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Principles and Elements of Action Reflection Learning

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"Can the great lore of the creative but untrained pioneers of adult education be studied so that it can be passed on in a more systematic fashion?" Cyril Houle, 1964

PRINCIPLES AND ELEMENTS OF ACTION REFLECTION LEARNING

Paul Roberts, Isabel Rimanoczy, Boris Drizin

SUMMARY

Action Reflection Learning (ARL) is a practitioner developed approach, originally aimed at leadership development. Over time, the use has expanded to other applications, becoming a powerful way to design and facilitate learning in different contexts.

Relatively little research has been conducted to explore the defining characteristics and key elements of the ARL practice. This article presents the conceptual framework that resulted from a research conducted by Rimanoczy. It describes the seventeen key elements that were identified, and presents the ten learning principles that were found to underlie the practice.

The main contribution of this new conceptual framework is that it transforms the tacit knowledge of the ARL practitioners into an explicit knowledge. Tacit knowledge is what we don't know that we know. It includes know-how, judgment, experience, insights, rules of thumb, intuition, and skills. Having an explicit knowledge of ARL categorized and grouped by principles, elements and tools will enable the ARL community to reflect further and develop new knowledge and insights, to share and leverage experience, capitalizing on the improvements and enabling replication of successes.

The article gives examples of the tools and devices useful for a new practitioner. For those interested in the theory and principles behind ARL the article provides ample material too.

1. Introduction

Action Reflection Learning (ARL) is a learning methodology that has been developed as a powerful way of designing and facilitating learning interventions in a broad spectrum. It has mostly but not exclusively been used so far for leadership, team and organisational development. Its origins, history and philosophy will be described in this article.

Despite its implementation and success in many different organisational and educational contexts, and its increasing use to tackle a wide range of organisational issues and challenges, (Rohlin et al, 2002), relatively little research has been conducted into its defining characteristics. A strength of the methodology is that it can be creatively adapted by practitioners according to cultural context, organisational situation, and individual practitioner style. However, at the same time, what still defines it as ARL, its common Elements and underlying Principles, have not yet been clearly formulated.

The primary purpose of this article is to propose a conceptual framework that describes the 10 key learning Principles, 17 Elements, and a wide variety of tools which can be used to implement each element, and that were found, through a process of original research, to constitute the practice of ARL. An important aspect of this framework is that it is able to differentiate, and also show the relationship, between principles, elements and tools.

The article will first present the research, that led to the creation of a framework conceptualising ARL in terms of principles, elements and tools. The 17 common elements will be described and referred to the 10 underlying learning principles. In addition, the article will indicate the philosophical and theoretical grounding of each of the learning principles in different intellectual traditions concerned with learning and education. A conclusion will be offered, reflecting on the relevance of this research and the conceptual framework developed from it, for the ongoing practice of ARL. Finally, appendix 1 of the article includes a short account of the origins and evolution of ARL.

2. Research

In 2004, Rimanoczy initiated a research to explore what were the common elements and principles among ARL practitioners. For this research the exploratory and descriptive methods, (following the definition of Sampieri, Collado & Lucio,2003) were combined to collect and evaluate data from the different aspects, dimensions and components of the practice of the ARL learning methodology.

An initial literature review allowed Rimanoczy (2005), to develop an inventory of elements that are present in ARL programs, and to draft a preliminary classification of them. One of the interesting consequences of the literature review was to identify components that consistently appeared in different accounts of ARL, and at the same time to observe that those components corresponded to different levels of abstraction. This heterogeneity led to the creation of a conceptual framework, (which will be shared in Section Four of this article) that placed the components in different categories: Principles, Elements and Tools.

The next phase of the research was to develop a questionnaire that could be used with a group of practitioners to elicit more in-depth information about the practice of ARL. The questionnaire was constructed with the following research questions in mind:

a. What are the components most frequently used in successful ARL based programs?

b. Which components of design depend on the context and which don't?

c. What are the underlying principles of the ARL approach, that have led to successful results?

The questionnaire listed 34 components that covered elements, tools and principles found in the literature. Below, Table 1 shows the list of the 34 components surveyed.

Table 1

Co-design	Body language of the Learning Coach (LC)
Personal Learning Goals	Learning exchange
Expectations	Sequential learning
Just-in-Time (JIT) Learning	Reflection on Action
Linking	Self awareness
Balance Task/Learning	Diversity in the groups
Questions	Unfamiliar environments
Dialogue	Unfamiliar tasks
Stop/Reflect/Write/Report	Unfamiliar relationships
Learning journal	Challenging questions
Systemic approach	Visualisation
Safe environments	Facilitation role of the LC
Norms	Instructor role of the LC
Active Listening	Individual coaching role of the LC

Build on the positive	Learning styles
Emotional connections	Framing
Personality styles	Variety of activities

The Questionnaire was sent to a sample of 33 consultants who had participated in at least two ARL programs in the MiL Institute or with LIM, in the role of designer and/or learning coach, between 1995 and 2004. The sample covered a wide geographical spread: Sweden, Denmark, Mexico, Argentina, Chile, Peru, Colombia, UK, USA.

23 questionnaires (70% of the sample) were returned. These 23 respondents in turn represented 27% of the total population of practitioners that met the criteria cited above. In addition, some in depth interviews were conducted.

The analysis of data indicated that the average utilization of all the Principles, whether permanently or occasionally, was very high: 97.5%, which allowed to conclude that the Principles identified by Drizin and Rimanoczy corresponded satisfactorily to the reality of the practice.

As for the Elements, 68% of the surveyed individuals indicated that they used the Elements 'always', 30% indicated that they used them 'sometimes', and 2% indicated, 'never'. This led to the conclusion that the Elements identified corresponded well to the reality of the ARL practice (98%). It does not mean that these Elements are exclusive, but these were the ones found in the literature review, and it is possible to assume that they accurately describe the reality of the practice.¹

3. Principles, Elements and Tools

Analyzing the components used by ARL practitioners, Drizin and Rimanoczy investigated if there were common characteristics among those components. By doing so, they observed that the components belonged to different levels of abstraction and domains.

a. There were a few components corresponding to conceptual frameworks existing in various domains of literature, such as 'Systemic approach' and 'Self-awareness'. They called these components 'principles'.

b. There were other components, such as 'Learning styles' or 'Just in time learning' that were not as abstract as a theory or conceptual framework, neither were as concrete as a tool. They corresponded to strategies - ways or means to implement a concept - based on tacit assumptions. They called these components 'elements', and began to analyze what assumptions they represented, in order to identify the theoretical principles that grounded them. For example, the question became: Why do practitioners use 'just-in-time-

¹ The study validated the use of the elements. It did not explore the impact of isolated elements in the overall success of the interventions, therefore the qualifier "success" was limited to overall positive participant rating, as stated by the surveyed practitioners. Beyond the focus of the study the data allowed to compare the practices of consultants from both organizations, and to make recommendations to both organizations about areas that may require best practices exchanges, learning exchanges and/or training. For the full study, contact isabel.rimanoczy@LIMglobal.net

learning interventions' for ? The answer was 'to make the learning more meaningful, more connected to the reality of the learner'. So the missing principle behind this was "Relevance".

