

A Personal Philosophy of Anticipatory Action-Learning*

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Introduction

While thinking about traditional action-learning, I began to wonder what philosophy Reg Revans espoused back in the 40's in the coal mines of Wales and England. Perhaps "those who do the job are the best people to solve the problems" would have been his catch-cry. Interested in action-learning's recent progeny, anticipatory action-learning (AAL), I began to explore my own philosophy and values in relation to this work using the PATOP model (Whiteley 2001) as a guide to ensuring my philosophy, values, assumptions, theory, organising principles and practice were in alignment. This is important to me as my business values are "integrity, creativity and foresight". I need to check from time to time that I am walking my talk. PATOP stands for Philosophy (and values), Assumptions, Theory, Organising, and Practice. (Whiteley 2001) The discussion in this essay has been structured around the PATOP model.

Philosophy and Values

I believe that creating the future is not solely about an "expert" generating one for you in a workshop or a lecture. Deep anticipatory action learning is a process of co-creating the future with those who have a stake in it. It involves questioning assumptions, challenging the status quo, creating an environment that facilitates the

emergence of futures, encouraging experimentation, and it's about learning for the individual and collective (usually an organisation or a community). With this philosophy in mind, my values in relation to the work became apparent and are organised into the following 10 concepts:

Participation

AAL seeks to include stakeholders in the creation of a shared future, encouraging them to talk about future possibilities. During these shared conversations, participants start to recognise and appreciate their many ways of knowing. Wisdom, intuition and experience are fused with facts and figures. All participants are acknowledged as equals. (Van Der Heijden 1996; Inayatullah 2002; Zuber-Skerritt 2002)

Insightful Questioning

Building on Mezirow's work on transformative learning, Marsick (1998) argues that adult experiences are "filtered through existing frames of reference or strongly held assumptions and beliefs." The questioning of these assumptions and beliefs, and the insights gained through reflection, integral features of AAL, enables individuals to appreciate the constraints on their own thinking and paves the way for opening the mind to creativity and new directions.

Literature on traditional AL suggests that insightful questioning is carried out amongst participants. In my

*I am indebted to Mark Humphries for his technical advice and insight toward the development of this essay.

experience, it is useful to have a coach with foresight expertise contributing to the questioning role in an AAL project as project team members unaccustomed to futures thinking may remain locked into past experiences.

Systems Thinking

Systems thinking seeks to understand interconnectedness, complexity and wholeness of components of systems in specific relationship to each other. The ability to think systemically enables us to "connect issues, events and facts in a holistic way" (Zuber-Skerritt 2002), to see patterns and trends and to appreciate the impact of the decisions we make across a broad spectrum.

Foresight

Foresight marks the ability to see through the apparent confusion, to spot developments before they become trends, to see patterns before they fully emerge, and to grasp the relevant features of social currents that are likely to shape the direction of future events

(Whitehead cited in: Tsoukas and Shepherd 2004)

In my view, the word "foresight" is also becoming synonymous with the methodologies used to facilitate the creation of preferred futures and to assess the consequences of today's plans on tomorrow's world. It is both futures thinking and futures action. It may arise from a formal study but may equally be the result of discourse between people who deliberately focus their attention on exploring and developing certain future pathways. Van der Heijden refers to the latter as "strategic conversations" (1996).

Futures thinking may be the most challenging aspect of development for participants in an AAL project, many of whom will be accustomed to environments where short-term thinking dominates.

Creativity

The ability to generate original concepts, meanings, new ways of doing things, and new

thinking is essential to an AAL process. Participants are encouraged to use imagination and not to allow their thinking to be limited to past experience or official futures.

Synergy

The ability of the AAL group to produce something that is greater than the sum of its individuals' abilities through the sharing of information, knowledge and skills.

Openness and Trust

Participants are encouraged to be open and share their ideas and thoughts whilst being receptive to the views of others. The creation of an environment of trust is a critical success factor for AAL projects.

Focus on Learning

Whilst AAL initiatives are practical and purpose-oriented, they emphasise the importance of individual and collective learning as being of equal value. AAL provides an environment suitable for transformative learning and development for both individuals and collectives, and facilitates the exploration of a multiplicity of futures through abstract conceptualisation and reconceptualisation. (Marsick 1998; Inayatullah 2002)

Emergence

Closely linked to "synergy", emergence can be defined as "the arising of novel and coherent structures, patterns, and properties during the process of self-organisation in complex systems." (Goldstein 2004) The word "emergence", in my view, also infers that you will allow futures to come forth without shaping them according to your own beliefs.

Organisational Resilience

The anticipatory aspect of AAL assists organisations to become learning organisations, building resilience to shockwaves in complex and dynamic operating environments.

A learning organisation is one that combines adaptive learning: the capability to interpret, react, adapt to or influence your environ-

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ment as necessary for survival; with generative learning that enhances the capacity to create. (Senge 1990; Smith and Peters 1997) Inayatullah agrees stating that a key element of a learning organisation is "a constant exploration of alternative futures: foresight as central to the organisation." (2002: 135)

The capacity to create one's own future forms a vital part in building resilience in individuals and, I propose, in organisations. As a metaphor for organisations, resilience captures the essence of an adaptive, generative organisation where strategy is no longer about a linear process of scheduling from "A" to "B" but an emergent process that empowers people to anticipate, adapt and create strategies in response to emerging issues and discontinuities. I suggest that a resilient organisation would be better equipped to respond, adapt to and survive sudden changes in its environment much as a resilient individual is. In doing so, the organisation becomes one that charts its own future rather than one that is stressed by the tyranny of the urgent.

