

Mike Pedler

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## Abstract

This chapter describes the philosophy and approach of Reginald Revans (1907–2003), a UK scientist and educational innovator. It traces the influences on his thinking, from his early imbibing of Christian and Quaker traditions to the later impact of world philosophies especially including Buddhism. His contribution to our understanding of change management processes gives a central place to learning, both personal and institutional. Revans' approach emphasizes the practical and moral significance of personal involvement in action and learning, as a means of resolving the intractable social and organizational problems that we find around us. Over a long life, Revans was ceaselessly active in testing his ideas which were always in a state of emergence. He leaves a rich heritage of proposals and possibilities for present practitioners. Five of the legacies of his work are discussed in this paper: Virtual Action Learning, Critical Action Learning, The Wicked Problems of Leadership, Unlearning, and the Paradox of Innovation.

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## Keywords

Action learning • Leadership • Wicked problems • Innovation • Unlearning

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M. Pedler (✉)

Henley Business School, University of Reading and Centre for Action Learning Facilitation (CALF), Reading, UK

e-mail: [mikepedler@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:mikepedler@hotmail.co.uk)

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## Introduction

Reginald Revans (1907–2003) was successively an Olympic athlete, a nuclear physicist, an educational administrator, and one of the UK's first professors of management. He is best known as the pioneer of action learning (Revans 1982, 2011), an approach to social and organizational development through engaging people in learning from their attempts to change things. Drawing on ancient sources of wisdom and more recent forbears such as Dewey and Lewin, action learning is aimed at the improvement of human systems for the benefit of those who depend on them (1982, pp. 280–286). It is a pragmatic but moral philosophy with a strongly humanistic view of human potential that commits us, via experiential learning, to addressing the intractable problems of organizations and societies.

This chapter traces Revans' early influences and the sources of his personal and professional motivation, before summarizing his contributions to our understanding of change management and learning. After a description of his ideas and insights, the legacies of his work are discussed along with recent developments in practice.

## Influences and Motivations: Understanding the Difference Between Cleverness and Wisdom

Revans was born into Edwardian England, a short age basking in post-Victorian achievement and surety but darkened by a growing anticipation of turmoil and change. If there were war clouds over Europe, then there was also political change

afoot at home with the rise of working class awareness and the Labor movement. His early memories included meeting a delegation of seamen with his father as part of the inquiry into the sinking of the Titanic. It particularly impressed him that some of the seamen had bare feet. When he later asked his father what had been the most important lesson learned from this disaster, the reply was “What I learned from the Titanic inquiry was to discriminate between cleverness and wisdom” (Boshyk and Dilworth 2010, p. 50). Revans held this as one of the most important incidents in his life, and his father’s insight became a touchstone of action learning. (NB Detailed descriptions of Revans’ early life and influences and also of the historical development of action learning can be found in Boshyk and Dilworth 2010, especially Chaps. 2, 3, 4, and 6, which include contributions from some of his family and friends. Chapter 3: “Reg Revans: Sources of Inspiration, Practice and Theory” is especially useful.)

He was driven by strong values which included Christian and Quaker influences. In old age, he could still recite long passages from the Bible, read to him as a child by his mother. He attended Society of Friends meetings during his years at Cambridge University (1928–1935), and the Quaker influence was important in terms of his beliefs and practices. As a researcher in nuclear physics in the Cavendish Laboratory, but also a pacifist connected to the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, Revans was troubled by the military implications of the work at the Cavendish and eventually gave it up. Quaker practices can also be seen as influencing his ideas about action learning as it emerged over the next 30 or 40 years. The emphases on the fundamental equality of people, the importance of private indwelling or reflection, the centrality of inquiry, and the tradition of the “clearness committee” to help members with difficult problems and dilemmas are all visible in most current action learning practice (Dilworth and Boshyk 2010, pp. 54–59).

Yet Revans’ moral and ethical influences are not limited to Christianity and Quakerism. In making it clear that he did not see himself as the inventor of action learning, which he regarded as ancient wisdom, he drew widely from many world philosophies: from Aristotle and Sophocles to the Enlightenment philosophers and Marx and in the teachings of Confucius and the Buddha. The mature Revans was “struck by the astonishing similarity between Buddhism and action learning” (1982, p. 529) and thereafter quotes the Buddha on the causes of suffering and how they can be eased. Revans wanted to heal the split between thinking and doing that he identified as toxic in the social structures of businesses, hospitals, and universities. In presenting action and learning as enjoined with each other, he proposes both a therapeutic process to encourage people to overcome the problems that immobilize them and as a means of invigoration and renewal through grasping the opportunities and challenges of social and organizational change.

