

ACTION LEARNING AND ACTION RESEARCH

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ACTION LEARNING AND ACTION RESEARCH: GENRES AND APPROACHES

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Foreword

Mary Brydon-Miller

While on a recent visit to North-West University in South Africa hosted by one of the editors of this volume, Professor Lesley Wood, I had the opportunity to visit some local schools. We arrived at the school in Rustenburg to find that classes had been dismissed because there was no water. But while we were visiting the school, a community volunteer, John, arrived with two huge plastic tanks of water and the children who were still nearby gathered around to fill their bottles. Water shortages like this are a serious challenge for schools in this part of the country, but school leaders are working to address the problem through creative solutions like including systems for gathering rainwater in new school developments. And children are engaged in learning about the environment, working together on school gardening projects and monitoring weather stations located on the school grounds. These schools are the site of a Participatory Action Learning (AL) and Action Research (AR) project and are my partners in a global climate change education initiative. AL and AR are also at the centre of a campaign to protect local beaches on Panglao Island in the Philippines, to develop a social enterprise partnership between a motorway services site and local non-profit organizations in Southwest England, and in the creation of a new teacher mentoring program in my own hometown of Louisville, Kentucky.

All of these projects reflect the core tenets of AL/AR described in this book. And for the researchers and practitioners involved in these projects, and all those like them around the world, this volume is an important and timely contribution to finding more effective ways of engaging in community-based education, research and activism.

Key points raised by the editors and authors of this book concern what these strategies have in common as forms of AL/AR and what distinguishes them from one another. By sharing a focus on creating opportunities for community participation in order to address pressing economic, social, cultural and environmental issues, all these forms of AL/AR are founded on the understanding that human relationships and a shared commitment to serving as agents of positive change underlie everything we do in AL/AR. Adaptability and willingness to innovate and embrace the emergent nature of knowledge and understanding are additional

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hallmarks of all forms of AL/AR, as illustrated by the variety of approaches included in this volume. These approaches are used not only for community engagement but also in a wide variety of fields for personal, professional and organizational development, in small project teams or at large scale in a whole organization – nationwide or globally.

Contributions by many of the key figures in the world of AL/AR, as well as by rising leaders in the field, provide readers with a wealth of opportunities to explore the major themes and many variations of AL/AR. Researchers, practitioners, consultants and community partners new to AL/AR will find this book an invaluable guide to understanding and engaging in this approach to research, but even those of us who've been working in this area for many years will find new insights and inspiration.

Mary Brydon-Miller

Acknowledgments

We sincerely thank three groups of people. One is the authors of this book for their collaboration, cooperation and excellent contributions to this volume. Another is our critical friends who kindly read and commented on the first draft chapters of this book, providing us with constructive critique and suggestions for improvement: from Austria, Stephan Laske; from Colombia, Doris Santos; from Israel, Victor Friedman; from New Zealand, Jan Robertson; from Singapore, Hairon Salleh; from South Africa, Annette Wilkinson and useful suggestions from Rod Waddington, Ansurie Pillay, Bruce Damons, Ansie Kitching, Corne Kruger, Elsabe Wessels, Marinda Neetlingh, Karen Venter and Akpovire Oduaran; from the United Kingdom, Mary McAteer and Mike Pedler; and from the United States, Davydd Greenwood and Margaret Riel. The third group is our ALARA friends in Brisbane, in particular Bob Dick and Ron Passfield.

We also acknowledge the helpful comments and suggestions for improving the quality of our work from Maureen Todhunter, our friend and professional copy-editor; and the assistance we received from proof-reader, Jo Anne Pomfrett; and from graphic designer, Anna Ng. Thanks also to the production team of Emerald who have provided excellent technical and editorial support.

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Reviewers' Comments

This edited collection takes on the valuable but difficult task of identifying the non-negotiable or defining characteristics of action learning (AL) and action research (AR). The task is difficult because the 'action' approach values multiple perspectives and worldviews and encourages participants to own and create their knowledge. This results in a family of approaches as AL/AR evolves to serve practitioners in their learning process. As editors, Zuber-Skerritt and Wood have invited a wide range of perspectives from AL/AR advocates/scholars who have contributed to the evolution of the now many genres. They close with embracing their goal of deepening understanding AL/AR as philosophy, methodology, theory of learning and process for community engagement. This book does an excellent job of challenging action researchers to critically think through their traditions in contrast to other approaches. The chapters provide a solid foundation for AL and AR approaches to create understandings and knowledge based on values and worldviews that uphold inclusion and will further develop the quality of social sciences and our democratic world.

Margaret Riel, PhD, Director, Center for Collaborative Action Research,
Pepperdine University, Los Angeles, CA, USA

The author list for this edited book reads like a 'who's who' in action learning (AL) and action research (AR). These authors are leaders in the field internationally, bringing years of research and theoretical and professional experience to their writing. Many of these authors influenced my own action research PhD in coaching leadership over two decades ago and I wish such a text had been available then. It offers extensive perspectives on the subject, with strong validation of research methodologies. AR has been generally misunderstood in universities and not highly regarded as a research paradigm. Supervision of action research postgraduate studies can be problematic, and for the AL/AR scholar/researcher may feel murky and difficult to negotiate. But this complexity typically matches the wicked problems, often those of justice, social relationships and environmental sustainability, that ALAR seeks to address. In this way, the paradigm is true to its early beginnings in Kurt Lewin's work – in pursuit of social justice.