Elements constitute the core characteristics and the key features, that, when implemented together, distinguish ARL interventions from other types of action-learning based designs that may have some of them present.

The complexity of this conceptual framework construction was further revealed by the fact that some elements were meant to serve various assumptions simultaneously, therefore relating to more than one principle.

For example, the element 'Guided reflection' was representing the following assumptions:

- Individuals have certain knowledge, that can be accessed via introspection (Tacit Knowledge principle)
- Individuals can make meaning and extract lessons when they reflect on their experience (Reflection principle)
- Individuals can expand their thinking when they uncover their assumptions (Uncovering, adapting and building mental maps and models principle)
- Individuals develop their self-awareness when they establish new connections between their actions and the effects of their actions (Self-Awareness principle).

c. Finally there were very concrete, instrumental components, such as 'Setting expectations' or 'Co-design', corresponding to the tactical resources to implement the strategies (elements). They called these components 'tools', and analyzed to what element they corresponded, and to what principle.

This initial framework helped to answer the second question, "what ARL components depend on the context and which ones don't. " The answer laid in distinguishing the components into elements and tools.

Principles point us in the direction of theory, which exists beyond ARL. Elements are the ARL characteristics and tools are tactics and resources individual practitioners have to implement the elements. Yet the three levels are interconnected, and help to demonstrate the interrelationship between theory and practice. For example, tools used without an understanding of the theoretical basis of the work of the Learning Coach can seem, at best, mere technique or, at worst, gimmicky; likewise, theory without practical tools to embed it, can seem overly abstract and academic.

4. An Overview

The following table offers a summary and overview of the connections established between the principles, elements constituting ARL, as well as examples of tools. This table emerged as a result of the research, becoming a conceptual framework to code the practice.

PRINCIPLE	ELEMENTS	TOOLS
Theoretical Foundation	Implementation strategies	Implementation tactics

<p>Relevance <i>Learning is optimal when the focus of the learning is owned by, relevant to, important and timely for the individual.</i></p>	<p>Ownership: Taking ownership for one’s learning</p>	<p>Co design; Personal Learning Goals Expectations framed as questions</p>
	<p>JITL: Just in Time Learning (Just in Time intervention)</p>	<p>Various Concepts and Tools. The choice will follow the need of the learners at a certain point in time. It may be a decision making tool, a planning process, a feedback formula, etc. Learning Coach (LC)</p>
	<p>Linking: Connecting the concept with other contexts, generalization, application</p>	<p>Reflection question on how to transfer what was learned to other situations</p>
	<p>Balance Task/Learning</p>	<p>Project Real work/challenge Capturing lessons at individual and team level</p>
<p>Tacit Knowledge <i>Knowledge exists within individuals in implicit, often unaware forms, is under or not fully utilized and can be accessed through guided introspection.</i></p>	<p>Questioning</p>	<p>Different tools (Reflection and dialogue, Stop Reflect) Different types of questions LC Learning Journal</p>
	<p>Guided Reflection</p>	
<p>Reflection <i>The process of being able to thoughtfully reflect upon experience is an essential part of the learning process, which can enable greater meaning and learning to be derived from a given situation.</i></p>	<p>Guided Reflection</p>	<p>Different tools (For feedback, awareness of personal contribution, for assessing need of change, planning)</p>
	<p>Feedback</p>	

<p>Uncovering, Adapting and Building New Mental Maps and Models <i>The most significant learning occurs when individuals are able to shift the perspective by which they habitually view the world, leading to greater understanding (of the world and of the other), self-awareness and intelligent action</i></p>	<p>Unfamiliar Environments Questioning Guided Reflection Exchange of Learnings</p>	<p>Diversity in teams Unfamiliar environments Unfamiliar tasks Unfamiliar relationships Challenging questions Visualization, “What if” activities</p>
<p>Social Learning <i>Learning emerges through social interaction and, therefore, individuals learn better with others than by themselves.</i></p>	<p>Exchange of Learnings</p>	<p>Learning Partners’ Debriefs Reflection & Dialogue</p>
<p>Integration <i>People are a combination of mind, body, feelings and emotions, and respond best when all aspects of their being are considered, engaged, and valued.</i></p>	<p>Appreciative Approach</p>	<p>Positive body language of LC Active Listening tool Value the strengths of individuals Celebrating</p>
	<p>Safe environments</p>	<p>Norms; Contracting</p>
	<p>Whole being involvement</p>	<p>Activities that include/allow emotions; Personal Introductions, Reflection & Dialogue</p>
<p>Self Awareness <i>Building self-awareness through helping people understand the relation between what they feel, think, and act, and their impact on others, is a crucial step to greater personal and professional competence.</i></p>	<p>Learning and Personality Styles</p>	<p>Framing Designs respecting diverse styles MBTI, ECI, Firo B</p>
	<p>Coaching 1 on 1</p>	
	<p>Guided Reflection</p>	<p>Learning Journal, Personal Histor</p>
	<p>Feedback</p>	
<p>Repetition and Reinforcement <i>Practice brings mastery and positive reinforcement increases the assimilation.</i></p>	<p>Sequenced Learning</p>	<p>Sequenced Design Different activities to check on application, transfer</p>
<p>Facilitated Learning <i>A specific role exists for an expert in teaching and learning methods and in techniques which can help individuals and groups best learn.</i></p>	<p>Learning Coach</p>	<p>Roles of a LC: Reflector Teacher JIT Coach Facilitator Designer</p>

<p>Systemic understanding and practice <i>We live in a complex, interconnected, co-created world, and, in order to better understand and tackle individual and organizational issues, we have to take into account the different systems and contexts which mutually influence one another and affect these issues.</i></p>	<p>Five Levels</p>	<p>Different outcomes defined. Different processes, concepts and tools to address those outcomes. Different designs/ activities to address those outcomes Key Lines: 1) Personal: Processes to include feelings and personal stories, to include the "whole" person: mind, soul, body 2) Professional and 3) Team: Tools/techniques and knowledge required for the efficient work on the project 4) Organizational: Processes and workshops to deal with organizational challenges, i.e. change, mergers, transfer of learnings, culture etc 5) Business: The project/ challenge to work on</p>
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5. The 17 elements and their relation to the 10 learning principles

In this section a short description of each element is offered and the location and connection of each element to the ten learning principles identified and clarified. It should be noted that four of the Elements ('Questioning', 'Guided Reflection', 'Feedback', 'Exchange of Learnings') can be found under more than one principle.

In addition each of the ten learning principles is described and some key theoretical ideas underlying them outlined. This is not intended to be an exhaustive account of all the theoretical roots underlying each principle (in a 'post-modern' world such a view of knowledge is inherently problematic) but more to illustrate the richness and diversity of the theoretical sources that the work of the Learning Coach draws upon.

- **Element: Taking ownership for one's learning**

This element refers to the involvement of the participants in setting both their own learning goals and expected outcomes of the activity they are to engage in. It may include also the involvement of the participants' managers and a clarification of their expectations and, to a lesser extent, may also involve other key stakeholders who may have an interest in the participants' outcomes. From the research, the key however seems to be the involvement of the participant as the person most responsible for his/her own learning.

