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Introduction

The theme for this Special Issue arose from a session at the 2018 Action Learning Conference, where Sonja Antell and Ruth Cook talked about their projects focused on urgent social issues such as poverty, homelessness and food insecurity. It was reminiscent of Revans’ characterisation of action learning as *Helping Each Other to Help the Helpless* (1982, 457–492).

Revans’ ambition extended well beyond management education to the improvement of the organisations and systems that we depend on and ultimately the societies in which we live. The session came alive for me because of the focus upon social improvement, upon, if you wish, the desire to make the world a better place. Fittingly, the conference was being held in Liverpool, in the world’s 5th richest nation, where monuments to industry, empire and slavery mingle with the more recent signs of neglect and decay including homeless people on the streets.

Much of what is called action learning today is for personal and career development rather than for organisational and social improvement. This perhaps reflects an era infused by the individualistic ethos of market fundamentalism and so-called neo-liberalism (Edmonstone 2019), where the social takes a back seat to the quest for personal success.

What is social action?

There are two questions here: what do we mean by action in action learning? And, building on that, what do we mean by social action? Listening to Ruth & Sonja speak in Liverpool, it seemed obvious to me that this was social action – action to help those who suffered the deprivations of poverty or homelessness, but also to benefit the wider society. I put out the call for papers and, to judge by the enthusiastic response, seemed to catch a wave. Since then, I have been thinking more about the notion of social action, with the result that the picture has become richer and more complex, but as ever, not necessarily clearer! The following section is a summary of this thinking, to which some close colleagues made notable contributions.

Action

Action is the first requirement for action learning: it is the origin of significant learning and the outcome point of that learning. The inseparability of action and learning is...
emblematic, as in Revans’ epigrams: ‘Learning is cradled in the task’ and ‘Learning involves doing’ (2011, 3–5); a view also shared with other ‘action modalities’ (Raelin 2009) concerned with ‘actionable knowledge’ (Argyris 1993). Action can be defined as ‘someone’s doing something intentionally’, where someone is an agent or one having agency, that is, the power to act, and the something is an event, brought about by the agent’s intent (Honderich 1995: p4/5). But such definitions are slippery and rarely comprehensive. So for example, a person can be said to have done something even when doing nothing, whilst another can say that their most profound act is to change their thinking.

In editing these papers about action learning in the service of social improvement, I have urged contributors to make plain the social impact of their work. but this is not always so straightforward where outcomes might include people not doing things that they might otherwise have done or someone having a radical, but invisible thought. And yet, unlearning something, especially when it is a habit that has become dysfunctional, maybe far more effective than trying more new strategies; a transformative change of heart more powerful in its effects than any number of variations on existing themes.

But what distinguishes such an ‘action’ from ‘inaction’ (Vince 2008)? This is hard to do if it remains private to the person and it would also not meet the action learning test. However profound an internal change of heart or mind, it is not an action in these terms unless it is shared with at least one other person. Revans liked to quote the Buddha to stress our moral responsibility in this respect:

> It is better to do a little good than to write difficult books. The perfect man is nothing is he does not diffuse benefits on others, if he does not console the lonely. The way of salvation is open to all, but know that a man deceives himself if he thinks he can escape his conscience by taking refuge in a monastery. (Revans 2011, xiii)

**Free will?**

Rather like nature/nurture discussion in human development, there is a long-standing debate in the social sciences as to whether agency or structure is the most significant influence on human behaviour. In this argument, and roughly speaking, agency is the capacity of individuals to make free choices, whilst structure includes all the constraining economic, organisational and social arrangements including cultural factors such as customs, norms, ideologies and languages.1

In the social sciences, social constructionism has greatly influenced how we understand the idea of action. From this perspective, how we perceive reality depends on shared assumptions so that many of the things we take for granted and believe to be ‘true’ are actually constructed in human interaction. To illustrate this point, my colleague Chris Blantern likes to quote Richard Rorty’s epigram that even ‘Nature has no name for itself’. On the other hand, it is clear that people can sometimes rise above structural constraints to resist and deny what is held to be common sense and true. Alongside many mundane examples, Victor Frankl’s (1958) account of how he managed to make sense of, and even transcend, the hellish context of the concentration camp, inspired a generation of humanistic psychologists.