This is a text for leaders of organizations, schools and community groups, who want to engage the people who are affected by problems in the creation of the solutions. It offers readers inclusivity of perspectives and will be a beneficial read for beginning action researchers and their supervisors, more experienced action researchers wanting further critical perspectives and challenge, and for leaders in the field wanting to engage in participatory AL/AR.

Jan Robertson, PhD, Adjunct Professor, Griffith University; Academic Leadership Consultant and Author of *Coaching Leadership: Building Educational Leadership Capacity Through Partnership*, New Zealand.

In bringing together an impressive range of authors and perspectives from across the globe, Zuber-Skerritt and Wood have produced a text that celebrates the rich diversity and multi-perspective nature of action learning (AL) and action research (AR), while demonstrating the coherent framework in which these approaches operate. This important book will make a real contribution to the understanding and work of practitioners from a range of disciplines and contexts. It is clearly and coherently structured, with chapters that are accessible to novice AL/AR practitioners, yet offer critical challenge to those who are more experienced.

As a typology of these approaches, it is comprehensive and cogent. Presenting a critical discussion of each approach, it offers readers an opportunity to 'see inside' the practice and theory of these approaches in a range of contexts, each with its own complexity and challenges. Topics for discussion and reflection at the end of each chapter help the reader develop deeper understanding of the topic concerned, and more importantly, address the issue of values underpinning our actions, learnings and research. In this way, the book becomes more than the sum of its parts, clearly illustrating the power and potency of (and indeed great need for) such approaches in our contemporary world.

Mary McAteer, PhD, Director of Professional Learning Programs, Edge Hill University, Lancashire, UK.

This fine publication addresses a real need among followers (and critics) of action research, by clarifying and demystifying the most common genres of and approaches to action learning and action research (AL/AR). It filters and illustrates, and explains what AL/AR is and what it is not. The book re-establishes AL/AR as practical, collaborative, emancipatory, interpretive and critical – a philosophy, methodology and approach to learning and development for addressing complex global challenges.

In structuring the publication, the editors effectively weave together the rich voices of leading scholars of AL/AR. The result is a coherent assembly of diverse ideas and experiences that produce a wealth of distinctive, informative nuances.

This work can become an important reference on the shelves of researchers, authors and other practitioners. It has the potential to motivate and empower a wide readership to study, acknowledge, adopt and adapt AL/AR – further establishing its rightful place as a research paradigm suitable for bringing true social change in our times.

Annette Wilkinson, PhD, Professor, University of the Free State, South Africa.

I have learned that whenever Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt publishes something, it is worth paying attention. Zuber-Skerritt and Lesley Wood have put together an edited collection that is unusual in being integrated around a principled overview of the fields of action research (AR) and action learning (AL). The overview distinguishes usefully between action learning and action research, and makes a case for their synergies and differences in ways that enhanced my understandings greatly. This is accomplished by the editors' having recruited the principal exponents of the genres that are the topics of each chapter and asked them to reflect synthetically on their particular areas of work. The result is both a panoramic view of AL and AR and a

deep dive into many of the varieties of practice. The writing is clear, pedagogically adept, and analytically cogent. The editors and the contributors deserve great credit for having put together such a useful and thoughtful overview of these fields.

Davydd Greenwood, PhD, Goldwin Smith Professor of Anthropology,
Cornell University, USA.

Forty years ago I applied for a Chair in Management and Business Education. In my application lecture I discussed the potential of Action Learning (AL) and Action Research (AR). Obviously, I do not remember any details of my speech. But still today I can recall that several colleagues on the appointment committee strongly questioned the value and the scientific character of AL and AR. Today, 40 years later we can find a large and differentiated body of research and practical experiences, and a broad range of contexts where AL and AR have proven their theoretical and empirical strengths. No longer are there serious doubts about the scientific relevance of these approaches.

This book is of great merit to its editors, Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt, the Australian Doyenne of AL and AR, and her colleague Lesley Wood, having collected contributions from outstanding scholars and experienced practitioners in the field of AL & AR from all over the world. This is not just a collection of articles. Presented within a well substantiated framework, the chapters reveal the evolution of this participatory, transformational paradigm, unfolding the great utility, diversity and richness of the various genres of AL and AR, and thus offering a very useful, comprehensive guide. Readers will benefit greatly from the didactic of every chapter – not only illustrating the what, why, and how of each genre, but also offering topics for further discussion and reflection, and tips for further reading. This rich collection on AL and AR can be very useful for not only emerging scholars and other newcomer practitioners but also for more experienced scholars, looking for their own way of adapting this approach creatively and constructively – at this time when AL and AR have such methodological relevance for resolving small and large scale difficulties in our complex world.

