

Creating Opportunities for Reflection in Action Learning: Nine Important Avenues

Robert L. Dilworth

ABSTRACT

Reflection, especially critical reflection, requires deep connection with the inner self. This can be difficult to achieve after long periods of blockage caused by the repetitiveness and intensity of daily events. To achieve connection with your deeper self requires a quietness of mind, self-honesty, and at least brief escapes from what can be the unsystematic clutter of our lives. It can only be brought about by practice and a sincere desire to know ourselves and our potentialities. This is the territory that Reginald W. Revans of England refers to as System Gamma--how we change and the organization we are with can change.

The Basics of Action Learning

This article is not designed to provide an encompassing overview of action learning. Its purpose is to expose an often neglected part of action learning to some deep scrutiny, namely the reflective component that Revans saw as such an essential complement to action. In fact, the learning flows from the reflective part of action learning more than the action component. The action component gives us the ammunition for reflective examination, learning and change.

In order to create some common planking under the subject, I will reiterate some of the more basic principles that undergird action learning. Action learning can come in many configurations. However, the presence of the following characteristics are what separate action learning from other modalities, some of which may at times be inaccurately labeled action learning.

1. It is always a real problem that the action learning set or individual set members are dealing with. In some cases a set will address a common problem. In other cases, the individual team members may bring to the set problems from their own workplace. In either case, the standard is the same. The problems must be real, meaning unsolved and of considerable significance. Revans argued for problems that can be so daunting that they appear insoluble.

2. The perfect situation in the view of Revans is to be confronted by a real problem with which you are unfamiliar, and to have to solve it in an unfamiliar setting (Revans, 1983, pp. 21-22). To that I add that it can be instructive to be asked to engage in action learning with set

members that you either do not know or have had only minimal contact with before. This adds a third dimension of unfamiliarity.

While meaningful learning can occur in settings that are familiar, while dealing with problems with which you are somewhat familiar, it is in the unfamiliar setting and confrontation with an unfamiliar problem that the learning can prove to be greatest. This can seem counterintuitive to those with limited experience with action learning. Several questions can result. "Why would you want to place people outside the bounds of their knowledge and familiarity?" "Why train people for one thing if you are then going to ask them to solve problems that they have not been trained to solve?" The answer is that you want the person outside of their comfort zone and placed in a situation where they must ask fresh questions and even challenge their own long held assumptions about what should be true.

3. An action learning set should have no more than four to eight members. Four to Five seems ideal.

4. All members of an action learning set are equals. There is no designated leader. Set members share the leadership role. The set operates by consensus.

5. Learning (L) = Programmed Instruction (P) + Questioning Insight (Q). Revans made it clear in this "Learning Equation" (Revans, 1983, p. 11) that you need both ingredients for learning, but he also strongly believed that the process needs to begin with questioning insight (the "Q" factor), the here, the now and what you sense may occur, as opposed to beginning with an examination of past

knowledge and results (the "P" factor). When you begin with questioning insight, you can find that some of the existing "P" is of little value, and there may be new "P" that needs to be developed.

6. A facilitator (also referred to as Set Adviser or Learning Coach) is almost always present in action learning. When a facilitator is involved, the role can differ widely. Some believe in the omnipresence of the facilitator when the set meets, believing that the facilitator needs to be there to make sure that reflection occurs and that important learning opportunities are not overlooked. Revans takes a different view, and one that closely aligns with what this author believes. Revans holds that the set can do its own best facilitation. Therefore, the facilitator involvement is best limited to setting up the process properly, jump starting the work of the set (without excessive "P"), and then fading back. During the process of action learning, the facilitator serves as a resource and promotes the learning process. The facilitator only intervenes in a limited way, letting the set chart its own course, including the interpretation and capture of its own learning. The facilitator does not attend all set meetings, and may only be present for a portion of other meetings.

The view that the facilitator should not be omnipresent gets strong support from adult learning theory, where the goal is fostering independence, not reinforcing dependence (e.g., a facilitator or teacher who will tell you what to do). The learning comes out of the action learning experience, not the "fount of knowledge" of some supernumerary, who may have views that are far off center with learner needs. The participants decide what structure they need to use and the milestones to be pursued in accomplishing the work of the set. While the facilitator will assign the overall deadline, and point out some intermediate markers that need to be honored, it is up to the set to manage its own effort.

There can be more controversy around the role of a facilitator than any other area related to action learning. Some adamantly hold that the facilitator is the center of the process, with "absolute authority" over the action learning set. Others, myself included, believe that the learner is at the center of the process, and that to have a facilitator regularly intervene during the activities of a set only serves to dilute the learning that would otherwise occur. It can also become extremely irritating to the learners. I have seen instances when the members of a set asked the facilitator to leave.

7. As indicated at the outset, action must be balanced by reflection. It is the reflective component that generates the depth of learning. Some of it is reflection-in-action as you move along in your project effort. We do this daily in our lives. There is also "reflection on reflection-in-action", which inherently calls for looking back over the various reflective moments when the actions were taking place and examining them for patterns. This is greatly facilitated by the maintenance of a learning log.