We do not live as atomised individuals, but in communities and societies. As social beings, we are both unfree and free. As persons subject to processes of acculturation
and socialisation, and the internalisation of aspects of existing institutional frameworks and current systems of beliefs, ideas and values, we are not entirely free to create the world as we might want it. However, socialisation processes can be resisted and challenged; cultures and institutions are always being questioned and internally contested, with alternative ideas and voices existing alongside the orthodoxies. So we are unfree because we are inevitably constituted by these acculturation processes, creatures of our times; but also free because old institutions and social paradigms can be broken and new ones created. For us, social beings action learning offers a means of doing this work.

**Social action**

Whilst action learning assumes the possibility of personal agency, and the ability of the learner to encourage themselves and their fellow set members into action, it also holds that both action and learning are social processes. In action learning, participants learn with and from each other and act outside the set with other people in their organisations and communities. Without this involvement of other people, the notion of action hardly makes any sense, and thus all action is social action. In arriving at this view, Revans drew on the Scottish philosopher John Macmurray (1961), who forges a position bridging the poles of the structure/agency debate.

Macmurray’s achievement was in challenging Kant’s idea of the Self as primarily a thinker or knower (an ‘egocentric position implying ‘extreme logical individualism’ 1961, Vol. 1; xvii). Instead, he asserts the prior place of action before thought: ‘action is ontologically prior, knowledge arises within action’ (1961, Vol. 1, xvi). This is a revolutionary shift which turns Descartes’ view of the thinking Self on its head and puts in its place the acting Self: ‘I do, therefore I am’. However, Macmurray goes on to argue, the very notion of Self implies an Other and we are always ‘persons in relation’: ‘We exist only as agents, and in our existence, we are parts of the world … and … in action the Self and the Other form a unity’ (1961, Vol. 1, 220). Because there is no atomistic individual self unrelated to other people, action can only take place between persons and in the interpersonal world; so, it is not so much ‘I do, therefore I am’ as ‘We do, therefore we are’.

**Action in the world**

Making plain the social impact of action learning may be difficult where individuals are engaged in invisible shifts or unlearning, but it can also be difficult because action learning happens in the contexts of organisations, communities and other social entities. Revans was very conscious of the need to extend the reach of action learning ‘outwards from set to learning community’ (2011, 71). He proposes an array of supporting structures to amplify the work of the set (‘the cutting edge of every action learning programme’ 2011, 7) including sponsors, clients, client groups and supporting assemblies as part of ‘the multiplier effect’ (2011, 12). These were the means to bring about the organisational and social transformations to which he aspired. Revans’ ‘general theory of human action … a science of praxeology.’ (1971, 58; 33–67) consists of three systems or spheres: those of personal action and learning, specific project development and the wider whole system of organisations in their environments. Although such elaborate structures are rarely present in action learning programmes these days, the multiplier is visible in a number of these
papers, as where Cathy Sharp, for example, talks about the ‘unknowable number of different people’ taking part in leadership processes (Sharp: 2).

For action learning to be deployed helpfully in social renewal and improvement, a whole systems perspective becomes essential for tackling those knotty issues where there are no simple solutions and where responses require collaboration from several agencies acting together. When I first heard Revans speak in 1976, he told us that action learning was a very simple idea, not new, but enshrined in ancient wisdom. It made sense to me, I got it, then and there. but the experience of trying to use it was anything but simple. For a start, nothing was ever incontestably ‘successful’. We ran projects and they sometimes worked and they sometimes didn’t; or some people were successful to a degree, whilst others showed little progress. Simple cause and effect are hard to trace in the dense networks of big systems and organisations; accidental ironies and unintended consequences could be counted on and successful outcomes, insofar as we could find proof of these, were too removed to be reasonably be tracked back to their origins.

