



# **Deep Impact: Boosting Action Learning**

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## **Abstract**

Action learning is an integral part of many management programs, especially in executive education. Action dedication to the task at hand, collective activities and deep free questioning of basic assumptions of practice have been put forward as common denominators for action learning. In this essay we add the method of active imagination within a state of spontaneity to achieve deep impact in a short time span, as illustrated by action learning sessions based a constructionistic and dramatic learning process.

Key words: action learning, constructionism, active imagination, spontaneity, intuition, improvisation, non-scripted drama, emotion

Action learning means that people learn from their actions through a process that helps them to reflect on their experience, in order to learn from it. Forms of action learning has been used, praised and criticized for decades (e.g., Wolfe 1975; Certo 1976; Kolb 1979b; Revans 1983). It is a broad category of pedagogical approaches to learning-by-doing where instruction is mixed with questioning to make concepts and models actionable (Glaser & Resnick 1972; Kolb 1979a; Revans 1983). Raelin (2000) described three principles all variants of action learning seem to share: 1) That the learning is acquired in the midst of action and dedicated to the task at hand; 2) That knowledge creation and utilization be seen as collective activities wherein learning can become everyone's job; and 3) That its users demonstrate a learning-to-learn aptitude which frees them to question the underlying assumptions of practice. However, the debate about its application and value lingers on (e.g., Raelin 2006).

On the philosophical level action learning builds on a 'constructivist' epistemology (see Inhelder & Piaget 1958; Piaget 1971) which assumes we make ideas about the world from within as opposed to just absorbing inputs from the outside. Learning new external facts or new ways to handle internal insights becomes a profound process of adjusting our mental models to accommodate new experiences. Until we have developed knowledge from within, we do not change more than on the surface and this is why action learning fosters behavioral change. In Piaget's term action learning help participants 'accommodate' rather than just 'assimilate'.

Proponents of action learning often stress the potentially deeper impact of self-awareness, self-criticism and self-understanding from action learning

not usually required in more traditional forms of learning (e.g., Pedler 1997). In management education it is natural to apply action learning to 'softer' themes like change management, leadership and strategy and such educational programs usually last for weeks, months and sometimes years. Participants learn by working on exercises and projects relating to their own work, both during and in between program modules, i.e., in parallel with their daily work. In our experience the 'doing' part of learning-by-doing in management education, however, is often limited to data gathering and rational analyses and to verbal and visual media. In action learning the educator has the role of a background facilitator for group-based self-learning rather than being a classical instructor. In our experience this transformation is easier said than done for management educators groomed in traditional, instruction-based teaching (and instructionistic epistemology).

As much as it encourages behavioral change by stimulating new ways of thinking sometimes the need for changed actions is more urgent than what typical management programs can accomplish. For instance, new strategic initiatives often imply immediate needs for radical changes in what managers actually do in addition to modified organizational structure and routines. But, action learning can be speeded up to also meet this challenge.

The purpose of this essay is to fuel the academic discourse about action learning in management education by answering questions like: How can the recognized benefits of action learning be accelerated? How can this be done with increased depth? How can action learning have really 'deep impact?' We propose building on the old concepts of 'active imagination' and 'spontaneity' and the practices of facilitated hands-on constructions and non-scripted

drama. In the following we explore theoretically the concepts of active imagination and spontaneity and intertwine these abstractions with illustrative episodes from an executive education with immediate deep impact (see Appendix 1 for background information about this educational experience). Then we reflect over the implications of our claims.

## **ACTIVE IMAGINATION**

Imagination can be framed as the capacity to ‘see as,’ which is a fundamental cognitive faculty through which complex reality is made understandable (Thomas 1999). It can also be seen as the capability to collect from experiences the potential patterns and correlation that can compose a robust representation of the world (Deacon 1997).<sup>1</sup> This capacity to imagine the world, to interpret it through cycles of experience and analysis is the essential character of our thinking and has been discussed by the Ancient Greeks and during the Enlightenment (Cocking 1991), as well as in contemporary philosophy, e.g., by Bachelard (Kaplan 1972).