This element is achieved through activities such as client meetings for co-designing programs, interviewing the participants in advance of the program, and working with them both beforehand and on the program to define, and refine, their personal learning goals.

- **Element: Just in Time Learning/Just in Time Interventions**

This refers to the importance of the timeliness of the intervention. Although it is never possible to define with exact precision when is the right time for a particular intervention, the Learning Coaches exercise their best judgment in paying attention to the process - observing difficulties, obstacles, slow-down of processes, moments of uncertainty or confusion, or moments of extreme assertiveness - and introduce a tool, an activity, a question, or a concept that may help the individual, team and/or organisation in moving forward.

An important competence, therefore, of the Learning Coach is to choose from the range of his or her own resources which are the most appropriate interventions to be delivered at the most appropriate time, in a non-prescriptive manner, and in a way that maximises the potential learning of the participants. It is particularly important for the Learning Coach to hold back from 'rescuing' them as they face difficulties or challenges, because this can prevent the participant from solving the difficulty, and thus short circuit to the opportunity for greater learning.

- **Element: Linking**

The research found that ARL practitioners pay special attention to connecting the learning experience to other contexts. Rimanoczy (2005) calls this element 'Linking', and it refers to establishing an explicit connection between a current event, and the learning arising from it, to other contexts in which that same learning could be applied.

Linking helps the participants to take their current experience out of the realm of anecdotal knowledge, and into the field of application and usefulness. Linking is rarely made spontaneously by those participating in an experience, and it often requires a pause to reflect, to bring further awareness into what just happened, and how it could be replicated in other scenarios. The Learning Coach will pay special attention to helping make these connections, frequently using different types of questions to challenge and provoke the construction of the connections.

- **Element: Balance Task/Learning**

Just as well-timed interventions have a higher impact on learning because they are anchored in the most current and relevant reality for the participants, the balance of attention paid to task and to learning, (or to content and to process), is equally important to ensure that learning is maximally relevant. This was consistently mentioned by the ARL practitioners surveyed. While the balance is seldom 50/50, the Learning Coach should pay special attention so that the task does not dominate the work of the participants, nor that they focus excessively on conversations about the process or the learning. A key Learning Coach skill is knowing when to switch the focus from task to process or vice-versa.

The opportunities the Learning Coach has to implement this element are present both during the design phase as well as during individual sessions in the implementation of a program or intervention. An important challenge for the learning coach can be to make sure that the engagement in, and momentum of, the task does not preoccupy the participants so much that they fail to reflect on and extract lessons from how they undertook the task.

Principle # 1: Relevance

Drizin and Rimanoczy concluded that **Relevance** is the underlying principle behind these four elements. Relevance is defined as: "*Learning is optimal when the focus of the learning is owned by, relevant to, and important and timely for, the individual.*"

This principle is at the heart of learner-centred approaches to education such as inquiry learning (Murdoch, 1998: Murdoch and Wilson, 2004).

Other significant educationalists, such as Paulo Freire (1970), in his work on 'Popular Education', also refer to the importance of relevance. Kurt Lewin (1951), the founder of 'Action Research', highlights the importance of using real, current events to extract learning, which can be applied to other contexts.

Other key figures in the history of this approach to learning include Dewey, through his influential formulation of 'experiential learning' (1938), and Vygotsky (1962, 1978) in his ideas of 'situated learning'. A more contemporary figure, Lave, (1988) formulates this principle as a principle of her own work. She states that, "Knowledge needs to be presented in an authentic context, i.e., settings and applications that would normally involve that knowledge."

This principle has further been at the basis of action learning (Revans, 1982), Action Reflection Learning (Rohlin, 1984, 2002), self-managed learning (Cunningham, 2005) and work-based (Raelin, 2000) approaches to management development, where the focus of the learning is the real work challenges and/or projects of the manager, ensuring that the manager is engaged in and committed to both the project and the learning that happens simultaneously alongside the execution of the project.

- **Element: Questioning**

This is a very important element found in the ARL practice. Questioning refers not only the action of asking questions to the participants, but further, the intent to challenge perspectives, assumptions, to support the participants in exploring an issue deeper and in finding the answers by themselves. This aspect of helping to surface and challenge participants' assumptions through skilful questioning is also an important element of the learning principle of **Uncovering, Adapting and Building New Maps and Mental Models**, to be described later (as principle 4).

Learning Coaches should have an endless array of available questions at hand, and will creatively use their judgment to select which could be the most effective question to achieve a certain purpose in a given moment. It could be probing questions, learning questions, reflective questions, self-awareness questions, challenging questions, creative questions, critical thinking questions, clarifying questions. In addition, the Learning Coach will encourage participants to frame issues and dilemmas arising in the programme as questions in order to promote an atmosphere of inquiry.

- **Element: Guided Reflection**

This element is another essential component of ARL, so much so that it is found in the very name of 'Action *Reflection* Learning'. A key understanding was discovered early in the practice of this particular type of action learning. This was that learning does not just happen automatically as a consequence of action - an intermediate step of pausing and reflecting is required.

Guided reflection draws the learning out of the experience, by creating awareness of connections and possible cause-effect relationships. Guided reflection converts events into interpreted events, creating possible cause-effect connections. Guided reflection adds further information and information can become knowledge. Knowledge may later be converted into wisdom and learning that are applicable to other contexts.

While the term 'guided' sounds overly directive, it is, rather, intended to evoke the active role typically needed from the Learning Coach to insert activities of reflection into the rather action-oriented flow of a session. Understandably, participants, who are rewarded at work for getting results, tend to focus on solving the challenge, and it is not their typical reaction to stop, to reflect, and to make meaning out of their experiences. The ultimate goal, as with all the other elements, is to make the participants so familiar with the elements, so comfortable with their use, and so convinced of the utility of the elements, that they assimilate them, and begin to use them in their own practice. But until this happens, it is the role of the Learning Coach to insert opportunities for reflection. The importance of this element is such that it has been related to more than one principle (see below connected to the principles of **Reflection**, and **Self Awareness**).

The Coach has manifold tools to implement this element. Some common examples in the practice of ARL include: Stop Reflect Write Report; the use of certain questions that stimulate thinking; the use of a Learning Journal. In all these, the act of writing is an important tool in the practice of ARL to promote reflection.

Principle # 2 Tacit Knowledge

The principle that Drizin and Rimanoczy have posited underlying the Elements of Questioning and Guided Reflection is what they call **Tacit Knowledge** – "*Knowledge exists within individuals in implicit, often unaware forms; it is frequently under-or not fully utilized and can be accessed through guided introspection.*"

Knowledge is understood here as information or understanding gained either by experience, learning and perception or through association and reasoning. Knowledge is an assimilated experience, whether it is seen as constructed as we talk (constructivist paradigm), or conditioned by background, culture, ethnicity, gender, age, etc. This Tacit Knowledge principle ("*Knowledge exists within individuals in implicit, often unaware forms*") has a long and rich intellectual history going back at least as far as Socrates, The role of the educator is to bring out what is already latent within the individual. This notion is also expressed in the original Latin meaning of the word 'education', meaning to 'draw or lead out'.

Many meditative disciplines and spiritual traditions invite individuals to find wisdom from within, rather than from an external source of authority. The underlying assumption is that the answers to a person's questions already lie within themselves and are far more effective than those provided by outsiders.