In the face of these sorts of dilemmas, contradictions and intractable problems, action learning scholars have paid a good deal of attention to the idea of Critical Action Learning (CAL) (e.g. Edmonstone 2019; Pedler and Hsu 2014; Rigg and Trehan 2004; Trehan 2011; Vince 2004, 2008, 2012). CAL is a post-Revans response to the convoluted and political nature of action in complex systems of organisation. In dealing with such conundrums, unlearning may be as important as any new learning because things are as they are because of the way we have thought about and dealt with them in the past. Revans was aware of this, warning constantly of the ‘idolisation of the past’ (2011, 41–50), and even proposing, in a whimsical moment, new professorships ‘to tell us not how to acquire knowledge but how to forget it’ (1982, 527).

So, we are actors not just in personal relations but in complex systems of organising, where particular actions form part of interactions and ramifications far beyond any individual’s reach and awareness. These forms of daily interaction. or micro-organisational acts. also go to make up the character of the organisation: for example, via hierarchical acts or by generative and collaborative actions, by democratic or controlling ones, including or excluding practices and so on. Many or most of these daily acts are habitual and thoughtless, but this is the ‘life-world’ that both generates actions and conditions them. Taken collectively these daily acts sediment into the structural, informing identities, local cultures, habits of taboo and deference and of how power is created, used and abused. This is also where action learning can sometimes help through the questioning and awareness raising processes that can produce changes of heart and mind where the near-invisible processes of change can begin.

**Social justice**

What fired me up in Liverpool was not the excitement of trying to make sense of ‘social action’ (although I have enjoyed this) but because these projects aimed to help improve actual people’s lives in the places where they lived. During our email conversations, Tom Bourner asked me whether continuing to explore the possible meanings of social action was producing anything useful? As he observed, more than 2000 years after Plato defined knowledge as justified true belief, philosophers are still debating its meaning. At the same time, few of us would deny that there has been a huge increase
in useful human knowledge over these years. Perhaps a ‘good enough’ meaning of ‘social action’ would suffice: pondering its nature is all very well, but does it help bring about more social justice?

When the focus of this Special Issue became clear, a first thought was that social action was that taking place in the social sphere, by which I mean taking place in the public services, in local communities, amongst social enterprises and not-for-profit undertakings where the bottom line is social improvement, as distinct from the commercial sphere, where profit is the important consideration. Organisations in the social sphere are concerned with social justice, where the purpose of action is to address a social problem or to realise a social opportunity. Questions of social justice raise important matter of consequence from any action: who benefits and who loses?

A merit of profit as a goal is that it makes things simpler; in its absence an often competing assortment of social, economic and political values or ‘bottom lines’ appear. These often reveal themselves as dilemmas or wicked problems that are not ultimately resolvable: should a homelessness charity focus on the immediate crisis or on building accommodation? Should a Local Authority, strapped for cash, close its public libraries or cut support for local bus services? Should a National Park focus on conservation and wilding (and keep people out) or on creating facilities and attract more users?

**The papers in this special issue**

Most of the papers in this Special Issue demonstrate their awareness of questions of social justice and of the complex and multi-layered context of social action. These accounts also often bring their own definitions of social action to the party. There is a richness to the work illustrated here, both in the issues addressed and in the range of contributors and contexts. Problems tackled include the climate emergency, sustainability and the circular economy, food poverty and insecurity, homelessness, active citizenship, social entrepreneurialism, disadvantaged people and the learning of young women abducted by Boko Haram. This diversity is also reflected in the range of contributors. The researchers, learners and activists reporting their work here are from Hungary, South Africa, Australia, Poland, Canada, Nigeria, Mozambique and the UK. Together these papers are a tribute to some ‘little good’ that is being done in a world about which we hear so much that is bad. The varieties, adaptations and combinations with other approaches demonstrate a confidence in an action learning idea that is alive and evolving.

It has been difficult to decide the order in which the papers should appear. The normal division into Refereed Papers and Accounts of Practice does not work well because all contributors provide case examples of how action learning is being used in their situations. And, whilst some papers are more academic and theoretical than others, all make contributions to the understanding of the issues in their settings. The order chosen is therefore somewhat arbitrary but begins with the more academic papers and proceeds to those more focused on practice. In reading these papers, readers might like to ponder: What can we learn about action learning from applying it to social action? and also, What can we learn about social action (and social change) by applying action learning to it?

