Building capacity through action learning

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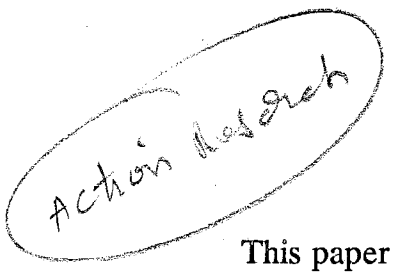

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INTRODUCTION

The ability to learn from experience is critical for individuals and organizations seeking to be effective in rapidly changing and complex situations. Educators, corporate managers, public administrators, and grass roots activists have all been challenged by the dilemmas of learning from action and experience. While using many different terms (including action research, action science, experiential learning, participatory research, organizational learning, learning systems, etc.) these people have developed a rich and varied set of insights into facilitating what might be generally called "action learning."

The purpose of this paper is to review several streams of work related to action learning (AL), and to consolidate some of the key principles in an effort to help organizations expand their capacity to develop action learning strategies. Particular attention will be paid to the relevance of action learning principles for non-governmental and community based organizations (NGOs and CBOs).

Section One provides an overview of the various streams of literature related to AL, highlights common purposes and values, and gives brief examples of the application of AL from three of the streams. Section One also presents a four part cyclical model of AL. Sections Two through Five describe each phase of the AL model in detail, from experience, to reflection and inquiry, to individual and joint learning, to action, and back to experience. Section Six highlights some distinctive features of NGOs and CBOs and offers some thoughts on applying AL in these settings. The final section of the paper is an annotated bibliography of books and articles on which this review is based.

SECTION ONE: OVERVIEW OF ACTION LEARNING

This paper combines learnings from six different streams of thought, all of which apply to ALED's purpose of building organizational capacity by learning through experience. While the six different streams come from different countries, sectors, and traditions, they share many similar purposes, underlying values, and methods. Underlying all six streams is a cyclical model of AL that can be used by NGOs and CBOs to organize their thinking about designing their own approaches to AL. Readers who are especially interested in one of the streams may refer to the annotated bibliography at the end of this paper for additional references.[1]

Summary Of Six Streams of AL Literature

The six streams of AL literature can be roughly categorized into a Northern tradition and a Southern Tradition. The Northern tradition comes primarily from European and American experience, with efforts to improve the performance of private and public sector organizations. The Southern tradition comes mainly from the experience of people in Third World countries, working on individual and group empowerment as aspects of cultural and political change.

The Northern tradition has four principal parts. One is the work of Reg Revans whose focus was on helping managers and other organizational leaders learn from each other to improve their capacity to intervene in problems that had no obvious solution. Of the six streams of work reviewed here, only Revans and his followers specifically used the term "Action Learning" to describe their work. (See Box 1 for summary of an AL project in the Reg Revans tradition[2])

Action research is the next major part of the Northern Tradition of AL. The early action research of Kurt Lewin aimed to solve practical, real-life problems while also contributing to theory and general knowledge about social and organizational systems. While Lewin's work broke new ground in terms of partial collaboration between researchers and "subjects", expert researchers were still seen as primarily responsible for interpreting what was going on and for designing change efforts.

BOX #1: Action Learning in an Industrial Organization

A Welch textile factory was in danger of closing because of production problems and inefficiencies which senior management was unable to solve. The factory manager agreed to sponsor an action learning "set" of eight people, including textile factory workers, supervisors, and the production manager. The group met for four hours, every two weeks with the help of an outside "set advisor." The first meeting, was a review of AL principles, followed by each set member describing their view of the problems at the factory. At the end of the meeting the set agreed on two key problem areas (unclear job descriptions and confused work flow) and made plans to investigate the problems before the next meeting. In second and third meetings set members reported on their thinking and action on the problems and began planning some coordinated solutions. At the end of the fourth meeting the set advisor asked the group to identify: 1) changes in individual behavior resulting from the discussions; 2) other changes requiring more investigation or other people's authority; and 3) how the group could continue without the outside set advisor. Based on its positive progress, the group got approval to continue for four more sessions. By the seventh or eighth meeting the group functioned more as a team, understood the "bigger picture" influencing factory performance, and had solved several concrete problems. Prior to the AL meetings, group members say they believed their role was to listen and take instructions. In the AL meetings, members came to see their role as advising the factory manager, and taking responsibility for acting on issues discussed in the set meetings. The set advisor's role was significant at the beginning, helping people understand the principles of AL, helping with overall problem definition, and with set member selection. The set advisor also helped in maintaining continuity from meeting to meeting, encouraging equal participation, and keeping set members focussed on analysis and personal responsibility, rather than fixating on problems and blaming others.

