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Dear Reader,

As we've shared with you, our book *Action Reflection Learning: Solving Real Business Problems by Connecting Learning with Earning* will be out in February. As we talk about it, we have heard over and over the same question: What is the difference between Action Learning and ARL? Is there any difference? Is it just a branding issue? So we decided to address this question in this month's article.

Enjoy the reading!

Isabel Rimanoczy
Editor

Quote of the Month

"Science is organized knowledge. Wisdom is organized life."

Immanuel Kant
(1724 - 1804)

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Action Learning & Action Reflection Learning

by Isabel Rimanoczy

A personal story

In 1994 I was attending a conference in Copenhagen whose organizers also promoted a pre-conference session at the MiL Institute Campus in the south of Sweden. Since I was traveling a long distance from Argentina, where I was living at the time, I decided to sign up for both events. Big was my surprise at the very unconventional design of the MiL conference! The sessions were very interactive and were shaped by the questions of the participants rather than the typical scripted conference design using keynote speakers. I heard stories about results of ARL programs, and was curious about this approach that was new for me. I asked for more information, for articles or books I could read, but there was not much available. A couple of years later I received experiential training in the design and delivery of ARL programs. Still, the question remained in my mind: *What makes ARL work? How is it similar or different from Action Learning?*

What is Action Learning?

Action Learning has been around for over sixty years now, since Reg Revans coined the term, and there have been numerous attempts to give a definition of what it is, how to design and how to operate action learning programs. Interestingly, Revans himself, never provided a single, comprehensive definition, and over time he alternated emphasizing one aspect and then another.[1] Since then, action learning has been applied throughout the world in numerous variations and in diverse contexts.[2] However, running throughout these different applications of action learning, there are some common characteristics:

- Real problems are tackled in real time, and there is no "right" answer to the challenge addressed

- Participants meet several times in small stable learning groups (called 'sets') of 4-8 members

- Problems addressed are relevant to the participants' workplace realities

- Participants support each other's learning, asking questions, reflecting, and extracting lessons

- Participants take action to resolve the problem

The origins of ARL

ARL as a practice has its roots in Sweden, where in the late 1970s a group of academics, consultants, HR professionals, line managers and corporate directors formed a task force to find better ways of developing leaders, ways different from the classic management training of that time. In the mid 1980s the MiL Institute in Sweden shared their practice with a group of training professionals[3] in the USA, who founded LIM, and they jointly called the approach ARLto validate and stress the importance of individual and group reflection in heightening awareness and in developing new frameworks for learning.[4] In hindsight, they may have been trying to give a new name to a new practice, which at that time no longer fitted the original action learning settings and specifications.

One step further

In 2004 I initiated a research study to explore if there were common elements used by ARL practitioners, and if so, what learning principles supported their practice of ARL. Intrigued by the reported success of the practice, I hoped to find the answers through the study. Indeed, I was able to identify a number of elements that constituted the core of the approach, and to unearth the learning principles that lay at its foundation. This coding process helped to bring clarity to the practice of ARL and led to the establishment of a conceptual framework that proved useful for designing and delivering ARL learning interventions.

What does ARL look like?

Initially, ARL was not a theory or a clearly defined model; it had come to be defined as "what ARL practitioners do". The methodology evolved organically following the practices of its several practitioners, who shared a fairly loose conceptual connection among themselves.

Like Action Learning, ARL began as an alternative developmental methodology for leadership development. However, over time the ARL approach has been used to achieve different outcomes and in a variety of contexts. It has been used in developmental efforts with existing teams, to help individuals become a better performing team, to support the transition of a leader into a new team, and for teams working on a crisis. It has been applied for organizational development, i.e. in the integration process of mergers and acquisitions, in the design and implementation of organizational change programs, in the facilitation of performance appraisal processes, and in the launch of mentoring programs. Additional applications are related to training or development, such as in programs to prepare young high potentials for their next challenges; for the development of specific managerial and leadership competencies; for development of leader-coaches; for

development of HR competencies and for individual support through coaching. For educational purposes, it has been used in classroom settings.[5]

What all those interventions have in common is the use of an eclectic set of principles, which emanate from a variety of disciplines: adult learning theories, humanistic psychology, cybernetics, behaviorism, Gestalt psychology, social learning, among others. As a result of coding the research findings of the ARL practice and identifying its elements and principles, it became clear that ARL has grown into a learning methodology, in the broader sense, applicable to a variety of learning interventions and scenarios.

How do Action Learning and ARL relate?

