Writing an Account of Practice as a Process of Theorising in Action Learning

David Coghlan, Trinity College Dublin david.coghlan@tcd.ie

Clare Rigg, University of Suffolk. C.rigg@uos.ac.uk

In an introduction to the Accounts of Practice section of this journal in 2010, we noted that accounts of practice have stories to tell and insights and excitements to share (Rigg & Coghlan, 2010). We posed the questions as to whom these accounts are for and why the journal publishes them. In this article we provide an answer, namely that accounts of practice are a practice of theorising in terms of Revans' theory and practice of action learning. At the action learning symposium held virtually on 21st April 2021, we facilitated a workshop on theorising from practice. There was rich sharing and discussion on participants' experiences in action learning, particularly in higher education contexts. The strength of this journal in having both refereed papers and accounts of practice was affirmed strongly. In academic writing refereed papers are inherently accepted as engaging with and creating theory, in the sense of explanations and conclusions that have wider applicability. However, in this paper we explore how the process of writing an Account of Practice paper can also be seen as a process of theorising, articulating the kind of knowledge created from learning about what learn in and through action.

Theorising

Theorising is described as the process of what one does when producing a theory. It is described as further thinking to explain data, reduce complexity and create better understanding and as occurring within the contexts of discovery and verification (Swedberg,

2014). It works in terms of cognitive operations - speculating, guessing, supposing, conjecturing, hypothesizing, conceiving, explaining (Hansen & Madsen, 2019), 'racking one's brain' and 'thinking deeply', sensemaking (Weick, 2014), and social activities of talking, listening, reading and writing in a community of scholars (Hansen & Madsen, 2019). The activities of theorising are largely ignored, with the emphasis being generally placed on the theory as the outcome (Swedberg, 2014).

A stereotypical negative view of theory is that it is abstract and abstruse and separate from the practicalities of life. As a stereotype this view has its truth and its limitations. One limitation is that it expresses only one form of theory or knowledge. What this view of theorising ignores is the realm of practical theory or, in Argyris' terms, actionable knowledge (Argyris, 2004). This is knowledge that enables us to deal with the practical issues of everyday living. Practical or actionable knowing is focused on practical tasks. It needs be differentiated for each situation as we work out what is going on in a given situation and what this situation requires in order to move forward. It varies from place to place and from situation to situation in that what works in one setting may not work in another. Understanding actions in the everyday requires inquiry into the constructions of meaning that individuals make about themselves, their situation and the world, and how their actions may be driven by assumptions and compulsions as well as by values. Practical knowing is particular and practical and it draws on resources of language, tone and volume of voice, eloquence and body language, pauses, questions, omissions and so on. Coghlan (2011) argues that action learning produces practical knowledge and, therefore in the context of this essay we make the case that Accounts of Practice offer a way of practical theorising in the sense of cogenerating actionable knowledge. We ask how, in terms of Revans' learning formula, L=P+Q, where Q represents questioning insight, by which Revans means insight

that comes out of questioning programmed learning (P) in the light of experience, the L

might be understood as actionable knowledge and the result of a process of theorising? To

explore these questions we revisit the foundations of Revans' theory of action and the

processes of human knowing that are exercised in action learning.

Action Learning

Action learning, as developed by Revans, grew from a mid-20th century disenchantment with

positivism and prevailing cultural beliefs in the dominance of expertise, which fostered the

conviction that, unless problems can be solved by a purely technical solution, there is more

learning to be had through action being taken by those involved with an issue. Revans' key

idea was a synergy between learning and action: 'there can be no learning without action and

no (sober and deliberate) action without learning.' (2011: 83). At the heart of action learning

is a distinction between and among puzzles and problems. *Puzzles* are those difficulties for

which a correct solution exists and which are amenable to specialist and expert advice.

Problems, on the other hand, are difficulties where there is no single solution and require the

collaborative engagement of those owning or impacted by them. Problems are central to

action learning because, in addressing them, different stakeholders can advocate alternative

courses of action in accordance with their own values, past experience and desired outcomes.

Accounts of practice address problems.

Revans (1971) proposed a theory of action in terms of a science of *praxeology*, comprising

what he called *systems alpha*, *beta* and *gamma*). In essence, *system alpha* focuses on the

investigation of the problem, its sources, history, the external environment and available

internal resources and the value system underpinning the desire to resolve it. *System beta*

focuses on the problem resolution, through cycles of experimentation and the group processes

of questioning, supporting and challenging. *System gamma* focuses on the learning as

experienced uniquely by each of the participants through their self-awareness and

questioning. Systems *alpha* and *beta* focus on the investigation of the problem while system

gamma focuses on the learning or as Coughlan and Coghlan (2021) put it, the emergent

actionable knowledge. The three systems *alpha, beta* and *gamma* are perhaps best understood

as a whole emphasising how action learning involves engagement with real issues and is

scientifically rigorous in confronting the issues and critically subjective through managers

learning in action. They form the processes of a theory of action, a praxeology in Revan's

terms, and so may be construed as a form of theorising (Figure 1).

