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# **Developing Managers as Learners and Researchers: Using Action Learning and Action Research**

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# **Developing Managers as Learners and Researchers: Using Action Learning and Action Research**

## **Abstract**

This article takes the view that formal educational programs often miss opportunities to use the rich experiences of working managers to produce both learning and knowledge. Two alternative pedagogical approaches, action learning and action research, are proposed as contributing to management education by their respective capabilities of generating practical learning and producing actionable knowledge. These approaches are compared with one another and with conventional classroom methodology using a new framework based on voice, level, form, and time.

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It is commonly accepted that experience is the basis for knowledge. Experiencing itself is not knowledge but is a constitutive element of knowledge. Experiencing needs to be accompanied by some sort of inquiry into experience, an inquiry that seeks to frame meaning and judgments and that leads to thoughtful action (Dewey, 1938; Kolb, 1984; Flanagan, 1997; Raelin, 2000).

Managers, it is argued, learn on their feet, in the day-to-day enactment of their managerial roles (Mintzberg, 1973). This article seeks to inquire how management education programs that enroll working managers as students can effectively make use of their experiences to: a) contribute to their learning and b) to produce research in action that, in turn, can provide them and others with useful actionable knowledge. In crafting our response to this inquiry, we describe two approaches, action learning and action research, and explore how action learning accomplishes our first objective of converting experience into practical learning and how action research accomplishes our second of engaging in research on experience that can produce actionable knowledge. Action learning is a pedagogical process that involves learners working on and reflecting together on real-time problems occurring in their own work setting. Action research, meanwhile, is a research process wherein learners participate in studies both as subjects and objects with the explicit intention of bringing about change in the setting under study.

The article begins with a depiction of conventional approaches to managerial learning the results of which, it is contended, do not produce sufficient practical learning nor actionable knowledge primarily because they do not incorporate live or real-world experience into the learning process, nor can they induce sufficient reflection on that form of experience. In contrast, in the subsequent two sections, we illustrate how both action learning and action research not only make use of the experiences of managers but use these experiences to produce both practical learning and actionable knowledge. In the next section, we delve comparatively into the learning produced by these two approaches showing how they speak out of a different voice, level, form, and time, compared to conventional educational approaches. We then devote

a section to illustrate how these learning approaches produce practical learning and actionable knowledge, which, in our conclusion, we propose results from their processes being ‘parathetical’ rather than hypothetical. Their inquiry does not arise from propositions about prior and subsequent actions as much as from propositions and actions presented simultaneously.

## **HOW MANAGERS TRADITIONALLY HAVE LEARNED IN FORMAL EDUCATION**

The way most working managers have historically formally learned is through classroom education or training. Unfortunately, though the tab for executive education is staggering (upwards of \$12 billion in the U.S.), there is growing concern that we are not netting a sufficient return from this considerable investment (Fulmer and Vicere, 1996). Transfer of learning on the job, for example, has been found to be quite low; in fact, in some cases, less than 5 percent of learners claimed to have used their instruction. According to Sveiby (1997), after five days, learners remember less than a tenth of what they heard during a lecture. When activities are used involving seeing and hearing, the retention climbs to about 20 percent. However, when learners learn from doing, they remember 60 to 70 percent of what they practice.

The record in terms of outcomes from formal management education is comparable. Graduate management education, the MBA in particular, has come under increasing attack for its reliance on analytical detachment over insight, and for a curriculum that has over time become narrower, shorter-term-oriented, and more technical (Hays and Abernathy, 1980; Raelin, 1994; Mintzberg, 2004). Of course, much of graduate education is provided on a full-time basis to students who do not have the luxury of untangling a messy problem as part of their learning. As a result, they and their professors may find it more comfortable to work on technical problems that almost always afford a clear answer. Furthermore, the same lectures prepared for the full-timers, indeed the same classroom methods, are typically recycled in the part-time classes. It is

tragic that so few programs attempt to apply the real problems that managers are facing every day in their work environments to their classroom lessons. As a result, they leave students with the impression that management problems can be nestled into neat technical packages.

Management, however, is a complex practice since problems change from one setting to the next and decisions are often made with incomplete, even incoherent, information (Whitley, 1988; Bennis and O'Toole, 2005). Clearly we need a management education approach that appreciates the contextual variety in management practice and can transfer whatever is learned into actionable knowledge inside the organization.

