore with those who do know without fear or reprimand; and where sharing rather than competitiveness becomes the rewarded norm.

Another challenge for management development is to encourage left-brain and active people to appreciate that silence and intuition have their place.

Open space conferencing could provide one powerful way for exploring now knowing, and how to know better, another way is action learning, whose philosophy and processes are focussed on asking questions, voicing uncertainties and doubts, sharing insights, experience and ideas, and collaborating through focussed 'dialogues'

(taken from 'Information overload—permission to not know?' 1996, by permission of the author: Krystyna Weinstein)

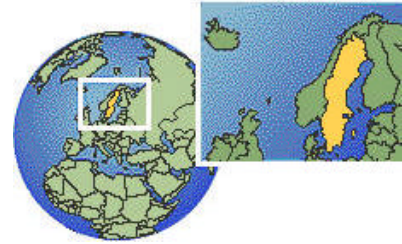
Table 1
Progress from data collection to learning

Process	Form	Nature
See	Data	Exists all round
Select	Information	Recognised, compartmentalised
Absorb	Knowledge-in-theory	Specific, memorised: knowing about
Use: apply, question, interpret	Knowledge-in-action	Focussed, understood, ie knowing why and how to
Evaluate	Learning	Recalled, reviewed, reflected on, integrated

What is happening in Borås.

Here in Borås we have started new sets with those employed in social service and middle managers in the field of elderly care.

The Municipality of Borås sponsors the project and the local government sees the project as a support of the leadership. Both the participants in the set and the set advisors work as middle managers/leaders.



Utbildningscentrum (The education centre) that I run have had a set advisor course. I know that there are different opinions about having a course but we find it useful to give the set advisors a chance to learn from our experience of the process in a set and from each other. One very important part of the course is working in sets.

The course is organised in three parts: Firstly we have one starter/'kick off' for half a day. Secondly we have a two-day session with theory and practice. Thirdly there are four half-day meetings. We have a further half-day after two months. We meet the set advisors to have some input of new knowledge and to learn from each other. At these half-day meetings we always work in sets for at least 50% of the time.

Last week we met the group of middle managers for the third time. (After the half-day and the two day session and another half-day) we asked them:

What is good about your work in the set?

The answers were as follows:

- * We respect each other
- * It's good to have the set meeting at a neutral place (the education centre/Utbildningscentrum)
- * It's nice and instructive to meet people from other parts of the municipality.
- * It's good to have the meetings more frequently in the beginning.
- * Good actions that the set participants see at the set meetings
- * I really like to listen and learn from other set members.

I really like to listen and learn from other set members

What could be better?

- * I must be better in allowing the silence.
- * I must be better in supporting the set members to ask questions.

- * It's hard to get everyone to have a dilemma/learning focus at every meeting.
- * I must be better in getting the set members into a set meeting and not a discussion group.

For those of you that have followed the work here in Borås I can tell you that some of the sets for headmasters and teachers that we started two/three years ago are still running. I have had a set with middle managers from different departments and parts of the municipality for two years now and five of a group of eight want to continue another year. The reason – well they find the work useful in their profession.

We will continue our work and evaluate this continuously. Perhaps we can tell you more about this work and give you the opportunity to meet some of the middle managers at our (AL Sweden) international conference in December 2005.



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The next Newsletter will be published in September
Please send contributions directly to Lancaster
(preferably on e-mail) to:
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Food for thought.....



Many people will walk in and out of your life. But only true friends will leave footprints in your heart. To handle yourself, use your head; to handle others, use your heart.



**Yesterday is history.
Tomorrow is mystery.
Today is a gift.**

Great minds discuss ideas; Average minds discuss events; Small minds discuss people.

Anger is only one letter short of danger. If someone betrays you once, it is his fault; if he betrays you twice, it is your fault.

Learn from the mistakes of others. You can't live long enough to make them all yourself.



Notice Board



Skill and Network Building Action Learning Workshop

Wednesday, 6th July 2005

at

Health Park Campus,
University Hospital of Wales

from 9.00am—5.00pm

with registration/facilitators briefing from 8.30am

Costs:

Existing IFAL members: £40

New members £50.00 (including 6 month's membership)

Non-members: £60.00

Your workshop leaders are:

Chris Yates and John Sweet


Bring your project, problem or other piece of work which can be presented to a set. The work should be 'meaty', be described in five minutes and contain a request for help. A single page describing you and or/your work can be put up in a 'gallery' at the beginning of the conference.

Further details and booking form from:

Pam Wright IFAL Administrator:, Dept of Management Learning,
Lancaster University, Lancaster LA1 4YT
Tel/Fax + 44(0)1524 720115 email: p.wright@lancaster.ac.uk


Notice Board

Set membership



If you want to join an existing set, find new members for your set or find a set facilitator there's a new service, SetMatch, which helps you to do just that. You place a 'request' in the monthly e-newsletter and readers can email you directly. The newsletter - and unlimited SetMatch requests - are free to registered users of the site:

www.actionlearningsets.com



Bernhard Hauser is working with virtual action learning teams (but not using web techniques for set meetings so far) and would be very interested in joining a set where this is happening.

Contact him on:
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Books....books....books

Action learning books

I expect that a number of people at the workshop on 6th July will be asking what book on action learning should I read? I do not think it is all that simple.



So I thought it would be useful to give some first impressions of a few of the books available including a recent volume "The Action Learning Handbook" by Ian McGill and Anne Brockbank. I had mixed expectations about the book, because, on the one hand it was the book action learning by Ian McGill and Liz Beaty that provided my first contact with action learning and stimulated me to find out more about it and to join IFAL. On the other hand, I found the volume "Facilitating Reflective Learning In Higher Education" to be a little disappointing, concentrating on a number of rather convoluted theories of reflection and dialogue exchange and less in the way of practical help.