- Cathy Sharp’s *Practising change together – where nothing is clear, and everything changing* is about leadership in the complex contexts of community wellbeing and health
care in Scotland. However, this is less about individual leaders and more about collectivities facing the practical reality of how to practice change together in unstable and ambiguous environments. Illustrated by case examples from Scottish communities, leadership and social action are treated as relational and dialogical practices done by people acting together. Rather than the bounded action learning set, the preferred methodology of action inquiry enables the involvement of ‘a larger, more disparate and perhaps unknowable number of ‘unusual suspects’”.

- **Participatory action research as political education** is Éva Tessza Udvaryhelyi’s approach to working with people experiencing homelessness, housing poverty and difficulties due to physical disabilities in Budapest. A notable insight in Tessza’s paper is the view of social action as ‘anything that disrupts existing relations of power and exclusion”: an example given is a homeless person attending an interview about harassment and discrimination with the head of police. The author and her co-workers’ personal engagement and commitment to the work is very obvious throughout this paper, not least in the account of how ‘the actor is changed as she learns from the process’.

- **Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt and Lesley Wood**’s account of *The transformative potential of action learning in community-based research for social action* is illustrated with cases from South Africa and Australia. The claim here is that action learning must be developed in a systematic and educational way to enable individuals and communities to learn and develop personally whilst also engaging in social action for their particular needs and contexts. The aim of the work is for people to become both self-directed learners and activists who are able to challenge and disrupt dominant power relationships and traditional ways of conducting research.

- **Action learning & Action research to alleviate Poverty** by George Boak, Jeff Gold and Dave Devins reports on a collaborative project funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation to alleviate poverty in the Leeds City Region, UK. Action learning, action research and appreciative inquiry were used in with managers from 12 large local organisations, with the aim of identifying and spreading good practices in employment and procurement policies. The outcomes include the implementation of good practices by the participating ‘Anchor’ institutions which can have a considerable impact on poverty in their regions by virtue of their size, their spending, and the numbers they employ.

- **Annie Booth, Kyle Aben, Todd Corrigall & Barbara Otter**’s account of *Carbon Management and Community-Based Action Learning: A theory to work experience* tells the story of an undergraduate/graduate action learning initiative co-developed by the University, the Chamber of Commerce and local businesses in Northern British Columbia, Canada. Students work together with local businesses who are aware of climate change and the need for better carbon management to gain practical skills and create carbon footprint analyses. As a student notes, the experience changed the way she approaches her work: ‘Since then, I’ve changed our outreach programming to be nearly zero-waste, prioritized the use of recycled materials, and have encouraged staff participation in community initiatives like Go by Bike Week’.

- **In Using Participatory Action Learning to Empower the Active Citizenship of Young People**, Anna Jarkiewicz, of Lodz University, Poland, deploys Participatory Action Learning (PAL) to develop the active citizenship of young people in schools. Via a European educational project called Future Youth School – Forums (FYS-FORUMS), the aim is to create a model of schooling that promotes the idea of active citizenship. Outcomes
include students developing their ‘transversal’ skills, improving relationships with teachers; and changing their attitudes towards active citizenship, which is reflected in their thinking about social actions and the need to get involved in them.

- **Social Action Learning: Applicability to Comrades In Adversity in Nigeria** by Adrian Ogun, Reginald Braggs & Jeff Gold describes work to help young women students learn from their harrowing experiences of being abducted by Boko Haram in Northern Nigeria. Action learning is found to facilitate student engagement and confidence, enabling them to voice their learning concerns and to develop social and emotional learning. The authors suggest that other victims of war and social violence may benefit from these students’ learning experiences, including child soldiers, refugees, internally displaced persons and a wider community that includes the re-orientation of victims of teenage trafficking and sexual grooming.