Let's consider another principal method of developing working managers and executives, which is through experience per se, such as by rotating them through a wide range of experiences so that they can learn the broad task of managing the whole organization (Vicere, Taylor, and Freeman, 1994). In practice, managers are often given a variety of so-called "stretch" assignments to season them and to expose them to various operating areas in order to help them learn "general management" skills (Lombardo and Eichinger, 2000). Unfortunately, these assignments, though often challenging, do not necessarily come with any consistent form of mentorship, nor is the assignee given much chance to reflect with others regarding the skills presumably being learned. In other words, this "learning from experience" also tends to teach in private, reinforcing the notion that learning is done individually, not collectively, in organizations. So, the skills and knowledge they may be learning are often unconscious to them. As a result, they may not be able to bring this knowledge into public view for teaching or learning purposes (Pleasant, 1966; Polanyi, 1966; Anderson, 1990; Reber, 1993).

In addition to experience per se, classroom and training instructors can use "experiential" activities to attempt to simulate real live experience. These simulated endeavors, often referred to as experiential learning, can be quite effective in giving learners a taste for the use of concepts in action. They also subscribe to a constructivist view of learning stipulating that the purpose of

teaching is not to transmit information but to encourage knowledge formation and development (Bruning, Schraw, and Ronning, 1995). When given ample freedom to engage in self-discovery with others, learners will actively construct the necessary knowledge to make sense of their environment (Coombs and Elden, 2004). Using a consulting format, for example, students can face actual organizational problems, can contribute research as an integral part of the decision-making process, and can experience social, political, and behavioral issues within a cultural context. Once they obtain a taste of these organizational realities as a consultant, they should be better prepared to encounter and reflect critically on real problems one faces as an employee or insider.

There is, however, no substitute for engagement in the workplace where learners find that they will have to take real positions, make moral judgments, and defend them under pressure. As Brown and Duguid (1996) aptly put it, their challenge is to become a practitioner, not just to learn about practice. If a reflection opportunity is combined with the work experience, they can begin to realize the possibility of reframing experience through reformulating taken-for-granted operating assumptions. Through such a reflective process, they can use their live experience to generate practical learning and knowledge for action.

## **DEVELOPING MANAGERS' PRACTICAL KNOWLEDGE THROUGH ACTION LEARNING**

Managerial learning occurs fairly constantly in the workplace but needs to be elicited; otherwise, it risks not being applied in new settings. As pointed out earlier, the learning going on is often tacit to working managers who, unfortunately, are unable to develop a cohesive explanation of their knowledge and skill (Viljoen et al., 1990). We need a practice that can convert the tacit or

implicit learning into explicit knowledge (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1994; Raelin, 1997). This is the purpose of action learning, especially in its attempt to highlight the practical knowledge that is on the doorstep of the learner but for his/her systematic examination of it. In this way, it modifies conventional learning approaches available through classroom and training events. In the section below, we describe the action learning approach and how it can enrich practical learning.

### **Action Learning**

Action learning is an educational approach typically applied in a group setting that seeks to generate learning from human interaction arising from engagement in the solution of real-time (not simulated) work problems (Pedler, 1996; Marquardt, 1999; Raelin, 2000). In its original conceptualization, learning results from the independent contributions of programmed instruction (designated P) and spontaneous questioning (designated Q) (Revens, 1982, 1998). P constitutes information and skill derived from material formulated, digested, and presented typically through coursework. Q is knowledge and skill gained by apposite questioning, investigation, and experimentation. Most action learning theorists consider Q to be the component that produces the most behavioral change since it results from interpretations of experience and knowledge accessible to the learner. These interpretations are bolstered by feedback from mutual learners who in learning teams participate in a debriefing of the learner's workplace experiences. Q also offers the advantages of connecting with the participant's prior knowledge and practice, of stimulating growth at the participant's current stage of development, and of providing intrinsic feedback from the work itself rather than from an external authority.

In a typical action learning program, a series of presentations constituting programmed instruction might be given on a designated theory or theoretical topic. In conjunction with these presentations, managerial participants might be asked to apply their prior and new knowledge to



a real live project which is sanctioned by organizational sponsors and which has potential value not only to the participant but to the organizational unit to which the project is attached.