The Nature of Reflection

If you ask someone to define reflection, you are liable to receive widely varied responses. In the simplest form, mention may be made of stopping to think, a momentary pause in the activities tied to living (e.g., stopping briefly to reflect on what is needed on entering a grocery store). When it comes to reflecting on your life and critical decisions that need to be made, it becomes much more difficult.

For some, stopping to reflect on their existence can seem too painful. It can bring to mind memories of failure or life tragedies. I had a student about four years ago who told me that she simply could not do any deep reflection. She said, "I am afraid of what I may see". Part of her memory was in effect off limits. Protection of her self-image and self-esteem required that she stay clear of certain sensitive subjects.

While there can be obvious psychological blockages to reflection, the more common reasons for finding it difficult to reflect are much more basic. First, opportunities to reflect are driven out by the frenzy of life activity and day in and day out crises. Therefore, the ability to reflect lies undeveloped, and when one attempts it, reflection can seem extremely awkward--like a right-handed person trying to sign their name using their left hand. Business executives can be especially resistant to reflection because it can seem a needless detour from current business activity.

It takes time and practice to unlock the ability to reflect. The art of critical reflection takes even longer, and some never get there. However, once the impasse is breached and reflection starts to occur naturally and routinely, the individual can feel empowered and in control of their own life. That can be a liberating experience. When the reflection pushes to the deeper levels of self, it becomes possible to jettison dysfunctional assumptions and behaviors. Deep learning can then occur. It can become transformative learning. The individual is elevated to a new plateau of self-awareness. At this point, it becomes what can be called emancipatory learning--throwing off the self-imposed, and frequently externally imposed, chains that have been constraining clear thinking and advance.

Reflection in the end is a dialogue with self. It can lead to a form of self-catharsis, where we find ourselves listening to our inner feelings. I remember a person in one of my action learning sets in 1996 in England who reached a point where she could hardly wait to get back to her room at night to reflect on events of the day and their meaning. She indicated that she found herself good company and had meaningful conversations with herself as part of the act of reflecting.

Jack Mezirow, who has written on transformative learning and reflection, says this:

Reflective learning involves assessment or reassessment of assumptions. Reflective learning becomes transformative whenever assumptions or premises are found to be distorting, inauthentic, or otherwise invalid. (1991, p.6)

In discussing "reflection and making meaning", Mezirow indicates:

Much of what we learn involves new interpretations that enable us to elaborate, further differentiate, and reinforce our long established frames of reference to create new meaning schemes. Perhaps even more central to adult learning than elaborating established meaning schemes is the process of reflecting back on prior learning to determine whether what we have learned is justified under current circumstances (Mezirow & Associates, 1990, p.5)

What this all leads back to and places in focus is the Learning Equation of Revans. Here it is the reflective process (the questioning insight, or Q) that confirms or disaffirms what is currently in the inventory (the programmed instruction, or "P") from the standpoint of true relevance to what is being dealt with first hand. What Mezirow is saying in so many words is that reflection enables you to judge the relevancy and appropriateness of prior learning to the situation that now confronts you.

Victoria Marsick anchors the concept of action learning to the process involved, including the importance of reflection:

Action learning combines individual responsibility and reflection on personal experiences with comprehensive attention to the multiple perspectives of various stakeholders within a social unit--in this case the organization. It is thus oriented to problem solving, but with a twist, since the emphasis is on helping people better understand and formulate problems through continual cycles of action (implementation of some sort) and reflection on, and in, action (Mezirow & Associates, 1990, p.43).

A final way to look at the nature of reflection is through the model developed by Chris Argyris of Harvard. He speaks about "single loop learning". This ends up being a very simplistic level of reflection, and it in no way challenges what is going on. It lives for the moment and treats situations in a one-dimensional way. It can be akin to my earlier example of deciding what to buy in a grocery store. In the corporate boardroom, it can be the safe chatter that can occur, with careful avoidance of conflict, and little hint of going after what could be the underlying roots of problems being addressed.

"Double loop learning" on the other hand carries you to a level where there is more authentic communication taking place. The reflection runs deeper and does set about rooting out the source of

problems being encountered. Argyris has pointed out that few organizations reach a high level of authenticity. Argyris also talks about "espoused theory" versus "theory in use" (Argyris, Putman & Smith, 1985).

We can say one thing (espoused theory) and then do something quite different (theory in use). In many instances in organizations, theory in use "trumps" what has been espoused. We confront this phenomenon almost every day in our most typical work environment. The espoused theory can involve broad pronouncements of change (such as the promises of a politician), thus suggesting the presence of double loop learning. The reality can play out quite differently, and be more aligned with single loop learning.