- **Armando Ussivane and Paul Ellwood**’s title **Action Learning in the Service of Food Security and Poverty Alleviation in Mozambique** speaks for itself. Action learning is brought here to a state enterprise delivering a large food security and poverty alleviation programme in Mozambique. A wide variety of stakeholders including subsistence farmers, community leaders and international private investors were brought together in an unusually large and diverse action-learning set to tackle their apparently intractable differences in the agendas of autonomous stakeholders. In a culture that does not question seniors or confront ‘challenges’, action learning enabled stakeholder conflicts to be explored and sometimes resolved.

- **Developing the Circular Economy in Tasmania** by Genevieve Cother is an early account of a project to help Tasmanian SMEs to implement circular economy ideas and principles. Participants were offered initial seminars to raise their awareness of key concepts including resource efficiency, sustainability and environmental management before moving on into three action learning sets. Results so far show gains in resource efficiency and waste management and some radical ideas needing further work. An interesting finding of this research suggest that ‘an inaugurating theoretical framework is not required to get us moving in the right direction’, this affirming Revans’ view of the place of P in the quest for radical innovation.

- **Stephen Moss**’s **Transforming the lives of people facing severe and multiple disadvantages** tells the story of an action learning intervention to help organisations working to help people with severe and multiple disadvantages including combinations of homelessness, substance abuse, mental health, domestic violence and abuse and chronic poverty. Apart from supporting the participants with their specific organisations challenges, wider findings included: the considerable tension between implementing ‘what works’ at scale and facilitating ground-up innovation and participation in communities; better understanding by commissioners of the systems change impacts when they commission new services; and the need for enhanced system level leadership.

- **Chelsea Marshall & Ruth Cook**’s **Using action learning to tackle food insecurity in Scotland** reports on ‘A Menu for Change’ run by a collaboration of charitable organisations and three local authorities in Scotland. Action learning sets worked within this complexity of organisations in an action learning system operating at three levels: people with lived experience of food insecurity, representatives from community-level advisory groups and strategic-level groups of senior managers from the councils and third sector. This architecture brought credibility to the sets’ work and facilitated resulting actions
and recommendations. This experience confirms findings from other papers about the benefits of developing action learning systems when tackling complex social problems.

- **Developing empowered and connected leaders in the social sector: The Rank Foundation’s engagement with Action Learning** by Sam Anderson, Caroline Broadhurst, Siobhan Edwards & Michelle Smith describes action learning sets being used to help increase the impact of charities and social enterprises. Two case examples illustrates how the sets can help to connect, sustain and support the social action responses of the local organisations involved: one highlights the importance of diversity and set compositions which reflect the variety by sector, community, age, gender, and sexual orientation; the second explores how set processes help participants to reflect on which actions are most congruent with their values and then support their implementation.

- **Drop-in Action Learning** by Paul Levy & David Knowles outlines the DIAL project where more than 300 people from small and micro-businesses have attended the sessions over the last five years. Based at Brighton (UK), which has a high proportion of entrepreneurs and small businesses, DIAL has focused on helping start-ups to launch successfully, and pre-startups to progress towards the startup. Being community-based means that this business development is also a form of local, social action. This paper examines the effectiveness and potential of DIAL as a new form of action learning including the specific challenges and advantages of the drop-in element and the particular benefits of non-formal meeting spaces such as cafes and pubs.

**Note**

1. Free will versus determinism is a very old and circular philosophical argument which always reminds me of the Monty Python sketch where the Pythons trek to Paris to see Jean-Paul Sartre. On encountering Mrs. J P Sartre, in a headscarf washing the front steps, they ask if her husband is free. Taking the fag from her lower lip, Mrs. Sartre replies: ‘I don’t know dearie, he’s been trying to decide that for the last 40 years’.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

**Notes on contributor**

Mike Pedler is Emeritus Professor at Henley Business School, University of Reading. He is founding editor of the Journal: *Action Learning: Research and Practice* and co-founder of the Centre for Action Learning Facilitation (www.c-alf.org). He works and writes on action learning, self-development, leadership development and the learning organisation.

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