The project undertaken in action learning does not necessarily solve the initial problem that was presented by the sponsor. The potential solution that the individual or team comes up with may not work or may not be endorsed. Perhaps the team has come up with a solution, but one that addresses another problem. Nevertheless, action learning works if it is comprised of management participants: (1) who care about the problem, (2) who are given the authority to work on it at their own discretion even to the point of being transformed by participation in the project, and (3) who are committed to inquiring about the most fundamental assumptions behind their practices (Pedler, 1996). What is critical is that the learners confront the constraints of organizational reality, leading oftentimes to the discovery of alternative and creative means to accomplish their objectives.

Consider the case of Maggie (introduced in Raelin, 2000, p. 208), the new registrar of a museum service in a large city in the UK, and who at the time was pursuing a Master's degree by action learning at the University of Huddersfield. The museum service was composed of four separate museums plus a large art gallery. As registrar, Maggie was assigned a year-long project to upgrade the Service's collection standards in order to qualify for national registration and receive funding aid. In working through this project, Maggie exemplified how an action learning student experiences each of the aforementioned changes.

1) She became part of the problem. Maggie reported that initially she began her project more as a consultant than as a member of the staff. She realized that to be effective, she would have to adopt a role in which she would be seen more as "one of them." As she became aware of the gap that existed between herself, a motivated young woman, and the comfortable, settled, middle-aged "men with their cardigans," she began to reframe the situation. She came to think of herself as being a "learning manager" in a "non-learning organization." Thinking of herself in

these new terms considerably helped her to formulate new actions she could undertake to positively influence the organization.

2) She became transformed. As her project evolved, she began to see that she herself was using ineffectual attributions to characterize her staff. For example, through reflective dialogue in her learning team, she became aware of her observation that her colleagues were unable and unwilling to change, graphically captured in the phrase, "Old men in cardigans waiting for retirement." In her own words, Maggie noted:

Following discussion in my set [learning team], I reflected and realized I needed to look again and re-interpret my observations. I found I came to appreciate more clearly the staff's situation.

3) She promoted double-loop learning. In double-loop learning, participants seek to inquire about the most fundamental assumptions behind their very practices, even the governing values of the systems of which they are a part. One of Maggie's interventions was to initiate an extensive training program for staff, but in order to make it useful, she had to overcome a widely shared perception that training was a "waste of time." Again, through assistance from her learning team, she reformulated training as something more than teaching and instruction; it could also serve as a tool for community building, bringing together groups and individuals in the Service who had never met. Further, by rotating the training venues among the Service's different museum sites, staff could be given the chance to visit sites in the same city that until then, many had never seen. Better working relationships evolved among the staff and Maggie established vital contacts with both internal and external training providers and other stakeholders throughout the city. **Her experience, furthermore, demonstrated how action learning, especially in its reflective practice orientation, elicited practical learning for Maggie from real-time interventions in her own worksite.**

## **DEVELOPING MANAGERS' ACTIONABLE KNOWLEDGE THROUGH ACTION RESEARCH**

Managers are most interested in knowledge when it can be produced in the service of, and in the midst of, action (Peters and Robinson, 1984; Eden and Huxham, 1996). Action research intentionally merges theory with practice on the grounds that actionable knowledge can result from the interplay of knowledge and action (Argyris, Putnam and Smith, 1985). Theory can be applied directly to practice in the field using a collaborative approach combining scholars and practitioners (Raelin, 1999) and by practitioners themselves (Coghlan *et al.* 2004; Coghlan and Brannick, 2005). In the ensuing section, we describe the learning approach of action research and how it probes into organizational circumstances.

### **Action Research**

Action research has been traditionally defined as an approach to knowledge generation that is based on a collaborative problem-solving relationship between researcher and client and that aims at both solving a problem and generating new knowledge. It developed largely from the work of Kurt Lewin and his associates and involves cyclical processes of diagnosing a change situation or a problem, planning, gathering data, taking action, and then fact-finding about the results of that action in order to plan and take further action (Lewin, 1946; Peters and Robinson, 1984; Greenwood and Levin, 1998). The central tenet is that action research focuses on important social or organizational issues as they are being planned and implemented with those who experience these issues directly. Argyris, Putnam and Smith (1985) outline the main tenets of action research:

- It involves change experiments on real problems in social systems. It focuses on a particular issue or problem and seeks to provide assistance to the client system.