Revans carried many of these beliefs and practices into his own life. He was uninterested in money and famously willing to go anywhere to talk to anyone “for the price of the bus fare.” He lived simply and ate sparingly and did not own a car and preferred to walk, including on journeys between Manchester Airport and his Altrincham home, carrying his small suitcase. A man of great humility, always willing to listen and to learn, he was also iconoclastic, impatient, and critical of

those he saw as exploiting rather than helping their fellow humans. This put him often outside establishment institutions, sometimes made him enemies, and perhaps contributed to a lack of the wider recognition of his work.

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## Key Contributions: Putting Learning at the Heart of Managing Change

Revans' contribution to managing change through action and learning is deceptively simple and not easily encapsulated. There is no single theory, no "hierarchy" or "universal model" to convey his message. Action learning is not presented as an organizational change model but as a practice for bringing about desired changes including in oneself. What he taught is that change and learning have to be practiced and cannot be learned secondhand. In placing learning at the heart of his ideas, Revans questions the predictability and linearity of change models that follow Lewin's unfreezing – moving – refreezing perspective. He rejects as illusory the many models and recipes which propose that change can be managed successfully this way or that, whatever the context. Change is an inevitable and natural condition of human organization; the question is: will we be overwhelmed by it or can we learn our way through so as to improve things?

Revans is a radical and his writings are based upon a moral philosophy, involving:

- *Honesty about self*
- *Starting from ignorance* – from not knowing in order to find fresh questions
- *Action as imperative for learning* – not just thought
- *In a spirit of friendship*
- *For the purpose of doing good in the world*

The essential preconditions for learning are honesty with self and the admission of ignorance. Action learning is not for the resolution of *puzzles* "or difficulties from which escapes are thought to be known" but for *problems* and *opportunities* "about which no single course of action is to be justified" (Revans 2011, p. 4). If we know how to proceed, then we just follow the recipe and little new learning takes place. Action learning on the other hand does not offer recipes, but starts from the acknowledgment of being lost or stuck, and from not knowing what to do next. For the big challenges in work and life, learning starts in first being able to admit to ignorance and loss of direction.

Revans' key contributions to learning theory consist of a network of elements which are bound up with each other. As action learners start with questions based on not knowing what best to do next, I started this chapter by asking some of my practitioner and academic colleagues for their views and with their help produced the following principal elements of his theory. These are, as discussed below, as follows: Action, Learning, The Principle of the Insufficient Mandate, Problems Not Puzzles, The Risk Imperative, Questioning, Sets, and The Ambiguity of Facilitation.

## Action

There can be no learning without action, and no (sober and deliberate) action without learning

Revans used this epithet, perhaps, as a conscious alternative to Lewin's dictum "No action without research; no research without action," to emphasize the interdependence of action and learning. Learning comes about through doing and "is cradled in the task" (2011, p. 3), but equally all learning is for the sake of action. The power of action learning stems from its philosophy of action and emphasis on the practice of change; no one can say they have learned anything until they have tried to change or improve something.

## Learning

Revans used an equation to show that learning was the key to managing change:

$$L \geq C$$

holds that, in any organism, including individuals and organizations, the rate of learning has to be equal to, or greater than, the rate of change. Unless we adapt through learning, we become extinct. A colleague remembers hearing this "ecological equation" for the first time: "*It was simplicity itself – even obvious in retrospect – but it certainly made a major impact on me at the time (1970s)*" (Personal communication). Revans' second learning equation:

$$L = P + Q$$

holds that learning (L) is a combination of P, *programmed knowledge* or traditional instruction, and Q, *questioning insight*, the insight that comes from fresh questions and critical reflection. The Q factor is of particular importance because action learning is intended for work on difficult problems without known solutions.

## The Principle of Insufficient Mandate

Those unable to change themselves cannot change what goes on around them.  
(Revans 2011, p. 76)

Revans insisted that learning was always a voluntary activity. Managers and other people change their observable behavior only when they wish to; they may be "cognitively aware of the need to behave differently and yet remain determined not to do so in practice" (2011, p. 5). The *Principle of Insufficient Mandate* is another simple proposition with profound implications because it means that the starting point

for any change management is with each individual. Everyone, regardless of rank or experience, becomes responsible for their own self-development in this process. It also means that there is a direct connection between the development of people and the development of organizations and that the former is a necessary condition of the latter. Linked to this insight is another: that a person's past experience, however wide, is of limited relevance in periods of rapid change. More than this, the "idolisation of past experience" (Revans 2011, p. 42) is a potent block to new learning.