Stephan Laske, PhD, Emeritus Professor, University of Innsbruck, Austria.

This book brings together a collection of interesting works from established scholars to bring to light various genres and approaches in the fields of action learning and action research. From the conceptual discussions and practical exemplars, readers of this book who are new to action learning and action research will gain a clearer understanding of the what, how and why of action learning and action research. Readers with greater familiarity and experience in the field will gain a deeper appreciation of the field's traditions as well as new curiosity – or wondering into the future – about how action learning and action research can be relevant and integrated to new genres and approaches. This book is also a timely reminder of how the participatory paradigm can be a forceful counter response to the growing neoliberalism of the twenty-first century.

Hairon Salleh, PhD, Associate Professor, Policy and Leadership
Studies, National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological
University, Singapore.

This book presents the self-reflective process of a group of Action Learning (AL) and Action Research (AR) practitioners and advocates. Readers are invited to become involved in this self-reflective process as the authors analyse the origins and development of most of the main genres of AL and AR through their own experiences while seeking to address global and local problems in complex contemporary times. Each chapter illustrates the diversity of ways to think and act collaboratively to address difficult situations through the various types of AL and AR. Together the chapters serve to demystify AL and AR and how they can be used or adapted to create conceptual and practical knowledge for, and while achieving, sustainable social change.

Professor Doris Santos, Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Bogotá DC,
Colombia, South America.

I welcome the appearance of this new survey of action learning and action research, compiled by leading scholars from Australia, USA, UK, Ireland, South Africa and Austria. This book promises some interesting excursions into intriguing aspects of action learning and action research practice in a difficult field of work.

Professor Mike Pedler, Emeritus Professor of Action Learning at Henley
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About the Authors

Mary Brydon-Miller, PhD, is a Professor in the Department of Educational Leadership, Evaluation, and Organizational Development in the College of Education and Human Development at the University of Louisville, USA. She also holds the honorary title of Extraordinary Professor in the research entity of Community-based Educational Research at North-West University, South Africa. She is a participatory action researcher who conducts work in both school and community settings. Her current research focuses on research ethics in educational and community settings. She is the Editor, with David Coghlan, of the *SAGE Encyclopedia of Action Research* and has recently completed work on a book on ethical challenges in the context of participatory research with her colleague Sarah Banks from Durham University, UK. Her next major project focuses on working with middle-school students from around the world to engage as citizen scientists to better understand the impacts of global climate change.

Danny Burns, PhD, is a Professor of International Development at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), University of Sussex, UK. He was formerly Professor of Social and Organizational Learning at the University of the West of England where he co-directed the SOLAR action research centre with Susan Weil. Danny has written extensively on action research, including two books: *Systemic Action Research: A strategy for whole system change* (2007) and *Navigating Complexity in International Development: Facilitating sustainable change at scale* (2015). He has directed more than 25 action research projects and teaches a successful short course on action research with Joanna Howard at IDS.

David Coghlan, PhD, is a Professor Emeritus and Fellow Emeritus at Trinity Business School, Trinity College Dublin, Ireland. He specializes in organization development and action research and is active in both communities internationally. He has published over 170 articles and book chapters. Recent books include *Conducting Action Research* (Sage, 2018); *Inside Organizations* (Sage, 2016); *Organizational Change and Strategy* (Routledge, 2016); *Doing Action Research in Your Own Organization* (4th ed., Sage, 2014); and *Collaborative Strategic Improvement through Network Action Learning* (Edward Elgar, 2011). He is co-editor of *The Sage Encyclopedia of Action Research* (2014) and of the four-volume sets, *Fundamentals of Organization Development* (Sage, 2010) and *Action Research in Business and Management* (Sage, 2016). He serves on the editorial advisory boards of *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*; *Action Research*; *Action Learning: Research and Practice*; *Systemic Practice and Action Research*; and *The OD Practitioner*, among others.

Bob Dick, DLitt, is an Independent Scholar, an occasional academic, a coach and mentor and a consultant in community and organizational change. He has been a practitioner and an academic for almost a half century, and continues to work in both fields. In both he uses concepts and processes from action research, action learning, action science, narrative and community and organization development to help people (including himself), organizations and communities to improve their work, learning and life. The single most important book he read as a practitioner was *Theory in Practice*, the 1974 book in which Argyris and Schön introduced the foundational elements of action science to the world. Since then, action science has been a core influence on his work. It influences much of what he does and how he does it. Bob resides in Brisbane's leafy western suburbs with the love of his life, Camilla.

Robin R. Hurst, EdD, SPHR, is an Assistant Professor of Adult Learning and Human Resource Development in the School of Education at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU), Richmond, USA. She came to VCU after more than 20 years of experience in human resource management, and training and organizational development, with both multinational and domestic organizations. Robin has consulted with numerous organizations in organizational development, leadership development using action learning, ethical decision-making and continuous improvement. Robin holds an MA in Human Resource Development and an EdD in Human and Organizational Learning from the George Washington University. She has presented at both national and international conferences in the areas of action learning in graduate education, organizational culture development in cross-border mergers and acquisitions, organizational identity, transformational learning in student study abroad programs and moving training evaluation to a higher level. She has published her work in international journals, and has served as an Associate Editor for *Organizational Culture: An International Journal*.

