INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ACADEMIC RESEARCH IN PROGRESSIVE EDUCATION & DEVELOPMENT

OPEN ACCESS JOURNAL

Vol 1, Issue 1, (2012) E-ISSN: 2226-6348

Action Learning in Higher Education: Towards A Conceptual-Compatibility Framework

Farooq Mughal

Assistant Professor Department of Management Sciences, COMSATS Institute of Information Technology, Park Road, Islamabad 44000 – Pakistan

Email: farooq_mughal@comsats.edu.pk

To Link this Article: http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARPED/v1-i1/10927 DOI:10.6007/IJARPED/v1-i1/10927

Published Online: 26 March 2012

Abstract

The purpose of this research article is to further the discussion on implementing action learning technique in a university setup. The action learning is an experiential learning method intended for personal development, group and team development and leadership development. The research article presents a theoretical discourse is to develop a framework for implementing action learning technique in higher educational institutions. The researcher tries identifying dimensions which either inhibit or allow the use of action learning. The researcher uses a discursive analysis framework by reviewing several papers on action learning research. In an attempt to establish a structural model compatible to the higher educational framework, the author has identified three dimensions which formulate the compatibility framework which are: (i) action learning practices, (ii) individual influences and group behavior, and (iii) higher educational needs. In order to implement an action learning project these three dimensions play an important role in the successful achievement of learning goals.

Keywords: Action Learning, Higher Education, Discourse, Individual and Group Behavior

Introduction

In recent times, action learning has evolved as an efficient tool for learning and development which focuses on bringing change in actions and thought simultaneously. The growing body of literature on action learning acknowledges the wide use of this technique in a variety of organizations and contexts. Despite its original conception by Revans in 1940's, action learning has been subject to different interpretations mostly due to its simplistic concepts and flexibility of being adopted quickly. In a theoretical discourse of the literature, the author has observed that the use of action learning has been restricted in university-setups because of its misconceived perception of being 'managerialistic' in nature (Brockbank and Mcgill, 2007). Action learning practitioners have mostly limited its application in organizational-setups for industrial growth and productivity especially in the areas of leadership development and team management (Brockbank and Mcgill, 2007).

The term 'action learning' in *'real'* refers to *'group-based learning'* which is not limited to managers in an organization but also to those willing to use this approach to foster reflective

learning based on dialogue, discussion and deep-listening (Mughal, F, 2010). Educators must extend their teaching methods from traditional to experiential methods such as action learning. In isolated incidences where action learning has been used in higher educational institutions, the academics have overlooked the factors which may affect the outcome of the learning experience. In an attempt to facilitate academics in academic institutions, the author has tried proposing a conceptual model for action learning practice which is compatible with the higher educational framework to enhance student-learning.

Variations in Action Learning Practice

O'Neil (1999) proposes four schools of thought based on her extensive review of literature and evidence through interviews in the USA, UK and Sweden. These schools are identified as: i) 'Scientific', ii) 'Experiential', iii) 'Critical Reflection' and iv) 'Tacit'. The four schools are briefly explained below:

a. The Scientific School of Thought

Action learning is conceptualized as a problem-solving technique which draws its foundations on the basis of three interactive systems which he called, 'alpha', 'beta' and 'gamma'. *Alpha* system is the interplay of 'the learner's value system', 'the external system that affects the decision-making process', and 'the internal systems in which the learner works'. *Beta* system achieves its goal through a series of five steps which are: 'survey', 'hypothesis', 'experiment', 'audit' and 'review'. *Gamma* system focuses on personal development and emphasizes on the interaction between the learner and the environment (Sutton, 1997; Dilworth, 1998; Revans, 1982).

b. The Experiential School of Thought

This approach helps learners to learn from their experiences, construct meanings, focus on personal development and helps monitor progress towards achieving learning goals (Yorks et al., 1999).