We can also see this in our personal reflection about our lives. It can be a case of self-deception, such as self-talk that promises basic changes in the way we are leading our lives, whether health, career or family related. What we then do can be quite different, and we can block an association of the two by saying either that "we tried" (such as a failed weight loss program), or by simply allowing the espoused theory and theory in use to live side by side, which can be called in psychology, cognitive dissonance (the ability to hold contrary beliefs or views simultaneously). This is an inauthenticity that can pose a major barrier to critical reflection. While this phenomenon can be rife in organizations, we have an opportunity to counter it directly at a personal level. Reflection requires that we first be honest with ourselves. This does not seem a lofty goal, and we cannot achieve honesty with others if we are not honest with ourselves. As they say, "To thyself be true!"

Gregory Bateson has pointed to what he refers to a "level three learning" (sometimes referred to as "triple loop learning"). Here the depth of reflection (truly a form of critical reflection) runs deeper still. Rather than stopping with an examination of the "why" (double loop learning), level three learning examines the "why behind the why". It is a progressive peeling back of layers of prior learning and long held assumptions, some even dating back to early childhood, to get at the underlying truth. This is where the more profound examples of personal transformation can occur.

What strikes those of us who have been deeply involved with action learning is how impactful action learning can be. I could cite many stories of individuals emerging from an action learning experience feeling liberated or transformed. Some of the excerpts from action learner reflective essays later in this article suggest the degree of impact the participant in action learning feels. In the book *Action Learning: Images and Pathways* (Dilworth & Willis, 2003), a number of examples of such transformation are highlighted. Invariably, they flow out of the depth of reflection that has occurred, and action

learning seems to be able to trigger the reflective processes better than probably any other modality.

Building in the Reflective Component

There is no one way to induce reflection in those who are not accustomed to reflection. It is best to employ multiple strategies. Here are a few that I recommend be considered.

1. Set Composition. The reflective component begins with set composition. By having a diverse make up in the set, an unfamiliarity factor becomes embedded. It necessitates dealing with other cultures, age groups, learning styles and gender. All of this can help enrich the dialogue and open up new ways of thinking and conceptualizing. There must be a cultural sensitivity in doing this. For example, it can be best to have those of equivalent age and status assigned to a set in Asia. That parity allows for equality of participation, something that might be stifled by older individuals being sprinkled in with those who are much younger.

If you believe in the importance of diversity, it also leads you to the belief that there is an advantage in having the facilitator assign people to sets, rather than having participants determine for themselves which set they will be in. When wide latitude is allowed, it invariably leads to the formation of cliques. Those who know one another cluster together. Those of the same gender or cultural identity can also cluster together. This defeats the opportunity to build in diversity. It can be as valuable to have unfamiliar associates in an action learning set, as it is to have unfamiliar problems and settings to deal with. Unfamiliarity and diversity help motivate reflection.

2. Learning Log. The maintenance of a learning log can be helpful. However, it requires disciplined attention. A common question is "What should be included?" It is certainly not a "Dear Diary" type process. One of the obstacles to getting into the flow of reflecting on what is happening is the sense of awkwardness people can feel in keeping such a log. They haven't yet found themselves to a deeper level of reflection. Therefore, it can become relegated to making entries that only outline what occurred, but without any underlying reflection on why it may be important, or what else it may suggest.

One way to overcome the initial impasse in getting started is to ask the set members to use a Critical Incident related approach to determining what they need to record. Here are some possible questions to ask, to which the individual can add his or her own.

- a. *When did I feel most engaged?*
- b. *When did I feel most distanced?*
- c. *When did I feel most puzzled?*
- d. *When did I feel most affirmed?*
- e. *What gaps in my learning did I discover, and how should I go about closing/narrowing them?*

A question can arise about when you should make entries in the log. One ideal time is following a meeting of the action learning set, but there can be other times as well. You process information between set meetings, especially when you are pursuing a difficult project to conclusion. You should make entries in your log as the spirit moves you.

Once the opening awkwardness and unfamiliarity of keeping such a log is overcome, the process can become a natural part of one's existence. This becomes true as reflection becomes more natural. To most people reflection can seem unnatural. Who has time to reflect on what is happening when they are caught up in daily events? As one becomes comfortable with reflection, they can find that they are living happier lives and are much more aware of how they need to shape their existence. They see opportunities that they did not know existed before. In some cases, it can result in a major life change. The person can also begin to see opportunities to change the organizations they are associated with.

What the learning log gives you is a record of reflection on action as events or key milestones take place. What can then turn such information into something of greater value is when you later, or at regular intervals, reflect on reflection-in-action, namely looking for patterns and drawing connections between what has occurred. Have your personal views shifted as a result of the pattern of events you see? What is the significance when you examine longitudinally what has occurred? One effective way to generate the reflection on reflection-in-action is to challenge yourself to write a personal essay, a stream of consciousness, on what the entries in the learning log seem to convey, and how you can best interpret your findings and apply them.

3. Type 2 Learning. Alan Mumford of England places, what he refers to as Type 2 learning, between the informal and accidental learning that is a part of a work routine (CCMD Report, 1994, pp. 13-14). Mumford also distinguishes between "retrospective" and "prospective" learning. What Mumford proposes has a direct connection to reflection. It can also be tied back to the learning log concept already explained, as well as the development of a personal essay on reflection-in-action.