[Figure 1 here]

Coghlan (2012) explores the notion of insight and its role in action learning through the

recognisable structure of human knowing. The structure of human knowing comprises three

operations: experience, understanding and judgement (Cronin, 2017). Experience is an

interaction of inner and outer events. We can not only see, hear, smell, taste. and touch,

imagine, remember, feel, and think but we can also experience ourselves as seeing, hearing,

thinking, feeling, remembering and imagining. Understanding provides possible answers to

questions posed to experience. It not only names, experiences and distinguishes them from

one another; it also correlates and associates experiences with one another. Understanding

comes through insight, an act that grasps the intelligible connections between things that

puzzle us. When we ask 'what was that noise that I just heard?' 'What does it mean?'

answers to such questions come in the form of insights, which are acts of understanding, of

grasping and formulating patterns, unities, relationships and explanations in response to

questions posed to our experience. The movement from experience to understanding is a

move from description to explanation as we seek to make sense of and find an explanation for

our experience. The search for understanding is intelligent, that is anticipating a rational

answer. While insights are common they are not always satisfactory answers to our questions.

The question then is, does the insight fit the evidence? This opens up a question for

reflection. Is it so? Yes or no? Maybe. I don't know. So we move to a new level of the

cognitional process, where we marshal and weigh evidence and assess its sufficiency. We set

the judgment up conditionally; if the conditions have been fulfilled, then it is reasonable to

judge that this is the case.

The movement from understanding to judgement involves what Peirce (1903)

calls 'abductive' reasoning. Abductive reasoning is the thinking in which we

engage when we are puzzling out what is going on. It is motivated by surprise

in the face of anomalies or puzzles and it generates a plausible provisional

explanation. In contrast to logical deductive or inductive reasoning, abductive

thinking has been described as 'uncodifiable conceptual leaps' (Langley, 1999:

691) and can be characterized by being 'struck' (Cunliffe, 2002, citing

Wittgenstein, 1980:85) by a direct insight into or understanding of an

experience. In Pierce's view, abduction is the foundation of a new idea and the

emergent understanding of the problem.

We are not just knowers; we also make decisions and act. Action learning

pushes us to bring our learning into action. The process of deciding is a similar

process to that of knowing. From experience we ask questions about the value

as to what possible courses of action might be. At this level we ask what

courses of action are open to me and as we review options, weigh choices and

decide, we reflect on the possible value judgements as to what is the best option

to try out. As we follow through on action and observe the consequences of our

trials, our judgement is either affirmed or refuted and through further learning

we refine our knowledge. Of course coming to know is not always as straight

forward. On an individual level we can be inattentive to some data, not ask the

questions that might be disturbing, make superficial interpretations, be guided

by unresolved feelings, avoid challenging decisions and be paralysed from

acting by anxiety (Vince, 2010). Groups and organizations have tacit and

unexamined assumptions that inhibit questioning and learning (Argyris, 2011).

Accordingly, attention to the process of knowing in action learning sets requires

rigorous questioning of each other's experience, understanding and judgements

and critical examination of underlying assumptions and tacit structures (Rigg &

Trehan, 2004; Trehan & Rigg, 2015).

From the operations of experience, understanding and judgment, deciding and taking action,

a general empirical method may be formulated which is simply the enactment of the knowing

process. This method is grounded in: attention to experience, envisaging possible

explanations of that data (understanding through abductive reasoning), preferring as probable

or certain the explanations which provide the best account for the data (judgement). This

method is expressed as:

- Be attentive (to experience)

- Be intelligent (in understanding

- Be reasonable (in judging)

- Be responsible (in taking action)

The general empirical method is embedded in enacting in Revans' praxeology. As discussed

above, insight is an act of understanding that grasps the intelligible connections between

things that previously have appeared disparate. So we move from description to explanation

by asking questions, particularly aloud to fellow set members. Answers to questions come in

the form of insights, which, as we have seen, are instants of understanding, of grasping and

formulating patterns, unities, relationships and explanations in response to the questions

posed to our experience. Yet, insight on its own is not sufficient to generate a fit. Rather,

insight must be followed by judgement in order to assess and verify the evidence. These steps

of creating explanations and making predictions to try out in practice to address our

problematic situation is a process of theorising.

The general empirical method is played out through L=P+Q whereby experience is subjected

to questioning insight in the company of peers and taking action (Coghlan, 2012). Those

engaging in action learning attend to their experience in confronting a problem for which

there is no evident solution. They learn to ask intelligent questions for understanding by

means of *system alpha*, engage in addressing the problem through experimentation supported

and challenged by set members; through abductive reasoning they test insights through

system beta and articulate learning as actionable knowledge through *system gamma*.