But imagination is more than abstract reasoning and interpreting. Already Immanuel Kant saw imagination as an ‘illuminating lamp rather than a reflecting mirror’ (Warnock 1993). It can be used actively to ‘dream the dream onward’ as Carl Gustav Jung put it when his patients actively used material surfacing from the unconscious to find their ‘true self’ (Hopcke 1999; Jung 1997). If the insights arising from unconscious levels are made a foundation for further active personal development, rather than just passively explained

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<sup>1</sup> Others have distinguished different kinds of imagination. For instance, the descriptive one, which allow us to describe the world as we see it right now; the creative one, which allows us to come up with entirely new ways to see the world; and the parodic one, which allow use to challenge and even destroy what we do not like (Kearney 1988).

like Sigmund Freud practiced, Jung argued it can move us toward greater balance, health, and creativity.<sup>2</sup>

Jung defined 'active imagination' as a method and/or technique of deliberate concentration and for this positive purpose. To this end he often included play-based and creative approaches and is by many seen as the father of play therapy (Schaefer 2003). In his work he often employed drawing, especially mandalas (Gracia 1981; Jung 1997). His own construction of a village in the dirt after his break with Freud 1912 helped him not only to express his emotional turmoil better, but also to process and reintegrate the emotional material in a less threatening way (Jung 1963, 1997; Schaefer 2003). Others expanded the activity of active imagination into a variety of verbal and nonverbal often playful expressions from within, such as Sandplay (Kalff 1980); creative arts work with clay, painting and other hands-on artistic media as well as conceptual media like drama, poetry, music and dance in groups or individually (Moreno 1983; Chodorow 1991; Malchiodi 1998). If several media are used together the creative arts process is called expressive arts (e.g., Rogers 1993).

In the field of pedagogy others have picked up on the concept of active imagination. For instance, Kolb (1979b) used it to conceptualize learning styles, in particular visual/spatial intelligence. While not addressing active imagination per se Harel and Papert (1991) extended Piaget's constructivistic ideas by suggesting that learning happens most effectively during an active

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<sup>2</sup> Thus, Jung viewed the unconscious not just as a depository for repressed (usually negative) material like Freud, but also as a positive resource. He furthermore believed that the unconscious psychic life went beyond the personal, to include a 'collective unconscious' of humanity itself, something he described as the unlearned tendency to experience things in a certain way (Hopcke 1999). Jung illustrated symbolically the different functions of the collective unconscious in Archetypes, i.e. symbols structurally similar to Freud's notion of biological instincts.

process of *physically manipulating materials* to discover new ways or interacting with the world, and potentially, also to accommodate/transform. Their ideas about 'constructionism' help us understand and appreciate the importance of different *media* for shaping and expressing ideas in various contexts. By projecting our inner ideas and feelings in tangible forms we cannot not only communicate them, but the very act of physically shaping our ideas change them. Said differently, from the combined perspective of constructivism-constructionism, action learning should engage participants to hands-on<sup>3</sup> manipulate different media to describe, create and challenge - to imagine - what they are dealing with.

To extend cognition-biased ways to frame imagination and in line with play therapy and constructionism Bürgi and Roos (2006) suggested that imagining also has a behavioral and material dimension. What we do (actions), what we use (materials) and in how we think (concepts) are all part of (active) imagination. Practicing our imagination, therefore, means taking on the metaphorical roles of handymen, architects and storytellers, they argue. Anything that is imaginative in human experience - our descriptions, creations and even our challenges - are typically a blend of these dimensions and roles. Hence, bringing together methods for mental and physical active imagination boost action learning

### **Illustrating Individual Active Imagination**

Imagine a group of managers that have warmed up to apply creative arts techniques with ease. Using a wealth of colorful hard and soft materials

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<sup>3</sup> Wilson (1998: 7) highlighted the critical role of the hand: '*...any theory ... which ignores the*

(plastic bricks, cotton wads, clay, paper, wood, pieces of metals, etc) we asked them to individually build a three-dimensional model of their job, *but without featuring themselves in it*. Using the materials and their physical properties they individually formulated with their hands and mind a physical representation of something very important to them.