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Action Learning in Action; Global Leaders for the 21st Century; Global Human Resource Development; Technology-based Learning; and Global Teams. Over one million copies of his publications have been sold in nearly a dozen languages worldwide. Mike also served as the Editor of the UNESCO Encyclopedia volume on Human Resources and is an editor and/or advisor for several leading professional journals around the world. He has been a keynote speaker at international conferences in Australia, Japan, Philippines, Malaysia, South Africa, Singapore and India as well as throughout North America.

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Rhonda Nixon, PhD, is an Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Teacher Professional Learning, in a medium-sized school district in Alberta, Canada and she is an Adjunct Professor at the University of Alberta. She is a critical participatory action researcher who continues to conduct such research in her field. In her previous jurisdiction and work as a PhD student at the University of Alberta, and later, as a Professor at the University of Victoria, British Columbia, Canada, she provided school stories of critical participatory action research within the book by Kemmis, McTaggart and Nixon (2014) *The Action Research Planner: Doing Critical Participatory Action Research*. She continues to work on teacher professional learning from a critical participatory action research stance. Her goal is to ensure that teachers' and leaders' practices are about improving life chances of students locally and globally.

Ron Passfield, PhD, is an Emeritus Professor with the Australian Institute of Business, Adelaide, Australia. He was a Founding Executive Member (1991) of the Action Learning, Action Research Association (ALARA) and President for five years. He has used action learning and action research in multiple contexts for more than 40 years. Over the past decade, Ron and his colleague, Julie Cork, have conducted more than 50 longitudinal action learning programs ranging from four to six months for managers in multiple roles and locations. The program is focused on people management and is designed to help managers to create a workplace culture that is conducive to mental health. Participants covered many managerial roles within public services such as police, doctors, nurses, engineers, accountants and scientists. Ron is the author of the mindfulness blog: www.growmindfulness.com.

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Franz Rauch, PhD, is an Associate Professor (tenured) and the Head of the Institute of Instructional and School Development at the University of Klagenfurt, Austria. He holds a master's degree in Natural Sciences (teaching certification), a PhD in Education and a *venia docendi* in Education. He has been involved in research and development projects based on action research nationally (e.g., University Courses for Teachers, Program IMST and Network ECO-Schools) and internationally (e.g., EC Projects PROFILES, PARRISE and ARTIST) for many years. He is one of the editors of the *Educational Action Research* journal and serves on editorial boards of other journals (such as *The Journal of Environmental Education*). Recent publications on action research include *Networking for Education for Sustainable Development in Austria: The Austrian ECOLOG-schools program* (Educational Action Research, 2016, 1). He is co-editor of *Action Research, Innovation and Change* (Routledge, 2014) and *Promoting Change through Action Research: International Case Studies in Education, Social Work, Health Care and Community Development* (Sense, 2014). His further research and development areas are education for sustainable development/environmental education, networks in education, school development, science education and continuing education for teachers.

Richard Teare, PhD, is Co-founder and President, Global University for Lifelong Learning (GULL), a non-profit international network movement that works with other organizations to facilitate self-help in communities and the workplace. Earlier, he held professorships at four UK universities and he is currently an Adjunct Professor, Caribbean Maritime University, Jamaica. Richard has been an Emerald journal editor for more than 30 years and his academic publications include 23 authored, co-authored and edited books on aspects of community development, service management and organizational learning. Among these, he is the author of *Lifelong Action Learning: A Journey of Discovery and Celebration at Work and in the Community* (Amazon, 2018) and co-author of *Lifelong Action Learning for Community Development* (Sense, 2013) and *Designing Inclusive Pathways with Young Adults* (Sense, 2015) the first and second in a series of books about GULL's work with communities.

Amanda Trosten-Bloom, MSc, Principal, Corporation for Positive Change, USA, is a widely acclaimed Appreciative Inquiry Consultant specializing in high-engagement whole system change. Her award-winning work has included community-based

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Diana Whitney, PhD, a leading figure in the fields of Appreciative Inquiry and Large Scale Change, has been at the forefront of positive change theory and practice in the USA and worldwide for three decades. She founded the international consultancy, Corporation for Positive Change, and co-founded the social constructionist think tank, the Taos Institute. Her work – designing and facilitating strategic culture transformation, merger integration and leadership development with Fortune 100 companies – has gained her a worldwide following. She is a prolific and award-winning author of dozens of chapters and articles and 20 books, including *The Power of Appreciative Inquiry*; *Appreciative Leadership*; *Appreciative Inquiry: A Positive Revolution in Change*; and *Positive Approaches to Peacebuilding*.