Mumford suggests that there is value in setting a time frame for retrospection (e.g., two months). What can you learn from what has occurred during that period? This can be developed from an examination of your learning log and general reflection. Once you arrive at your findings, what is the significance of the findings if you now look at them prospectively several months into the future? In effect, what have you learned, and what is the potential for applying it as time goes on? Some very powerful learning can emerge from this kind of reflection.

4. The Way the Process is Designed and Orchestrated. While you are not setting out, if you are the facilitator, to endow the action learning set with vast quantities of "P", it is necessary to set the stage for action learning. There needs to be some understanding of the basic precepts that govern the process. Coverage of the reflective component becomes particularly important, because as already pointed out, there can be little understanding of what true reflection connotes, let alone critical reflection (the deeper level).

In my experience, the only way to get people accustomed to reflection is to encourage them to do it, explain how it can be accomplished, and set up situations that allow them to practice reflection. Some of the "avenues" that follow will address the "how to" of doing this.

The key point is that reflection must be emphasized from the very first breath of the action learning set and then reinforced as the experience progresses, but in ways that do no interfere with the operation of the set. You want a minimum of interruptions or interventions.

5. Break Space. The author has started employing what he calls "break space" to jump start the reflection process. In the Spring of 2004, it manifested itself as ten minutes at the start of each set meeting where all set members closed their eyes, remained silent, and reflected. Reflections can only really breed in silence. That is the "sunlight" that causes the reflection process to grow.

Rather predictably some saw the ten minutes of reflection as a waste, even a distracter from their project effort. This can be attributed in part to the awkwardness of being asked to reflect. Some said as much. "I really felt out of my element being asked to do this". However, most came around to welcoming these moments and incorporated them at the start of their set meetings. Others indicated that they had incorporated it into their daily lives.

Some of the break space periods I billed as simply "break space". Others became "focused break space", where I encouraged them to think about the most important event in their lives that week, what made it important, and what they might learn from it. At other times, as the pressure of what they were working on as a set began to build, I encouraged them to reflect on what was going right and why. This could serve to relieve stress, provide positive reinforcement and possibly open up opportunities to take an approach that was working in one area and try utilizing it in an area where problems were still being encountered.

6. Hybrid Sets. When there are multiple sets operating concurrently, there is a strategy that can be used to promote reflection. It uses what I refer to as "hybrid sets". I began using this approach in 2001. It was quickly adopted by Georgia State University as well.

One of the problems you have in getting action learning sets to reflect on what is occurring is the urgency of working on their project or projects. There can be a feeling that any time set aside to reflect is time not well spent. In reality, reflection can lead you to a level of understanding that can propel an initiative forward, but such opportunities can seem obscure when you are under pressure to reach a conclusion in a set period of time.

To side step such time pressure, I create hybrid sets, drawing from the regular action learning sets. In the spring of 2004, I had three regular sets operating. From these sets I created three hybrid sets. Every hybrid set contained members from each of the three regular sets. As in the case of the regular sets, diversity of set member content was emphasized in determining the set to which a person would be assigned.

The convention governing the operation was that while in the hybrid set configuration you discussed the learning taking place, not the individual projects being pursued by the regular sets. However, that was at times like trying to hold the water back behind a dike. There was a pent up desire to compare notes about projects, and there was in fact value in doing that. The set members frequently found out that the kind of concerns they were experiencing were being experienced by all the regular sets. There was something affirming about that.

As time went on the inclination to assign a great deal of emphasis to comparing notes across regular sets declined. More of the time turned to the learning, and in the view of the participants the value of the hybrid sets went up. Part of this can also be attributed to a gradual movement on the part of the participants toward greater receptivity and comfort with reflection in general.

7. Life Histories. One effective way to begin inducing reflection is the use of life histories. In action learning sets that I am involved with, it is accomplished as follows. One of the very first things set members are asked to do when the set is being formed is take time to develop a four-page, single-spaced life history. It is not to be a resume or simply a chronology of life events, but rather a narrative about their life. What was important to them? What has gone right? What has gone wrong? What do they aspire to do? There is no set format around this life history narrative. It is simply their life story. They are asked to "get in touch with themselves" in writing it, and encouraged to just let the thoughts flow.

By prior agreement with participants, life histories are cross shared among all participating in the action learning experience, including those in their regular set and members of the other regular sets. All of this is to be kept confidential within the sets of action learning participants. It helps create a sense of learning community among all sharing the action learning experience.

Action learning sets consider the life histories, as well as work histories, educational background and life experiences of their fellow set members in drawing up a profile of their set. It is a case of reflecting on who is going forward with them in the experience, and understanding what each can bring to the table in terms of skills, knowledge and abilities. One common finding among participants is that the group of learners is extremely rich in life experience, as well talents. They begin to identify with one another. Dialogue in turn opens up and deepens. There is a greater inclination to be disclosive in what they say. Thoughts and ideas flow more freely. Less is held close to the vest. Trust grows. There is more willingness to share ideas and thoughts.