## Problems Not Puzzles

Action learning is not intended for puzzles – "difficulties from which escapes are thought to be known" – but for addressing problems or opportunities, "about which no single course of action is to be justified by any code of programmed knowledge, so that different managers, all reasonable, experienced and sober, might set out by treating them in markedly different ways" (2011, p. 4). Action learning is for intractable or novel situation where there is no single right answer. The biggest danger in such situations is to act on the basis of thinking we know what to do or to act on the advice of those who think they know, instead of starting from a process of inquiry. Revans reserved much of his scorn for experts (as distinct from expertise) who treat problems as if they were puzzles and for prescribing formulae in situations where learning is the first essential (Revans 2011, p. 8).

## The Risk Imperative

Action learning is to "attack real problems . . . or fertile opportunities" which "carry significant risk of penalty for failure" (Revans 2011, p. 6). Without this element of risk, no significant learning is likely to happen. In contrast to the emphasis on cognition in many learning theories, heart is as vital as head in Revans' thinking. His *Risk Imperative* is a recognition that people who tackle situations with no known solutions must essentially risk failure. To take risks in order to learn demands personal courage and is helped greatly by the encouragement of others, especially of fellow set members (see below).

## Questioning

The idea of setting questioning insight alongside programmed knowledge seems so obvious now, but it remains such a powerful perception about learning with peers. (Colleague – personal communication)

The importance of Q, or *questioning insight*, links to the distinction between puzzles and problems. While puzzles have "best" solutions and can be resolved by applying P with the help of experts, problems lack known answers and are best approached through the search for fresh questions. For any person, stuck with a difficulty or

dilemma, or confronted by an opportunity they cannot grasp, the questions to open up new possibilities can be, once again, surprisingly simple: “What are you trying to do? What is stopping you? What can you do about this?”; and especially in relation to organizational problems: “Who knows. . . Who cares . . . and Who can . . .” (Revans 1982, p. 715). To provoke such questioning, and to help with new lines of thinking, action learning invokes the power of the small groups of peers or Set (see below). Questioning or the Q factor also informs Revans’ broader thinking about organizational learning, which he sees as depending upon “the upward communication of doubt” (1982, pp. 280–286). In his discussions with managers, he would often restate this principle as: “*doubt ascending speeds wisdom from above*” – an aphorism that undermines the hierarchical assumptions that underpin so many change models.

## Sets

As a small group of colleagues meeting regularly over time to help each other act and learn, the set is “the cutting edge of every action learning programme” (Revans 2011, p. 7). Sets are made up of volunteers who help each other to address difficult tasks, by listening, questioning, both supporting and challenging, exploring alternatives for action, and reflecting together on the learning from these actions. The peer group of the set is a deliberate strategy to encourage us to trust our own judgments and resist putting our fates in the hands of others (including facilitators see below). As an autonomous unit, the set can also be seen in the broader context of organizational change management: it “*provides the core process. . . where change is understood in pluralistic terms rather than as the will of one or a few people; in this way action learning can ensure the consideration of many voices and a dynamic for alignment*” (Colleague – personal communication).

## The Ambiguity of Facilitation

Because action learning is about self-development (as part of social development), and because its aim is to encourage people to act on their own challenges, it is vital to avoid dependency on any external authority or expert. Facilitators can be classed as experts in this context, as unlike the set members, they do not put themselves at risk by carrying “personal responsibility for real life problems.” Revans does allow that some “supernumerary” may be needed to get action learning programs started, but he is always very wary of what he refers to as “ambiguous facilitators” (2011, p. 9).

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## New Insights: Against Facilitation for Autonomous Learning

In the professional world of management and organizational development, nothing has caused more resistance to Revans’ ideas than these strictures on facilitation. It is one of his most contentious claims and the one most often ignored in practice. Most action learning programs have facilitators, operating with varying degrees of expert

power and control. Those who find themselves in this role and who wish to follow Revans' teaching should remember his injunction that it is the action learner who is important: the facilitator is dispensable.