Recently, the term "Participatory Action Research" (PAR) has evolved to describe a third form of AL in which outside researchers and people inside the focal system collaborate on all aspects of a learning and change process. Major goals in PAR are to empower participants through new insights, enhancing an entire system's ability to study and change itself, and to envision and create new future possibilities. The Northern version of PAR has focussed on large scale, planned change in organizations, communities, and countries, mainly in politically open societies in industrialized countries. PAR has experimented with the creation of new forms of social organization and networks in order to manage PAR projects. (See Box #2 for summary of a Northern PAR project.[3]) There is also a Southern version of PAR which will be described later. A fourth branch of Northern AL is called "Organizational Learning," which strives to create organizations which are continually improving their capacity to create their desired future. It does this by changing "the way inferences about past actions and outcomes get translated into [individual and organizational] routines, processes, and procedures that guide future behavior, more or less independently of the particular individuals [involved]."[4] Perhaps more than any other part of AL, Organizational Learning tries to understand and make use of the connection between individual level learning and organizational capacity building.

The Southern tradition of AL has two major, but interrelated parts. The first is the work of Paulo Freire, in which he uses interactive inquiry among people without much formal education to foster individual and collective transformation. In this inquiry, people from oppressed groups examine

BOX 2: A Northern PAR Project

The mayors of three municipalities in an economically weak region of Norway asked some University researchers for help in attracting large national companies to the region. After discussion among the Mayors, researchers, and key community members, the project goal changed to focus on "indigenous development with local participation and control using an [action research] process." Over the next 5 years, researchers, area politicians and administrators, entrepreneurs, and other citizens met to build a multi-sector, interorganizational network to promote indigenous economic development. The project relied on a "co-generative" model of learning in which experts in social science research engaged other constituents in dialogue to develop locally relevant theory to guide action. A primary forum for these dialogues was the "search conference", a technology for helping large groups of diverse people discover common ground in their history, their views of the present and in their visions of the future (Weisbord, et al, 1993). Initially, search conferences were conducted in each of the municipalities to generate a shared understanding of local problems and create task forces to address particular issues. Follow up meetings were held several months after the search conferences to coordinate task force activities. The second phase involved a regional meeting from each municipality and evaluations of task force activities and of the regional network meeting itself. The third phase of the work involved leadership training to support development across municipalities, a search conference to create common ground between the public and private sector, and evaluation and report writing conducted jointly by researchers and participants. The report writing helped consolidate learning and provided a shared understanding of the structure of the evolving networks.

their own experience and discover their own explanations of reality and "name" this reality. The power to name one's own reality is itself an exercise in freedom which begins the process of empowerment. Freire sees learning as a dialectic process (what he calls "praxis"), between reflection and action.

The second branch, the Southern version of PAR, has much in common with Freire's work and in many cases draws directly from it. Southern PAR emphasizes the role of knowledge as the basis for empowering oppressed people, and has developed a theory of collaboration between people from privileged classes (who mainly have academic knowledge or conceptual knowledge) and people from exploited classes who mainly have experiential knowledge. Two key principles in southern PAR include transformation of unjust monopolies of knowledge and power in society, and the valuing of people's experience and culture as valid sources of knowledge and meaning.