- It, like managerial decision making more generally, involves iterative cycles of identifying a problem, planning, acting, and evaluating.
- The intended change in an action research project typically involves re-education, a term that refers to the requirements of a critical knowledge that can change patterns of thinking and action that are presently well-established. Effective re-education depends on participation by clients in diagnosis, fact-finding, and free choice to engage in new kinds of action.
- It challenges the status quo from a participative perspective, which is congruent with the requirements of effective re-education. This may include challenging the premises of current belief systems.
- It is intended to contribute simultaneously to basic knowledge in social science, to actionable research within the affected system, and to social action in everyday life. High standards for developing theory and empirically testing propositions organized by theory are not to be sacrificed nor is the relation to practice to be lost

### **Insider Action Research**

Action research is generally presented in terms of a professional external researcher working with a client system to achieve intended outcomes (Schein, 1995; Greenwood and Levin, 1998). However, we are particularly concerned with situations where action researchers are both managerial participants in an educational program and insiders to their own organization – the client system. Hence, the focus is on the working manager who is a “complete member” of the organization and not one who joins the organization temporarily for the purpose of consultation or research. In insider action research, the researcher as a manager, who may be in any functional or staff area, is not only concerned with studying some aspect of the organization but with changing it (Coghlan, 2001; Coghlan and Brannick, 2005).

As insiders, while they are familiar with their organizational setting, managers undertaking action research have to create the space and character for their research role to emerge. They need to learn how to look at the familiar through a fresh perspective and become open to discovering what they don't see and how their perspective is grounded in their functional role or occupational sub-culture. They need to develop relationships with people with whom they did not associate previously, change the nature of pre-existing relationships with them, and become involved with the setting more broadly than they had hitherto in their functional organizational roles.

Krim (1988) provides an example of action research in his own organization that he also pursued while in graduate studies. He reports how as the initiator and coordinator, he researched the implementation of a new labor-management cooperation program based on employee participation. He outlines the context of change in a city hall power culture, and describes both the political and conflicting dynamics within that culture and the processes of his own personal learning. He describes his reflection process in terms of a pyramid of five steps: regular observation and recording on a daily and hourly basis; weekly selection and analysis of critical incidents; exploration of issues with his academic supervisor; rehearsal and role playing with his supervisor in anticipation of further critical incidents; and public testing in the real life situation. He reports how this cycle of continuous rehearsal and performance allowed him to improve his actual performance in a highly political and conflict-ridden situation. Political knowledge became a critical currency in Krim's city hall organization. However, as he points out, his understanding of the informal knowledge-based power structure was inadequate when he underestimated the connection power of one particular individual whom he tried to replace. That person was able to muster considerable support to resist Krim's efforts to replace her, leading to intense confrontational conflict. He further recounts how he was accused of spying as his research notes were pilfered from his computer and circulated among his antagonists. His note-

taking at meetings was perceived as a tactic for manipulation. His account illustrates the dynamics of doing action research in one's own organization and the learning about how to more effectively handle the dual roles of researcher and manager.

## **LEARNING OF A DIFFERENT FORM, VOICE, LEVEL, AND TIME**

In this section, we show how action learning and action research produce learning of a different kind compared to conventional education. Moreover, as two alternative practices, they can be differentiated by form, voice, level, and time.

### **Forms of Knowledge**

When we think of how managers typically learn, they pursue new knowledge in a familiar setting – the classroom – and use a form of knowledge that is also familiar to them. Having been socialized to view the classroom as the prominent locus of learning, they seek what we might call propositional knowledge, or knowledge concerned with “knowing what.” It involves placing into practice thoughtful action based on theoretical formulations (Grimmett *et al.*, 1990).

Another form is practical knowledge, which entails deliberation among competing versions of effective practice. The ensuing dialogue helps learners not just know what, but also “know how.” Using action learning as a principal vehicle, practical knowledge is mediated through peer deliberation and by the context of the actual situation at hand. Practitioners thus use “rules of thumb” about how to act in particular situations and, when consulted, can bring to bear their contextual understanding (Sanders and McCutcheon, 1986). For example, a product designer might develop practical ideas about how and when to approach her manager after realizing that a colleague used her ideas without attribution during a briefing on a new product launch.