Upon completion we invited everybody in turns to present his/hers job from the viewpoint of the construction, using the variety of explicit and implicit features and properties used. The presentation was, intentionally surprising, to be performed in *first person* meaning that the presenter took on the role of being 'the Job' and talked from the job's perspective. Examples:

- *'I'm a boat. I'm tense. Eyes are on me and these are accepting and/or questioning me. It is a heavy job. There's some weight at the back. I'm on a journey. There are some danger sign ahead. The journey is uncertain.'*
- *'I'm between a rock and a hard place. I'm trapped in a box and going around in circles. I have to deal with a lot of hot air. I feel stretched and I don't really know what I'm doing right now. There are so many paths and options I could take. There is also a dark side of me, but sometimes I feel lighter, like being among the clouds in heaven.'*
- *'I'm open and instable. I have decided to lock myself up – to protect myself. I go inside myself. Yet, I'm looking and searching for something.'*
- *'I'm not well shaped. I'm trying to - in a soft way - keep others together. BIG eyes are watching me. Smaller, closer eyes are friendlier.'*

**Impact.** Participants used a large variety of materials to express meaning and emotions. For example, intellectual reasoning was mostly showed with hard construction blocks while emotional attitudes typically came out in soft cotton-like materials. During the de-brief participants said they were both surprised and awed about the passion and depth of the presentations. One participant said: *'Presenting yourself with some material and speaking in the*

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*interdependence of hand and brain function, the historical origin of that relationship, or the impact of that history on developmental dynamics in modern humans, is grossly misleading.'*



*'I' form gave me the opportunity to think about myself and to express my feelings in a safe environment. For me – as an introvert personality – it gave me a great feeling to share some characteristics from myself with the others.'*

Moreover: *'Speaking as 'I will' changed the whole world; I will be the provider of solutions to Company X's people related business opportunities and issues; I will base such solutions on solid business cases.'*

### **Illustrating Group-Based Active Imagination**

In a subsequent session we divided participants in two parallel groups (A and B) with maximum variation in terms of roles, nationality, gender, etc, to each construct a model of their own organization as they subjectively saw it in real time, here-and-now. The groups worked under identical conditions, i.e., a big empty table without chairs and with access to much and varied construction materials (hard and soft, colorful, natural and artificial, light and heavy, etc). When the two groups had completed their constructions they were asked to share with the other group the story of their organization as manifested by them in the model, in detail.

Not surprisingly, despite being made as identical as possible and given the same conditions, the two groups offered very different narratives. Group A's story depicted a flow-like journey towards an end-goal consisting of the 'fruit of the labor', while group B's story depicted a snapshot of a current state of affairs in the organization seen as serving the regions supervised from above. During the following open discussion people reflected over how different the constructions were and how differently the two groups went about the task. For instance, the A-group used many metaphors and was process

oriented, while the B-team was more directly descriptive and less process-oriented. The level of engagement also varied between the two groups/tables. In group A all participants readily co-constructed the emerging model, whereas in group B two to three people participated less. However, all participants engaged actively in the storytelling and subsequent debrief conversation. Upon completion the groups shared their stories by actively using their constructions, for example, pointing, lifting, breaking apart, moving things closer or further away. The ambiance was good as people smiled, laughed and interacted in positive ways. All participants had talked and, it appeared, were now willing to engage with one another to make what was abstract ('the organization') more concrete (the model and its physical attributes).