c. The Critical-Reflection School of Thought

According to Marsick & O'Neil (1999: p.6) "reflection is powerful, but critical reflection is more powerful" as it has the capability to identify the root of the problem. Weinstein (1995) asserts that proponents of this school tend to explore their beliefs and values, have the ability to adopt change and gain a better insight of their inner feelings through critical self-reflection.

d. The Tacit School of Thought

This approach emphasizes on accidental or unplanned learning that takes place from any activity such as through observation, interaction or routine work (Rogers, 1997). This approach may be useful for adult learning in educational contexts where conflict-resolution, social learning or problem-solving can be achieved unexpectedly (Yorks et al., 1999).

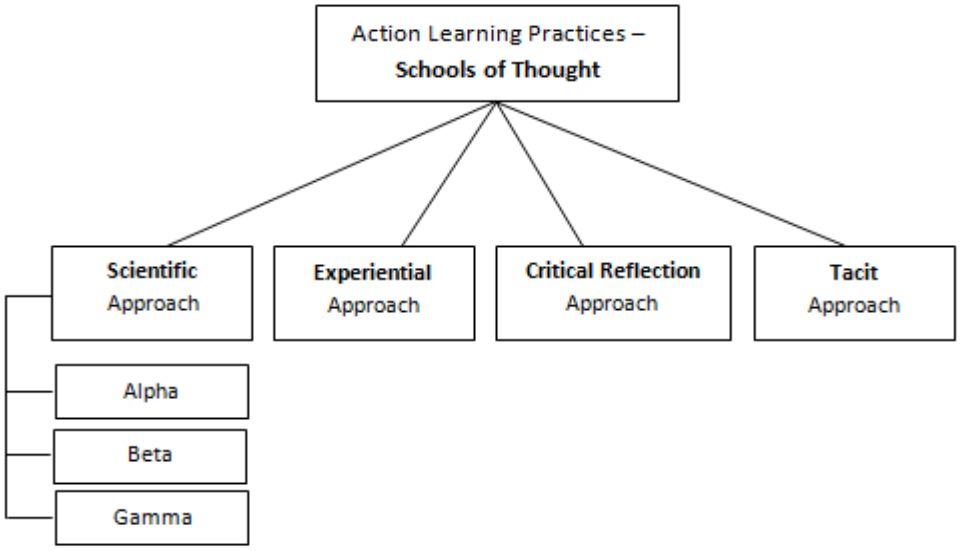


Figure – 1: Action Learning Practices – Schools of Thought
[*Source:* O'Neil, J. (1999). 'The Role of Learning Advisors in Action Learning', Columbia University, NY]

Group Behavior and Individual Influences on Action Learning Practice

In his research, Reynolds (1994) identified five types of group methods for learning which include games and simulations, role plays, discussion groups, action learning, and experiential work and T-groups. Amongst these methods, this manuscript focuses on action learning as it induces the learner to solve problems and bring about learning, change and development simultaneously (Pedlar, 1983). Hallein (1984) suggests that setting the atmosphere for learning in a group is important for developing a conducive environment that overcomes the fears and beliefs which may create barriers to learning. Group learning activities are counted as student-centered strategies which are effective for promoting active and deep learning; subsequently this has contributed towards the growth of group learning in higher education (Horng et al., 2005).

Since action learning as a group experiential learning technique uses individual experiences shared in a group setting, there may be instances where influences of individuality and group atmosphere may affect the outcome of the activity. Attempts have been made to differentiate the *human nature* from 'individuality' as inherent and a common entity which allows humans to feel happiness, sadness, play or exercise which is part of *human programming* (Hofstede, 1991). However, what humans do with their feelings, how do they express or behave is modified by society or culture from which they belong (Marquardt, 1998). While Hofstede (1991) sees 'individuality' as the way in which a person acts is usually modified by society, culture and personal experiences.