As a developmental innovation, action learning emerges in the late 1960s, especially through initiatives undertaken in a consortium of London hospitals (Clark 1972; Wieland and Leigh 1971; Wieland 1981) and in the UK engineering conglomerate General Electric Corporation (GEC) (Casey and Pearce 1977). Though not limited to either organization development or management education, action learning gained prominence through its opposition to expert consultancy and traditional business school practice. In 1965, Revans resigned his chair at Manchester having lost his battle to make action learning the *modus operandi* of the new Manchester Business School (MBS). The installation of the MBA as the flagship program represented a victory for the "book" culture of the traditional university over the "tool" culture of the new College of Technology, which he saw as being more appropriate for the needs of managers (1980, p. 197).

I first heard him in the 1970s when he came to address a large group of management teachers in a newly formed Polytechnic Management Centre. Revans announced that management development was a moral practice and that we teachers were responsible for developing people and seeking to influence their conduct, their direction, and their actions. Most of those present found hard to engage with this. At that time, we were busily preoccupied with teaching marketing, operations management, and strategy and finance on business management programs, yet Revans argued that, to resolve our own problems and moral dilemmas, we should consider such questions as "What is an honest man (sic)?" and "How do I become one?" (Revans 1971, p. 69). Unsurprisingly this uncompromising prophet did not take everyone with him on that day – or indeed in the 40 years since. Still today many management teachers focus their energies instead on P, "the stuff of traditional instruction" (Revans 2011, p. 3).

Revans' practice can be traced back to the 1950s when he was Director of Education for the newly established UK National Coal Board. Eschewing the standard staff management programs with their learning from experts and lecturers, he encouraged the colliery managers to research their own problems as encountered in their pits and brought them together periodically to learn with and from each other. The term action learning did not appear in his writings until 1972 when he presented it as bringing together a number of key principles. Beyond this he resisted definition, liking instead to say what action learning is *not*: "*job rotation.... project work.... case studies, business games and other simulations.... group dynamics and other task-free exercises.... business consultancy and other expert missions.... operational research, industrial engineering, work study and related subjects ... (or) ... simple common-sense*" (Revans 2011, pp. 77–93).

Action learning is part of a wider growth of interest in action approaches or modalities in management and organizational research which contrast with more positivist approaches. It can thus be seen as part of a wider family of action-based



approaches to research and learning, including action research and action science, which focus on “knowledge (as) produced in service of, and in the midst of, action” (Raelin 1999, p. 117). It has been described as an unusual “nondirective” form of action research (Clark 1972, p. 119) and is distinguished by the sovereignty it gives to the problem holders and its skepticism on the views and advice of experts of all kinds, including facilitators, academics, and professional researchers. This non-directiveness reflects Revans’ belief in self-help, and skepticism regarding experts of all kinds includes academics and other external advisers.

At the same time, it is a family of approaches in itself. Revans was a good listener and always wanted to hear what people had to say. He was impatient for change and social progress and wanted to see action following the words. His response to the stories of those he met would usually include the question: “. . . and what are you going to do about it?”

Action learning is perhaps best understood as an *ethos* rather than a single method and, while there is broad agreement on the main features of the idea, there are wide variations in its practice (Pedler et al. 2005, pp. 64–65). Partly because he resisted any single definition of action learning, including how it could be practiced, Revans’ seminal ideas have stimulated a variety of methods and approaches, some of which are discussed below in section “[Legacies and Unfinished Business: A Rich Heritage of Ideas and Provocations](#)”.

Revans welcomed these different interpretations as long as they observed his basic principles and supported the purposes of alleviating problems and improving lives. However, some practice developments in action learning since Revans are controversial in terms of his basic principles. Different practice communities have developed their own versions of action learning which can either be construed as departures from, or as developments of, “Revans Classical Principles” or the “Action Learning Gold Standard” (Willis 2004). The most obvious example is the widespread use of facilitators and even – in their strong form – action learning “coaches” (Marquardt 2004; Leonard and Marquardt 2010). Many current action learning practices regard facilitation as routine and ignore the power and sovereignty issues inherent in this stance. Some programs, such as those modeled on GE’s Workout in the USA (Dotlich and Noel 1998), have been critiqued for departing from Revans’ principles. Dixon (1997) has suggested that such designs lack key aspects of the action learning idea such as personal responsibility for action and space for reflection and are more appropriately seen as task forces or action projects. Some practitioners have argued that facilitation is necessary or appropriate to particular cultures or in working with particular forms of action learning, such as virtual action learning (VAL) and critical action learning (CAL) – discussed in section “[Legacies and Unfinished Business: A Rich Heritage of Ideas and Provocations](#).”