Within this tradition, Fals-Borda and Rahman emphasize the relationship between knowledge and power, showing how elite control over the production of knowledge contributes to domination as much as elite control over the production of material resources. Tandon further explores the value of dialogue as a method of individual and social transformation. (See Box #3 for a summary of a Southern PAR project.)

This review does not attempt an exhaustive comparison of all aspects of each stream of thought. Rather, the focus is on features of these streams which are either shared or complimentary, and which might be of use to NGOs and CBOs considering how to design AL efforts.

BOX 3: A SOUTHERN PAR PROJECT

The survival of a peasant community in the Peruvian Andes was threatened by a highly infectious disease that was killing large numbers of sheep. Members of the local peasant organization decided they needed more information about the technical, social, and economic aspects of the community in order to launch an effective, collective response to the disease. Several research groups were formed to collect and analyze information, one of which focussed on traditional medicine practices. Elders and women were included on the commission because of their knowledge of traditional medical practices, and young people were included because of their greater literacy and scientific skills. The group collected data on the incidence and treatment of livestock disease. The group consulted with professionals who believed that contaminated water was causing the illness, and also with village elders who claimed the disease was a punishment from the Mountain Gods. Finally, the group established empirical tests of the traditional treatments to determine which were most effective. Test results were shared with the whole community, and there was community dialogue to choose a treatment method appropriate to the local economy. "The topics, methods, and implementation were all decided by the peasants themselves. They themselves systematized their experiences and generated new choices and new actions in a process of joint reflection. In this way they created, through a permanent process of education and research, their own intellectuals, educators, and researchers. In the same way we saw how popular knowledge, empirical knowledge, and myths and beliefs, stemming from the political and economic reality of the community, could be transformed into functional scientific knowledge... We could clearly observe in the whole process that the role of the professionals was transformed into the role of facilitators as the community assumed responsibility for the research without denying the important role of the professionals." (Gianotten and de Wit, in Fals-Borda and Rahman, pp. 69-70.)

The Purpose of Action Learning

The basic purpose of AL is to enable people to learn from their experience so they are able to solve real organizational or social problems. The Northern and Southern traditions of AL emphasize different sorts of problems.

The Northern tradition generally aims at incremental improvements in organization functioning, either through solving specific organizational problems, or by enhancing an organization's ability to study and change itself. When the Northern tradition tackles larger scale change, it is usually in the form of complex collaborations among tightly organized systems such as government agencies and private companies. In the Northern tradition, large scale social change is usually defined in terms of strengthening cooperation and coordination to make incremental improvements in the quality of people's lives, or in the competitiveness of a nation's or region's economy.

The Southern tradition usually aims at more fundamental transformations in economic and social relations. The Southern tradition is more concerned with individual transformation as a prerequisite for larger systems change, and is less planful or explicit about how individual change leads to social change. It is a more organic, less highly engineered approach, appropriate to situations where civil society may be weak, and political space is limited.

- Fundamental Values and Beliefs in AL

Fortunately, many of the underlying values in all branches of AL are consistent with the values of many progressive NGOs and CBOs. AL is democratic, transformative, and humanistic.

AL is democratic in that it aims to involve people in the process of influencing or making decisions that directly affect their lives, whether this is in the workplace, community, or society. It is also democratic in that it respects the validity of all people's experience and knowledge, not just that of so-called experts, technocrats, academics, or other professionals. AL attempts to reduce hierarchical distinctions among people seeking to learn from one another.

AL is not content with the status quo. It is aimed at enabling people to learn in order that they may change themselves as well as the larger systems in which they work and live. Individual change is crucial in AL, since changed knowledge results in changed power to intervene in the world. AL is most valuable when individuals and organizations are facing complex, rapidly changing situations for which no prior or obvious solution exists. Inner and outer transformation is a continuous feature of AL.