In addition to the above, Marquardt (1998: p.114) suggests that human nature, culture and personality include behaviors, symbols, rituals and artifacts which are visible to people within and outside their group. Therefore individuality may have its impact on the '*practices'* which in turn may be subject to change as opposed to the underlying 'values and basic assumptions' which formulate these practices (Hofstede, 1991).

Action Learning in Higher Education

In the recent past, there have been some studies which have identified the growing use of action learning in higher educational institutes in the UK and USA (Dixon, 1997). However, Bourner & Frost (1996) still argue that higher educational institutes are focusing on programmed knowledge as their core teaching process. Mumford (1997) suggests that the routine practice at higher educational institutes is teaching through books and lecture i.e. using the traditional pedagogical methods. When Revans (1957) proposed the use of action learning in universities and higher educational institutes, he received very little encouragement. There are a number of reasons to this response. In particular, Bourner & Frost (1996) have identified five basic reasons as to why educational institutes have been sluggish in adopting action learning as a learning practice, these are summarized as:

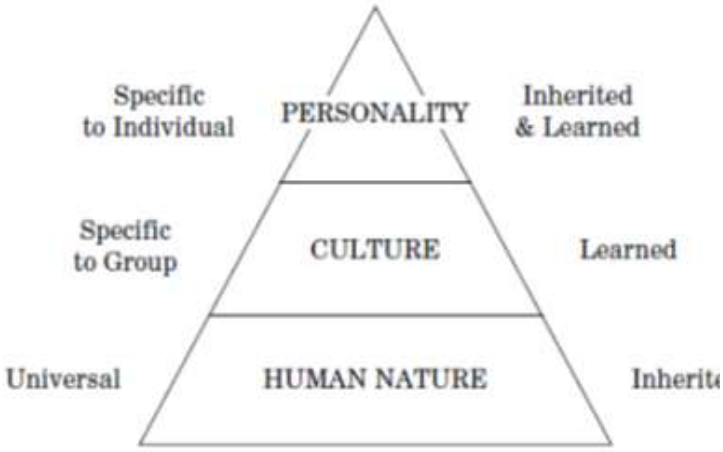


Figure – 2: Human Nature, Culture and Personality

[*Adapted:* Marquardt, M. J. (1998). 'Using Action Learning with Multicultural Groups', Performance Improvement Quarterly, Vol. 11, No. 1]

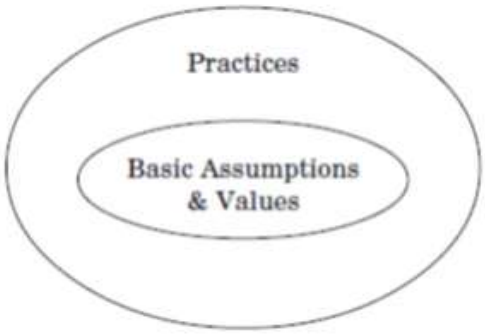


Figure –3: Layers of Culture

[*Adapted:* Marquardt, M. J. (1998). 'Using Action Learning with Multicultural Groups', Performance Improvement Quarterly, Vol. 11, No. 1]

- Higher educational institutes focus more on assessments, evaluations and certifications – therefore they have taken time to understand the value of experiential and group learning.
- The learner's intention and persistence to gain a certification which may be beneficial in enhancing career and life opportunities can be difficult to patch up with action learning.
- Action learning involves groups of learners called, 'sets' which require set facilitation skills that are comparably different from lecturing or teaching skills.
- Introducing action learning parallel with the courses of the degree or certificate programme may be difficult to manage at times.