Lesley Wood, DEd, is a Research Professor in the Faculty of Education and Director of the research niche area, Community-based Educational Research at North-West University, South Africa. She is a National Research Foundation rated researcher whose interests lie in researching participatory ways to facilitate

psycho-social wellness within various educational communities. She has received international recognition for her work in action research and HIV and AIDS, having been awarded an Honorary Doctorate in 2014 by Moravian College, Pennsylvania, USA. She has published over 80 articles, chapters and books, and has received several internationally funded grants for her projects.

Stefan Zehetmeier, PhD, is an Associate Professor at the University of Klagenfurt, Austria. He has experience with action research in diverse contexts for more than 15 years. As researcher and teacher educator, he was involved in several Austrian large-scale teacher professional development programs based on action research. Moreover, he was involved in national and international research and development projects based on action research. His further research interests include mathematics and science teacher education, school development, evaluation and impact analysis of teacher professional development programs.

Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt, PhD, is an Adjunct Professor at Griffith University, Australia; Honorary Research Fellow at North-West University, South Africa; and Pro Chancellor, Global University for Lifelong Learning (GULL), USA. After her undergraduate and postgraduate education in German universities, she obtained four doctoral degrees while living in Australia: PhD in Literature and Applied Linguistics (University of Queensland, 1976), PhD in Higher Education (Deakin University, 1986), DLitt in Management Education (International Management Centres, UK, 1992) and an Honorary Doctorate in Professional Studies (GULL, USA, 2008). Ortrun has published 42 books, over 70 book chapters, over 60 refereed journal articles and more than 100 professional and conference papers, and has produced over 50 educational video programs. She has been awarded over \$1.2 million in competitive R&D grants and has led action research and leadership development programs in many universities in Australia, New Zealand, Hong Kong, Singapore, Japan, Sweden, Holland, Austria, Germany, England, the United States, Canada, Fiji, South America and South Africa. In 2018 she was appointed an Officer of the Order of Australia, a prestigious national honour for “distinguished service to tertiary education in the field of action research and learning as an academic, author and mentor, and to professional bodies.”

List of Acronyms

ACT	Acceptance and Commitment Therapy
AERA	American Educational Research Association
AI	Appreciative Inquiry
AI 4-D cycle	Discovery, Dream, Design and Destiny (Destiny, aka Delivery)
AIDS	Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
AL	Action Learning
ALAR	Action Learning and Action Research
ALARA	Action Learning and Action Research Association
ALARPM	Action Learning, Action Research and Process Management
ALS	Action Learning Set
AR	Action Research
ARNA	Action Research Network of the Americas
BBP	Basic Business Philosophy
BRC	British Red Cross
BSc	Bachelor of Science
BTU	British Thermal Unit
CARN	Collaborative Action Research Network
CCM	Church and Community Mobilization
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
COMBER	Community-Based Educational Research
CPAR	Critical Participatory Action Research
CPM	Confident People Management Program
DBA	Doctor of Business Administration
DEd	Doctor of Education
DFID	Department for International Development (UK)
DLitt	Doctor of Letters
EAR	Educational Action Research
EC	European Community
EdD	Doctor of Education
EJOLTS	<i>Educational Journal of Living Theories</i>
ENSI	International Environment and School Initiatives Project
GCWAL	Global Centre for Work-Applied Learning
GLE	Granada Learning Experience
GM	General Manager
GULL	Global University for Lifelong Learning
HDI	Human Development Institute

xxii List of Acronyms

HDWFD	Hunter Douglas Window Fashions Division
HIC	Hospital International Communications
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
HR	Human Resources
HRD	Human Resource Development
HRO	High Reliability Organization
ICF	International Coaching Federation
IDP	Internally Displaced People
IDS	Institute of Development Studies
IFAL	International Federation of Action Learning
IFR	<i>International Financial Review</i>
IMCA	International Management Centres Association
IMST	Innovations Make Schools Top Program
INGO	International Non-governmental Organization
IUS	<i>Institut für Unterrichts- und Schulentwicklung</i> (Institute for Instructional and School Development)
JWCS	Joy to the World Community Services
LAL	Lifelong Action Learning
LfT	Learning for Transformation
LL	Lifelong Learning
MA	Master of Arts
MAPP	Mindfulness All-Party Parliamentary Group
MARC	Mindful Awareness Research Center
MASA	Mindfulness, Action Learning, Self-Awareness, Agency Model
MBA	Master of Business Administration
MBSR	Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction
MEd	Master of Education
MHCD	Mental Health Centre of Denver
MPhil	Master of Philosophy
MSc	Master of Science
MTSF	Medium Term Strategic Framework
NEARI	Network Educational Action Research Ireland
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
NRF	National Research Foundation
OD	Organizational Development
PALAR	Participatory Action Learning and Action Research
PAR	Participatory Action Research
PASA	People Against Sexual Abuse (renamed Positive Attitudes, Solutions and Actions)
PFL	<i>Pädagogik und Fachdidaktik für Lehrkräfte</i> (Teacher Education in Subject Areas)
PhD	Doctor of Philosophy
PM	Process Management
PNG	Papua New Guinea
PRIA	Participatory Research in Asia
ProFil	<i>Professionalität im Lehrberuf</i> (Professionalism in the Teaching Profession)