Revans’ writing displays a morally charged and sometimes Biblical flavor that reveals his early influences. He can be both discursive and declamatory and also dismissive. A Welsh colleague of mine, whose family background had made him a connoisseur of nonconformist thinking and preaching, used to say that Revans

reminded him of William Hazlitt, possessing the same love of words and of language filled with passion and power. This is not to everyone's taste and does not always make for accessible reading. Revans' books in fact did not sell well and are now with one exception out of print. His ideas however have spread widely through the efforts of his followers and borrowers. The ideas of action learning have had a significant effect on the practices of management, leadership, and organizational development in many different settings around the world, and Revans' words continue to offer stimulation, encouragement, and inspiration to practitioners and scholars grappling with the intractable problems of human development.

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## **Legacies and Unfinished Business: A Rich Heritage of Ideas and Provocations**

Revans left a rich heritage of ideas, provocations, and invocations. His writings and those of his successors continue to stir invention and experiment. Five of the legacies of his work are discussed below:

- Virtual Action Learning [VAL]
- Critical Action Learning (CAL)
- The Wicked Problems of Leadership
- Unlearning
- The Innovation Paradox

### **Virtual Action Learning [VAL]**

VAL or Virtual Action Learning (Dickenson et al. 2010; Caulat 2012a, b) is "action learning which takes place in a virtual environment... via a range of enabling, interactive and collaborative communication technologies" (Dickenson et al. 2010, p. 59). As a development of Revans' approach which he could not have anticipated, VAL is a recent response to the realities and requirements of dispersed organizations. It can be glimpsed here in an audio form courtesy of a colleague's recent experience:

I have been working with a German bank which acquired several other smaller banks in 2012. The Bank wants the managers to reflect on their leadership practice and to identify how they can lead remotely without having to travel every week to see their employees. First I ran a Virtual Leadership training for them, specifically tailored to their needs. Then we engaged in groups of 5 to 6 participants into Audio Action Learning sessions (3 sessions of 3 hours each). During the sessions participants share the plans that they made at the end of the training (what they wanted to do differently, what they wanted to start doing and what they wanted to stop doing) and how they are progressing on their plans as well as what they learn about themselves as "remote" leaders. We are working with 50 managers in an intensive way and with a further 100 further in a lighter way, and the changes are starting to make a difference. The Bank will make a qualitative assessment of the changes resulting from the initiative In September. The audio action learning is working well because the managers realized that the Bank is serious about the

changes – the initiative was also kicked-off with an article from the Board explaining that it was about achieving concrete results – and also because it helps them to persist in their plans and to deepen their learning as small groups.

## Critical Action Learning (CAL)

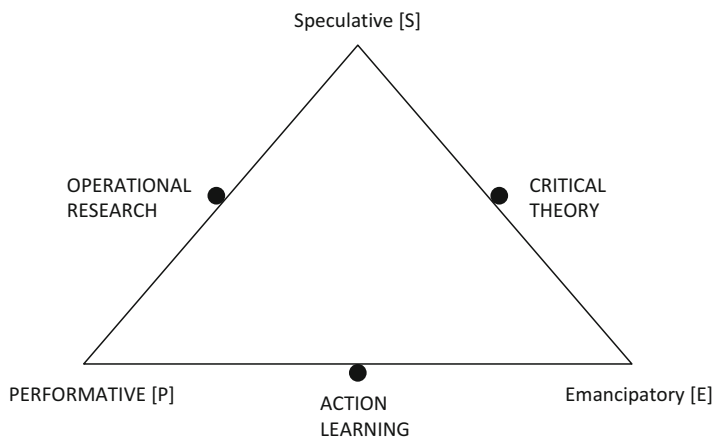
As in the VAL example above, the protean nature of action learning makes it easily adaptable to local agendas, and the downside of this is that it can be employed by those in power to preserve existing conditions rather than to change them. Critical theorists such as McLaughlin and Thorpe (1993) and Wilmott (1994, 1997) have posed this challenge to action learning; given its versatility, how can action learning avoid the trap of being “selectively adopted to maintain the status quo?” (Wilmott 1994, p. 127). CAL aims to critique social and organizational conditions and in particular to question how power is distributed and used and how this influences events. An example of the CAL approach is offered by Reynolds and Vince: “Do ideas brought into action-based discussions help to question existing practices, structures and associated power relations within the organisation?” (2004, p. 453).