AL is humanistic in that it encourages personal growth, and holds that personal growth is a prerequisite for systems change at higher levels. AL also has a strong bias in favor of organizations that value each person's skill and knowledge, and treats them as important. Finally, AL believes that individuals can participate in creating their own reality and futures, through engaging in learning and action, rather than simply being passive victims of forces beyond their control. In this view, the goal is to help people become "subjects", or co-creators of their history, and not just objects of that history. This is a perspective that is very affirming of the creative, powerful abilities within each person, and which puts these abilities to the service of some larger good. Southern writers, such as Fals Borda and Freire tend to be more sophisticated than some of their Northern counterparts in their understanding of systemic forces of social domination. Nonetheless, these Southern writers still affirm the importance of individual conscientization in affecting change in large systems.

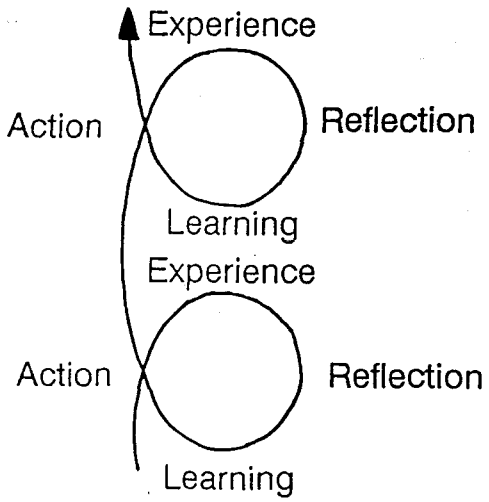
The preceding sections have provided some background and general flavor for action learning, but what is AL and how does it work?

Overview of the Four Part Model of Action Learning

The different streams of AL offer a variety of models of how learning, action and change are related, informed by the different experiences out of which they come and the types of systems they seek to change. Despite the differences, it is possible to distill a general model of AL which is consistent with the key features of each stream of AL. This model has four parts: Experience; Reflection and Inquiry; Individual and Collective Learning; and Action. These four parts can be thought of as parts of a repeating cycle. Each cycle builds upon the previous one, creating an upward spiral of increased learning and more effective action.

The following sections, Two through Five, discuss each part of the model in more detail, and highlight the principles of each. The focus here is mainly on the principles behind the AL model, since specific methods of application will vary greatly depending on circumstances.

Figure 1: Action Learning Cycle



SECTION TWO: THE CENTRAL ROLE OF EXPERIENCE IN ACTION LEARNING

Reality, and people's experience of it, is the pivotal part of the action learning cycle. Even though AL is a cyclical process, each cycle may be seen as beginning and ending with experience.

Experience as the Source of Learning

People's experience of reality is the starting place for learning and change in AL. Many in AL, especially in the Southern tradition[5], believe that the essence of reality is apprehended through experience. This process is an intuitive one in which feelings and understanding occur naturally in response to experience without mediation by formal instruction or academic models. The philosopher Ortega y Gassett uses the term *vivencia* to describe this process of immediate comprehension of experience.[6] More simply put, people know their own experience. We may not be immediately able to put our experience into words or fully understand its importance in the larger world, but we do know our experience.

Unlike many other Northern approaches to learning--which value **thinking** over all other ways of knowing about the world-- AL believes that **feelings** and **action** are also valid sources of knowledge. In AL people's feelings about and perceptions of their experience are seen as facts, just as much as are ideas.[7] There is an ancient tradition of believing that "doing is knowing"[8], although in modern times in the West this belief has given way to abstract theorizing as the dominant mode of learning. So while the Northern tradition of AL tends to place a high value on conceptualization and theory building, it also values experience. In AL, learning is seen as a process in which concepts derive from and are modified by experience.[9]

Another, and quite practical reason why AL sees experience as the source of learning is that adults seem to learn best when the learning involves real consequences or risk. Most adults are motivated to learn when they experience needing to know something or to do something,[10] and not simply by the love of learning. Revans believes that without risk, (i.e., negative consequences for not learning) little learning will occur because a person will have little need to examine or change their values, thoughts or behavior.[11]

Since people's experience is an important foundation of knowledge, then it is also an abundant resource, available to all. There is no organization, community group, work group, or collection of organization leaders that does not have available to it a rich set of experiences on which to draw, and concrete, real life problems to try and understand. When addressing complex, dynamic problems like those facing most NGOs and CBOs, it is critical to tap into the diverse experiences of all people involved. Without doing so, important parts of the overall picture may be missed. Also, since people and their experience are so closely tied, to not draw on people's experience is the same as rejecting the person. Organizations and groups who routinely reject people by not letting them contribute their experience to collective problem solving, risk alienating people and losing their potential energy, wisdom, and other contributions.