PV	Personal Viability
RANIR	Refugee Action Network for IDP [Internally Displaced People] and Refugees
R&D	Research and Development
SAAGG	South Asian Academy for Good Governance
SAR	Systemic Action Research
S-ART	Self-Awareness, Self-Regulation and Self-Transcendence Model
Seven Cs	Communication, Collaboration, Commitment, Coaching, Critical and self-critical attitude, Competence, Character
SOS	Sense of Self
SPHR	Senior Professional in Human Resources
SPIRAL	Systemic Participatory Inquiry Research and Action Learning
Three Es	Emancipation, Empowerment, Emergence
Three Rs	Relationships, Reflection, Recognition
TSR	Training, Service and Revenue
TUC	Trade Union Council
UK	United Kingdom
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
US	United States
USA	United States of America
USAID	US Agency for International Development
USIP	United States Institute of Peace
VCU	Virginia Commonwealth University [USA]
VSO	Voluntary Service Overseas
WIAL	World Institute for Action Learning
WV	World Vision
WVI	World Vision International
WVL	World Vision Lebanon
WVSL	World Vision Sri Lanka
WVM	World Vision Mongolia

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Introduction

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Chapter 1

Introduction to Action Learning and Action Research: Genres and Approaches

Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt and Lesley Wood

Chapter Outline

In this chapter we introduce the book's main aim: to provide a platform for the world's leading scholars of Action Learning and Action Research to explain the what, why and how of their respective action learning and action research genres. In seeking to provide a typology of action learning and action research, as editors of this book we asked the authors of each chapter to address these aspects of their particular genre: (1) what it is (and is not); (2) for what purposes and in which contexts it is best suited; and (3) what processes are most effective for conducting research. We explain why this book is necessary, based on our own experience as learners, researchers, supervisors, examiners, authors and leaders of action learning and action research. We also explain the importance of action learning and action research in their many forms for addressing increasingly complex global challenges that confront humankind in the twenty-first century. We argue that, and illustrate how, in this era, action learning and action research approaches are ideal for resolving complex problems of personal, professional, organizational and community development and sustainability and learning through the experience. We also discuss potential pitfalls and challenges of action learning and action research and how to overcome them. This is important for demystifying both and for identifying why they have been misunderstood and misused, and therefore criticized or totally rejected as a valid learning/research methodology by some academic researchers. We explain how the authors contributing to this book reflect on their rich and diverse experience, on their practical and theoretical work through which they have contributed new genres, and on their insights and conclusions over a lifetime of learning through active research and development (R&D). Finally, we outline the contents and structure of this book, before reflecting on and drawing conclusions from this chapter about why and how action learning and action research need to be clarified as a valuable contribution to learning and research, conceptually and practically.

Introduction

Action Learning (AL) and Action Research (AR) are useful and increasingly popular approaches to improve personal, professional, team, organization and community development. They are based on a participatory paradigm of working together for the common good. Many approaches to AL and AR have evolved over time and the main ones are discussed by the authors in this book. AL and AR each have many definitions, so to start this book let us clarify and introduce these concepts as a basis for further discussion.

Action is almost an all-embracing term. In this book its temporal scope includes past, present and future. It refers to something done in the past that has affected or can affect our present insight, learning and knowledge and enables and compels us to plan our future action in light of this insight, learning and knowledge.

Action learning is learning from and through action or concrete experience, and through reflecting on this experience and taking action as a result of this learning. It is learning from and with each other in AL 'sets' to address a major, complex, practical problem in the workplace, organization, community or other site of collective activity. One of the early definitions of AL is Reg [Revans](#)' (1982) equation for learning: $L = P + Q$, that is, learning is programmed knowledge plus questioning insight.

P is the concern of the traditional academy; Q is the field of action learning On the whole, however, programmed knowledge, P, already set out in books or known to expert authorities, is quite insufficient for keeping on top of a world like ours today, racked by change of every kind. Programmed knowledge must not only be expanded: it must be supplemented by questioning insight, the capacity to identify useful and fresh lines of inquiry. This we denote by Q, so that learning means not only supplementing P but developing Q as well. It is arguable which is more important ...; the evidence is that a surfeit of P inhibits Q, and that experts, loaded with P, are the greatest menace to adaptation to change by questioning, Q. (p. 16)

According to [Revans](#) (1982, 1991), AL is a process by which groups of people (managers, academics, teachers, students or 'learners' generally) work on real problems, issues or concerns, carrying real responsibility in real conditions and contexts. The solutions people come up with may require changes to be made in the organization, and such changes often pose challenges to senior management or to others who seek, for whatever reason, to preserve the status quo. Nevertheless, the benefits of pursuing and sustaining such change are potentially great because the people involved actually own their own shared problems, their own shared solutions, and so are highly likely to be collectively committed to achieving and sustaining improved outcomes.

