

Review of *ABC of Action Learning*, by Reg W. Revans and edited by Mike Pedler, Farnham, Gower Publishing, 2011, 138 pp. (\$23.70) (paperback), ISBN 978-1-4094-2703-2; (ebk), ISBN 978-1-4094-2704-9.

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The most accessible and practical publication on Action Learning by its founder, Reg Revans, is the *ABC of Action Learning*. It is by far the most concise statement of his principles and elements of his practice, a rich source for both those wanting to learn about Action Learning and those wishing to refresh their practice and deepen their understanding of it.

Originally published as a 38-page booklet in 1978, it has been revised three times, once by Revans (1983), twice by Pedler ([1998](#), [2011](#)), and printed six times in the English language. The 1978 edition was reprinted twice in the UK. In addition to Revans' self-published first edition, also once by the Action Learning Trust in 1978 and later by David Botham, the Director of the Revans Centre for Action Learning and Research, but we are uncertain as to the exact date. Revans' 1983 edition was republished in its entirety in 2004 by Barker ([2004](#)) with his commentary. Pedler revised and updated the 1983 edition in 1998, and then in 2011 he made further (slight) editorial changes to the 1998 edition. There were two Swedish-language editions and five printings (1981, 1983, 1986, 1989, and 2000) initiated originally by the Management Program in Lund (MiL) and one publication in Norwegian (1984).

All editions of the booklet were dedicated to Janet Barbara Craig (1917–2002), and it read as follows in the first edition: 'To Janet Craig whose efforts have made Action Learning possible in this country', and became a little more patriotic in the next edition: 'Dedicated to Janet Craig whose support made Action Learning possible in the country of its origin.' Janet Barbara Craig was a professional nurse and nursing researcher, and Director of Nurse Training and Development at the King Edward VII Fund. As her obituary stated, 'When Professor Reginald Revans, of Manchester University, published *Standards for Morale* in 1964, it had a profound influence on her' and they 'subsequently worked together' until her passing. She also catalogued his archive and library (Dopson [2002](#)).

The first edition was, unlike the subsequent edition in 1983, not only shorter but also more focused on his experiences with workers, and managers of small enterprises and their issues, and less on the larger institutions and businesses that he had been used to. Not surprisingly, he was at this time also equating 'worker participation' in the enterprise as Action Learning as well. Although self-published, the Forward Engineering Group Training Scheme of Birmingham helped support the publication as did Alan Lawlor and Colin Wootton, its two 'officers' 'who helped provide the ideas'.

The same booklet was republished in 1978 by The Action Learning Trust (1977–1982), one of many collaborative partnerships and consultancies established by Revans in the UK after his permanent return from Belgium in 1973–1974 (Boshyk, Barker, and Dilworth [2010](#)).

In 1983, a new version appeared, expanded to 84 pages, published for 'Revans Action Learning International Ltd' (RALI) by Chartwell-Bratt. RALI was a company 'whose principle activity' was to be 'the planning, implementation, and management of action learning programs, but in addition to these commercial activities', RALI was

deeply concerned to establish the validity of action learning ... as a medium of social regeneration [because action learning] has application not only to the creation of industrial wealth, but also to the problems of our schools, our hospitals, and other social services.

RALI was willing to work with 'business schools, trade unions, local authorities, management consultants', and others. Along with Revans, the other partners in this enterprise were the companies Chartwell-Bratt (owned by a Swede, Bertil Bratt) and the publisher of Revans' 1982 book, *The Origins and Growth of Action Learning*, as well as Foster Wheeler Power Products who helped fund the publication of that text (Revans 1983, 2).

It is relevant for this review to elaborate a little on the context and, therefore, the differences between the 1978 and 1983 Revans editions in order to help explain why the 1983 edition is considered to be such an important source for understanding traditional Action Learning. From the mid-1970s, we see the intensification of what was perceived to be Britain's declining economic fortunes and a marked increase in social tension. This malaise found its way into the 1983 edition. We see reference to 'these more austere times', 'our present emergencies', and 'failing culture'. There was a greater sense of urgency and need in the 1983 edition that did not exist in the 1978 edition. It was also a time when US short-term managerial practices were being severely criticized: European and Japanese companies were seen to be far more competitive. The established business schools in the USA were often seen as contributing to the seeming demise of US competitiveness and managerial competence (Hayes and Abernathy [1980](#); Khurana [2007](#), 294–312). Revans was not favorably disposed to business school education and we see therefore a much harsher tone in his critique of business schools and their professors in the 1983 edition.

Another difference between the two editions is that by 1983 Revans had gained more experience with his 'experiments' and programs, and a more pragmatic understanding of the 'logistics' of Action Learning because of his extensive work with colleagues such as David Casey (who allegedly coined the term, 'set') David Pearce, Jean Lawrence, Alan Lawlor, Bob Garratt, and others, who helped him better develop and define the processes, the 'logistics' of Action Learning – something he admitted was less than thoroughly defined previously (Revans [1982](#), 613). This helps explain the greater detail and thoroughness, and even the more practical structure of the text that we find in the 1983 edition as opposed to the 1973 edition.