Accounts of Practice as Practical Theorising

For practitioners engaging in action learning, knowing how they know, that insights are

merely speculative until tested and affirmed by judgement is central to the process. The

general empirical method of being attentive to data, intelligent in understanding, reasonable

in judging and responsible in taking action provides both a solid foundation for inquiring-in-

action and a benchmark by which to test how they are learning. It also provides a mechanism

within the action learning set, whereby members may challenge one another as to how an

insight emerges from questioning experience, and how an individual has weighed the

evidence on which they have based a judgement. It encourages members to attempt to

articulate how their mind is working in, for example, how they weigh evidence and form

judgements as to how an incident is good or bad from their perspective, and also how they

feel. As they identify potential actions to try out, the empirical method of action learning L is

effectively also inviting them to make predictions or in other words to conjecture or

hypothesize. Along with the other activities of theorising listed earlier - speculating,

guessing, supposing, conceiving, explaining, racking one's brain, thinking deeply, struggling

to make sense – taking place in a group setting of talking, listening, questioning are at the

heart of the action learning process. As a consequence, we argue that the praxeology of

systems alpha, beta and gamma provide the infrastructure for theorising the process and

outcomes that results in the emergence of learning (L), the actionable knowledge. Coughlan

and Coghlan (2021) make the point that as action learning participants move from one

learning engagement to another and as their learning (L) develops so too does programmed

learning (P) as it becomes a resource for the next learning initiative.

Table 1 provides an overview of the process. Writing an Account of Practice article can also

be seen as an action that emerges from the action learning process. It begins from experience

and questioning that experience, and often this is done collaboratively in the action learning

set. Interpretations and understanding are shared and talked through over time in multiple set

meetings and judgements consolidated so as to frame the account of practice. The judgement

also focuses on what the intended contribution of the account of practice might be, that is, a

clarity of what it is that readers are expected to learn. That consolidation may include making

connections to and comparison with relevant literature (P in Revans' terms). The actions are

to write up the account and submit for publication.

Conclusions

The act of theorising turns the attention from the outcome of theory generation to the act of

theory generation itself. It places the issue firmly in the question, "How do we come to

know?" Revans' systems alpha, beta and gamma provide a foundational action theory that

grounds the theorising process in action learning. This is the core of theorising in the

praxeology of action learning: that the enactment of *systems alpha*, *beta* and *gamma* through

the L=P+Q formula produces actionable knowledge (L) and itself becomes P for future

learning. This means therefore, that accounts of practice are more than merely interesting

stories. They are at the heart of Revans' sophisticated learning theory and as a synthesis of

learning and action, the writing of them is an act of theorising.

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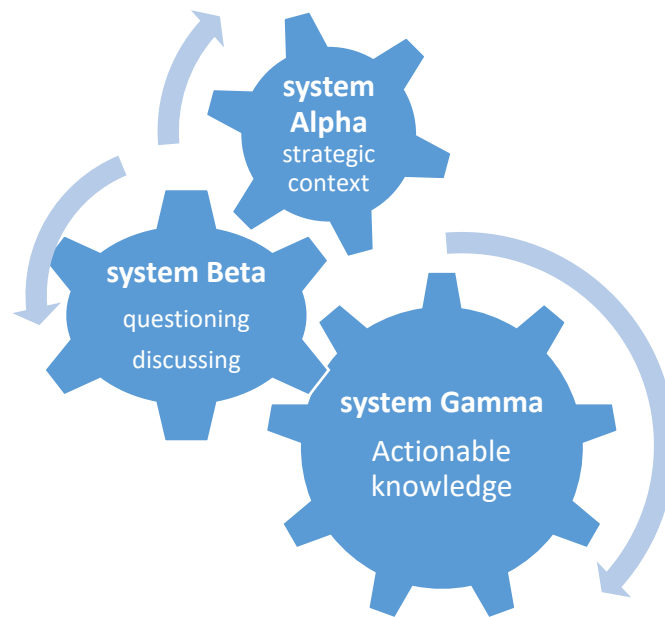
Figure 1 Revans Praxeology as Theorising

Operations of Human Knowing	Activity	General Empirical Method	Examples of Questions	Action Learning
Experience	**Attentiveness** [to data of sense and of consciousness]	Be attentive	What is the problem? What is happening/has happened in the organisation? What are the questions we are asking? How are we thinking about what has happened? How are we questioning one another's experiencer?	*System Alpha*
Understanding	**Intelligence** [Envisaging possible explanations of that data]	Be intelligent	How do we understand What are we learning/have learned? What answers, however provisional, are emerging through over time in multiple set meetings?	*System Beta*
Judgment	**Reasonableness** [Preferring as probable or certain the explanations which provide the best account for the data]	Be reasonable	What judgements are we coming to? What have we learned? How is our judgement/learning confirmed? What is the contribution of our account of practice?	*System Gamma*
Action	**Responsibility** [for action]	Be responsible	What will we do next to test our explanation and judgement of a potential solution in the organisation/system? Writing up and submitting the account of practice	

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