In response to the above, O'Hara et al., (1996) presents a model of implementing action learning in an academic context designed on the model of Reeve (1995) depicting a framework of higher education. In this model O'Hara et al., (1996) talks about three parts, which are described below:

a. Learning to Learn Orientation

In this part, the model focuses on action learning set as providing a safe and a conducive environment with confidentiality, trust and mutual support towards the aim of learning (Bourner & Frost, 1996). The set (group meeting) provides an opportunity for individuals to share their experience and challenge their comrades with the intent for solving problems (Revans, 1982). The members of the set share a common purpose, intellectual and emotional energy and advocate cohesive aims (O'Hara et al., 1996).

b. The Higher Education Framework

The higher educational framework consists of the traditional practices associated with the programmed knowledge, while action learning can induce the learners to add the element of questioning through reflection on the problem (Pedlar, 1997; Mumford, 1997; Inglis, 1994). The action on the problem can then be implemented which can provide an alternate way of enticing students or adult learner to learn through sharing experiences with others while being constructively challenged (O'Hara et al., 1996).

c. *Outcomes*

The result of the academic qualification would not only provide the learner with new insights on the subject but the element of action learning would develop new skills and abilities to deal with new situations on job or in life (O'Hara et al., 1996). Furthermore, it personally develops individuals for bringing about change (Lawless, 2008) and learning helps in solving problems of members (Mumford, 1997).

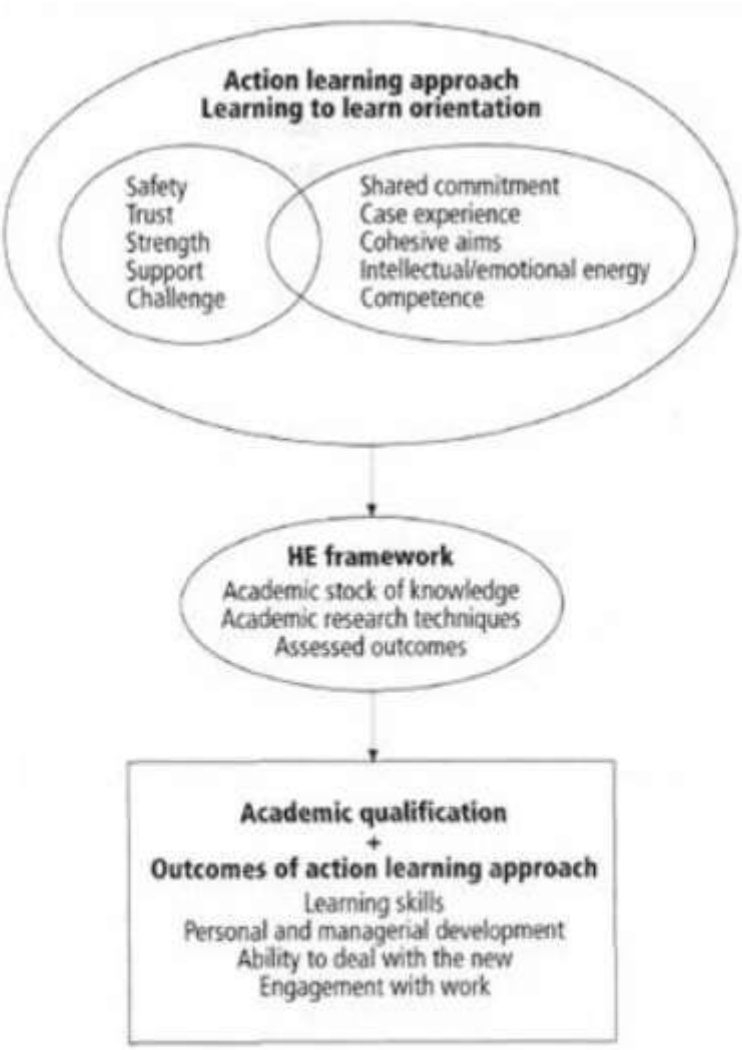


Figure – 4 : Model for Integrating Action Learning with Higher Education

[*Adopted:* O'Hara, S., Webber, T. & Reeve, S. (1996). 'Action Learning in Management Education', Education and Training, Vol. 38, No. 8]

The Compatibility Framework

In accordance with the literature review, the researcher has developed a research model based on the aforesaid concepts to illustrate how action learning projects can be conducted in higher educational institutions. The model is divided into four parts. The first part constitutes the action learning practices and the various schools of thought which affect the design of an action learning project. The second part consists of the individual and group influences which individuals carry with themselves. The third part incorporates the framework for implementing action learning in an academic context while the fourth part relates the design components of an action learning project.

