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The concept of action learning is certainly not new. It was developed by Professor Reg Revans in the 1940s when he was Director of Education for the National Coal Board. According to Johnson (1998:296), Revans developed the idea “that *the colliery managers who were experiencing organisational problems might learn from one another by talking through their difficulties and personally taking action*”.

Revans continued his work on action learning throughout his entire life from 1907 – 2003. During this time, he inspired many others, including Mike Pedler who was a professorial fellow at the University of Salford. Pedler updated an original book by Revans entitled the *ABC of Action Learning* to bring more attention to the concept. The Revans Centre for Action Learning and Research was eventually established at the University of Salford.

This illustrates how much progress action learning has made within academia since its inception in the 1940s. The concept of action learning was ridiculed by management schools throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Revans described action learning as “*freedom from teachers, from any form of printed syllabus or regulations, from any fixed institution or even from any literature save the most occasional... not even a case study or business game*”., He also referred to the material being taught in business schools in 1976 as “*an inexhaustible avalanche of lofty hocus pocus*”. Given these statements, it is not surprising that many were initially sceptical of action learning.

It is this concept of taking action that distinguishes action learning from any other. Bourner et al (1996) state that action learning is a “*process of reflection and action, aimed at improving effectiveness of action where learning is an important outcome*”. However, the author notes that learning by doing is a long-standing concept. Koo (1999) provides two very early quotes: “*What we have to learn to do, we learn by doing*” (Aristotle, a 4th-century Greek philosopher) and “*I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, I do and I understand*”. (Confucius 500 BCE) The author prefers the following quotation from Revans: “*...one is forced to enquire into what one really believes, as distinct from what one may claim to believe while arguing in the seminar or at the case-study*”.

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In action learning, the learner should become the focal point of the learning process. The success of action learning relies on learners being motivated to learn for themselves. (O'Hara 1997, cited by Koo 1999). There should be a collective approach to the problem solving of real problems with a cycle of inquiry that never varies. This cycle consists of a person completing the following:

- Presenting their problem without interruption
- Being questioned by the other set members
- Exploring the problem
- Summarising what they have heard
- Declaring what action they intend to take

This continues for as many set members as time allows until the review of the set's progress at the end. The review may focus on the process, the content or both. This cycle of inquiry will begin again at the next set meeting. However, the members who agreed to take actions must report back at the beginning. The set needs to maintain strict timing and process boundaries each time and recognise that the conduct of the set mirrors its values. Pedler (1991) sums up action learning well by stating that it involves three components: the people who take responsibility for taking action (this is key), the problems or tasks themselves and the set of colleagues who support and challenge each other to make progress on problems. Zuber-Skerrit (2002) identifies the latter as critical friends.

Revens (1998) makes the distinction between problems and puzzles. He argued that the difference is that some a puzzle requires some knowledge and a solution, whereas there is no correct answer to a problem. Revans also formulated a learning equation for action learning:

$$\mathbf{L} = \mathbf{P} + \mathbf{Q}$$

L = Learning, **P** = Programmed Knowledge & **Q** = Questioning Insight

Although some variations to this formula have been suggested (Mumford 1995, Smith 1997), Revan's equation continues to be the most widely used.

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A plethora of articles have been written about action learning during the 1990s; More programmes for undergraduate and postgraduate degrees and management programmes within organisations incorporated action learning as one of the primary methods of learning. In fact, the author was the programme manager for Bury Metropolitan Borough Council for a Diploma in Management by Action Learning in 1992/93. This was carried out in collaboration with the Manchester College of Arts & Technology (MANCAT) and Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU).

In this programme, the author played a role as a Set Adviser to one of the three sets – project supervisor to some students in the programme, as well as a co-deliverer of the design. This project also involved co-delivery of the residential induction and recruiting to the programme which was the first central in-house programme that incorporated action learning. The author's set reflected the approximately 20 middle managers who came from a variety of departments and had an array of responsibilities regarding the programme.

Much of the published research focuses on managers from the same organisation who took part in action learning sets. This was the author's first experience regarding action learning. Consequently, I have used it as a part of my reflections of action learning and the approach to it within the MSc programme. Although this experience occurred nearly 14 years ago, the memory of it still remains clear. This experience represented one of the most challenging and richest ones of my entire life. It can be used to illustrate how it could be incorporated into the thinking and reflection of more recent experiences.

Reflections sheets for each of the sets attended between December 2005 and February 2007 are included in appendices 1-6 using the format by Pedler (1996:85) which will be referred to briefly in the following paragraphs. However, the author has decided to use the perspective on action learning offered by Bourner & Frost (1996) when they investigated how action learning had been experienced by the reflections of