These are the ways in which AL views experience as the beginning of the learning cycle. But how is it also the end of the cycle?

Experience as the End Point of Learning

One key aim of AL is to change reality, or people's experience of reality. In this way, experience can be seen as the end of the cycle. These changes can be at many different levels, and of various degrees or depths.

AL can be used to change experience at the individual level. In AL people develop new insights into themselves, their behavior, and their place in larger organizational and social systems. Such insights inherently change people's perception of their experience. AL also provides people with new abilities to learn and act. The list of new individual skills learned through AL is almost endless, but include improved ability in such things as communication, management skills, confronting dominant power holders, analyzing complex problems, and thinking strategically. Perhaps most importantly, AL can help individuals create new future possibilities for themselves and for the collectives of which they

are a part. AL does this by encouraging people to create their own understandings of their present reality and to create their own ideas about the future rather than passively accepting fate or the models of "experts" or other dominant groups.

At the group and organizational level, AL can change peoples' experience of individual and organizational effectiveness by changing established routines, processes, and procedures. As people employ AL inquiry principles, they begin to ask "high quality questions" not only about the habitual ways things are done, but about the way the group or organization goes about learning from past experience. AL can essentially give an organization or group an enhanced ability to learn about itself. Not only can the organization improve its effectiveness, but people's experience within the organization is one of greater involvement, energy, collaboration, and democracy.

As described earlier, AL has also been employed to change experience at the level of whole societies or nations, either through tightly designed interorganizational collaborations (as are more typical in Western, industrial democracies), or through naturally expanding cultural movements which combine participatory education and social organizing as central strategies for empowerment.

Changes at any of these levels (individual, group and organizational, or societal), can happen in a variety of degrees or depths. There is nothing necessarily radical or incremental about the changes in experience which AL can help create. For example, AL can be used by leaders of successful NGOs or CBOs to create small improvements in particular areas of their organizations (for example, improving accounting systems, or enhancing communications), or it may be used to fundamentally transform the power relations and operational assumptions of the organization (for example, shifting from a hierarchical form of decision-making to a form which is highly participatory and inclusive). The degree of change depends on how the task is defined and on the composition of the AL group.

SECTION THREE: LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE VIA REFLECTION AND INQUIRY

Each stream of AL offers a variety of skills and methods for reflection and inquiry. These are the keys to maximizing individual and organizational learning. This section reviews some of the key principles and methods for inquiry and reflection in AL.

Learning in Complex, Risky and Uncertain Environments

AL is well-suited to learning in situations where no simple, pre-packaged solutions to a problem exist, where there is substantial risk to an individual or collectivity if a good answer is not found, and where it's not clear what may change in the future. This is because AL has the ability to generate creative solutions from a variety of stakeholders, requires substantial personal involvement and self-examination, and can continually react and adapt to shifting circumstances. How does AL do this and what are the conditions for learning under these circumstances? The key AL principles here are collaboration, trust and respect, suspension of assumptions, and creation of new social systems.

Collaboration is a key requirement for learning in the AL framework. In part what this means is eliminating the traditional distinctions made between "teacher" and "student", or "researcher" and "subject." The kinds of issues AL seeks to understand and change are not usually ones where there are any experts or where "programmed knowledge" (to use Revans' phrase) exists which can be given to students by teachers. AL is not based on what Freire calls the "banking concept" of knowledge in which experts or teachers make deposits of existing knowledge in the "learner's" head, for withdrawal when needed. Rather, in AL all participants in the process are experts in their own experience, and draw on that experience to learn from one another about themselves and their larger system. The Southern tradition of AL has a well developed philosophy of participation which argues that eliminating the "subject-object dichotomy"[12] in research, education, and in daily life is a crucial part of eliminating systems of domination which rely on monopolies of knowledge and power.