**Impact.** During the de-brief one of them said: *'The session provided me with a unique way to see, hear, and feel what had previously seemed to be abstract. This 3 dimensional way of thinking led me to strategies/solutions/possibilities that I never would have been able to produce by using traditional methodologies.'* Another one pointed out: *'Because others could see and touch the model it helped me more effectively communicate my thoughts to the team...I could more fully share my concerns.'* Others stressed an important team insights: *'We, as a group, have been able to point out in a very concrete and visual way that they are some attitudes to be changed fast...'*

## SPONTANEITY

The word comes from Latin *sponte*, of one's free will, voluntarily. Spontaneity can be framed as *'...the very condition and foundation of spirits, readiness and action...that which the person may be expected to rise to and to rise with on his own, 'sua sponte,' ...'an all important characteristic quality of a person'* Meyer (1941: 151). Centuries ago Kant argued that cognition, whether in judgment or perception, always involves spontaneity (Kant et al. 2003). In his language spontaneity (Ger: Spontanität) is an inner, self-determined activity whereby a thought (concept), understanding and judgment (Ger: *vermögen zu urteilen*) are possible. This makes spontaneity distinct from the receptivity (Ger: *Rezeptivität*) whereby perception is possible. Hence, his central distinction is here between spontaneity from within and receptivity from the outside.<sup>4</sup>

In the humanistic psychology movement spontaneity is regarded as a sign of health. For example Maslow (1968) claimed spontaneity as one of a dozen attributes for self-actualized people who lead a creative, authentic and healthy life. But within the field of psychology during the 1900s it is the inventor of psycho- and sociodrama, Jacob Levy Moreno, who more than others has put the concept of spontaneity in the center for his practices (Moreno 1983).<sup>5</sup> He defined spontaneity in many different ways: as a *factor* animating all psychic phenomena, as the *ability* to sustain a flexible state

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<sup>4</sup> Kant's First Critique and Second Critique discuss the spontaneity of our understanding and of our free will, respectively, and the Third Critique demonstrates how both stem from our faculty of reason (McBay Merritt 1994).

<sup>5</sup> Whereas in theatre acting is a specialized skill that people train to please an audience, in psychosociodrama anyone can role-play from within. There is no demanding audience, only fellow actors. In psychosociodrama the players are free to explore 'what if?' (Blatner 1996; Dayton 2005). Moreno favored a horizontal, social system approach (Fox 1987) and thrived in the overlapping zone between psychology and sociology (Moreno 1949). His methods were focused on groups and interpersonal feelings of attraction and repulsion, 'tele', (Jennings 1939).

more or less permanently, a perennial 'de-conserved'<sup>6</sup> attitude, acting on the spur of the moment (Sorokin 1949), a form of *energy* that propels the person to respond positively in the face of the unexpected (Moreno 1953), an adequate, authentic and novel *response* (Dayton 2005). But in his many texts he frequently returns to defining spontaneity as a *state* from within (1983). '*The spontaneity state develops and warms up until it articulates at the level of speech.*' (Moreno 1941: 213). In his writings (e.g., 1983) he indicates that the more we train to enter a state of spontaneity the stronger we keep a latent perennial attitude to warm up from, which is in line with his above mentioned idea of ability to sustain a flexible state.

We see that Kant distinguished inner spontaneity from outer receptivity and that Moreno defined spontaneity as a desirable state we have to warm up to. Practices for such warm ups are usually carried out in groups because the dynamics of interpersonal feelings of attraction and repulsion, 'tele', (Jennings 1939) are important for carrying forward a state of spontaneity within the individuals as well as for the group working in concert. Hence, we argue that Kant's 'Spontanität' and 'Receptivität' do not have to be distinguished but merged, because perceptions of others is vital for 'tele'. From this follows our definition of spontaneity as an emergent mental state of heightened attention to the environment combined with heightened self-awareness during which we are ready to immediately reflect deeply whether and how to act. Thus, spontaneity is not automatic, instinctive reflexes, nor is it a disorderly, emotional, uncontrolled or impulsive activity. It is a state of mind in which we see '*a readiness of the subject to respond as required*' (Moreno 1946: 111).