Action research was arguably first conceptualized by Kurt [Lewin](#) (1951) and further developed by [Kolb](#) (1984), [Carr and Kemmis](#) (1986) and subsequently

many others. In brief, AR consists of a spiral of cycles of action and research with four major phases: *planning*, *acting*, *observing* and *reflecting*. Planning includes identifying and defining the problem and analytical approach and on this basis preparing a strategic plan. Acting refers to implementing the strategic plan. Observing entails watching, perceiving and evaluating the action by appropriate research methods and processes. Reflecting refers to thinking back critically, not just about the results of the evaluation but about the whole action, research process and outcomes, that is, the previous three phases of planning, acting and observing. This in turn may lead to identifying a new problem/issue or way to address it, and hence, a new cycle of planning, acting, observing and reflecting.

Here the basic assumption is that people can learn and create knowledge (1) on the basis of their own concrete experience; (2) through observing and reflecting on that experience; (3) by forming abstract explanatory or analytical concepts, principles and generalizations; and (4) by testing the implications of these concepts in new situations, which will lead to new concrete experience and hence, the beginning of a new cycle (Kolb, 1984).

The aims of AR are (1) to improve practice and contribute to conceptual and practical knowledge by improving our understanding of a situation and its complexity; and (2) if warranted, to suggest and make positive changes to the environment, context and conditions in which that practice takes place, to achieve and sustain desirable improvement and effective development. Thus, AR is an approach to social science research that is:

- *practical*, that is, the results and insights gained from the research are not only theoretically important to the advancement of knowledge in the field, but also lead to practical immediate improvements during and after the research process;
- *participative and collaborative*, that is, the researcher is not considered to be an outside expert conducting an inquiry with ‘subjects’, but doing research with and for the people concerned with the practical problem/issue;
- *emancipatory*, that is, not hierarchical; all people concerned are equal ‘participants’ contributing to the inquiry;
- *interpretive*, that is, social inquiry is assumed to result not in the researcher’s positivist statements based on right *or* wrong answers to the research question, but in solutions based on the views and interpretations of the people involved in the inquiry. Research validity is achieved by certain methods, such as triangulation and participant confirmation or member check; and
- *critical*, that is, the ‘critical community’ of participants not only search for practical improvements in their work or other collective activity within the given socio-political constraints, but also act as critical and self-critical change agents of those constraints where needed.

AR is therefore a philosophy, methodology, theory and process of learning and development. It can be used not only to enable practical and emancipatory outcomes, but also to generate relevant and authentic theory that has real meaning for those involved (Wood, 2013; Wood & Zuber-Skerritt, 2013;

Zuber-Skerritt, 2011). AR is making a vital contribution to knowledge creation and knowledge democracy by those using it to help address increasingly complex, global challenges confronting humankind in this twenty-first century. As such, it is gaining in popularity worldwide.

Even so, as experienced action researchers, postgraduate supervisors, examiners of theses and reviewers of articles and books, we recognize that this emerging paradigm of AR in the social sciences has been widely misunderstood and misused by some researchers, students, educators and practitioners. This stems from confusion around (1) the research and development (R&D) paradigm that underpins the practice of AR; and (2) the many AL and AR genres that have emerged over time.

Aims, Scope and Contributions of This Book

This book makes timely and valuable contributions to knowledge about the theory, practice and process of AL and AR by clarifying what constitutes AL and AR in their many forms and what does not. We believe this clarification will help in strengthening and moving AL and AR into the future, based on inclusive values and worldviews, as an appropriate and valuable approach to R&D in the human and social sciences.

Therefore, this book aims to provide an inclusive overview of the most common genres and approaches of AL and AR, explaining their differences while also highlighting what they share – their adherence to the basic epistemological, ontological and axiological principles of AL and AR. By ‘genre’ we mean a type, style or category of AL and AR, whereas ‘approach’ signifies a way of dealing with a problem, dilemma, difficult situation or a question of academic debate.

Most of the authors contributing to this book are internationally acclaimed as leaders in their fields and individually have published work that outlines the essentials of AL and AR. However, this is a seminal work whose very purpose is to collectively present a wide variety of types and foci in the large family of AR, expressly to offer a comprehensive guide to AL and AR. The authors of each chapter therefore focus on a specific variation of AL and/or AR and discuss the *what*, *why* and *how* of the particular approach, including potential challenges and ideas on how to overcome them, to identify and illustrate the utility and distinctive qualities of these varied yet closely related AL/AR types.

As editors of this book, we conceived its content and design on the basis of recognizing a real need for the overview this book provides, particularly through the many requests we receive for such guidance from postgraduate students, beginning researchers, established researchers who are newcomers to AR, thesis examiners and reviewers of articles. AL and AR have, after all, begun to flourish across recent years. We recognize that this overview may also motivate researchers, educators and practitioners working inside or outside the AL/AR paradigm to adopt/adapt the genres discussed here, or to create their own variants that better suit their particular contexts. Importantly, this creation/adaptation can encourage further development of theory, practice and process of AL and AR because by their very nature AL and AR are an ever evolving paradigm and

praxis – one of their distinctive strengths. In summary then, the unique contributions of this publication are providing an inclusive overview of the existing genres and approaches in the fields of AL and AR, and stimulating thought and ideas about possible new future directions.