The action learning project is placed in the center and is shown to be conducted under the academic context while individual and group influences the programme - shaping the learning experiences, actions and reflections of individuals who participate in the programme. The action learning project is established using its design components which are used to run the

project. The project is greatly dependent on the design as it identifies the degree of efficiency and effectiveness of the project. The individual and group influences play a significant role in the participation of an individual and the behavior of the group on the whole. This behavior would play a vital role in the outcomes of the project as individuals hold the power to mold the set in any direction especially in the absence of a set advisor or a moderator. The action learning practices (schools of thought) usually controlled by the moderator identify the goal of the action learning project. The model is placed in two parts below for further review:

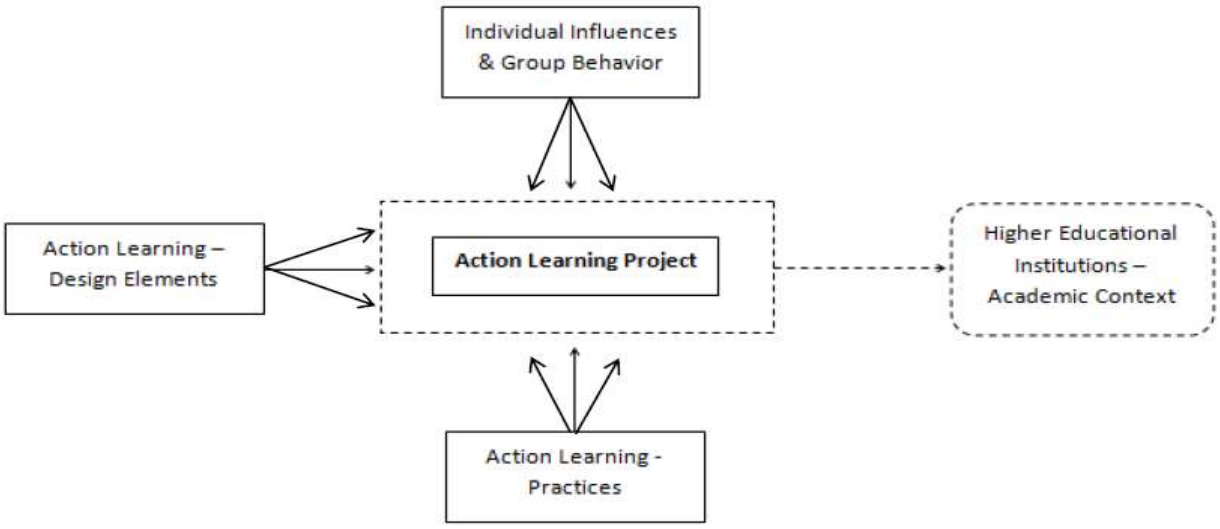
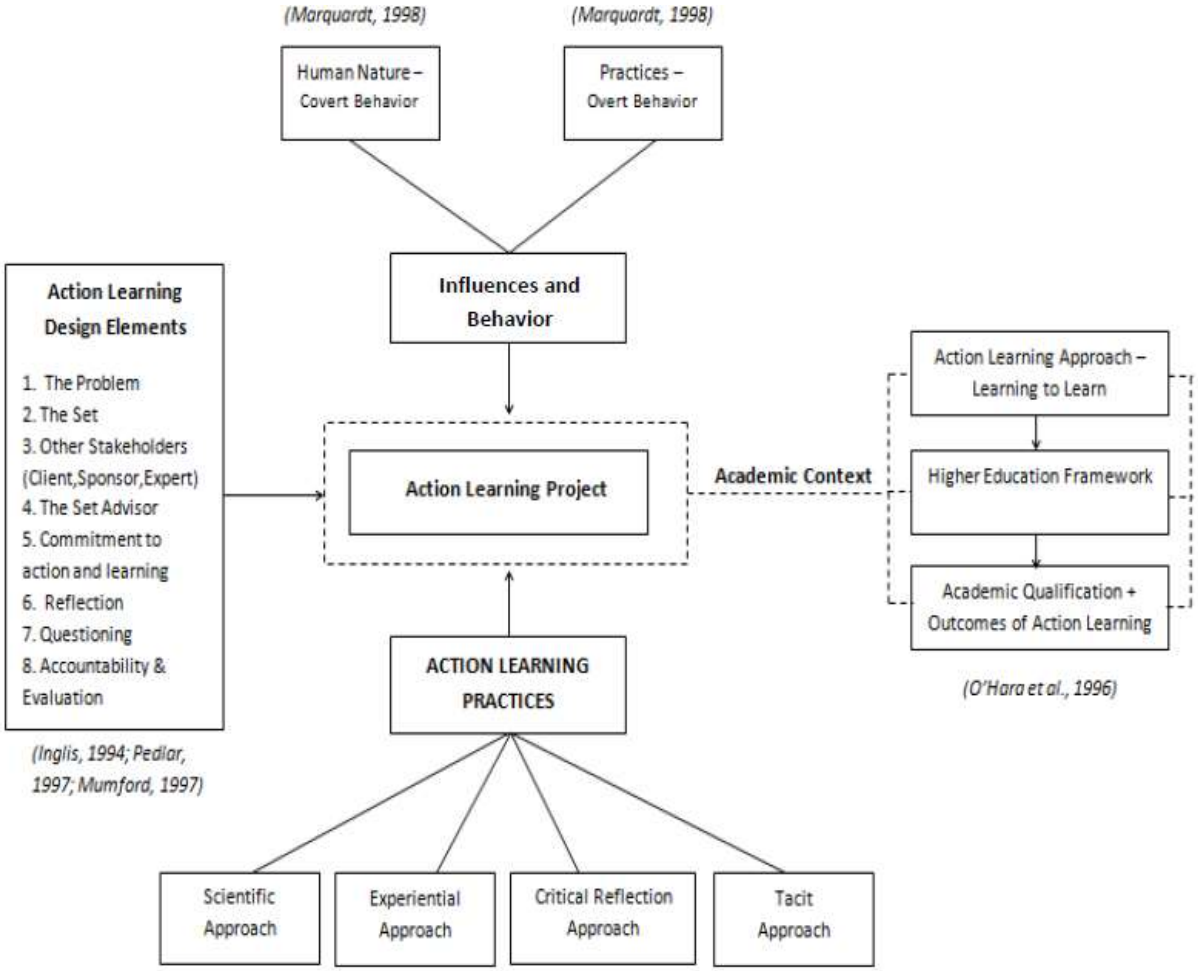


Figure 5: The Research Model – Influence of Culture and Practices on Action Learning in an Academic Context



ext

Conclusion

Action learning in higher education is gaining support of academics and researchers as an appreciative tool for learning and development of students. Action learning in its true sense conveys a simplistic approach as a group-based learning technique which acdemics can apply to emphasize on actions, reflections and past experiences. Higher educational institutions are trrying to implement action learning in their degree programmes as a supporting technique to instigate a reflective culture based on thought provoking group discussion challenged constructively by peers and class-mates. In order to implement action learning – academics are overlooking the fact that there is diversity in the experiences of students especially where the class compisition is multicultural in nature. Groups which are culturally diverse in their nature tend to bring in flavour from different parts of the world especially in countries like the USA, UK and Australia where students from all over the world are heading to gain world-class education. When higher educational institutions are facing such challenges then there is a need for a framework which identifies cultural and societal attributes that affect outcomes of the learning process. Therefore, the compatibility framework is a starting point for academics and researchers to explore and present conceptual models which are in alignment with the higher educational framework and focus on socio-cultural aspects of students.