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<sup>6</sup> To Moreno 'cultural conserves' are finished products of a creative process. He describes an intricate

## Intuition and Improvisation

While Moreno put forward creativity as the outcome from being in a state of spontaneity (1983) we would like to be more detailed in our definition of what characterizes spontaneous actions. We suggest intuition and improvisation as factors within the concept of creativity and increased capacity for intuition and improvisation to be the most vital outcome of spontaneity. There is no unified definition of intuition in the literature, but its value has been recognized for centuries. For example, more than a century ago James Fitzjames Stephen wrote (Stephen & Posner 1992: 270 and quoted in Anderson 1926: 365) '*The one talent which is worth all other talents put together in all human affairs is the talent of judging right upon imperfect materials, the talent, if you please, of 'guessing right'.*' Thus, intuition means the process by which people come to immediately know without conscious awareness or rational deliberation. It is through our intuition we suddenly just know or feel things are, or are not right; like Jung's description of intuitions often coming 'like a flash' (Jung 1997: 103).<sup>7</sup>

Like intuition, improvisation is a somewhat unclear concept in the management literature (e.g., Crossan 1998; Weick 1998). It usually indicates action with a very short time span between events leading up to the decision to act (or not to act) and the very act. Moorman and Miner (1998: 702) defined improvisation as the time gap between '*...composing and performing,*

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cyclic motion between spontaneity, creativity, cultural conserves and warming-up activities (Moreno 1955).

<sup>7</sup> He described four orienting functions of consciousness: thinking, feeling, sensation and intuition. Briggs and Myers found Jung's types and functions so revealing that they developed the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator based on his ideas.

*designing and producing, or conceptualizing and implementing.*' Thus, while intuition is an *internally* oriented (mental) process to know without knowing quite how, improvisation is an *externally* oriented action, which the actor, at the spur of the moment, knows and feels is appropriate in the particular circumstance. Improvisation is a way to practice knowledge gained from intuition and other sources. Out of the blue we 'just did it.' Within a state of spontaneity our actions are internally driven, spur-of-the-moment straight 'from the gut'. Being in a 'state of heightened attention to the environment combined with heightened self-awareness during which we are ready to immediately reflect deeply whether and how to act' enhances our ability to meet change, to improvise as required. Moreno wrote: *'It can well be said that, with the magnitude of change, the magnitude of spontaneity which an individual must summon in order to meet the change must increase in proportion.'* (1940: 223). Changes often reach us in the shape of surprises. Engaging in psycho-sociodrama entails preparing for 'the moment of surprise' (Blomkvist et al 2000).

Not just the quality of our actions changes when we are in a state of spontaneity, the notion of time changes too. The impact of insights from a staged facilitated non-scripted drama is significant because of the situation's distilled and focused character, compared to situations in ordinary life being spread out over longer time. *'On the psychodramatic stage things are accomplished so much more quickly than in real life; time is so intensified.'* (Moreno 1940: 231). We agree with Moreno and suggest that action learning carried out in intense sessions of facilitated constructionism and psycho-

sociodrama within a state of spontaneity are beneficial and effective; the participants are more ready to meet the moment of surprise.

### **Illustrating States of Spontaneity**

During the next session we facilitated a process by which the scenes previously constructed 'came alive.' We began by asking the Bs what they felt was about to happen with the organization as depicted in their three-dimensional model, without judging it. One participant began to reflect in a reasoning manner on what was currently happening in their 'world', but the atmosphere of the group appeared to be withheld. For example, participants' body language around the table was restrained, and some of them did not seem to agree with the presenter. Hence, to engage the group we confronted the presenter and his team on the potential lack of clarity and consensus in what they said. As we continued to ask probing questions suddenly another participant from the Bs, Mary, exclaimed: *'I know what I would like to do with all this. May I...?'* Mary looked around the group who all stared back without words. We encouraged her to continue her approach the table, where she suddenly grabbed the tablecloth, folded it from all sides and pulled it up like a sack so that all the constructions were messed up – including tearing down materials they had attached to the ceiling.