Given this perspective, collaboration also means minimizing organizational hierarchies at least within the AL setting. Revans dealt with this precondition for learning by structuring learning groups mostly composed of people from the same hierarchical level, either within an organization or from multiple organizations. Other streams of AL tend to be more inclusive, and either include people from a variety of hierarchical levels, or else work within systems that are less hierarchical by to begin with. Organizations in which collaborative AL is most likely to be easily introduced are those which already practice some forms of participatory leadership, or where authority for decision-making has already been decentralized and pushed to the lowest possible level. People in such organizations will already have substantial practice in challenging organizational "superiors", being responsible for their own work, and having some understanding of how decisions in their area fit with the overall strategy and function of their organization or group.

Trust and respect is another precondition for AL, especially where some sort of social or organizational hierarchy exists within the learning group. In order to create a safe place in which to learn, people must feel free from the threat of embarrassment or retribution. Otherwise, people will be unlikely to be open to helpful yet critical feedback from others, will be unwilling to expose areas of ignorance or confusion, and will be reluctant to suggest new ideas which conflict with others' opinions.[13] To create this safety, an atmosphere must be developed in which people's individual differences are valued, and seen as sources of learning rather than as threats. Also, specific contracting around non-retribution might be needed between people at different levels in an organization or system. Participation in AL or other forms of adult learning is facilitated by people making free and informed choice to be involved and to participate.

In order to make use of the varied experience brought to an AL setting and to derive creative learning from it, it is also important for participants to suspend their assumptions. To "suspend assumptions" literally means to hang them out in front of oneself and the rest of the group so the assumption may be examined. (Isaacs, W., 1992, p.9) It does not mean not having assumptions; it simply means acknowledging an assumption exists and being willing to question it and have it questioned by others. (For example, examining the assumption that people without formal education are incapable of taking a meaningful role in NGO strategy formulation). If people hold onto preexisting beliefs about how the world works it is difficult to truly inquire into the nature of a problem, or to fully understand how another person's experience may inform the situation. The suspension of assumptions also facilitates inquiry in another way. It allows for changes in the process of inquiry itself if the current process does not seem to be working. For example, perhaps more needs to be done about creating safety, perhaps too many or too few people are involved, or perhaps the learning group is asking the wrong types of questions about its experience. If so, AL supports challenging any preconceived plans and changing course in mid-stream.

But what kinds of learning groups can meet these preconditions for learning in settings of complexity, risk and uncertainty? Often, new groups need to be created for the sole purpose of managing and implementing inquiry and change using AL principles. While the varieties are endless, three examples should help map out some edges of the terrain. Revans developed the concept of "learning sets", small groups of people, usually managers in industrial organizations, who agreed to meet together periodically to report on their activities in their organizations, analyze new issues, and plan further action. The role of the set members was to scrutinize each others thinking, and to develop "questioning insight" in themselves and each other.[14] Revans also worked with learning sets composed of intact work teams, government ministers, coal mine operators, and hospital staff. AL was applicable in all these settings, but to be effective each participant had to be working on real problems in a condition of "ignorance, risk, and confusion"[15]

Another form of AL learning group has been called a "dialogue group." The Southern version of the dialogue group is well described by Freire, as groups convened for "problem-posing education."[16] In dialogue, people who share some situation in common, come together to ask questions about their situation, such as "Why are

we poor?" As people inquire into the reality of their situation, powerlessness and resignation is replaced by increased understanding and a "drive for transformation and inquiry." (Freire, 1970, p.73) There are a variety of Northern versions of dialogue groups. Within organization change settings these include learning groups of managers or organizational teams which meet to inquire into the nature of organizational environments, individual perception and experience, and to test individuals' perceptions against the perceptions of others.[17] Within social change settings, the North also has a tradition of dialogue groups aimed at consciousness raising, emerging primarily from the Black Power and Women's Liberation Movements.