A third form is based on dialectical knowledge, which views knowledge as emergent and potentially transformative. Practitioner understanding is often a matter of recasting or reframing conventional ways of thinking in order to generate an appreciation of any novelty in the practice situation (Grimmett *et al.*, 1990). Dialectical knowledge can be used, therefore, to transform practice by having managers attend to features of the situation that were previously ignored. It might entail reconstructing taken-for-granted assumptions that might even lead the practitioner to identify and address the social, political, and cultural conditions that constrain self-insight (Habermas, 1971). Using action research as one predominant modality, it is concerned with not just knowing what and how, but in “knowing why.” In the incident above, the discourse might turn to whether the norms of the institution require personal attribution or free exchange of intellectual property. What are the implications of these different approaches for the distribution of knowledge within the culture and the behavior of organizational members, such as the product designer?

### **Voices of Experience**

Besides forms of knowledge, there are voices through which managers can participate and inquire into their experience (Torbert, 1998, Reason and Bradbury, 2001). Through first person inquiry/practice, they can reflect on themselves, on their own values and assumptions, and on how they behave. Through second person inquiry/practice, they can engage in inquiry with others on issues of mutual concern and can work to create a community of action and inquiry. Using the second person voice, they are better prepared to manage change while in the middle of it. Through third person inquiry/practice, they can move beyond immediate first and second person audiences to the impersonal wider community and make a contribution to the body of actionable knowledge.

These three voices can shape our thinking about how managers can develop as learners and researchers. First person skills focus on the managers themselves and require a process of self-

discovery. They need to appreciate the mixture of life experiences that have led to their present way of being. They may need to find an inner purpose to guide their everyday activities or to become more aware of the gaps between intention and behavior (Raelin, 2003). Such learning-in-action can be generated through personal discipline, such as may be made available through journal keeping, but also through raw courage to examine oneself autonomously (Coghlan and Brannick, 2005; Fisher, Rooke and Torbert, 2000; Raelin, 2000; Torbert, 2004).

Second person skills focus on inquiring and working with others on issues of mutual concern. Managers need to turn to their close colleagues not just for unconditional support but for honest feedback about their personal development. They need to persistently test themselves to question whether they are behaving as they wish to behave and whether they are having the effect on others that they wish to have. Second person learning can be developed experientially from participating in action learning teams.

Third person skills, meanwhile, take the perspective of the broader picture that enable extrapolation and dissemination to an impersonal audience. They derive from a confidence that one's own experiences are worthy of examination by others in new and different contexts. They subject these experiences to inquiry and research that offer the availability to change one's own practice world as well as to change the wider community's version of reality. Action research and conventional education at times provide the opportunity for this wider voice of third person learning.

### **Levels of Reflection**

Invoking the latter two forms and voices of knowledge using action learning and action research, learners can probe to deeper levels of reflection than that available to them through such sources of knowledge as authority, trial and error, or empirical research. They may entertain levels of reflection often referred to as double-loop and triple-loop learning, both of which seek to challenge the standard meanings underlying our habitual responses (Argyris and Schon, 1974).



In double-loop learning, we challenge our assumptions sufficiently to question the transfer of learning from one context to another. In triple-loop learning, we learn about the "context of contexts" in order to challenge our premises and entire frame of reference. Within the work environment, learners can generate understanding that goes beyond the current context as they engage these deeper, more critical, levels of learning.

The deeper levels of reflection may be necessary to integrate theory with practice. In single-loop reflection, points of theory may be applied in practice but the practitioner may not have developed the skillset and personal courage to challenge inapplicable theories. Double and triple-loop reflection often lead to a reconstruction of meaning when new experiences call into question our conceptual models (Bruner, Goodnow, and Austin, 1956; Piaget, 1969). In this way, as theory provides a valuable interpretation of practice, practice itself serves to re-shape our theories.

### **Time Orientation**

Most of our attention in learning focuses on "what happened," a form of retrospective evaluation that looks back on experience as a way to study and improve it. This approach to time in learning is "there and then," in that it is concerned with assessment of what worked and what did not work as a basis for learning. It has been popularized through the technique known as "after action review" or AAR, which systematically reviews the intended practices of teams with actual results, leading to subsequent improved execution (Darling and Parry, 2001). In interpersonal contexts, retrospective assessment has come into general use through the practice of both giving and receiving feedback.

Using especially action learning methods, managers are encouraged to make more use of "here and now" assessment. Akin to Schön's (1983) "reflection-in-action," this form of contemporaneous assessment occurs in the midst of performance as one reframes unanticipated

problem situations in order to see experience differently. While engaged in experience, planned responses often don't go according to form, triggering a series of unexpected reactions. In this situation the learner often reframes the problem on-the-spot in order to release oneself as well as one's colleagues from fixed views, leading to the consideration of new approaches.