At this point, it is possible to suggest that Action Learning based interventions can be seen as a specific design, where a group of individuals meet with or without an external learning facilitator, to work on one or several challenges and to learn from it. ARL, falling as it does into the realm of broader learning methodologies, is thought to contribute a comprehensive guide in the form of specific principles which serve to maximize learning in different applications and contexts, Action Learning programs being one of them. Fig 1. depicts an example of how different contexts where learning is involved are informed by ARL principles.
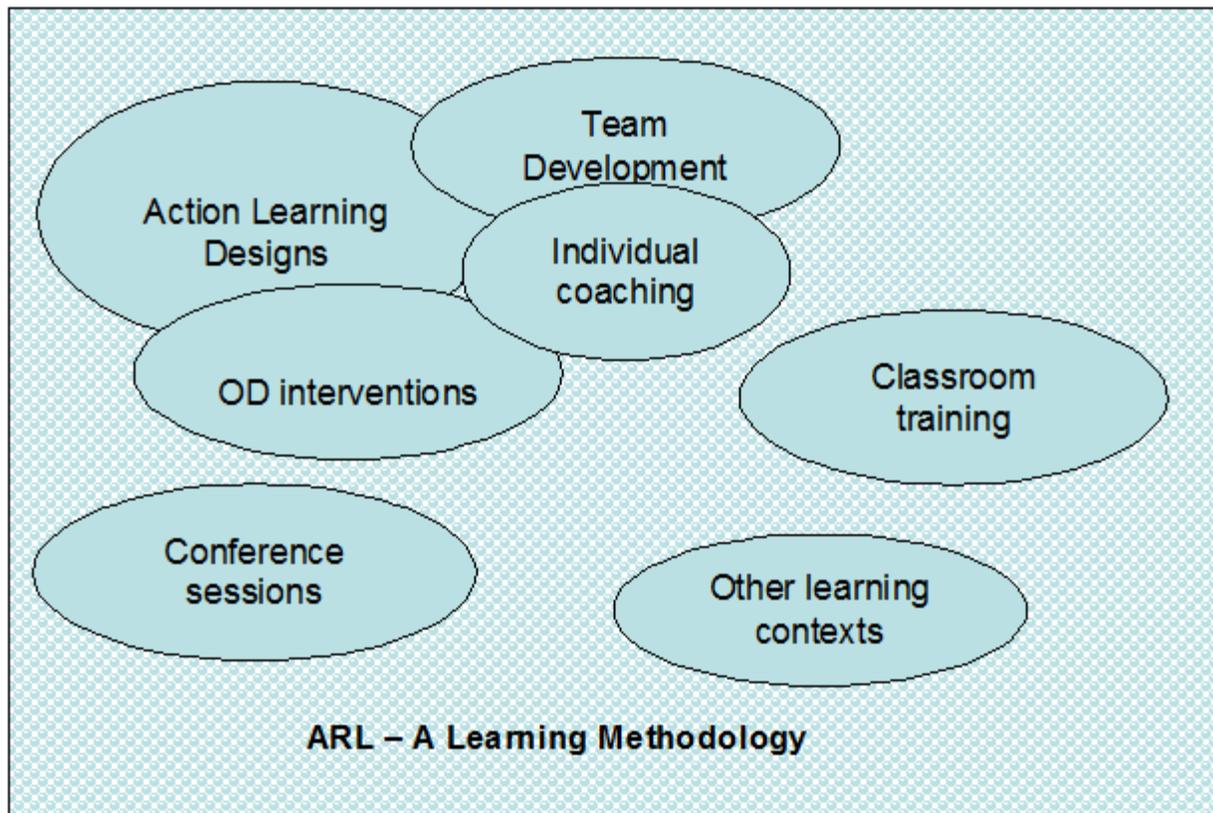
Fig. 1

This is not meant to diminish in any way the power of Action Learning. ARL has evolved as an "unstructured" practice, outside of conceptual frameworks and theoretical guidelines, being shaped by the shared experiences of practitioners using it. We believe that this collective wisdom eclectically combines the essence of some of the best thinkers, philosophers and authors, crossing the boundaries of scientific disciplines and time. No one has "invented" ARL. Like wisdom, we partly inherited it, we all partly continue building upon it.

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[1] See Mumford, A.. Learning in action. Industrial and Commercial Training. Vol. 27, No.. 8; pp 36-40, 1995
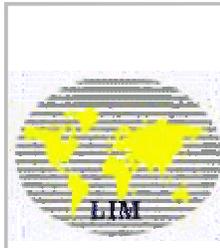
[2] Smith, Peter A.C.and O'Neil, J., A Review of Action Learning Literature 1994 - 2000, Part 2 - Signposts into the Literature, J. Workplace Learning, Vol. 15, No. 4, 2003 and Smith & O'Neil, 2003 and O'Neil, J. and Marsick, V. *Understanding Action Learning*, AMACOM, 2007

[3] Ernie Turner, Lars Cederholm, Victoria Marsick and Tony Pearson

[4] Rohlin, L. et al. *Earning while Learning in Global Leadership*. Vasbyholm: MiL Publishers AB, 2002.

[5] See Rimanoczy, I. (2007) Action Learning and Action Reflection Learning: Are they different? Industrial and Commercial Training.

> If you want more triggers for reflection, visit
> http://isabelrimanoczy.blogspot.com.