1. For researchers or students who have never encountered *Action Learning: Research and Practice* what is the journal about in a nutshell?

MP:

The purpose of the journal is to publish articles in the theory and the practice of action learning, which is an approach to management and organisation development which says that you cannot learn unless you first try and implement an action or try and change a situation which we call a problem. It is also the case that when you take some action on a problem or a situation then you invariably learn from that, so it’s a theory if you like of learning which is being particularly applied in management education but also to a wide area of professional fields. And it’s particularly important because there has been a turn in recent years away from what we might call propositional knowledge, knowledge provided in lectures, what in action learning is called programme knowledge, or the knowledge that’s in books and films and things like that, and what we call questioning insight, knowledge that comes from questioning and inquiring into a new situation or a changed situation.

So basically the journal is for all the people who are concerned with that sort of learning, whether they be researchers, students, managers or professionals who themselves are trying to find new organisation leadership solutions, or indeed academics and teachers who want to find better ways of researching and teaching.

2. What are the origins of the journal?

MP:

Action learning as I understand it originates in the work of Reg Revans who was a rather remarkable man, born in 1907 and not dying until 2003. He was first of all trained as a nuclear physicist at Cambridge, he later became [Assistant] Director of Education for Essex just before the war and then after the war he became one of the first professors of Management Education in the UK at UMIST in the 1950’s and at that time he was very interested in operational research i.e. the application of scientific ideas to the resolution of organisational problems. I think he later became in the 1960s and 1970s, more convinced of the human impact in organisational problems and issues so although operational research tries to deal with the technical or scientific issues/aspects of problems he became more convinced that it was the human actions and managerial actions in particular that had an
impact on creating the problems that needed to be resolved. So action learning came out of that rich heritage. It has got elements of science in it, it’s got elements of the applications of operational research, and then more latterly it’s got learning theory, and behind it all a sort of moral philosophy about improving systems for the people who work in them and the people they serve.

3. What do you think are the most contentious issues in contemporary debate and research in education which your journal seeks to address?

KT:

I think the language of contention is an interesting one, and I think for me what we are interested in is opening up for challenging scrutiny, new areas of knowledge and new areas that are emerging. So for instance, Mike has often talked about the challenges of Wicked problems in organisations and given the current climate Action Learning is well positioned to begin to tackle some of those. The second one that we’ve alluded to in our earlier response is around how do you enact actionable knowledge and policy, and that’s a really interesting but contentious area. In the education field, the challenge in terms of contention is making knowledge relevant, viable and transferable in the workplace and then there is this issue about content versus process. We are very interested in the processes of learning as we are in the content of learning.

MP:

I’d just like to add a couple of things to that. One is that there are great challenges in the actual practice of action learning, anybody trying to put it into practice will find that although this is a very simple idea it is actually quite difficult in many situations to get the right conditions to give it a chance to work properly. So for example, all people taking part in action learning ought to be volunteers, they ought to be able to freely join in this situation and of course learning is a voluntary activity, you can’t compel people to learn and you can’t actually compel people to act in the sense of action learning.

So people need to be volunteers and yet in many organisations it’s difficult sometimes to create that condition, so for example some people get sent on training courses and they also get sent on action learning and that doesn’t work, or it doesn’t work very well. So there are practical and interesting difficulties with using action learning, but there are also some more knowledge based issues which are of interest to researchers and academics and in particular what interests me is in the academy action learning is seen as something which is just learning by doing. It is not taken seriously as an academic topic and I think one of the quests of the journal is to bridge the gap between practice and academia in such a way that actionable knowledge or the practical knowledge that comes from action learning is seen as
just as important as the speculative or philosophical knowledge which the university majors in. And I think that’s quite a controversial issue and I can think of lots of people if they were sitting here would be laughing by now!