This idea finds further expression in the twentieth century with the founding of psychology as a separate discipline. Freud, a seminal figure in the history of psychology, saw the aim of psychoanalysis as making more consciously available to the individual, that which is within their psyche in a repressed, unconscious and, therefore, tacit form.

This principle, in its application to education, recognizes that the learner, even as a child, but especially as an adult, is not a passive, empty vessel. This means that learners already have some kind of knowledge, together with their own mental models and frameworks, which will influence their search for answers in the processing, interpretations and understanding of new knowledge to which they are exposed. Being an empty vessel implies waiting to be filled with appropriate knowledge. Instead, the learner is an active inquirer, and learning is most effective when the learner is supported in the process to access their tacit knowledge.

A number of scholars have differentiated between 'explicit' and 'tacit' knowledge (Polanyi, 1958, 1966; Kogut and Zander, 1992; Nelson and Winter, 1982; Davenport, Thomas H., and Lawrence Prusak. 1998). 'Explicit' knowledge is easy to define, capture, and transfer to different formats, whereas 'tacit' knowledge is difficult to codify and transfer, because it is deeply rooted in individual minds, or within 'communities of practice' (Wenger, 1998), and individuals and/or communities often cannot easily articulate their premises and knowledge bases.

The notion of 'tacit' knowledge has become an important theme in knowledge management (Nonaka, 1991). Originally articulated by Polanyi (1958), it refers to the idea that individuals typically have much accumulated knowledge within them which they may not be able to consciously and clearly articulate. As the key resources of organizations are increasingly seen to be the intellectual capital that the organization contains (Stewart, 1997), an important issue for organizations becomes accessing and harnessing this intellectual capital in the form of tacit knowledge that is distributed across the organization.

- **Element: Feedback**

Feedback was originally described by Norbert Wiener (1950) in cybernetic systems as the process in which part of the output of a system is returned to its input in order to regulate its further output. In more human terms, it can be viewed as the process by which meaning is made out of a sequence of actions or events. Feedback was found in the research not only related to the verbal acknowledgement of behaviours and their impact on others, but also how people, of their own accord, can discover in the consequences of their actions, feedback about how effective or appropriate their actions are.

The Learning Coach implements 'Feedback' through a number of resources. These can be verbal or written, implemented through questions or instructions, individually or in pairs or teams, or in fishbowls.

This element is also related to the two learning principles to be described later of **Uncovering, Adapting and Building New Maps and Mental Models** (principle 4) and **Self-Awareness** (principle 7).

- **Element: Guided Reflection**

This element has already been described as a key element of **Tacit Knowledge**, and it is further an important element of the principle to be described immediately below of **Reflection**. There are a variety of ways in which learning coaches apply guided reflection: after action review, planning reflection, learning reflection, anticipating scenarios, critical thinking.

Principle # 3: Reflection

Reflection constitutes a basic assumption behind the practice, supported by many previous thinkers and researchers, and too important not to be considered as a conceptual principle in its own right.

*Drizin and Rimanoczy decided to describe **Reflection** as: "The process of being able to thoughtfully reflect upon experience is an essential part of the learning process, which can enable greater meaning and learning to be derived from a given situation".*

From Socrates, Plato and Aristotle to the present, reflection has been presented as a source of wisdom. In philosophy, reflection often means asking fundamental questions such as: 'what is it?'; 'how is it?'; 'why is it?'.

The notion of locating reflection at the heart of learning has roots in the work of the philosopher and educator John Dewey (1916, 1938), already mentioned as a key source for his formulation of 'experiential learning'. Grounded in Dewey's thinking, Kolb's (1984) further work on 'experiential learning' is a deep, philosophical and comprehensive investigation of just what was involved in the commonplace activity of learning from experience. He identified four continuous, cyclically linked phases: concrete experience (in which a person has an experience); reflective observation (in which people are able to critically reflect upon and investigate their own experience); abstract conceptualization (in which people develop ideas and hypotheses, and potentially enrich their worldview through their reflection); and active experimentation (in which, based on their ideas and hypotheses, people take action in the world). Such action then leads to further concrete experience and the cycle is re-initiated. In practice, of course, the different stages cannot be so neatly delineated and occur simultaneously.

Rimanoczy (2000, 2005) developed a change cycle that, by using an event as the starting point, and using reflection as the process, allows an individual to establish connections between action and its results, which she terms 'feedback'. This cycle can be used to explore what the individual's own contribution was to the result (awareness), and then to establish whether there is a need to change. If this is the case, what follows is to craft an actionable, feasible and realistic plan, leading to a new (corrected) action. This action again, will be observed through critical reflection: What happened? Reflection is the process that takes the individual throughout the cycle.



I.Rimanoczy, 2005

Lewin's (1951) theory and practice of 'action research' has been one of the founding disciplines of the field of organizational development. Action research, unlike more traditional research where objectivity and disengagement are sought, is actively aimed at changing, and therefore intervening in, social situations. It requires continuous cycles of action and reflection – a stage of action based on a possible hypothesis, and then a stage of reflection to evaluate the effects of the action, the validity of the initial hypothesis, and the possible generation of new hypotheses. Again, reflection is an indispensable stage of this process.

Hence, the ability to critically investigate one's own and others experience, both by thoughtful introspection, and also by external means such as open dialogue and skilled questioning from others, is seen by Kolb, Lewin and also by Rimanoczy (2000) to be a key part of the learning process and, therefore, of change.

Reflection is further highlighted in the work of Schön with his reflection in action and on action (1983), by Mezirow as critical reflection to foster transformative learning (2000), also by the Frankfurt School of critical theory notably Habermas (1971), by Van Manen (1990), and throughout the work of Chris Argyris (1982) among others.

- **Element: Unfamiliar Environments**

Throughout the literature and practice review, Rimanoczy (2005) found the consistent use of unfamiliar environments in the ARL designs, exposing the participants to challenging situations where they didn't have expertise or knowledge about the task or project they were charged with tackling, or where they had to work together with other participants from different functional areas, ethnic groups, or cultures. In some cases, unfamiliar environments could also be found in the locations to which the participants were taken.

This led Drizin and Rimanoczy to call this element 'Unfamiliar Environments', referring to the common underlying aspect that many different activities were pointing to. This element is very common in traditional action learning programs, and had been initially recommended by Reg.Revans, who preferred

to establish groups in which the participants were in unfamiliar settings or environments (Marquardt, 1999)

The tools and resources the Learning Coach has to implement this element are potentially unlimited: from trips or "cultural missions", where the participants are given a certain instruction to explore the business and social environment, to the deliberate creation of diversity in the composition of the teams, groups or learning partners, as well as activities that foster creative thinking, questions that uncover and challenge assumptions and purposefully imprecise instructions to provoke new interpretations.

- **Element: Exchange of Learnings**

In the practice of ARL, it was consistently found that participants are encouraged to share their experiences, reflections and insights with others. This was, therefore, called 'Exchange of Learnings', and the Learning Coach implements this element through specific design decisions and a variety of tools (e.g. sessions of Reflection and Dialogue, instituting learning partners, fishbowls, World Café sessions, learning charts, summaries and debriefs).