In the brief, but significant silence around the room we switched into a so-called socio-dramatic mode of facilitation aimed to encourage expression of the group's deep wishes. This facilitation mode includes questions like *'How do you feel right now? What do you really want to say?'* We encouraged Mary to move towards the 'mess' she had created and invited her to sit in it,

which she eagerly did. On the table, grabbing and vividly shaking a bunch of fluff, cotton-like material with a harsh voice Mary then said repeatedly: *'Fuzzy, fuzzy! That's how we are! When others tell us (what to do) we just respond in a fuzzy blurry way!* Her action and assertion surprised everyone in the room and, we think, it surprised herself too. To help her clarify and concretize what came up from her hidden inner resources we prompted: *'What does 'fuzzy' really consist of?' 'How does it look, feel, sound?'* Mary answered: *'It is cloudy. A monotonous voice speaking unclear statements without any real contact with the one who asks.'*

From this point it was not just the group B who told their story to the As, but the two groups together in action. Typically for a sociodrama we played out two choirs of opinions (consisting of several participants each who eagerly joined in being 'doubles' supporting and strengthening the role putting forward the opinion): a demanding corporate level on one side and their organization defending itself in a fuzzy way. Role exchange made it possible for some of the participants to experience how it was to be on the other side and have an opposite standpoint. Both sides, independently of who held the positions at the time, expressed themselves loud and vigorously. Body language was dynamic to emphasize what was said. Symbols were used to enhance the role character, e.g., the 'watching eye' of corporate level was physically present as a toy eye glued on to the forehead of its actor. Many participants certainly put forward delicate needs and opinions in new ways and we observed eagerness to act, improvise, and not just talk. Furthermore, as far as we could tell, their intuition flourished.



**Impact.** During the de-brief one of them said: *'The emotional 'outbreaks' where not only powerful as for learning insights, they where also very healing in order to embrace the required change.'* Along the same line another participant said: *'Emotion has a tremendous power.'* One more participant stressed how demanding the session was: *'...it was not a classic approach where everybody was brainstorming on a flip-chart. It gave me the opportunity to think on another level, more intense and more from the inner site. I realized that standard, common answers were not enough. I had to come up with thoughts, ideas, and feelings which are influencing my day to day work.'*

We perceived a strong 'tele' factor which was confirmed by the feedback: For example, one participant stated: *'I saw a team!'* A second person stated: *'For me, this session created a tremendous group dynamic. We have been able to share emotions that we in normal working environment never express.'* They were open and present in the situation and the communication was frank. Said one: *'I had the feeling that what I had to express was easy, without constraint regarding what I had in mind and the acceptance of the rest of the colleagues in the team.'* Moreover: *'Personally, I have had the unique opportunity to see my colleagues acting in a different way than at work and they gave a lot of themselves.'* They dealt with moments of surprise within an intensified experience of time as illustrated by the proclamation: *'One day for this type of workshop was not enough. Even at 6:30 no one really noticed that it was time to stop because we felt we were accomplishing something important.'*

From the clear opinions expressed without restraints of political correctness, the firm body language and expressive voices we conclude that

participants also *gained* courage and self-confidence from the process. They brought forth many opinions of delicate character and did not shy away from 'calling a spade a spade'; a very important characteristic for authentic behavior. One said: *'There is nothing more powerful than authenticity, our passion, our enthusiasm.'* Another participant stated: *'Also, stand for your ideas and opinions: if you think that your boss or colleague asks you to do something that you do not agree with, just say it and do not execute without thinking! Don't do it just because the boss said so.'* After a moment of reflection he continued: *'It is difficult to tear down the 'self image' you have created for yourself but it is important in order to get at the truth.'*

## **REFLECTIONS**

### **What's new?**

To our knowledge it is new for action learning, especially within the field of management education, to employ an expressive arts process including detailed constructioning and non-scripted acting to explore and learn from the inner resources of the individual in the group and organization. From our understanding it is new to combine methods for active imagination and stretching to a state of spontaneity to make action learning faster and deeper in management.

We began this paper by referring Raelin's (2000) three criteria all action learning seem to share - action dedicated to the task at hand, collective activities and deep free questioning of basic assumptions of practice. We agree with Raelin in his summary but would like to add active imagination and

spontaneity for significantly deep impact on action learning in management education.