Another major contextual difference was the evolving management education landscape in the UK and its implications for Action Learning. In a perceptive observation by Clutterbuck in November 1976, he wrote that 'while the traditional massive projects continue, the future of the action learning technique seems to lie in less ambitious undertakings'. He maintained that there would inevitably be an evolution in action learning's philosophy and practices, including shorter programs in order to meet the needs of businesses in the UK (Clutterbuck [1976](#)). While no other 'massive' projects came his way after the General Electric Company and Belgian consortium programs, Revans' growing exposure allowed him to widen his Action Learning activities into new sectors of society and in other countries, further enriching the 1983 edition.

In 1998, Pedler published a revised version of Revans' 1983 text. He wanted to make it more readily available as most of Revans' texts were either difficult to find or were out of print. He also wanted to make Revans' 'wisdom' more accessible to the modern reader and more attractive in organization and layout. In this first revision, Pedler's publisher, Lemos & Crane fulfilled these objectives with an attractive design, clear layout with a short description of

the each chapter's content, and outline of each chapter's sub-headings and content. He added an updated annotated Bibliography and included a Foreword by David Botham. He added a page from the 1978 edition that was not included by Revans in his 1983 edition. In Pedler's [1998](#) edition, it made its way to the end of Chapter 7. This was a wise choice as it adds to our understanding of 'design issues' relating to Action Learning. Pedler also added a new Chapter 8. It was originally an article published from 1969 and appears in Revans' *The Origins and Growth of Action Learning* (Revans [1982](#), 280–286). He includes this text 'because it addresses the issue of the learning organization well before its recent popularity' and because 'Revans always envisaged Action Learning in this wider context in contrast to those who present it as a small group learning method' (Pedler [1998](#), xii). This is also understandable given that many are not aware of Revans' pioneering work and interest in systems thinking and application of it to organizations (hospitals), and in building robust and inclusive learning systems (National Coal Board).

Pedler decided not to include some pages from the 1983 edition in his 1998 revised edition. Chapter 6, 'Some Illustrations of Action Learning Programmes' (Revans 1983, 56–60), is a discussion of Revans' programs in the UK, starting with the National Association of Colliery Managers (1952), as well as a few pages about 'Action Learning Programmes Overseas'. This chapter was excluded because it 'covers the ground only until 1983' and would have required a major update and a 'completely new text' (Pedler [1998](#), xii). Revans' other writings are full of more detailed and updated elaborations of his work in both the UK and abroad (Revans [1980](#)). Pedler also deleted Revans' discussion about experiences with the 'principal exchange options for designing action learning programmes' (Revans 1983, 21–26). This section was a sophisticated and very detailed elaboration on the four options: 'a familiar problem in a familiar setting'; 'a familiar problem in an unfamiliar setting'; 'an unfamiliar problem in a familiar setting'; and 'an unfamiliar problem in an unfamiliar setting'. Although valuable, it is very historically specific and would have required the inclusion of the 'experiments' from 1952 to 1983, something Pedler decided not to include as we have seen.

Without question, and in whatever edition, Revans' *ABC of Action Learning* is the 'go to' source for those interested in the fundamentals and explanation of the principles underlining Revans' approach to Action Learning. Of course, it is necessary for those wanting to go deeper into the sources and to see the evolution of Action Learning, to consult and study the original 1978 and 1983 editions, as well as other works by Revans.

But for those so inclined to delve deeper into the original texts, they confront other challenges and Pedler has tried to address these as well.

He has often commented on Revans' writing style. For example, in a review of Revans' book *Action Learning: New Techniques for Management*, Pedler described Revans as a 'latter day' William Hazlitt (1778–1830), the early nineteenth century essayist and social commentator (Pedler [1980](#)). (This reviewer has also seen a letter of Revans' in which he also views himself in this way.) Pedler finds Revans' original texts full of 'long sentences, with multiple semicolons in lengthy paragraphs' achieving 'a magnificent but dense oratorical style, which can be hard to penetrate for all but the most persevering reader' (Pedler [1998](#), xiii).

From our own experience and from others, we have often been told by those wishing to inform themselves about Action Learning that it is no mean feat to read, let alone translate, his writing into other languages, especially for non-native English speakers. Even highly educated native speakers find the Oxford Dictionary (full version) a very helpful companion when reading Revans, so rich and nuanced is the language. However, his writing is also

sometimes described as 'arcane'. In this regard, and helpfully, Pedler has sometimes changed some of the words and terms used by Revans. Among these are 'colleague' or 'participant' for 'fellow'; 'staff' for 'subordinates'; 'whatever' for 'whatsoever'; 'whoever' for 'whomsoever'; and so on. Revans' exclusive use of 'he' has been changed to either 'his or her' or 'participant's'. One could have also replaced 'comrades in adversity' by 'partners in adversity' (39) – something Revans' himself changed in his later writings. Unlike Revans, 'action learning' is capitalized in Pedler's editions, and most of the bolded and italicized text in the 1983 Revans edition is not done so often in either of the Pedler revised versions. An improvement in readability is one of Pedler's objectives and this has been accomplished especially in several chapters, particularly Chapters 2 and 3, where he organizes the Hazlitt-like text; so it can be read more clearly, and therefore, more usefully.