For example, rather than report in a matter-of-fact way about a case of under-supplying a retailer, a distributor brings up with his action learning team an actual predicament during which he was rebuked by a store manager for not responding to demand. The dialogue begins to examine whether the exchange allowed the principals to get the root of the problem, having to do with seasonal purchases. The distributor reveals that since he can't always control the production process, he's not in a position to react as retailers would like.

Managers as researchers are also encouraged to consider learning that can be labeled, "here and beyond," that extends learning from the present into the future, both for themselves and for other learners. As a form of anticipatory reflection, managers under these circumstances may probe to a deeper level than the prior time orientations by considering alternative goals and approaches, by positing a series of "if-then" propositions based upon new contexts, or by challenging the underlying assumptions that govern the present situation (Loughran, 1996; Raelin, 2001).

Returning to the distribution problem above, an action research team might ask what would happen if the distributor continues to short-supply the retailer? Rather than let the problem fester, might there be a way for both the distributor and retailer to affect the production system rather than continue to mire in their own local dispute?

In Table 1, our two learning approaches are differentiated – and compared to conventional education - on the basis of the three forms of knowledge, the three voices of experience, the three levels of reflection, and the three time orientations. Since there is overlap across the learning approaches, we have highlighted in italics the proposed dominant styles but

have included in regular font what we propose to be subsidiary styles. So, as one example, though we believe action learning specializes in double-loop learning, especially through its team-based reflective practices, action learning teams also focus on single-loop learning and occasionally tread into the more transformational world of triple-loop learning.

---Insert Table 1 about here ---

### **ACTION LEARNING'S AND ACTION RESEARCH'S CONTRIBUTION TO PRACTICAL LEARNING AND MORE ACTIONABLE FORMS OF KNOWLEDGE**

Based on the preceding arguments, especially the distinctions across learning approaches preferred in Table 1, we see both action learning and action research offering substantial advantages over conventional education when it comes to the application by practicing managers of practical learning and more actionable forms of knowledge. Consider the following:

1) They insist on business and organizational relevance -- Most management education is delivered using proven models, cases, and “off-the-shelf” curricula. A familiar criticism of such offerings is that though well-presented, they may not relate well to the real world. As action learning and action research programs deploy projects in the participants' own organizations, the focus is on real issues.

2) They immediately transfer learning experiences -- In conventional education, learners attend a course or workshop and then are expected to practice or put into effect the taught principles or skills as soon as they return to their job. Using distributed educational models, sessions are spaced apart; hence, time is occasionally allotted in subsequent classes to discuss the impact of any personal or managerial changes. Although this approach may address the issue of

transference, it is normally not a key component of the experience, as most courses require learners to move on in order to cover new content. In action learning and action research, however, the application of course principles and skills is fundamental to the experience since participants are expected to use them in their project work. The issue of transference is directly tackled in action learning sets and in action research project teams as participants debate their successes and disappointments in implementing theory-based ideas. Furthermore, as they encounter resistance to their plans and actions, compared to general training programs, they now have the opportunity to bring back their experiences to their colleagues for further reflection. After completing a program, participants have thus not only studied managerial theory, but have tried it out in practice and have reflected on its utility as well. The workplace is the classroom.

3) They encourage the adoption of collaborative leadership and other practical competencies -- The evolving global marketplace has become increasingly competitive and thus has accelerated the demand for agile and experienced managers. Consequently, management education programs have shifted their focus to competencies such as collaborative leadership, strategic thinking, visioning, ethical judgment, and versatility. Action learning and action research can have a positive and noticeable impact on a manager's development in such areas. In project work, for example, participants could be required to employ resources throughout the company, using all the people skills and political acuity they can muster, take the risk of making a major decision, and then present and defend that decision in a professional yet convincing manner to upper management. The leadership and behavioral strengths and weaknesses of each manager soon become apparent, providing participants with the opportunity to learn from their experience.

4) They promote continuing education -- Many managers attend courses in management education and development out of necessity or obligation. They obtain their credits or certificates and then move on to do their job perhaps slightly better prepared than they were prior to the

experience. More often than not, they are not inspired to continue learning on their own and in real time; if a deficiency arises, there's always another course. Since action learning and action research only whet managers' appetite in relevant theory, participants almost automatically seek more information as they embark on their projects. The search process becomes fundamental to learning since past experience may not suffice as a guide. It teaches a fundamental proclivity of learning-to-learn that tends not to be disregarded once the project is over.