Assumption

A key assumption in this personal philosophy is that those who have a stake in the possible futures of a particular domain share a belief that they can shape the future. This assumption has its origins in my Western cultural upbringing. The Western view of futures can be likened to the Western view of nature: we believe we can control it; as distinct from other cultures that live in harmony with nature and may not believe it appropriate or desirable to intervene in destiny or their particular deity's will for the future.

Paradoxically, it may be this very Western belief in our ability to control our future that challenges individuals when confronted with the need to let go of control and allow futures to emerge during an AAL project.

Theory

Drawing on the work of Habermas (1984),

Stacey et al. (2000) and Stephenson (2000), and for the purposes of this analysis, I shall refer to the theoretical underpinnings of my personal philosophy as 'the theory of participative human agency'. With origins in critical theory, it seeks to ensure equity in future-creating by involving those affected by the potential futures in the process. It is predicated on the belief that, if an environment is created that is conducive to facilitating emergence, the interactions of the people involved will generate a shared preferred future.

Organising

Revans, along with other champions of action-learning, argues that it is ideal for finding solutions to problems that do not have a "right" answer because the necessary questioning insight can be facilitated by people learning with and from each other in AL groups. (Revans Institute 2003)

The exploration of futures, however, is not always about problem-solving and often requires a more creative approach. Unlike management processes aimed at problem solving, AAL projects do not start with predefined outcomes. The process is diachronous – the outcomes emerge during the course of the project and are negotiated by participants. (Stephenson 2000) AAL is therefore a democratic, participatory process that brings together skilled and talented people, irrespective of formal qualification or position. Revans referred to members of an AL group as "comrades in adversity", acknowledging that every member of the group had an interest in the project at both individual and collective levels. (Revans Institute 2003)

Stephenson (2000) identified a number of characteristics of the AAL process which have been adapted here for the purpose of "organizing":

- *Identifying the people who will take part in the activity; inclusive of as many views as possible*
- *Defining the scope of the anticipation*
- *Collaboratively agreeing on what is to be explored and how, during the process itself, not as preordained objectives*

- *Collecting data, with agreement on who gathers what*
- *Analysing and critically deconstructing the data, with particular attention to the consequences of trends and changes*
- *Developing alternative futures, scenarios or visions*
- *Reflection on the alternative futures envisioned*
- *Deciding which futures to prevent and which to pursue actively*
- *Developing actions on how to create preferred futures*

Practice

Each project is unique. Thus the extent to which I have been able to fully employ my values has been negotiated with the client and the project team in accordance with their imperatives.

In addition to calling upon the work of Inayatullah, Zuber-Skerritt, Stephenson and others for method and organising principles, there are other practices that I believe have contributed to project success:

- CEO and senior management sign-on and commitment to individual and collective learning
- Core team briefing on the AAL process
- Selecting core team from volunteers; engaging others as contributors
- Generating an environment conducive to creativity, experimentation, the challenging of current thinking and practice, the surfacing of assumptions, trust and team building
- Providing some tuition in futures thinking and foresight practice
- Ensuring high-visibility recognition for project team members and contributors
- Designing and implementing processes that will continue to support the work after I leave

Alignment

In the context of anticipatory action learn-

ing, the philosophy and values have been interpreted as requiring the insights gained through questioning and surfacing of assumptions to be used in conjunction with foresight thus loosening some of the constraints on thinking. By opening up our thinking we are able to explore a wider range of future possibilities and co-create a preferred, shared future.

Conclusion

The most enjoyable foresight projects in my experience have been those where AAL, or aspects of the methodology, have been utilised. I find it intrinsically rewarding to contribute to a project wherein individuals, organisations and communities are learning and growing, becoming empowered to create their own futures, and evolving.

Reflecting on recent experiences, I believe my theories and practice are aligned and congruent with my business value of integrity.

The most challenging aspect of foresight practice now seems to me to be enlightening people of the need to take a longer-term, systemic view when short-termism seems to be the dominant paradigm. This reminds me of Plato's simile of The Cave. As our foresight thinking and skills grow with time we break free from the chains that limit our vision and, turning to look up towards the mouth of the cave, we start to perceive things as they could be, rather than the shadows of past stories and current realities cast on the wall of the cave. Enlightenment is a gradual awakening, seemingly irrelevant to those still captivated by the illusions created by flickering shadows. According to Plato (1974), once reality is perceived, nothing can ever be quite the same again, and that perception remains the source of wisdom. In my view, once futures are perceived they too become a source of wisdom. Having explored a range of futures, we are required to return to the cave and share the insights with others in the hope that they too will break their mental chains and come to value foresight in creating and preparing for a range of futures.

If Revans philosophy in the 1940's was akin

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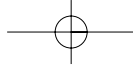
to "those who do the job are the best people to solve the problems" as surmised in the introduction to this essay, then perhaps my philosophy for anticipatory action-learning can best be summed up as 'those with a stake in the future are the best people to create the future'? As Plato said when giving his interpretation of The Cave "heaven knows whether it is true; but this, at any rate, is how it appears to me."

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