4. Why is action learning important?

MP:

I think it is important because it does have, actually, a revolutionary edge, or we might say an emancipatory edge, I’ll just explain that a little bit. This is basically because it is a learning approach rather than a training approach. As a learning approach it is always uncovering new knowledge and in some ways this is a subversive activity and a difficult activity. Let me expand on this a little bit. Action learning is both very pragmatic, i.e. it’s about what works and what can be done, but it is also a moral philosophy, it’s also doing the good, it’s not just enough to have what works, it’s a question of what works and what will move us to providing a better service, or creating a better system or creating better jobs for people. Now I know that raises all sorts of issues in itself but it is an important aspect of action learning, this emancipatory edge. Now if you go to Lyotard, who had a view of three forms of knowledge which he called speculative, performative and emancipatory, if we just stick with the pragmatic aspects of action learning, it might become a very performative thing, that is it might simply serve the existing purposes on an organisation or system and do its bidding. We do see some kinds of action learning like that which are almost like training, where people do not question the assumptions that lie behind the particular systems they are being trained in. If you take the emancipatory edge, that is where the questioning aspects of action learning come in. What is action learning allowed to question? For example the critical action learning focus says that anyone working in the action learning set should not only be inquiring into a particular, specific problem in their organisation. perhaps the installation on a new inventory system in an engineering company, but might also be inquiring into the assumptions underlying the way the whole engineering company is run, the way it’s led, the way it’s managed, what it’s doing in the world outside. Now these obviously are big questions which might get people into big trouble, but Revans often said, that until you run into resistance you know you’re not really doing anything, and it’s when you run into resistance that you really start to learn. It’s easy to over-exaggerate this and it’s important to say that people must choose their own level of risk, but action learning properly understood carries a risk, an action to promote progress on a problem carries a certain risk, and unless there is that certain risk then there is no profound learning and action learning merely becomes a form of training, which we do see in a number of settings. So it’s important to stress that emancipatory edge to action learning practice as we see it, and that is revolution.
5. Who do you feel are your readership, your core audience?

KT:

There are three core audiences that the journal is trying to attract; firstly academics interested in the conceptual developments of action learning and its relationship to practice, and that’s the key, its relationship to practice, not just theory for theories sake; we are particularly interested and very proud in the journal’s history in relation to scholarly practitioners – so what do we mean by that? We are particularly interested in engaging with practitioners who work with action learning in organisations, in communities, in policy circles, practitioners who are living it, doing it, but critically thoughtful about their practice. And then finally we are interested in managers [and] policy makers concerned with implementation and learning, in all the variety of areas including innovation, regeneration and community development, so it’s got a broad spectrum in terms of the audiences that it’s trying to appeal to.

6. What are the implications for anyone that wants to write for the journal? What advice do you have for practitioners?

KT:

Mike talked earlier on about this notion for a passion for action learning and that’s not always easy to communicate so what I want to do is try and focus on how do we enact that? How do we write about our practice, our theorising, or the kind of policy areas that we are trying to impact and influence? The journal has two routes for people to do that – accounts of practice and refereed papers.

Let me take accounts of practice first. People write accounts of practice for the journal because they have a story to tell, either about their experience of action learning or because they have an excitement or insight that they want to share in relation to their practice. But this section of the journal is more than just a platform for the exchange of techniques and knowledge. We talked earlier on about knowledge dissemination, this particular track for the journal is about knowledge dissemination but it is also about knowledge translation. What we are trying to encourage practitioners and academics to do in the accounts of practice field is really to begin to write about their practice but from a critical insight.

What we are looking for is engaging and informing stories but stories that have a real purpose in terms of learning; stories that embed action as part of the critique. We are interested in learning about what worked and what didn’t work but from a critical perspective, and by critical I mean to be able to stand back and examine from the author’s perspective the critiques that they were working and developing from.
The second area of papers that we encourage are in relation to the refereed paper track. Refereed papers are papers where we are asking potential authors to think about and encourage critical enquiry through asking the contributors to question their own assumptions and findings in the beliefs that they critique but also thinking about how they evolve and develop the theorising of action learning. So what perspective of action learning are they working from, because as we said earlier there are many different forms of action learning that have all embedded particular theoretical positions and propositions that kind of underpin that.

So it’s important whether it’s a refereed tracked paper or an account of practice that they are rigorous in terms of their thinking, they are clear in terms of the ideas and critiques that they are testing out, and the authors own assumptions and claims are backed by knowledge and understanding.