5) They provide time for interaction -- We know that one of favorite side-benefits from management education and development is the opportunity that managers get to share experiences, trade tips, and build their networks. Yet, it is normally considered a secondary objective, not a primary goal of the course. Action learning and action research make collegial interaction and conversation a fundamental component of the experience. Managers are not only encouraged but obliged to discuss their project experiences with one another. Naturally during this time they also engage in informal networking and sharing. Oftentimes, their exchanges entail a fair amount of self-examination and candid feedback that tend to lead to more realistic self-perceptions.

6) They counter cynicism -- If educational outcomes are not valued by organizational "clients," learners may sense a disjunction between course content and everyday organizational life and become cynical about course attendance (Salaman and Butler, 1990). Although this kind of thinking can never be eradicated totally, it is less likely to arise in action learning and action research settings since managerial legwork is required to launch the program in the first place. If executive sponsors do not want certain practices performed in their organization, then they won't sanction the respective projects. However, once they endorse an effort, they tend to be prepared, if not totally accepting of, double- and triple-loop learning challenges. Hence, program participants are likely to know early on whether their learning will be considered valuable and legitimate and appropriately rewarded.

7) They encourage working with a diverse workforce -- We have heard so much about the changing demographics of the workforce. Because their opportunities to acquire sophisticated skills are sometimes limited by circumstance, language, or even bias, historically under-represented workers present a special learning challenge. Action learning and action research promote adaptive behavior as well as the more traditional technical skills, encouraging managers to face the reality of working within a diverse workgroup head-on. For example, learning teams expect members to engage in free and open exchanges leading in many instances to disclosure about feelings toward one another. It is natural in this setting to inquire about diversity in cultural viewpoints.

8) They reduce the cost of training -- Often conventional programs are held at local universities or at off-site centers and require tuition reimbursement or vendor outlays. While instructional components tied to action learning or action research may be held off-site, project and learning teams are usually assembled on-site. Facilitators and mentors can be recruited from within the company. Material costs such as books and videos tend to be modest. Although participants may spend time away from their regular jobs, they typically work on significant projects that could reap substantial benefits for the organization.

9) They promote critical reflection -- Compared to conventional education, managers need not be reliant on theorists external to their environment to guide their knowledge. In the case of action research, managerial participants begin to focus explicitly on the generation of their own knowledge. They are in a position as much to invent new practice theories as adopt those already devised. However, they need to ensure that their knowledge be dynamic and, thus, subject to critical reflection by both themselves and their immediate peers as well as by others in different settings. The latter condition suggests that practitioners become active researchers in their own right through ongoing sharing with colleagues in alternative work and professional sites. Through their second and third person inquiry, they form communities of practice through

which they can share common methods and experiences. They enact interventions that recursively generate learning for themselves, for their organizations, and for the wider community (Adler and Shani, 2001). In this way, they subject their evolving theories to constant scrutiny and revision.

## CONCLUSIONS

This paper has addressed how formal learning may be integrated with managerial practice. We have put action learning forward as an approach that begins with the task and integrates theory with action through collective reflection. Action learning, as the term suggests, is an educative process. It aims at helping managers learn through primarily second person experience. Action research aims at contributing to dialectical knowledge, especially using second and third person experience. The learning in action of managers can lead to research in action and to producing actionable knowledge.

The two learning approaches are participatory. Theorists and practitioners mutually open themselves up to an inquiry process that seeks to "unfreeze" the assumptions underlying their actions. There is considerable focus on re-education and reflection. Working managers using these approaches will seek to improve themselves especially in regard to their human interactions and practices. They can accomplish this through impartial self-observation, critical reflection with others, and intentional, real-world action experiments that in raising consciousness tend to permit more control over one's actions.

Two pedagogical policy questions are raised by these approaches. First, if action learning and action research produce wider and deeper actionable knowledge than conventional learning, should the latter be dispensed with? Second, if these approaches work as stipulated, how might they be integrated into regular graduate degree programs?