So returning to the "Action Learning Handbook", interestingly, it starts with the author's experience of using action learning and in a short introductory chapter explains what action learning is. But whilst suggesting that "action learning multiplies the kind of support which a trusted friend or colleague would offer, listening without judgement and, without giving advice, helping the individual concerned to discover his or her own solution", the underlying point that it is a method of questioning does not come through sufficiently clearly until page 179, in a specific chapter on being a set member. Whilst there is mention that "attention to how the set is working and acknowledging the feelings of set members" the importance of giving it real-time within a set meeting, is again not strongly emphasised, until chapter thirteen entitled "The Process Review". And, rather than concentrate on issues of process and engage with the learning equation as in Reg Revans's original work "ABC of Action Learning", a larger chapter early on is devoted to organisational issues concerning the overall purpose and membership structure of the learning set. In it, they also present an interesting typology of action learning giving the first school as that characterised by its originator Reg Revans, a second school characterised as 'experiential' based on Kolb's ideas, where in fact the authors placed themselves and finally a third school characterised by "critical reflection" drawing on the work of Mezirow on transforming perspectives. A considerable amount of the previously published work on reflection and social context to be found in "Facilitating Reflective Learning In Higher Education" appears in the centre of the book. This is

followed by a fascinating dip into group dynamics. One concept after another is closely written and it is difficult to establish which concept has the most relevance to action learning sets. One of the problems of adopting an experiential approach to action learning is that its psychological basis aligns it more closely to models of therapy, and an attempt is made to disentangle the two at the end of the chapter. There are then, strangely at the back of the book, detailed chapters on being a presenter, a set member and facilitator. The last part of the book is entitled "Evaluating Action Learning". "The process review", is considered separately from the regular activity of a set, "where set members are asked to stand outside what they have been engaged with in order to describe and reflect upon how they have worked". It is recommended that they attempt to recall using the five dimensions of reflection, complicated constructions which are developed in the middle of the book, which involves taking on board Schon's concepts of reflection-in-action. The final chapters on evaluating action learning and ending action learning sets, deal sensitively with important issues of confidentiality, whilst making public the value and utility of action learning.

A more readable alternative to "The Action Learning Handbook" may be Christina Weinstein's "Action Learning: A Practical Guide". However, you may wish to give advice "to return to source", and fortunately, Reg Revans's "ABC of action learning" is still in print. The American text by Dilworth and Willis (2003) is perhaps one of the most recent books on Action Learning to try to keep closely to Revans's original approach, with a foreword by him.

Finally, I am sure not everyone will agree with my interpretation – I would like to see what others think!

John Sweet

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IFAL LIBRARY



The IFAL library is a unique collection of over 1000 articles and books on Action Learning. For minimal charge, the Lancaster



office will supply hard copies of the complete list of items and a short list of particularly important practice-related publications (£5) and copies of articles (£1.25). We believe that this is a valuable resource for practitioners, researchers and others interested in action learning.

Please send copies of any articles or reports on action learning you have read recently (or written yourself) for inclusion in the library.

Requests for a listing of publications and/or copies of articles should be addressed to:

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THE INTERNATIONAL FOUNDATION FOR ACTION LEARNING

THE WORK OF THE CHARITY AND THE BENEFITS OF MEMBERSHIP

The International Foundation for Action Learning is a company limited by guarantee and a registered charity, set up to promote action learning. This is a process for improving management in which people learn together by direct involvement in the identification, analysis and treatment of their own real problems and opportunities. It is a form of learning by doing.

Action learning is used in many industries, businesses and services in this and other countries. Examples are:

1. managing director groups;
2. helping the unemployed to start their own business;
3. developing skilled managers as they take on new responsibilities;
4. improving productivity in retailing and manufacturing companies;
5. bringing about operational change in large organisations;
6. improving services in health and education.

Action learning has demonstrated that it can help individuals and organisations to adapt in a fast changing world

Since 1977 when it was set up ALT/IFAL has become well-known and respected as a source of information and support for those who practice or are interested in action learning. IFAL encourages the use of action learning by:

1. Information - On request, responding to requests and promoting discussion by phone or letter.

2. Library - IFAL has a substantial library (over 1000 items) of writings about action learning, many of which are not available elsewhere. Copies of items may usually be purchased for the cost of photocopying and distribution. Some of the most useful are unpublished discussion papers.

3. Newsletter - A regular newsletter provides the opportunity for members to share their ideas and experience, it is used to spread news and views about the process of action learning and its development. It includes book reviews and reports of conferences, and promotes discussion through correspondence and articles.

4. Meetings/Conferences/Workshops - IFAL arranges meetings around the country for the purposes of exchanging information and to highlight problems in the application and use of action learning. Conferences are held regularly and occasional regional meetings provide a local forum for debate and learning.

The design of these meetings is always participative following the principle of action learning that people learn best from people who are also learning.

5. Network of individuals and organisations - Through its international membership, IFAL constructs a network of people who can support one another in their diverse experiences of action learning throughout the world in private, public and voluntary sectors.

In summary: IFAL exists to identify and encourage a network of enthusiasts who will support and develop the work of action learning worldwide. It is an educational charity and in order to do its work properly it appeals for financial and practical support from those who believe in the value of action learning

IFAL'S REGISTERED CHARITY NUMBER IS: 273242