CAL is perhaps the most important development in post-Revans action learning. While consistent with his view that attempts to manage organization change are always political, and that any change attempt involves uncertainty and risk, a “critical turn” focuses less on individual motivations and actions toward more relational and contextual views of power. The pervasive presence of power relations applies even to action learning sets themselves; Vince (2001, 2004, 2008) shows how political and emotional dynamics can impact on sets and produce, not the desired learning in action but instead a stultifying “learning inaction.”

In practicing CAL, a question arises: How can set members acquire the ideas that enable them to critique existing practices, structures, and associated power relations? Those seeking to practice CAL often find themselves providing inputs in one way or another so that set members can “get” the idea in order to use it; as a colleague puts it: in *“including critical reflection in our facilitation we probably do more than Revans might have suggested us to do, (but) it still is a central advice for me to leave the responsibility for solving problems in the set.”*

CAL also marks a shift in the epistemological basis of action learning. Pedler et al. (2005) use Lyotard’s “triangle” (Burgoyne 1994) to speculate on the shifts in how action learning has been interpreted (Fig. 1). In response to the question What is knowledge for?, Lyotard has proposed three types of knowledge – speculative (S), performative (P), and emancipatory (E):

Mapped against these three types of knowledge, Revans’ early work in schools, mines, factories, and hospitals was focused on resolving practical problems through scientific logic. In the 1950s and 1960s, Revans had not yet fully realized his idea of action learning, and he was in what can be called “operational research” mode seeking rational solutions to organizational problems. By the 1970s, individual learning and personal development have become central to what is now called action



**Fig. 1** Lyotard's triangle

learning, and his personal journey can thus be pictured as starting as a physicist from the top of the triangle (S), then moving to a point between P & S as he becomes concerned with practical problems, and then moving again to a point between P & E as he becomes convinced of the influence of human action and learning in the improvement of organizations and systems.

A shift to CAL requires a move toward critical and emancipatory theory, indicated by a point between S and E. The danger here is of gaining analytical power at the expense of a focus on action and reality testing; the continuing challenge for a CAL is to be critical while also being constructive. This is not easy, because CAL is achieved not just with the aid of critical theory but in drawing on the emotional power of the experience of being dominated, oppressed, or otherwise affected by power relationships. As Russ Vince comments (personal communication) *“To put this simply, I think that it is advisable in practice to balance power relations surfaced through critical reflection with acknowledgement of the emotional experience of learning together in the face of opportunities to both make and resist change. Therefore, in addition to the questions that are evoked when listening to others, I find that it is useful to connect with the emotions that are evoked in me as I listen. My assumption is that these are not usually my emotions. . . but are rather feelings being communicated by the action learning set member that he or she is barely aware of and finds difficult to own. Such feelings always have a profound effect on learning-in-action/learning inaction. Helping set members to trust that the feelings that are evoked in them as they listen to others is as important (to me) as helping them to learn how to formulate and intervene with questions.”*

This gets close to the essence of the action learning experience and illuminates the truth that while this may be a simple idea, it is a different matter to enact it. In an echo of the injunction I heard from Revans in the 1970s, Reynolds puts it thus (2011,

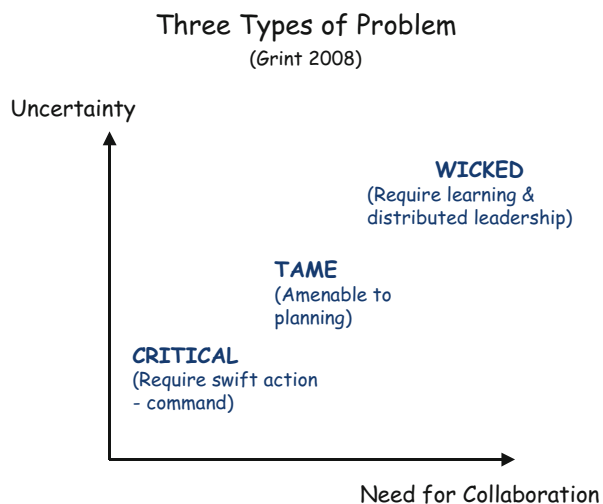
p. 12) "... .these complications of a critically reflective practice should not prevent action learning professionals applying it to their work. The impact which managers and professionals have on the workplace, working relationships and the social and physical environment demand it."