Ultimately, the first question raised here leads to the second. We are not espousing an elimination of conventional learning since its introduction to conceptual reasoning and its provision of a safe harbor for study are often preparatory to exposure to the inconstant world of the workplace. It is natural to start the development of sound and critical reasoning by focusing on one's own analysis of a situation, bringing to bear one's conscientious application of ideas to solve problems, and thinking through what went right or wrong in the past rather than what is going on now or in the future. There may be a need for sufficient enlightenment to distill knowledge from experience prior to taking a transformative stance that may require one to scrutinize other's and one's own privileged status. However, in due course, we would like our students to think and engage with content on their own rather than have it transmitted from an expert's mind to theirs. We would like students to find knowledge within a context and use that knowledge to change the context rather than rely exclusively and retrospectively on classroom learning.

Bringing action learning and action research into the curriculum is, fortunately, not only advised; it is being done increasingly as part of a many graduate programs around the world. There are, however, only a few programs that focus on these approaches as their explicit content. For example, the Graduate College of Management at Southern Cross University in Australia offers a Ph.D. (Action Research) Program, tailored to the needs of managers who use action research methodology to create new knowledge while addressing real problems in real time within their own organizations. The American University and NTL Institute for Applied Behavioral Science offer a Master of Science in Organization Development that enables students to acquire concepts while simultaneously building their capacity to diagnose, facilitate, and intervene in their own system on a real-time basis. The University of Bath in England sponsors a postgraduate program leading to a diploma, masters, and doctorate in Action Research. Normally pursued on a part-time basis, the program helps students as practitioners develop the



skills of reflective practice as well as develop a culture of inquiry as part of their work life. In addition to these programs, there is a growing movement toward establishing executive doctorates that, rather than merely add to the body of theory in management, are designed to produce and then apply theory into practice. Recent volumes, such as Adler et al. (2004) and Coghlan et al. (2004), present examples of the work of executives who confronted real-time issues in their organizations by means of action-oriented research and thereby contributed to critical organizational outcomes.

Most practitioner-centered masters and doctorate degrees offer their disciplinary content *by* action learning or action research rather than *on* action learning or action research. This is because the approach is one of discovery in which unlike conventional doctorates that start with what is known, practitioner-centered research based on action learning or action research starts with what is *not* known (Bourner and Simpson, 2005). It entails a process of praxis, that is, experimentation in a practice field that gives rise to knowledge through systematic means of inquiry. In the world of action learning and action research, the faculty member's role is paradoxically to step back from the center and serve as a facilitator of the student's self-learning and self-discovery (Hunt and Weintraub, 2004). As Dehler (forthcoming) suggests, the point of the learning in this setting is to prepare students for informed action in their work rather than a passing grade in their course. To do so, students typically will join the course as a cohort, using each other as a sounding board on their learning goals, and will typically work on a change project of direct relevance to the organization and for which they have some level of responsibility. Through the course, they develop the skill of reflection-in-action from reflection-on-action.

Our learning approaches are concerned with interventions in action that are not only useful to the participating organization, but are meaningful and valuable to interested members of a research community (Eden and Huxham, 1996). So, they purposely engage learners and

participants in both the inquiry and its context so as to incorporate critical subjectivity. Their reports of outcomes are thought to have reliability and validity because the data are rooted in real action, in circumstances that really matter to them (Pettigrew, 1990; Eden and Huxham, 1996). In Argyris and Schön's terms (1974), researchers and facilitators working in the practice field are more able to **summon participants' and their own** "theories in use," rather than **just** their "espoused theories." The inquiry process is thus not hypothetical, arising from a hunch or premise about prior or subsequent action, as it is "parathetical," arising from proposition and action presented alongside one another (Raelin, 1999). Developing managers as learners and researchers contributes to the development of actionable knowledge for communities of practice both here and now and beyond.

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Table 1

Summary of Learning Approaches by Forms of Knowledge,  
Voices of Experience, Levels of Reflection, and Time Orientation

	<b>Conventional Education</b>	<b>Action Learning</b>	<b>Action Research</b>
<b>Forms of Knowledge</b>	<i>Propositional</i>	<i>Practical Dialectical Propositional</i>	<i>Dialectical Practical Propositional</i>
<b>Voices of Experience</b>	<i>First Person Third person</i>	<i>Second Person First Person</i>	<i>Third Person Second Person First Person</i>
<b>Levels of Reflection</b>	<i>Single-Loop Double-Loop</i>	<i>Double-Loop Triple-Loop Single-Loop</i>	<i>Triple-Loop Double-Loop Single-Loop</i>
<b>Time Orientation</b>	<i>There and Then</i>	<i>Here and Now There and Then</i>	<i>Here and Beyond Here and Now There and Then</i>