### **What is our way of action learning it good for?**

We have seen from the literature how creative/expressive arts processes in psychotherapy, personal development and coaching, all representing action learning in various ways, can profoundly impact people's cognitive, social, emotional and behavioral levels. Within the field of expressive arts we have found the combination of constructionism and non-scripted drama to be highly beneficial for action learning when the theme is about 'softer' issues like change management, leadership and strategy, i.e., areas usually addressed for action learning. We have found the constructionism to be a strong promoter of active imagination and non-scripted drama an effective way to enter a state of spontaneity. The combination of the two seems to reinforce one another towards deep and fast impact on the participants to intuit and improvise freely.

We believe the concentrated experience of an intensively facilitated 1-2 day session, i.e., important insights and ideas do not get diluted and distracted by other events in life, promotes deeper impact than when action learning happens over weeks or months. As far as we understand this is beneficial for long-lasting effects of the learning because human beings need strong signals to change. For once, cutting down on time spent on an exercise is not negative for the result, but on the contrary, it can be both effectively and responsibly achieve the learning objectives. Furthermore, because of the depth and intensity of the sessions we believe our variety of action learning to

be of high, perhaps even higher, quality compared to traditional long lasting action learning. The intensity and the depth achieved make the participants wide open to their inner true selves and hidden resources as well as to others within the group and the tasks that bring the group together. Hence, our variety of action learning promotes participants' authenticity and subjectivity so they can meet and interact creatively in an atmosphere of freedom. Through the activities every partaker is encouraged to be concrete and visible because powerful group dynamics is based on strong interpersonal relations (the 'tele' factor) who in its turn stem from clearly defined individuals.

### **How was the deep impact perceived?**

From our own observations and participants' reactions immediately, after one month and after two months we think so. One participant said in her written feedback: *'I'm convinced that we would never have reached this impact by handling the process in a more well known and traditional way. Perhaps the same outcome but certainly not the impact.'*

Raelin (2006: 154) claimed that action learning *'...confronts learners with the constraints of organizational realities, leading oftentimes to the discovery of alternative and creative means to accomplish their objectives.'* We would like to add the importance for the people involved to prepare themselves for moments of surprise. We deliberately created the conditions in which participants gained clarity, faced new insights and took personal stances. In that respect they were indeed confronted with the perceived realities seen by themselves and their colleagues at that moment and together they created a whole range of possibilities not previously seen.

Because it was multi-sensual, emotional-laden and full of personal views the 'deep impact' action learning process we have described and illustrated is significantly different from abstract reasoning using flipcharts, power-points and tired phrases belonging to nobody. In the depth of some episodes in our illustrative case we observed catharsis-like experiences.<sup>8</sup> In our example it became a group-experience. Dayton writes (2005: 51): '*A catharsis that is successful within an individual should have the effect of increasing the spontaneity of the entire group, which should then reduce both the individual and group-dynamic disturbances.*' In our case catharsis implied learning from strong insights - 'aha!' - to the emotional relief of finding new ways to deal with what had come up - 'Puh!' The group moved towards new goals and made new mutual commitments.

### **What about the facilitator?**

If what we claim has validity it suggests a continued evolution of the role of the educator and pedagogy (and androgogy). Over the last few decades the emphasis in management education has moved from 'teaching' to 'learning' and we propose it should continue to 'facilitating.' In the teaching mode the role of the educator is the expert who instruct in front of participants. In the learning mode the educator is the coach who guides self-learning among participants. This is the fertile ground for action learning. In the

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<sup>8</sup> It is well known that drama has the potential to arouse the heart. Already in 440 B.C., in Sophocles' play 'Antigone', the chorus sang a hymn to Dionysus invoking his 'swift healing', 'katharsios' (κάθαρσις) (see Sophocles 1994). The word means cleansing and purging, which suggests release of emotional tension after an overwhelming experience. Aristotle in his Poetics recognized catharsis as an effect of tragedy (Fyfe 1967). At that time catharsis focused on pity and fear (Dayton 2005) and it came from being a spectator. But the catharsis experienced by an ancient Greek audience at the end of a tragedy has in modern psychotherapy evolved into a release of ideas, thoughts and repressed material from the unconscious, accompanied by an emotional response and relief (Breuer & Freud 1974; Malchiodi 1998; Dayton 2005).

facilitating mode, which is where we place deep impact action learning, the educator's role is to create favorable conditions for catharsis-like experiences. Some times in front of, sometimes among, but often behind the people the educator becomes an active 'para-therapist' carefully threading personal grounds.