Reflection is fostered in several ways out of this process. First, the act of writing the life history itself has an impact. Some participants will admit that this is their first opportunity to do such writing or reflection. They can feel ill at ease, awkward and even vulnerable. They can come away saying that they have examined their life at a greater depth than ever before, bringing away important new understandings about themselves. A second benefit is that it opens up broad dialogue in the set and promotes further self-reflection by set members. For example, they may find that others have encountered similar life problems, whether divorce, being a sole parent or job loss, but they may have handled it differently. Therefore, further reflection on their own experience occurs, as they continue to strive to make meaning.

8. Process Observation. Each set is asked to conclude each meeting with reflection on what happened during the meeting. One member of the set is to serve in a dual role for the session, participating in set activities while at the same time being observant of the behavior taking place.

The set member serving as process observer serves as a conscience to the set. Did the set follow its preset agenda? If not, why not? Did it determine what needs to take place next? Did set members treat each other with respect? Did everyone contribute? What can they collectively learn from what occurred? How does it inform them about what the set needs to do to strengthen its effectiveness? What learning opportunities need to be capitalized on?

9. Looking Inside the Dynamics of Action Learning Sets. The dynamics that are occurring within an action learning set can be less than entirely clear to those who are participating in the experience. In some cases set members can have a general appreciation for what is occurring but be reluctant to probe deeper. Therefore, there can be value in being able to look inside the team dynamics from "outside". Action learning set members can also be much more inclined to evaluate their team privately and independently than as a part of an open discussion in the set. It can be a case of not wanting to further destabilize a situation that seems unresolved or

less than completely defined, but at least reasonably contained. Therefore, to get the truth out in the open where it can be dealt with can require the synthesis of individual set member views into an integrated format that can then be subject to review by the entire set.

Since March of 2003, a survey instrument has existed that allows you to look inside the dynamics of action learning sets. Called the Action Learning Team Process Questionnaire™ (ALTPQ) and marketed by ITAP International in Princeton, New Jersey, USA, the author was the co-developer of the survey instrument. The instrument is based on a well established research base and instrumentation that is being used by a number of large organizations, including a suborganization of the United Nations.

Consisting of 31 questions, 29 of them using a Likert Scale, set members anonymously complete the questionnaire. While the results are known to consist of the aggregate results of individual set member inputs, the identity of who assigned what Likert rating or provided what comment is kept completely confidential. The facilitator does not even know the identity of who provided what input. That is only known to ITAP International in order to provide an ability to track responses in relation to multiple administrations of the instrument to the same set (i.e., Participant #1 as listed in the report is always the same person).

The results are displayed in various formats. Some of the areas that are plotted are level of trust, effectiveness of communication, extent to which work is equitably divided, extent to which leadership is equally distributed, how effective the set is in dealing with diversity, extent to which the set takes time to monitor group processes, effectiveness of the support provided by the facilitator, clarity of objectives being pursued, clarity of individual role and responsibilities, and perceived effectiveness of the set.

When the set receives the results it can be surprised by some of them. For example, it might show that half of a set assigns a high level of trust to the set, whereas the other half does not. This is obviously an issue that needs to be worked through. If one-third of a set are rather murky on the objectives being pursued, that is also a problem. A variation that can occur is when all are clear about the overall objectives being pursued, but some are unclear about their individual role and responsibilities.

How does this all relate to reflection? It very simply gets issues out on the table that would not be there otherwise, and allows them to be flushed through in depth. There is characteristically little or no animosity that results from such information being made known. What almost always transpires is an open and positive dialogue, including admission of concerns by various set members that

surfaced anonymously in the questionnaire results. Some very important and deep reflection can be an outgrowth of this process.

In addition to the Likert based questions, there is a question that asks the participant to reflect on the positive and negative things about the action learning experience. Here is a recent sampling of what the action learning participants said:

Positive:

- a. Diverse strengths and weaknesses.*
- b. Increased learning.*
- c. Real world experience*
- d. Has opened my eyes to the learning gaps that I have.*
- e. Action learning is helping me to learn more about myself and I believe it will increase my self-confidence.*
- f. Everyone is willing to help.*
- g. Allows you to think totally outside the box.*
- h. Much more fun than classroom learning.*
- i. Allows people with all experience levels to come together to develop or contribute to the success of the organization.*
- j. The learning is our own. We are able to "own" the project which will lead to increased satisfaction.*
- k. Has helped me identify other learning strengths that I have.*
- l. Helped me understand how I can work better in teams.*

Negative:

- a. The amount of work.*
- b The anxiety can sometimes slow down the learning process if it gets out of control.*
- c. Has reinforced why I did not like teamwork in the first place.*
- d. Has not helped me avoid the tendency to instant activity.*
- e. The success or failure of the project is on your shoulders alone.*
- f. I'm wondering if our suggestions will really be used [by the client].*
- g. This is a safe action learning environment, therefore some of the collaborative team effort that occurs during the project may not be the same in the real world (depending on the organization).*
- h. Many group meetings outside of class with time taken away from work, family and friends.*
- i. Sometimes it seems to take longer to accomplish things in a group when they could be done much faster on your own.*
- j. I have not yet learnt how to be confrontational in a team meeting.*