## The Wicked Problems of Leadership

CAL may be especially relevant to the wicked problems of leadership (Brook et al. 2016). First proposed by Rittel and Webber (1973) in the context of urban planning, problems of drug abuse, homelessness, or crime in a neighborhood are termed wicked because they are hard to fully describe, because actions often provoke unintended consequences due to complex interdependencies, and because they usually require complex multiagency collaborations to address them. The idea has recently been applied to leadership concerning issues such as managing change or developing innovation. Grint (2005, 2008) proposes a leadership model (Fig. 2) in which the progression from "critical" to "tame" to "wicked" problems is marked by an increase both in uncertainty about solutions and the need for collaboration:

While "critical" (used specifically by Grint as denoting a crisis) problems are the domain of *command* and "tame" problems, which can be very complex, as in timetabling a school or building a new hospital, are the natural domain of *management*, "wicked" problems defy rational analysis and are the domain of *leadership* (Grint 2008, pp. 11–18). Revans' word "intractable," used to describe the problems best addressed via action learning, conveys a similar meaning. For Revans such problems require leadership: while puzzles may yield to expertise, the task of leadership concerns the "unanswerable questions as well as the unformulated ones" (Revans 1982, p. 712).

**Fig. 2** Three types of problem



Much if not most action learning practice today takes place as part of leadership development programs (Conger and Toegel 2002, p. 332). The now widespread recognition of the uncertainty and risk of leadership decisions makes this highly appropriate. However, many leadership development programs remain largely taught, and where action learning is “tacked on” to such persuasive efforts, the warnings of the critical theorists are relevant. In such circumstances, action learning may be shaped to contribute to acculturation or “cultural doping” (Raelin 2008). In such circumstances, CAL might be of special value in managing change, although this might also be where it is least likely to be applied.

## Unlearning

Several colleagues nominated this as a key aspect of Revans’ thinking. Unlearning is implicit in Revans’ ideas about learning, and this is of particular interest in the context of the wicked problems of leadership. A colleague said he had learned especially “*the limited relevance of past experience as a guide to action in a period of change (especially accelerating change)*” whilst another reflected on how important it was for undergraduates to unlearn what they had been taught: “*I am stunned in every semester how surprising this is for many students, who so far successfully have passed their school and Bachelor classes thinking the learning process means to be able to reproduce theories from their textbooks.*”

Revans’ emphasis on learning as a voluntary activity implies the possibilities for not learning. This can be because learning is painfully elusive, and also where it is doggedly resisted: “there are also those who *soberly and deliberately refuse to learn*” (2011, p. 60 original italics). Learning in adults is “more likely to follow on the re-interpretation of past experiences than the acquisition of fresh knowledge” (2011, p. 6), but the “idolisation of past experience” (2011, p. 42) can hinder this reconfiguration, resulting in stuckness, avoidance, and “learning inaction” (Vince 2008). Revans stresses the need to start from ignorance and not knowing; the position from which questions may be asked. It also explains why he is so critical of misplaced expertise and the dangers of expert approaches whereby intractable problems are turned into puzzles with solutions.

Managing change and innovation depend upon escapes from old mindsets, and action learning, and CAL in particular, can provide helpful contexts for unlearning. Awareness of not knowing also opens up possibilities of nonaction – of attending, noticing, and being present without the compulsion to act. Wicked problems may often include elements of self-causation (Brook et al. 2016), and in these situations where knowledge is insecure and the consequences of actions unpredictable, the decision not to act, especially in previous and predictable ways, might be a good idea. It is not possible to know in advance what new possibilities might attend the refraining from habitual actions. By asking different questions so as to inquire into the unknown, deciding not to act maintains an openness to the emergence of possibilities not yet apparent (Hsu 2013; Antonacopolou 2009).

## The Innovation Paradox

Unlearning thus has a pivotal role in creating opportunities for new thinking. Innovation is at the heart of Revans' thinking, manifest in his proposal of the need for "fresh questions" to match or surpass the pace of environmental change. The pursuit of innovation in mature economies is a current example of a widespread and wicked problem. The UK, for example, has a long-standing problem of low productivity, and while innovation accounts for up to 70% of economic growth, only a "relatively small proportion of firms (are) engaged in innovative activity" (BIS 2014, p. 3). The traditional way to resolve this problem is "creative destruction," the process described by Schumpeter in 1942 whereby new firms with new methods, markets, and ways of doing things drive out and destroy the old. But this is very destructive, not only of inefficient firms but of lives, communities, and economies. Moreover, the pattern of innovation in mature economies in recent years has led to lower levels of wages, either due to market forces or as a "result of employers deliberately shaping the innovative process in ways which enhance their wellbeing at the expense of workers" (Stiglitz and Greenwald 2014, p. 164). "Creative destruction" also neglects the role of government policy and the place of learning, which have a key role in increasing productivity in modern knowledge-based economies: "creating a learning society should be one of the major objectives of economic policy" (Stiglitz and Greenwald 2014, p. 6).