MP:

We look for the same thing in some ways with both academic papers and practice papers. We look for people to link thinking with practice wherever possible. I can think of an account of practice for example written by someone who was responsible for running a project in a city council called ‘Transforming Derby’, that’s a bit of a clue about the city actually, and she was part of an action learning trainee facilitators group and she wanted to learn about how to do action learning and as part of that programme she set up five action learning sets in the city, bringing together people from different departments who didn’t normally meet together because they were in different silos or functions. And between then they managed to produce some very interesting results as a result of talking to one other and sharing resources where they hadn’t done this before. So she actually practiced her action learning in a very concrete way but she was also able to write a very interesting account of practice by reflecting on the things that had worked, the things that hadn’t worked, and why they had worked, and also reflecting back some of Reva’s ideas and saying that this proved to me the importance that you think you know something but you don’t really know it until you’ve tried to do it and sometimes failed to do it.

You could equally easily have a refereed paper that starts from practice, and here I am thinking of one written by Russ Vince called ‘Action and Inaction in Action Learning,’ and this started from his observation that when he was running an action learning set in a large commercial organisation, he noticed that as part of the talk in the action learning set, people could talk themselves out of, and talk each other out of, taking action in risky situations. And so he wrote a very interesting paper talking about how action learning can produce not action, but actually inaction, and he theorised this with the aid of some psychoanalytical theory and produced a very, very good paper, which although it added significantly to our understanding of action learning at a theoretical level, it was also clearly strongly rooted in practice so a practitioner would immediately recognise the problem that Russ was talking about, and at the same time might very well learn from the theory that
Russ was able to bring to bear and generate through that thought. So we want both practitioners and academics in a sense to talk to each other and keep the other in mind when they are writing.

7. What do you look for when considering articles and submissions?

MP:

Well a good article for us, and they can be of two sorts I should first say one is what we call a refereed paper, or an academic article which has to meet the normal academic and refereed requirements, so it has to, for example, refer to the relevant literature in the field, it has to pose a research problem, it has to propose a methodology and illustrate that it has provided a methodology that is suitable for approaching the problem and it has to present findings and outcomes, at the same time it also needs to focus on the issues in *Action Learning*.

There is another sort of paper that we publish which we think is equally important and those are called Accounts of Practice. These start in stories by practitioners of perhaps an action learning intervention that they have made or an action learning problem which they have in their organisation or work and how they tackle this and critically for us what they learned from tackling it. So we are particularly concerned to encourage practitioners to critique their own practice and say ‘this is what I did, this is what I got right, this is what I got less right, this is what I’d like to do better next time’ and be critically professional about their practice as action learning practitioners.

So those are the two main types of articles. I would say I look in both for a good story actually, whether it be a story of discovering an idea about action learning and how that was done or whether it be a story of trying to implement action learning. In each case we would want both the academic or the practitioner or whoever concerned to try and link back what they are doing either to practice, on the one hand, or to academia on the other hand. So for example in an account of practice we wouldn’t expect to see a long list of references, but we would expect an aware practitioner to have read some of the things which connect with the topic and the angle that they are taking on the particular practice issue that they are looking at. We are trying to encourage scholarly practice, at the same time we are trying to encourage our academics to think about the practice implications of what it is they are writing about and thinking about.

KT:

We are open to all types of accounts but the critical thing that we are looking for is to try and encourage the authors around critical enquiry, seeking contributions which question their own assumptions about their own practices and critique both theory and practice. We
are also looking for what we call sort of thoughtful, creative ideas that sometimes allows us and the authors to connect the different sources of ideas that they bring together from existing bodies of knowledge but also new bodies of knowledge, so for instance evolving the field of action learning in all its many complexities and all its many varieties as part of that process. Finally, one of the key things that we are always looking for whether it is in practitioner accounts, whether it is in reviews, or in academic papers, is the capacity to critically stand back and reflect on that practice and to help move the debate of action learning forward.

8. What are your aspirations for the future of the journal?

MP:

Well in many ways our aspirations for the future are to continue to what we have always done – to advance the quality of both the theory and practice of action learning and to contribute to broader insights into individual and organisational learning. But in saying those words, I think it’s important also to stress that all of the people involved in the journal and many of the people who write for it have a passion, have a feeling for action learning which is rather different from the rational statement I just made. And this underlying our aims for the journal is a sort of passion which isn’t easily communicable in words. It’s a passion for the idea along with an active participation in the practice so everyone who works with the journal, who writes for the journal, uses action learning, they don’t just talk about it. This is inseparable, we think, from the ambitions of the theoretical inquiry, so experiencing the surprise and power of action learning prompts an enthusiasm to share it and also raises the practical questions that prompt research and development. This commitment to practice and to theorise action learning stems from an acknowledgment that there is so much about the world that we don’t understand. Why is it that so many issues and situations are open to action learning and others aren’t? Why does action learning not work as it is intended to even when it has been well designed? Sometimes, why does it work when it does, when you might have expected it to stumble? And what are the connections between action learning? How do individual concerns connect with social and organisational issues? So there are many, many things that we don’t know and therefore that spirit of enquiry and enthusiasm for the method, for us, go together.