Exchange of learnings can be very significant in helping participants understand that others have very different perspectives and worldviews to their own, which in turn can help participants to critically examine their own assumptions and mental models.

- **Elements: Questioning and Feedback**

These two Elements have already been described in relation to the two earlier Principles of **Tacit Knowledge** and **Reflection**.

Principle # 4: Uncovering, adapting and building new maps and mental models

Drizin and Rimanoczy identified a principle underlying these four elements, which they called **Uncovering, Adapting and Building New Maps and Mental Models**.

This is defined as follows: "*The most significant learning occurs when individuals are able to shift the perspective by which they habitually view the world, leading to greater understanding (of the world and of the other), self-awareness and intelligent action.*"

This relates to the philosophy that our individual worldview and cultural paradigms do not come to us as a God-given or empirically deduced property of the external world, but that we actively construct the world we live in through the kinds of assumptions, maps, guiding metaphors, and mental models we develop, influenced by the educational, cultural, family and social contexts of the worlds we live in.

As Alford Korzybski (1933), the father of general semantics was one of the first to indicate, "the map is not the territory", pointing to the fact

that our perception of reality is not reality itself, but is our own version of it, or our 'map'.

No two people can have exactly the same map. While we typically have a similar underlying neurological structure, it functions differently in each of us. Trying to impose our map upon another person can lead to problems in communication. Learning to recognize the structure of another person's map allows us to "see the world through their eyes" and therefore understand and relate to others more respectfully and accurately. As Marcel Proust elegantly said: "The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes."

This leads a number of educators (Freire, 1970; Senge, 1990) to take the view that learning needs to be a critical and self-reflexive process that offers the opportunity to uncover and bring to the surface these mental models and assumptions, which are often largely subconscious, in order to expose them to critical scrutiny, and through this challenge, enrich and shift the underlying paradigms by which we interpret the world. If all this seems overly intellectual for highly action-focused managers, the point is that even the most action-focused managers will be basing their actions on some form of tacit world view. Our actions in the world therefore derive, whether consciously or not, from our interpretation of the world, and, if our ways of interpreting the world change, then so will our actions in the world.

This principle is also connected to Argyris and Schon's (1985) seminal work in 'action science', and to Argyris' (1978) ideas of 'single' and 'double-loop learning'. 'Single-loop learning' involves learning within the parameters of a given system, whereas, in 'double-loop learning', the operating assumptions of the system are themselves questioned.

- **Element: Exchange of Learnings**

This element has already been described and its importance highlighted in relation to the previous principle of ***Uncovering , Adapting and Building New Maps and Mental Models.***

Principle # 5: Social Learning

Drizin and Rimanoczy identified a further principle behind the element of 'Exchange of Learnings', which they called ***Social Learning*** and defined it as "*Social interaction generates learning*".

This principle is related to the idea, already outlined in the previous principle, that we live in a socially constructed world (Gergen, 1999). That is, put simply, reality does not exist as a given, external entity independent of ourselves, but that we create and shape the reality that we experience, at the same time as that reality is creating and shaping our individual worldviews. Moreover, we do not do this as isolated beings, but socially through interaction with others as families, friends, colleagues, and members of different cultures (professional, local, regional and national). Others become mirrors that play a significant role in our identity building. They stimulate thinking, inspire, and challenge.

This notion of a socially-constructed world has been developed by practitioners in appreciative inquiry (Cooperider & Whitney, 1999) who points out that the manner in which we conduct any inquiry will effect the reality that is evoked. If, therefore, we adopt a typical organizational problem-solving based mindset, we will evoke more of a reality based on problems. If, however, we ask questions that are aimed at uncovering what is working well, for individuals, team and organizations, then we will amplify that reality and make it more accessible for further learning and application.

This principle further points to the idea that although learning is embedded in individuals, it is essentially a relational, situated social activity (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Lave argues that learning, as it normally occurs, is a function of the activity, context and culture in which it occurs (i.e., where it is situated). This contrasts with most classroom learning activities which emphasize knowledge that is abstract and without context. Social interaction is a critical component of situated learning; learners become involved in a "community of practice" (Wenger, 1998), which embodies sets of beliefs, skills and behaviours that are available to individuals participating in the community.

Situated learning has antecedents in the work of Vygotsky (1968, 1978). The major theme of Vygotsky's theoretical framework is that social interaction plays a fundamental role in the development of cognition. Likewise, social learning theory, (Bandura, 1977), stresses the social dimension of learning through emphasizing the importance of observing and modelling the behaviours, attitudes, and emotional reactions of others.

Moreover, complexity theory (Lewin, 1993) further lays stress on the social nature of learning by viewing learning as a creative, emergent, unpredictable property of a network, arising through the interaction of the different individuals constituting the component parts of a social network.

In Revans' (1982) formulation, too, of 'Action Learning', an important dimension is that individuals work together in small groups, usually on projects of shared interest, to allow learning to arise not just from one's own project but also from the work of others, and to generate a group feeling that Revans' thought was important to help further learning, and liked to describe as a sense of "comrades-in-adversity".

- **Element: Appreciative approach**

The research indicated the consistent use, by the Learning Coaches, of an appreciative approach towards the participants, demonstrated by valuing their strengths, supporting self-directed improvements, and trusting their abilities to address problems and challenges. The Learning Coach has a variety of resources to express and foster the appreciative approach: by asking for successful experiences of the past, celebrating achievements, leading sessions to give positive feedback, introducing Active Listening, inviting exploration of what worked well and what can be further improved, modelling the curiosity to understand different perspectives, through positive body language, and also helping participants become aware of the importance of appreciation, both verbally and through gestures.

- **Element: Safe Environments**

In her research, Rimanoczy (2005) found that ARL practitioners pay special attention to creating a positive atmosphere to work with participants, where confidentiality is granted, and indeed becomes the norm, and where people are not judged or ridiculed when trying out new behaviours or expressing their opinions and perspectives. She called this element 'Safe Environments', as the conscious intent of the Learning Coach is to create a safe space that fosters trust and minimizes the risks associated with learning and trying out new behaviours.

Learning Coaches have several resources to implement this element: these include setting norms, contracting roles and expectations and agreeing on confidentiality, all of which are designed to create a climate of safety and trust.

- **Element: Whole being involvement**

The enormous variety of activities described in the ARL literature² indicates that great consideration is given to engaging the participants intellectually, emotionally, spiritually and physically. This was defined by Drizin and Rimanoczy as pertaining to an element that they called 'Whole being Involvement' of the individual, meaning the intent to address the participants as whole individuals, not ignoring feelings, spiritual concerns or physical needs.

The Learning Coach has a number of resources available to implement this element: these include, for example, outdoor activities, check-ins, sharing personal stories, meaningful introductions, life narratives, artistic production sessions, Reflection and Dialogue, and mementos.

Principle # 6: Integration

Drizin and Rimanoczy proposed that the three above mentioned elements, 'Appreciative Approach', 'Safe Environments' and 'Whole being involvement' of the individual, all pertained to a common principle which they called **Integration**, defining it as *"People are a combination of mind, body, feelings and emotions, and respond best when all aspects of their being are considered, engaged, and valued."*

This principle is strongly present in a specifically humanistic psychology, including authors such as Carl Rogers (client-based counselling), Abraham Maslow and Stanislav Grof (transpersonal psychology), Fritz Perls (Gestalt psychology), and Wilhelm Reich (body-based psychotherapies). It arose in the middle part of the twentieth century as an alternative to psychoanalysis and to the experimental, behavioral theories of Skinner, Thorndike and Watson.