References

Brockbank, A., McGill, I. **(**2007), *Facilitating Reflective Learning in Higher Education*, Open University Press – McGraw Hill Education, Berkshire.

Bourner, T., & Frost, P. (1996), 'In their Own Words: The Experience of Action Learning in Higher Education', *Education and Training*, 38 (8), pp. 22 – 31.

Dilworth, R. L. (1998), 'Action Learning in a Nutshell', Performance Improvement Quarterly, 11 (1), pp. 28 – 43.

Dixon, N. M. (1997), 'Action learning at Digital Equipment', In M. Pedler (Ed.), *Action Learning in Practice,* Brookfield, VT: Gower Publishing (Ltd.).

Hallein, I. (1984), 'Setting the Climate for Learning in a Multicultural Group', *Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resource*, 22 (4), pp. 57 – 62.

Hernandez, S. A. (2002), 'Team Learning in a Marketing Principles Course: Cooperative Structures that Facilitate Active Learning and Higher Level Thinking', *Journal of Marketing Education,* 24 (1), pp. 73 – 85.

Hofstede, G. (1991), *Culture and Organizations*. McGraw-Hill: London.

Kolb, D. A. (1984), *Experiential Learning*: *Experiences as a source of learning and development*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Lawless, A. (2008), 'Action Learning as Legitimate Peripheral Participation', *Action Learning: Research and Practice*, 5 (2), pp. 117-129.

Marquardt, M. J. (1998), 'Using Action Learning with Multicultural Groups', *Performance Improvement Quarterly*, 11 (1), pp. 113 – 128.

Marsick, V. J., & O'Neil, J. (1999), 'The Many Faces of Action Learning', *Management Learning*, 30 (2), pp. 159-176.

Mumford, A. (Ed.). (1997), *Action Learning at Work*, Brookfield, VT: Gower Publishers (Ltd.).

O'Hara, S., Webber, T., & Reeve, S. (1996), 'Action Learning in Management Education', *Education & Training*, 38 (8), pp. 16 – 21.

O'Neil, J. (1999), 'Facilitating Action Learning: The Role of the Learning Coach', In Yorks, L., O'Neil, J. & Marsick, V. (Eds.), *Action Learning: Successful Strategies for Individual, Team*

and Organization, Advances in Developing Human Resources – Academy of Human Resources Development.

Pedlar, M. (Ed.). (1997), *Action Learning in Practice*, Hampshire, England: Gower Publishing (Ltd.).

Reeve, S. (1995), 'Higher Education for Capability: Beyond Competence to Capability and the Learning Society', *Concept Paper developed upon a paper presented at UMIST,* Manchester, UK.

Revans, R. W. (1957), 'The Contribution of University to Management Education', Reprinted In *The Origins and Growth of Action Learning*, (1982), Chartwell-Bratt: Broomely.

Revans, R. W. (1982), *The Origin and Growth of Action Learning,* London: Chartwell-Bratt.

Reynolds, M. (1994), *Groupwork in Education and Training: Ideas in Practice,* London: Kogan Page.

Rogers, A. (1997), 'Learning – Can We Change the Discourse?', *Adult Learning*, 8 (5), pp. 116 – 117

Sutton, D. (1997), 'In search of P', In Mumford, A. (Ed.), *Action Learning at Work,* Aldershot: Gower Publishing Limited.

Weinstein, K. (1995), *Action Learning: A Journey in Discovery and Development,* London: Harper Collins.

Yorks, L., O'Neil, J., & Marsick, V. (1999), 'Action learning: Theoretical Bases and Varieties of Practice', *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, 2, pp. 1 – 18