KT:

Our aspiration for the journal is to continue to be a leading [international] forum for critical reflection, debates and explorations on the use of action learning, to contribute both to theory and thoughtful practice which is informed by best possible knowledge and understanding. We want to continue to advance the quality of both the theory and practice of action learning, we want to promote the development and dissemination of knowledge
and practice to support action learning in a variety of diverse settings and thirdly we want to create theory from thoughtful practice that contributes to broader insights into individual, organisational, systemic and community learning and development.

MP:

There’s another aspect of the future which is quite different and that is so far we have dealt mainly with action learning as practiced in the UK, and perhaps to some extent in the old Commonwealth countries and to a little extent in the USA. But what is happening with the idea of action learning now is it’s been seized upon and adapted and used by many, many countries from which we haven’t yet had many cases of practice or many ideas of the theory, for example in [Germany,] South Korea, in Singapore, in China, in Malaysia, these are all places where we hear that action learning is developing very rapidly. There is a large association called the Japanese Action Learning Association, the Korean Action Learning Association, and these associations already have several hundreds of practitioners who are tending to use these ideas in large commercial organisations, and this is all very interesting for us as it is yet another aspect of how the world is changing and some of the action, if you like, is taking place in places that we haven’t so far had strong connections with and developed good practices with, so that’s another important part of the future.

9. In what ways does Action Learning assist in the development of practice that perhaps competitor journals do not?

MP:

Well the journal assists in and encourages the development of working practice by holding together the academic and practice perspectives on any particular issue and we ask that all papers are written so that they can be appreciated by a wide readership, which includes academics, policy makers, practitioners and so on, and a key phrase is ‘excludes no one interested in the idea of action learning’. Now that’s quite a demand we put on our authors, to write, if you like, in ways that can be understood by a wide practice community. So that’s a very important way in which we hold the focus on practice and hope to encourage about theorising about practice.

Specifically there are articles and papers in the journal addressing particular contexts or problems in particular contexts, so for example we have quite a lot of public services papers in the UK, and also NHS, Health Service papers and I can think of for example where people have used action learning to help with service improvement projects, in the Health Service but also again in public services, and these are very specific papers which can give people an idea of what they might do next in their own settings. Other areas where there are often papers are, for example, leadership development in a wide variety of settings, sometimes in large commercial organisations, sometimes in smaller organisations like small and medium
size enterprises. So for example we had a *Special Issue on SMEs* and the action learning contribution to leadership development, which I believe was a bit of a landmark really because those sort of papers hadn’t been pulled together by any other journal in quite the same way with a focus on action learning as promoting leadership development specifically in the SME context. So we have a number of ways in which we can connect practice issues with the broader purposes and perspective on action learning.

10. **The journal aims to provide practitioners with new insights into their work – in what ways do you think the journal does this and do you see this as a way of fuelling content for the journal in the future?**

KT:

The journal aims to provide practitioners with new insights into their work in a variety of ways. Firstly, we try and ensure that authors think about action learning theory. What do I mean by this? What we are trying to establish here is getting them to articulate what theories they are using and how they are working out of those theories, where have they come from and how are they different in terms of creating the ground and emergence of new theories? So to give you some concrete examples in relation to that, very early on in the journal’s history it helped to establish the field of action learning but as a result there has been a variety of complimentary perspectives on action learning that have emerged. So one of those is critical action learning, there has been a really interesting set of papers from diverse perspectives, looking at the notion of what is critical action learning, both in terms of developing it’s theory and practice.

A second key area that the journal has developed is virtual action learning; how has it emerged? How has it developed? And these are both theoretical accounts which we are keen to encourage, but equally important is practitioner perspective on those, and each of those three fields have allowed the development of new theorising in relation to action learning but building on and critiquing the work that has been done in action learning for many years.