Humanistic psychology takes a more holistic, non-dualistic perspective on human beings as a combination of mind and body, matter and spirit,

² See: Arnell, E. & Turner, E. (2002); Billing, K. (2002); Brent, M. & Matheny. (1999); Cederholm, L. (2002); Cederholm, L. & Sewerin, T. (1996) Draeby, I. & Braddick, B. (2002); Hagerstrom, A. & Wickelgren, M. (2002); Lamm, S. (2000).; Marsick (1988,1990); Marsick, V. & Watkins, K. (1990); O'Neil, J. (1999); Rennemo, O. (2002); Rohlin (1984, 1996, 2002); Sewerin, T. (2002 and 2002b); Yorks, L., O'Neil, J., Marsick, V., Lamm, S., Kolodny, R., Nilson, G. (1998); Wickelgren, M; Jarvung, L.G. & Lindberg, A. (2002)

thinking and feeling, thought and action. It points out that all learning is emotionally grounded, and that our mental models are not just cognitive constructs, but also attached to deep levels of identity and feeling in our being.

Another author that developed a holistic approach, specifically addressing the human search for meaning is Viktor E. Frankl (2000). More recently, other humanistic-based theories have attempted to integrate spiritual and mythical dimensions, and different cultural perspectives to more fully encompass the range of human experience (Campbell, 1972; Wilber, 2001).

- **Element: Learning and Personality Styles**

ARL practitioners are conscious of the actual or potential different learning and personality styles of the participants, and include a consideration of these preferences in the design, in order to make learning more accessible to the diverse group. They also sometimes make the participants aware of their own preferences, through instruments and self assessment tools (Learning Styles Inventory, ECI, Firo B, MBTI, etc).

Different ways that the element 'Learning and Personality Styles' can be implemented by Learning Coaches are through framing an activity to meet the different learning styles (Why are we doing this? What will we do? How will we do it? And so what?), balancing learning with others with time for learning alone, balancing hands-on activities with intellectually challenging ones, using instruments, running sessions to explore different perceptions and preferences in the group and how they relate to personality styles, building the personality profile of the group as a whole, establishing strengths and areas for development, as well as exploring behavioural patterns and cultural influences.

- **Element: Coaching 1:1**

The research indicated the practice of giving both formal and informal individual support to the participants, and Rimanoczy called this Coaching 1:1. Coaching 1:1 can be a formal support, but is not limited to a contractual relationship between an individual and his/her coach. It also refers to personal encounters, where the coach is intentionally giving support to a participant, to hear how he/she is connecting the experience with life outside the program, what current challenges the individual is facing and helping to address those. It can take place during a break or a meal, in an e-mail exchange or in a phone conversation, previous, during or after the program.

- **Element: Guided Reflection**

This element has been mentioned and described earlier in this section under other principles (see **Tacit Knowledge** and **Reflection**). However, it is also a key element that corresponds to the principle immediately following.

- **Element: Feedback**

Like **Guided Reflection**, this element has also been described relating to other learning Principles, in this case to the principles of **Reflection** and **Uncovering, Adapting and Building New Maps and Mental Models**.

Principle # 7: Self-Awareness

Drizin and Rimanoczy found that the elements of 'Learning and Personality Styles', 'Coaching 1:1', 'Guided Reflection' and 'Feedback' could all be covered by a common assumption, defined as the principle of **Self-Awareness**, with the following definition:

"Building self-awareness through helping people understand the relation between what they feel, think, and act, and their impact on others, is a crucial step to greater personal and professional competence."

Many writers have laid emphasis on the importance of self-awareness. William James (1890) described the role of introspection to increase self-awareness. Freud further extensively developed the importance of delving into the emotions, feelings, thoughts of an individual and looking into the unconscious reasons of our reactions and behaviours, as a way to expand our understanding of selves and improve our relationships with others.

Other psychological theories, notably Jung's work on 'Psychological Types' (1924), emphasize the ways in which people are different from one another, rather than stressing a common psychology. Jung's original work was further developed by Myers and Briggs into a questionnaire that defines people as belonging to one of 16 personality types. Depending on our personality type, we have a tendency or preference to manage, learn, lead, relate to others, think, perceive and decide in different ways.

An important aspect of self-awareness, therefore, is understanding our own individual perspective on the world (through the use of questionnaires like the MBTI or others that identify personality and learning styles) as one of many possible perspectives, and not necessarily the best or most privileged position.

In the management field, Goleman (2002) identifies 'emotional intelligence' as the critical ingredient of leadership ability. He sees emotional intelligence being made up of four primary domains, of which self-awareness is one of the two domains of personal competence, the other being self-management.

This principle links with the other Principles concerned with learning, by stressing that, as learning is a holistic activity that involves the whole self (not just the mind), any more fundamental, or double-loop, or transformative learning necessarily touches on deep themes of human identity, purpose and awareness. That is self, meaning, learning and the social world are not separate, and that self-awareness and learning proceed hand-in-hand.

- **Element: Sequenced Learning**

The research found that most of the ARL interventions were designed as a sequenced series of sessions, which alternated time spent on an ARL programme with time back in the workplace. This enabled further cycles of action and reflection, where participants could put into practice what they had learnt, and experiment with different behaviours and actions in the workplace, and then return to the programme for further in-depth assessment and reflection on the impact of what they had been doing at the workplace.

This was interpreted as an element, in that it seemed to indicate the importance of the duration of time and on-going opportunities to practice, in trying out new behaviours, perspectives or tools. This element is clearly present in the design, in the way the programme is sequenced, and different parts interconnect, and can also be reinforced by following-up with individuals to support and sustain their on-going learning.

Principle # 8: Repetition and Reinforcement

Drizin and Rimanoczy called the principle underlying this element, **Repetition and Reinforcement** – *“Practice brings mastery and positive reinforcement increases the assimilation.”*

This principle has affinities with behavioural psychology (Skinner: 1971, 1974), John B. Watson (1925) and Ivan Pavlov (Hothersall, 1995). Whereas many of the other learning Principles can be linked to cognitivist and constructionist perspectives of learning, this principle is rooted more in a behaviourist perspective.

Skinner developed the theory of "operant conditioning." He thought that we behave the way we do because this kind of behaviour has had certain positive or negative consequences in the past. Like Watson, Skinner denied that the mind or feelings play any part in determining behaviour. Instead, our experience of reinforcements determines our behaviour. Internal reinforcement through brain modifications was explored by early behavioural psychologists (Watson, 1925) and external behavioural reinforcements by cognitivists (Ausubel, 1968; Bandura, 1977).

Repetition is also highlighted in the creation of habits, by Dewey (1922), who was influenced by the earlier writings of William James (1890).

Experimentation with behavior typically involves trial and error, with the associated risk of premature failure, and, therefore, indicates further the central importance of the overall environment (or in behaviourist terms, what kind of reinforcements are made available) in which learning occurs, which needs to be both supportive and challenging, allowing sufficient time for assimilation of the learning.