When should we choose which mode? If the desired outcome is specific skills and knowledge *teaching* is enough, all the way from teaching novices to experts (Dreyfus and Dreyfus 1986). If the desired, realistic outcome is assimilation-like behavioral change *learning* is sufficient. We accept from within what is demanded from us. But, is the desired outcome accommodation-like change *facilitation* is needed. Although the latter objective is often espoused in the design brief or program description of management education, in our experience, it is rarely achieved. Although many management educators want to be facilitating coaches rather than instructing experts, in our experience, this remains an aspiration rather than describing reality. Our claims about 'deep impact' action learning is an attempt to close the gap between what is said and done by educators and buyers/consumers of education alike.

### **Concluding remarks - from within**

Our objective in this paper was to fuel the discourse about action learning and we hope we have. Action learning has been an important development in pedagogy in general and in management education in particular. However, as we have shown in this paper the possibilities are endless to continue the evolution of how to learn about learning. Early positive

experiences with psychodrama in leadership training (Lippitt 1943) and sociodrama on problem solving in companies (Moreno 1951) support our overall claim. But, what worked well ½ century ago seem to have been forgotten. From a psycho- and socio-drama perspective, in this essay we have added construction activities with varied materials. From a creative/expressive arts perspective, we have added non-scripted drama. Either way, we have combined *existing* concepts and practices in an attempt to advance the field of action learning.

Blatner (1996) said that action approaches like the ones we have vouched for are good not just for people with problems but also for those who tend to over-intellectualize their experiences. Placed in a ‘learning’ situation the same managers who eagerly describe themselves and their peers as ‘hands-on’ executers thrive on observer-independent emotionless abstract reasoning on flat papers and lifeless screens. To them (and others) we would like to quote the American 19<sup>th</sup> century author Ralph Waldo Emerson who is known to have said: *‘What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us.’*<sup>9</sup> The ‘deep impact’ form of learning-by-doing we have described, illustrated and deliberated over here targets exactly that. We call it thinking and acting ‘from within.’

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.quotationspage.com/quote/2160.html>

## **APPENDIX 1: BACKGROUND OF THE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE**

In 2005 we were asked to design and deliver an in-company program for leadership teams of a multinational pharmaceutical company to speed up certain necessary behavioral change. In light of an anticipated acquisition the HR Director was charged to help self-renew parts of the organization. Specifically, the objective was to increase participants' openness, feelings of trust, courage and commitment to what they agree to do. As the company liaison the corporate HR Director wanted an action learning experience. He had heard about our experiments with strategy making teams (see Roos and Victor 1999; Bürgi and Roos 2003; Roos et al 2004; Roos 2006) and was open to try something new. The idea was to develop a short trial program for the EMEA leadership team, which was the region most immediately influenced by the upcoming acquisition, and if successful we would run the program for other leadership teams. We have since run the program twice – in February and October 2006.

Together we designed the program as an intensive 2-day module that could be delivered either stand-alone or integrated with annual retreats and the like. In both cases the program was run as an integral part of business meetings during which the teams worked together more traditional the day before and after the program. Before the initial run we interviewed by phone all participants beforehand using open-ended questions about their own background, roles, responsibilities, their outlook on the organization and its business environment, the leadership team and their personal view on these matters. For reasons of parsimony we did not gather such data for the



second program because we agreed with the HR Director it was not necessary.

The program consisted of three phases which we facilitated sometimes jointly, sometimes taking turns to be in the fore ground while the other supported the actions. The following outlines how the second program unfolded since it more strongly illustrates how intended action learning can become highly concentrated in time and experiences. The second program included 13 functional managers making up a complete leadership team, including people with regional responsibilities from China, Japan, Indonesia, Belgium, Holland, Germany, Switzerland, USA and Mexico. The description of the episodes above are based on our notes, photographs taken throughout the program, written feedback one month after the program, and an interview with the liaison two months after the program.

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