This chapter proceeds with five main sections that consider (1) the AL and AR paradigms, based on distinctive philosophical and methodological assumptions; (2) the need for transforming research in this twenty-first century to most effectively address increasingly complex, ‘wicked’ problems locally and globally; and (3) the usefulness of identifying and clarifying the wide variety of genres and approaches of AL and AR, by world experts, to enable expansion of their use and adaptation. Since this is the book’s introductory chapter, we also include (4) a brief summary of the contents and structure of this book, and in the final par (5) our reflections on why and how AL and AR need to be clarified in the way presented in this book, as a valuable contribution to learning and research, conceptually and practically.

Learning and Research Paradigms in the Social Sciences

In the social sciences there are many approaches to inquiry, with diverse understandings especially on the role of the researcher. In the AL and AR paradigm, the researcher is recognized as not an outside, unattached, objective expert, but a co-researcher with participants who are actively involved in the whole process from problem definition, through trial and error, to final solution. Solutions to complex human and social problems cannot be ‘delivered’ by experts; solutions need to be created by and with those who are affected by the problems, particularly if these solutions are to be sustainable. Any complex problem always has at least several possible solutions, depending on the social, economic, political, cultural and/or historical situation, context and conditions and participants’ preferences as to process and desired outcome. Participatory paradigms like AL/AR take this complexity into consideration. For example, critical theory recognizes that history and power relations shape reality, and that knowledge is mediated by values and context. Constructivism proposes that reality and knowledge are socially constructed. A participatory paradigm subsumes these ideas but reaches further.

AL and AR are underpinned by a participatory paradigm that understands reality through the sharing of experiences of people in relationship with each other, and where the researcher’s subjectivity is an inevitable and important part of the research process. Thus, in an AL and AR approach, the solution is created with and by the participants in the team project, including the researcher/facilitator as a co-researcher who joins the group to better understand their situation (like an anthropologist), and becomes part of the collaborative inquiry and action to help improve the situation for and with those involved. The aim and purpose of AL/AR are, through seeking to address shared concerns, identifying and exposing ineffective/inefficient, unjust or harmful practices that are detrimental to people and/or the environment, and taking action to bring about sustainable positive outcomes. In many respects,

then, AL and AR are linked into traditions of activism: citizens' direct action and community organizing. All participants in AL/AR projects are practitioners and co-researchers who become actively involved practically, intellectually and emotionally in the cause for which the research is conducted. It is precisely this commitment that is a necessary part of being an engaged practitioner or member of a community of practice.

Participatory paradigms recognize that knowledge is socially constructed and created from within, and for, a particular group and context. The researcher's role is to describe, analyse and explain the situation or case, in as convincing and trustworthy a manner as possible. The aim is not to establish generalizable laws for multiple contexts, but to know, understand, improve or change a particular social situation or context and to advocate for the benefit of the people who are also the 'participants' (not 'subjects') in the inquiry and who are directly affected by the results and solutions. Variables are not predetermined and controlled, but are taken on board as they are identified from the emerging meanings. These are multiple and dynamic. Rigour is achieved through triangulation and/or use of multiple methods and perspectives, and through participant validation. Therefore, this kind of inquiry is more complex and difficult to conduct if it is to be high quality, systematic and valid to those involved. But it is eminently worthwhile as it promotes the positive transformation of its participants, including the researcher, and thus greater likelihood of sustainable positive outcome.

Validity in a participatory paradigm is more personal and interpersonal than methodological, and should be based on an "interactive dialectic logic" (Reason & Rowan, 1981, p. 244) rather than a dichotomy of 'subjective' or 'objective' truth. This dichotomy can be overcome by the concept of 'perspective', that is, taking a personal view from some distance, and *after* an interactive dialectic using multiple data sets, respondents and co-inquirers. In brief, the action learner/researcher is interested in perspectives, rather than truth per se, and in giving a credible account of how the participants in the project view themselves and their experiences in the language they themselves use. For example, action learners/researchers use terms like 'problem', 'issue' or 'concern', rather than 'hypothesis', and personal narrative such as 'we argue', rather than the abstracted passive voice of 'it is argued'.

Several points need to be mentioned about these dichotomies and the observation that experience often escapes the hold of cold logic. First, there are other participatory paradigms in the social sciences, for example, feminist, poststructural and postmodern paradigms. Here we include them in the new, emerging paradigm for reasons of necessary brevity and simplicity. Second, these are observations of paradigms in their most absolute forms. In practice, there is no such purity.

The AL and AR paradigms of learning and knowledge creation can be explained in terms of ontology (assumptions about the nature of being/reality), epistemology (assumptions about the nature of knowledge and knowing), axiology (assumptions about beliefs, values and worldviews) and methodology (consequent strategy for approach to inquiry), as authors discuss in the following chapters.