- **Element: Learning Coach**

The Learning Coach is present throughout the ARL literature, as the external facilitator with a variety of roles: designer of learning scenarios, just-in-time instructor, reflector, facilitator and coach.

Principle # 9: Facilitated learning

The principle that was identified underlying the presence of the Learning Coach is called **Facilitated Learning** – *“A specific role exists for an expert in teaching and learning methods and techniques which can help individuals and groups best learn.”*

The role of the educator has continually been debated and contested in ideas about learning. It ranges from that found in more hierarchical

settings (teacher, instructor, spiritual master or guru) to that found in more participative contexts (mentor, advisor, counselor, coach).

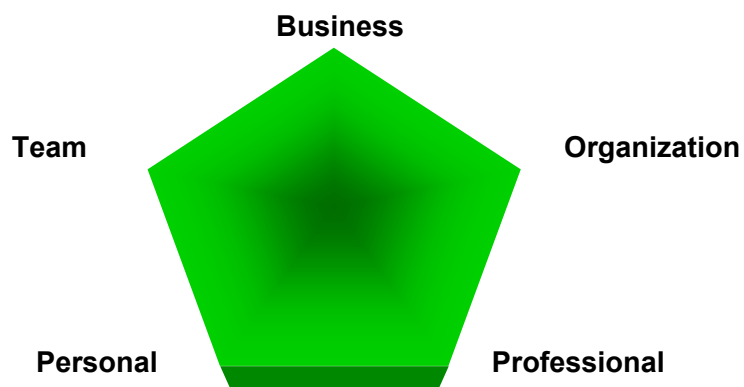
In educational settings, cognitive psychologists (Piaget, 1972), humanists (Rogers, 1969 and Knowles, 1970), and learning theorists (Kolb, 1984, Mezirow, 1990, Schon, 1983) emphasize different aspects of the role of the teacher or facilitator, but all acknowledge the importance of support for the learning.

Specifically, in organizational settings, an influential formulation of this principle can be found in the work of Schein (1988), who, alongside Lewin (1951), was another pioneer in the emerging field of organizational development in the fifties and sixties. In his work on 'Process Consultation', he clearly articulates a well-defined role for an individual based on the facilitation of an organizational grouping or team. This individual is typically not a formal member of the group they are working with, and can, therefore, be more independent of the organizational system, and freer to pay attention to the unfolding dynamics. The role of 'process consultant' involves helping the team or grouping pay attention to the way that it is working together to achieve a task, and through this, helping the team or group members achieve a higher level of task satisfaction.

The role of the Learning Coach used in ARL builds on Reg Revans (1982) role of the Set Advisor and on Schein's (1988) work, adding the roles of designer, teacher, coach and reflector as important roles in the facilitation of learning.

- **Element: Five Levels**

Throughout the descriptions of the practice of ARL, the research found an awareness of the different system levels, together with their interrelationships and mutual impact, which practitioners were working with. This element refers to the five system levels of personal (attitudinal, behavioral), professional (competencies and skills), team (team membership, team leadership), organization and business.



Two important applications of this element are to be able to identify and plan interventions at different system levels, and also to define and evaluate outcomes at all five system levels.

Principle # 10: Systemic understanding and practice

The principle that was found underlying the attention paid to the five mentioned levels was named **Systemic Understanding and Practice** – *"We live in a complex, interconnected, co-created world, and, in order to better understand and tackle individual and organizational issues, we have to take into account the different systems and contexts which mutually influence one another and effect these issues."*

As this principle is systemic in nature, it emphasises the integration and interconnection of the previous nine Principles.

This principle is based on understanding individuals, organizations and the world as complex living systems that both shape and are shaped by their environment. Systems thinking stresses wholes rather than parts, relationships and processes rather than separate entities, mapping rather than measurement, and pattern rather than content.

In organizational theory, these ideas have surfaced in the systems theory of von Bertalanffy (1968), and have been further developed by Jay Forrester (1969), and most recently clearly articulated by Peter Senge (1990) in his influential book about learning organizations, 'The Fifth Discipline'. For Senge, the ability to be able to think and act in systems terms is the key discipline by which organizations can become learning organizations and therefore sustain themselves in a complex, rapidly changing world.

Some writers (Capra, 1996) see systems thinking as the basis of a radically different worldview from the traditional, mechanistic, materialist, and modernist worldview that has shaped western thinking for the past 400 years. From this perspective, (Tarnas, 1991), the scientific revolution took over from the worldview of the Catholic Church in the seventeenth century, as the predominant western worldview and ushered in the Enlightenment with its values of rationality, progress and individual freedom, that remains dominant, but increasingly under challenge, to this present day. A shift to a systems perspective, therefore, represents a shift to a very different way of understanding the world.

6. Conclusion

Overall, this article has set out to describe a framework of principles, elements and tools, underlying the practice of Action Reflection Learning. This conceptual framework was developed from a combination of original research, involving a review of the literature in this field, questionnaires and personal interviews completed by practitioners, designed to help test and explore some of the initial ideas emerging from the literature review.

The three questions that triggered the research were answered through the development of the conceptual framework, the taxonomy of principles, elements and tools and through validation by the practitioners.

The purpose in identifying a framework of common elements and underlying principles is not to overly define, standardise, and thereby limit what has always been a creative, idiosyncratic and ever-evolving field of activity, an important feature of which has been that individuals have had scope and been encouraged

to develop their own forms of practice. Instead, the purposes are to contribute to the continuing development of both the theory and practice of ARL in the following ways.

- * Through identifying 17 common elements in the practice of ARL, to encourage practitioners to use these elements as a way of reflecting on and developing their own practice, both to highlight elements they see as cornerstones of their practice, and to identify possible gaps or less developed elements in their practice.

- * By outlining 10 principles that underlie the practice of ARL, to show the rich and extensive theoretical base on which the practice is founded. It can also be importantly noted at this point, but it is beyond the scope of this article to explore further, that the ten principles express not just a theoretical base but also a potential value base of ARL. For example, the principle of 'integration' is clearly related to humanistic values of 'authenticity' and 'wholeness'.

- * The conceptual framework transforms the tacit knowledge of the ARL practitioners into an explicit knowledge. Tacit knowledge is what we don't know that we know. It includes know-how, judgment, experience, insights, rules of thumb, intuition, and skills. Having an explicit knowledge of ARL, categorized and grouped by principles, elements and tools will enable the ARL community to reflect further and develop new knowledge and insights, to share and leverage experience, capitalizing on the improvements and enabling replication of successes.

- * The creation of this article is itself a product of individual and social learning emerging through cycles of action and subsequent reflection. In the spirit of wanting to encourage further learning, we would want to put forward these ideas not as an overly prescriptive model, but as a thoughtfully researched and constructed resource that others will be stimulated to use, both to inform their practice, and to develop their own theoretical frameworks and models of the complex, and often paradoxical, activity of facilitating others' learning.

In short, this framework is a constructivist first step. It is not neat, square, perfect and closed. It is an attempt to code, classify, and to create a nomenclature. More research needs to be done to explore if and how much the practitioners were familiar with theories, what other elements may be missed or have been developed further than what was described in the literature, how the practitioners deal with the dilemmas and contradictions inherent to be operating simultaneously with different paradigms, plus further refinements of the conceptual framework.