- k. Getting some to buy into action learning is sometimes difficult. How do you measure its usefulness?*
- l. If not carefully thought out, the action learning process could cause problems with learning as well as team cohesiveness.*

The Action Learning Team Process Questionnaire™ (ALTPQ) is usually administered more than once, in order to plot progress of the set. The first iteration occurs as soon as the team has developed an identity and demonstrates cohesion. The intensity of the action learning taking place (frequency and duration of meetings being one) influences the timing. If the meetings of the action learning set are widely scattered, tend to be brief, and are targeted at lesser problems or projects, the team may never reach a point where it really considers itself a team/set. The ALTPQ results will usually make this visible (e.g., trust level and communication will tend to score low). Subsequent administrations of the ALTPQ should have sufficient interval between them.

Finally, the reports should be explained to the sets, and then they should be allowed to make their own meaning from what the reports indicate. This is part of the learning, and it is also a way of further leveraging the reflection. It also reinforces to the action learning set that it is empowered.

In Their Own Words

Reflection is subtle. It occurs differently in each of us. Our brain processes can operate quite differently. Each of us has a different mosaic of genetic makeup and life experiences, and we tend to be programmed behaviorally by the cultures in which we reside (e.g., ethnic group, organization in which we work, community, church, country, family). How we are programmed can also relate to the periods in which we have lived. A person who lived through the Great Depression of the 1930's will have a different perspective than someone from Generation X. Those who lived through the Vietnam Era of the 1960's and 70's will have a different perspective than those who did not.

The best way to expose the nature of reflection, the power of action learning, and how it unfolds and comes together in action learning sets, is to turn to learner experiences. What follows are verbatim excerpts taken from reflective essays of participants in three action learning sets in the Spring of 2004.

1. My first response to the whole idea of action learning was gutwrenching fear. Fear of the unknown, to be sure. It was not that I didn't think that I could accept the challenge and be successful, but more of, how do I get my feet back under me? Where was my control in this situation? Working with a team or set didn't necessarily make you comfortable either. Working with set

members created new dynamics coming into play and the control issue was even more unclear.

2. As I reflected...at the start I was terrified of the project and action learning in general, a fear of the unknown. Having survived to the other side of the process I feel so much more capable and confident to tackle any new project I might meet in my career. It is liberating. The only other experience I can somewhat equate to this epiphany was the time I found myself diagnosed with cancer and required surgery within two weeks of diagnosis.

3. I think the biggest obstacle...was being asked to perform outside my comfort zone, my area of expertise. What I didn't realize at the start...was that action learning would make me stretch: my knowledge, my skills, and my resourcefulness, and in doing so provide me with a better understanding of myself and what I can really do when presented a problem that is outside my expertise, as the real world often requires us.

4. Action learning has been an amazing adventure, in self-discovery, self-awareness, self-preservation, and self-empowerment. I have not been untouched by my experience with action learning and I can honestly say that although there were incredibly stressful moments, there were also incredibly wonderful discoveries.

5. Discussions about differences were also a part of the hybrid group meeting. Several participants, both within and outside the hybrid group, described how the differing personalities and experiences of each team member provided balance. Each person brought different strengths to the table. For example, in talking with the hybrid group members, I noted that each group had a blend of detailed and less structured people, along with other differing qualities. These differences allowed for flexibility of leadership within the team. Individual members would play a leadership role based on the skill needed at the time. Sometimes it was so natural it was difficult to detect.

6. Writing these reflective essays is very difficult for me. My teammates have learned more about me than I would have dared share with people I have known for such a short period of time. I am excited about being able to open up. I remain cautious with whom I open up to, but I think that is normal.

7. I have always underestimated my abilities but I did not know how much until this experience. I am just realizing this because I have never been pushed to this level in an environment with such high expectations of success. My ability to adapt to situations and circumstances were tested time and time again. I am proud of the outcome.

8. I was able to acquire skills of critical insight and reflection. The interaction among individuals within the set became the driving

force of the action learning experience. We were all introduced to ideas other than our own. We were able to reflect on discussions and receive insight that might not have been discovered individually. The communication opened up complex areas for discussion. It is with effective communication that the set began to work through the complex issues. Things started to make sense.

9. It was not until the second hybrid set meeting that I realized how far I had come since the beginning of the experience. Being able to reflect with other set members not only gave me insight into projects being undertaken but also helped me realize how much personal growth I had achieved. The time spent in the hybrid sets enabled me to reflect on the learning experience and exchange project knowledge and learning experiences with persons from other sets.

10. Like most adult learners, I learn quickly if I am engaged in activities that I can apply to situations in being or situations that I may face in the future. The action learning experience enabled me to meet my learning needs.

11. We overcame our biggest fears and we are stronger both individually and collectively having lived this experience. I not only take away a plethora of knowledge and skills but also very special relationships. Only we are aware of how unsure we were with ourselves: Our fears and what we needed to do to accomplish our goals. We were partners in adversity. Through that adversity we evolved into stronger individuals.