Revans' thinking could prove helpful to those seeking to resolve the problem of innovation through policy and learning rather than through destruction and coercion. His "Innovation Paradox" (1971, p. 75) recognizes the difficulties of overcoming inertia and resistance, especially from top managements (2011, pp. 63–62): "any new or specialist solution . . . has to be integrated back into the total system of the enterprise" (1971, p. 90). This points to the gap between invention and implementation, which is not a puzzle to be addressed through "best practice" initiatives, because "Every effort to resolve this innovation paradox must be almost entirely situational" (1971, p. 90). Knowledge can be shared and technical advances replicated, but changes in practices and ways of working have to be uniquely realized in situ. In the context of managerial and organizational routines, this views Innovation as a practice not as an event. As Bourner puts it, the question is not whether an innovation works, but, in practice, "who can work it?" (2011, p. 122).

To address the Innovation Paradox, Revans proposes a "praxaeology" or general theory of human action with three overlapping systems of organizational decision, project cycles, and individual learning (1971, pp. 33–67). Success in integrating individual with organizational learning depends greatly on the quality of management and leadership practices, including good communication, and top management support (1971, p. 176). More recent writers using Revans' ideas to address the innovation problem include Kuhn and Marsick (2005), Wyton and Payne (2014), and Olssen et al. (2010), who argue that action learning can increase "innovation capability" in an organization.

However, the problem remains intractable. Recent reliance on organizational learning and knowledge creation to fuel innovation ignores the “institutional inhibitors,” because it involves risk it is often a low priority for both line and senior managements (Kalling 2007). Another recent case bears this out; Dovey and Rembach (2015) detail the resistances experienced to an action learning initiative in an Australian university, noting that “innovation is a notoriously difficult strategy to execute. Given its intention to transform the status quo, it is not surprising that in most organizations the rhetoric of innovation substitutes for its practice” (2015, p. 280). This is a very common representation of the innovation paradox: people encouraged to come up with new ideas but also warned not to rock the boat. The notion of the “tempered radical” (Meyerson 2003) suggests that commitment to the organization can be combined with being determined to change it, a concept that Attwood (2007) sees as very appropriate to action learning. Less encouraging is Vince et al.’s (2016, p. 8) manager who says of his company: “*Everyone wants to be a little bit more innovative, but not very much.*”

In the context of organizations established as stable entities, the idea of innovation is perhaps inherently paradoxical. Andriopoulos and Lewis (2010) see innovation as a process embedded, even mired, in paradoxes. Achieving it means simultaneously managing conflicting processes such as the pursuing of short-term survival and long-term sustainability. This in turn requires paradoxical approaches to managing and a certain “ambidexterity” (Andriopoulos and Lewis 2010, p. 104). Whether the innovation paradox is ever “resolved” is open to dispute. Paradox theory suggests that the contradictory elements that make up the paradox are not resolvable but persist and are enacted and re-enacted over time, as in Vince’s (2008) “learning in action” and “learning inaction” which are dynamic and opposed tendencies always present as two sides of the same coin. Action learning however is both an optimistic and a pragmatic creed, and Vince et al. (2016) consider how CAL might help here, noting that the contradictory dynamics created when action learners collide with the innovation paradox provide opportunities for critical reflection. This can bring about a recognition of “the inseparability of both the transformational potential of action learning and the political purposes it serves as a process for reasserting compliance to a set of established norms” (2016, p. 12).

In response to the question: “Who can make this innovation work?”, Bourner argues that “those who wish to share an innovation need to be explicit about the beliefs and values that underpin it, since only those who share those beliefs and values are likely to be able to make the new practice work well” (2011, p. 122). Innovation is – like learning – a voluntary activity, one that cannot be imposed or made mandatory. CAL is one means for addressing the innovation paradox head-on, through confronting the inherent tensions via critical reflection and allowing for some larger questions to be put. A voluntary practice of innovation means addressing those mundane but usually unasked questions at the forefront of the minds of all those contemplating any change; “Who benefits from this change? . . . and who loses? What will the new practices look like? . . . and what will be their impacts on jobs, privacy, autonomy? What is the function of the present



discourses of innovation? . . . and whose interests are being served?” Those who can make innovations work, or unwork, will make their decisions based on their estimates of the answers.

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