The work under review is Pedler's most recent revision of his previously revised (1998) edition of Revans 1983 version, with a new 'Editor's Note', two new chapters, one (Chapter 9) being an updated 'Annotated Bibliography' from the 1998 'Bibliography', as well as a new Chapter 10, 'Further Information', which is about the International Foundation For Action Learning (IFAL). A 'Preface' by Revans written for the 1998 edition that did not appear for some reason in the 1998 edition is included here. This contribution, except for the first two chapters and some minor changes in wording, is similar to Revans' 1983 'Author's Preface to the Second Edition'. The titles of the other eight chapters are the same as in Pedler's [1998](#) revised edition, except for the title of Chapter 2, which has been changed from 'Essential Rights' to 'Essential Logistics'. The 1998 'Foreword' by David Botham, and Pedler's [1998](#) 'Introduction to the [Mike Pedler] Library' were not included in the 2011 edition.

It is this reviewer's view that Mike Pedler has done all of us a valuable service by updating this booklet to make Revans, his ideas and practice, more accessible to today's readers and practitioners throughout the world. He states that he edited the original 'to encourage the widest possible reading of this enduring wisdom' and at the same time, Pedler was concerned not to 'materially' alter Revans' 'voice'. The former objective is fully in keeping with Revans' intention in writing the ABC of Action Learning in the first place (Revans [1978a](#), [1978b](#), 3).

Pedler mentions in his 'Editorial Note' that he is aware that the changes he has made to Revans' 1983 edition would be 'controversial'. When preparing the text, Pedler was supported in this endeavor by Revans' close colleagues and friends David Botham and the late John Morris. Revans, as we mentioned, also provided a Preface. True to Pedler's prediction though, criticism of his revised and updated version has been sometimes vitriolic.

Pedler has been accused of 're-phrasing in the interests of political correctness' and revising sentences from the original 1983 edition 'to facilitate "greater accessibility" (a euphemism for adapting a sentence into a new journalistic style used to make it easily read by lazy people' (Barker [2004](#), 207 and 267). Unfortunately, this criticism only serves to reinforce Gordon Wills' observation about why Revans and Action Learning were not as influential as they could have been in the 1970s and later: '... A holier than thou stance was ... often adopted by the great majority of his disciples over the years as a defence mechanism for the equally unsympathetic reactions of those denounced.' But the leaf does not fall far from the tree, and Wills also mentions that Revans 'was not wrong! He was simply not convincing us adequately. He showed scant regard for personal influencing skills. He preferred to denounce all professors and experts although paradoxically holding on the title of professor himself' (Pedler [1980](#); Wills [1988](#), 9).

To Pedler's credit he has not deleted Revans' comments and opinions in either edited edition even though they may seem too generalized and aggressively self-righteous at times. This sheds light on Revans' behavior and character and perhaps explains why he was considered the 'bitterest of gurus' by some commentators, and a normal human being with common shortcomings, perhaps in a positive way underscoring that there is no room for hagiography in the house of Action Learning (Clutterbuck and Crainer [1990](#), 124).

Rather than attack those who are promoting Revans' form of Action Learning, these critics could get involved with others in doing more about ensuring that Revans' original writings and primary source materials are preserved, copied, and made freely available to all interested throughout the world. Annotated texts helping readers understand the context in Revans' texts would also be appreciated. For example, what non-British (and even British) reader understands Revans' mention of the 'The Taff Vale judgement?' (Revans [1998](#), 75; 2011, 65).

For the modern age and for new generations of the curious who may not be 'persevering', we have also seen some other positive efforts to disseminate Revans' ideas in a more attractive and accessible format. It is well known that Revans' writing was not always as clearly understandable as the clarity we witness in his oral presentations. Mumford ([2008](#)) once made the same comment to Revans, and the latter concurred, much to Mumford's surprise. It is not difficult to see the contrast between his oral presentations and his writing. In this regard, IFAL is to be congratulated for preserving and making available the filmed and recorded presentations by Revans, and some are available on YouTube, even with non-English sub-titles.

Perhaps, IFAL together with others institutions and individuals could launch such a collaborative initiative to find a sustainable home and platform to preserve, disseminate, and make available the papers and texts of Action Learning practitioners throughout the world – and thus do proper service to even Action Learning's founder. It is indeed a sad comment that it has so far proven to be so difficult. We have already lost much of these materials. But it is not too late and we can at least start doing something about this.

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