12. When I reflect on this experience, I can't believe that this particular learning experience has taught me so much about myself. Not that I had low self-esteem before starting this project, but I will say this project has enhanced it. I have always been afraid of the unknown and tend to stick to things that are familiar since I find comfort in them. However, after completing this project I won't hesitate when asked to do assignments that are different from what I am used to. I have come to realize that even though something may sound different, that I shouldn't shy away from it. I also learned how to deal with different personalities.

13. I have learned a lot about myself through reflections on the text on action learning [Dilworth & Willis, 2003], the learning within and outside the set, and through gap analysis. I was also able to identify assumptions that I had entering the experience, which may or may not have influenced the learning gaps that I have identified.

14. Another assumption was that others would not value my ideas and opinions. It was enlightening to note that I was able to contribute successfully and comfortably within my team. The team certainly helped to foster that boost in self-esteem for me and the

knowledge that we can learn from each other in every situation in which we find ourselves.

15. Through the action learning team I was able to validate and express myself more and more openly, even though I know that others will not agree with my view. This was a learning gap that I expressed from the beginning of the experience, and I have been able to reflect and evaluate how this has affected my attitude in other areas of my life. It was interesting to see how different people dealt with team conflicts in their unique ways. It taught me how to reflect on how I have behaved and how others have perceived me when in the team. Because of the teamwork, I am more confident about working with teams and learning to deal with teams, and learning to deal with team dynamics was definitely a skill that I have added to my resume.

16. The most significant thing I learnt would be working with teams. For me, that was my major concern, having to work in such an intense setting for such a long period. Most times it is possible to avoid having to deal with team issues because one can always look forward to the end of the team effort with the knowledge that it would be over and everyone would return to their normal lives. But the difference with action learning was that it provided a safe and confrontational environment where team related issues could be dealt with effectively. It helped provide a model and served as an example of how I could and should work with teams in the future.

17. At first I did not understand the purpose of having a hybrid group in addition to our regular set, but now I realize the importance of having an opportunity to share our group's experience with other teams. For instance, it allowed me to vent and to compare notes. I liked knowing where the other groups were in their process, how they resolved conflicts and how they resolved other situations.

18. The overall action learning process is incredible to me. I am now a firm believer that you can take a small number of people and have them formulate a team and work on projects for which they have little experience. Proof of the success of action learning was everywhere.

19. Break space: I do not think that I have ever been in a group setting that utilized break space. Looking back, I see the power and importance of having something similar to a time out. I ran straight from work to the classroom and I looked forward to ten full minutes of quiet time to help me close the work day and transition to the class. Also, I value the quietness. No phone ringing, no one asking me a zillion questions, no interruptions...it was nice! On Tuesdays, break space was the first time in the day when I could actually concentrate. During break space, I would think about work related projects. Or begin to make a mental list for Wednesday. But most

times I would think about someone special or something that made me laugh or smile.

20. Personal histories: This assignment tied in some of my favorite components of learning with several of my personal interests. I am a people person. I am fascinated with getting to know new people and enjoy reading and writing. I am happy to share my life history with anyone who is interested. In my personal history, I tried to make light of the painful times; for example, my divorce, and the constant tall jokes [a woman over six feet tall], but then other times I wore my heart on my sleeve and exposed the pain. In addition, the assignment helped me to get to know my classmates. I remember being at home and had just made myself a snack and a cup of coffee. It was early Saturday morning and I looked forward to curling up in bed to read all the personal stories. That was some fantastic reading! I was impressed by the variety of writing skills. In my opinion, everyone has a story to tell, and I am all ears.

21. The Action Learning Team Process Questionnaire™ (ALTPQ). The learning coach has a strong vested interest in the action learning project and he demonstrates it in many ways. One example is the ALTPQ survey that provides him our honest opinion on the action learning process. I know that the learning coach values that input and since he receives all the data, he can get a good idea of what is going on within the groups without having to ask us directly.

22. I was puzzled at the beginning and had serious doubts about the relevance and efficacy of the action learning concept. It seemed to be too simplistic. What I didn't remember was that simplicity can be a strength. I failed to realize the power inherent in a fresh pair of eyes. It seemed ludicrous to me that people who knew nothing about a field could do a better job of problem solving than experts. I came to see, however, that it is because the action learning set knows nothing going in that they are able to escape the mental ruts of training and practice. Additionally, I failed to see the great benefit from teamwork in motivating people and sharpening their minds.

23. Personally, I think the most important requirement is the dedication of the individuals to the action learning process. Action learning sets with an earnest desire to succeed will push themselves in the right direction and learn through whatever means necessary to accomplish the task. Since action learning is in essence based on the team's own effort to find the right answer, the team's commitment to the assignment and the skills of the team members acquired along the way are more important than the intellectual training that they bring to the set in the first place.

