E S S A Y

Symposium on Action Learning: Introduction

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Action learning / research is a broad field of research with deep roots in the 20th century. Unlike futures studies, which is more content oriented (i.e., the futures of health, peace futures, global futures), action learning / research is process and methodology oriented – addressing the manner in which research is done, rather than what is researched. At its core it is collaborative learning for social change. This is particularly important because, in this age of heterogenous changes and multi-fold social challenges, we need to be able to bridge learning about our futures with action and innovation in the present, in a way that is effective and accessible for lay communities and organisations, not just experts.

The synthesis of action learning / research and futures studies is a relatively new theoretical and methodological development. While participatory futures studies goes back decades to the work of Galtung, Boulding, Van Steenbergen, Jungk, Dator, Bezold and others, the incorporation of action learning / research into futures work is no older than about a decade. One can sense in this symposium, therefore, emerging and evolving practices. In some respects this emergence has been facilitated by futurist networks, in particular the community of practice in Australia, and the works of Tony Stevenson, Sohail Inayatullah and others. But this emergence can also be seen disparately, perhaps part of a broader zeitgeist. This symposium brings together nine very committed practitioners and

approaches in this emergence from around the world.

We begin with Anita Kelleher, who in "A Personal Philosophy of Anticipatory Action-Learning" offers a broad yet concise overview of her use of anticipatory action learning through the "PATOP" model, which stands for Philosophy, Assumptions, Theory, Organising, and Practice. She uses this to find and formulate consistency and integrity within her own approach. And yet the disjuncture between foresight and action is deeply problematic in the futures field, an issue taken up in the next paper. In "Bush Mechanics – artificing a future our children we can live with" Paul Wildman and Evan Hadkins critique the dissociation between thinking and doing, and offer a "rebraiding" through artificer learning. This is exemplified by examples of what they call "Bush Mechanic Learning" that address challenges associated with the global problematique.

Futures thinking and organisational doing find synthesis in the essay by Rosa Alegria. In "The appreciative perspective of the future" she describes her futures work within organisations employing an action research approach known as "appreciative inquiry". Here we see how the appreciative inquiry method incorporates the work of Fred Polak through constructivist participatory processes that lead to empowerment and action. But how can futurists "get out of the way" so that futures emerge through participatory group processes? In "Open Space for futures: a brief introduction" Stuart

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Candy shows how the minimalist open space technology can be used to address complex contemporary and futures problems in an open participatory way.

In contrast to group process oriented work, Manish Jain's essay takes a turn toward consciousness, the interior world of the individual. Working with the education and development organisation Shikshantar, he explores the basis and process of "unlearning", critical in shifting from rigid mindsets to adaptable "mindflex", an aspect of transformational change and critical in the development of sustainable futures. Flexibility as a theme also emerges in the work of Kate Teske, in "Futures in Government: Use of Anticipatory Action Learning to explore Public Service Futures." She demonstrated how government bureaucracies, which traditionally are characterised by structures of control and rigidity, are increasingly being challenged to adapt to rapid and unexpected changes and uncertain futures, and how anticipatory action learning is being used in these settings.

Aside from government, how can communities re-invent themselves in the face of unprecedented challenges? Graham Leicester in "Sustaining Human Aspiration: action learning in Falkirk" offers a case study of how the application of action learning and futures helped to transform the fate of a community in central Scotland. Following on the theme of community, in "Maroochy 2025 community visioning and action" Steve Gould describes a comprehensive participatory futures project on the Sunshine Coast of Queensland, an exemplary case study in community development, incorporating a broad array of anticipatory action learning approaches. This case study demonstrates the potential and benefits of broad community participation and engagement in the exploration and formulation of alternative futures.

Finally, Robert Burke in "Beyond Strategy: leadership, futures and ethics in a complex world", critiques the organisational obsession with strategic planning, arguing that most change happens in conversations and "micro-interactions" around business issues and futures issues around purpose. He describes the

approach he takes directing the Mt Eliza Centre for Executive Education near Melbourne.

There are no doubt others working in obscurity linking research and action, the needs of future generations and innovation in the present. In time more examples will emerge. For now I hope you enjoy this small, yet rich collection of approaches and case studies in the slow, yet hopeful evolution of futures theory and practice.

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