Finally, as an illustration of knowledge arising from action, reflection and learning, the genesis and writing of this article is itself an embodiment of the learning principles to which the article refers, which have been outlined in the previous section.

For example the principle of 'relevance' is exemplified by the original research being based on the motivation of the two researchers, Isabel Rimanoczy and Boris Drizin, who wanted to investigate in greater depth the theoretical basis of their practice as management and organizational developers, and to develop a framework that would help to inform their and others' practice.

The framework emerging from the research was further refined through the many subsequent interactions the two initial researchers had with others, including a meeting between Isabel Rimanoczy and Paul Roberts with other

colleagues at the LIM annual conference in Puebla, Mexico, 2005 which led to his and others' interest and involvement in the framework, and resulted in the collaboration that has led to the writing of this article. This illustrates very well the principle of 'social learning'. Furthermore, the writing of the article has required much 'reflection' and accessing of 'tacit knowledge'. As a final message from the authors to the readers, our aim has been that reading this article will have stimulated further reflection and the accessing of the readers' tacit knowledge. In this way, the learning continues.....

APPENDIX

The Origin of ARL

The MiL Model

At the end of the 1970s, a group of academics from the University of Lund, in Sweden, together with a number of line managers and several managing directors, as well as consultants and professionals in the HR arena working in Swedish organizations, came together to create a movement of protest against the prevailing approaches and methods used in professional training.

Management training was fully focused on teaching concepts, techniques and theories, and the preferred method was lectures and courses. As Lennart Rohlin, President of the MiL Institute puts it, "Our ambition was to put leadership (instead of merely management) and learning (instead of teaching) in the forefront" (Rohlin, 1996).

The thinking of this group was that the corporations needed more than just managers; it was leadership that was essential to address the changing requirements of the business context. This thinking reflected the view of Abraham Zaleznik in his influential, classic article published by the Harvard Business Review, where he posits a manager/leader polarity, in which the manager is portrayed as a rational, practical and unimaginative person, in contrast to the leader, who is described as a visionary, restless, and dynamic character, better prepared to face changing environments (Zaleznik, 1977). Executives had to be prepared to face this new challenge, and traditional training was not enough to prepare them. The human dimension was missing – the understanding of what it's like to work with people, not merely with processes, equipment and systems.

At the same time, a strongly democratic and participative Scandinavian culture made it imperative to review the values on which leadership was based. Authority or influence? Control or empowerment? Power or consensus?

This avant-garde group came up with a different way to train, focusing on

learning rather than on teaching. This meant that they started to look for alternate ways to create learning scenarios that could be more effective than the traditional classroom training.

The "MiL Model" which originated in this convergence of values, objectives and approach to management training was also called "The MiL Philosophy", or the "Action Model" (Rohlin, 1984). As Rohlin describes it, "By 1976, I had worked for several years organizing seminars at Lund University for managers, but when people finally got to know each other and the trust level for real learning was established, it was over. For years I wrote and edited numerous university books, but when the students eventually gained the power to put the new ideas into practice, time had elapsed, the ideas were forgotten, or the concepts were no longer timely." (Rohlin, 2002).

This is how the MiL Institute³ was born, involving about 100 professionals from business, consulting organizations, and universities, working in a participative way over 18 months to develop the concepts on which the new approach would be based. The programs were based on three key principles: 1) developing leaders who thrive on change, and who are comfortable living with ambiguity and uncertainty; 2) building trusting relationships (not excluding authority and control); and 3) developing learning based on action and reflection, using real-time strategic projects as the vehicle for learning (Rohlin, 1996). One of the results of the development project was the creation of MiL as a membership organisation.

A few years later, the first international programs were developed, implemented in collaboration with strategic partners: Ashridge Management College, London Business School, INSEAD and IMEDE (now IMD).

The model that was created aims at developing value-based leadership, converting the managers into strategic 'Actors' who can generate their own theories of leadership derived through individual and group reflection. Initially the projects were worked on half of the time in a classroom setting, making the difference with traditional classroom in the wording: Program instead of 'course', learning coach instead of 'teacher'. Guest resources instead of 'lecturer', design instead of 'time schedule". MiL brought together groups of managers to work on real, organisationally significant projects.

The evolution of the model

In the 1980s, MiL designed and implemented programs to develop value-based leadership, using a design where learning is based on taking action to tackle real-life organizational issues. This model is strongly related to the Action Learning approach developed by Reg Revans in the '40s, where a group of people meet periodically to solve problems related to work. Each individual brings his own problem and the group members ask questions that help the individual to find his own answers (Revans, 1982).

The main differences between the Action Learning programs and the MiL model in the '80s were concentrated on the role of a Learning Coach, the use of group rather than individual problems, the group's lack of familiarity with the problem, and the duration of the sessions.

³ From now on called MiL

The MiL model continued to evolve, through changing and experimenting with the number of sessions, the duration of the sessions, the type of project selected, the role of the Learning Coach and the style of his/her interventions. By the mid '80's, MiL and the consulting firm LIM founded in the US to spread the methodology decided to call this approach Action Reflection Learning, to validate and stress the importance of individual and group reflection in heightening awareness and in developing new frameworks for learning. (Rohlin, 2002). Shortly later, the research arm ARL Inquiry was created, formed by a group of academics and consultants connected to Columbia University.

MiL and its sister company LIM experimented with different contexts to apply their ARL methodology: in more academic environments such as a management development program at the Master's level for graduates of the University of Lund, Sweden, and the University of Belgrano, Argentina; and, also, in open programs for member corporations of MiL and in-company programs. The ARL approach was also applied to different contexts and outcomes. Examples ranged from: programs to help executives become a better performing team, simultaneously helping them create new business strategies; facilitation in the integration process of mergers and acquisitions; individual coaching; programs for young high potentials; mentoring programs; leadership transition programs; organizational change programs; development of specific managerial and leadership competencies; development of leader-coaches; development of HR competencies; facilitation of performance appraisal processes; facilitation of teams working on a crisis; development of synergy in regional teams; development of Learning Coaches.

ARL in LIM

With the expansion of LIM into Latin America in the mid '90's, a need emerged to transmit the knowledge and experience of seasoned colleagues to a group of new consultants, and so LIM created a 'Learning Coach Development Program' .

This initiative promoted further conceptualization and refinement of the practice of the role of the Learning Coach, as it attempted to identify the elements that constitute an ARL program and to understand the common features embodied in different designs.

In the Learning Coach Handbook, LIM identified 2 principles: "The knowledge is inside you" and "The best learning scenario is real life", and eleven core elements: Questions, reflection, learning journal, team learning, learning coach, balance task/learning, just-in-time learning, sequential learning, systemic approach, learning styles, and appreciative inquiry. (Rimanoczy, Pearson & Turner, 2000, p.10-13)

As a result, LIM Learning Coaches came to understand their role, as well as the contributions, skills, behaviours, and mindsets that are expected of them. Yet the conceptual foundation of the ARL approach has largely remained mostly unexplored until recently, and this article has been an initial step in identifying that foundation

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