24. I also felt engaged during the hybrid set even though I did not know the total benefit of them. In much the same way as break space, I did not fully appreciate the hybrids until the end. Learning was not just about the professor standing in front of a podium

lecturing; it was rather about the exchange of ideas and the sharing of experiences. Come to find out, there were aha's taking place all over the classroom and the hybrid sets afforded us mutual aha exchange. Never before have I had the experience to do something like this.

25. Another major lesson that I learned that I will take forward to the future is the value of teamwork. I think we all get caught up in the "I am an island" mindset and that we can go it alone in all projects. The action learning project shows us that we need collaborative effort to get a quality job done. One person's ideas are great, but when you have a group of people, not necessarily like minded, coming together to tackle a project, then anything is possible. The group experience was difficult on days and wonderful on others but when I think back about what we accomplished, I would not exchange that experience for anything.

26. Another area where I felt engaged in the learning process was when I was taking the Action Learning Team Process Questionnaire™ (ALTPQ). I feel this is a great tool to use to see how others in your team feel about the whole process and how you mesh together as a group. I enjoyed reading the results from the first survey that I participated in and I am anxious to see how the responses have changed with this last survey. I think the answers will be different since we have grown immensely as a team since the time of our last survey.

27. The following are the most salient benefits I have valued from the experience.

- a. *Determination is the backbone of success.*
- b. *Reflection on action gives more value to action--past, present and future.*
- c. *Do not take things seriously (be patient with others).*
- d. *Open dialogue and expression are critical.*
- e. *Sometimes you laugh, sometimes you cry, sometimes it rains, sometimes it pours, and then there's the sun. That's just the way life is. One of my friends says: "work like you don't need the money, dance like no one's watching you, and love like you've never been hurt".*
- f. *That's how life is and if we do not take time to relax, enjoy and value each other, reflect on our actions and seek consistent improvement, then we would not have lived at all.*
- g. *Action learning has shown me how to be better at living and loving, and I think that is the greatest value I take away from the experience.*

Summing Up

It would be difficult to come away from a review of the unvarnished comments by those who have experienced action learning without

believing that something profound happened. There are many comments about discovery of self, enhanced self-confidence, appreciation for others, and finding the value of learning from and with each other in an action learning set.

As you study the texture of the comments, you also sense the underlying reflection that took place. Where it is not expressly referenced, and it is a number of times, you feel the implicit presence of reflection. It is a driving force, some of it collective reflection by the set, but the most critical is the personal reflection that is involved.

Finally, it is clear that the learners have validated the value of the action learning process. Most came into the experience feeling somewhat befuddled, fearful and uncertain of what would take place. Some questioned the essence of action learning. As one participant said: "it seemed so simplistic". The overwhelming conclusion was that action learning worked well, even spectacularly. It clearly surpassed expectations and it was by most measures a much more powerful learning experience than that associated with a traditional classroom. In every case, the participants were jousting with major problems confronting major corporations. The problems were real, and the clients (having heard of the deliverables from earlier action learning sets) had set their own expectations very high.

The participants in the action learning experience and each of the clients came away believing that the high expectations had been met. That says a great deal.

I need to end with a cautionary note for those who are contemplating the development of an action learning program or effort. Unlike what has been portrayed here, in providing you real time imagery from the experience of three action learning sets that only concluded their effort two weeks ago at this writing, results can vary. The results are usually of a high order, but that is dependent on the prework and follow on monitorship process being done right. Having an outstanding result is not guaranteed. It takes some concerted effort and commitment to make that happen.

The team composition needs to be carefully thought through. The project must in fact be real. The action learning set must start off on the right foot, meaning the process has to be brought into place properly. As outlined in this article, my approach is to cover a good many bases early in getting the process flowing smoothly. It is NOT a traditional curriculum design. It is more of an up front orchestration by an experienced learning coach, followed by a release of the set to plow its own ground and do its own thinking. It is a case of hands off versus hands on. Traditional trainers tend to have great difficulty doing this. They can construe giving action learning sets wide

latitude to learn as relinquishing what they view as "their role", even where it leads to suppression of learning rather than its facilitation.

Top management can also be a problem. When they don't understand what is taking place or the benefits it can yield to the organization, they can block use of action learning. Top management support is necessary, but it needs to be based on understanding of the concept, not simply saying that they support what is to occur. Blind support all too often unravels.

Fortunately, more and more organizations are coming to understand that action learning can be a powerful force for individual employee development and organizational advance. Some of us believe that action learning is what can fuel the learning organization, even play a key role in knowledge management.

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About the Author

The late **Robert L. (Lex) Dilworth** was an Associate Professor Emeritus of Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, Virginia, USA. He received his doctorate from Columbia University in Adult and Continuing Education. His specialties included human resource development (HRD), action learning, and organization development (OD). He spent a number of years involved with action learning internationally, including time spent in extensive collaboration with Reg Revans and Albert Barker of England, as well as Verna Willis at Georgia State University. Before he entered his educational career, he was a Regular Army Brigadier General in the U.S. Army. His military assignments included service as The Adjutant General (TAG) of the U.S. Army.

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