Inter-organizational networks are a third example of a social system developed to manage and implement inquiry and change. In inter-organizational networks groups of people come together to share information and coordinate action across a broad range of organizations and sectors (government, NGOs, private sector), to address problems which no one organization can solve alone. Several Scandinavian countries have experimented with action research methods to create interorganizational networks to foster regional economic development.[18] The "search conference" is another, more time limited approach to learning and action in inter-group and inter-organizational settings. In these conferences, many people (sometimes hundreds) with diverse views, come together to discover common ground based on sharing their views of the past, the present, and their desired futures, and then plan ways to narrow the gap between the present and the desired future.[19]

As should be apparent by now, dialogue is a crucial part of reflection and inquiry in AL, and so deserves a more detailed discussion here.

Dialogue as a Key Method in Reflection and Inquiry

There are four aspects of dialogue worth expanding on here: the social aspect of dialogue, key skills in successful dialogue, the role of dialogue in developing knowledge among "non-experts", and the generation of shared frameworks of understanding.

AL emphasizes reflection and inquiry which is social and collective, rather than individualistic. In AL, people learn with and from others. This is because AL is geared toward problem solving in situations where no one person has either a complete view of all aspects of the problem, where no pre-existing solution exists, and where the collaborative intervention of many different people is necessary. In dialogue, the purpose is to find the "coherence and truth" among multiple views.[20] This is very different from discussion or debate in which individuals seek to win, or overwhelm another's views by force of logic or rhetoric. In dialogue, not only can each individuals' view contribute to understanding and to generating solutions, but the group can together create thoughts and solutions which are greater than the sum of the individual ideas and perspectives.

There are several aspects of dialogue that require skills different from those used in learning through discussion or traditional teaching methods. The first is the ability to pose critical questions, what Revans calls "questioning insight" and what Freire calls "problem-posing education." (For example, questions such as "Why are we poor?"; "What business are we really in?"; or "By what measures will we know if we are achieving our goals?", are questions which can challenge basic preconceptions about the way things are and how they can be changed.) By learning to ask questions about their situation, participants in AL come to see themselves as active agents in shaping their present and future situations, rather than cogs in a machine or passive implementors of others' ideas . Approaches to learning or teaching which make students passive receptacles of expert knowledge (Freire's "banking concept") keep "learners" dependent on teachers, mystified about the source of knowledge, and fatalistic and passive about their futures. Furthermore, in situations of complexity or rapid change, expert knowledge is likely to become outdated or irrelevant quickly.

A second skill in reflection and inquiry through dialogue is the ability to test and develop "mental models" of reality. This means exposing one's

beliefs about reality to the scrutiny of others in the learning group, and being open to questioning individually or collectively held assumptions about how the society or organization works. (For example, Dr. Mohammed Unis, the Bangladeshi economist and founder of the Grameen Bank, was willing to have his mental models of the causes of rural poverty challenged and changed, leading to a new approach to rural credit, small business development, and poverty alleviation.) This can challenge and help make more accurate ones' perceptions about oneself and about one's view of the organization. Obviously, more accurate perceptions lead to better problem solving interventions. The process of testing and changing one's mental models of reality can either be a very natural outgrowth of group dialogue, or involve sophisticated methods and interventions.[21]

Systems thinking is a third skill area that enables more effective inquiry and reflection in dialogue. In systems thinking, the focus is on seeing the whole of a situation rather than disconnected parts. More specifically, it means identifying sometimes complex patterns of causality and feedback (A causes B, B causes C, C causes certain intended or unintended changes in A, etc., rather than settling for simple cause-effect explanations such as "A causes B"). For example, rather than isolating one aspect of an external funder's relationship to an NGO and saying "The funder wants to control us and perpetuate colonial patterns of domination", look to systemic forces to find opportunities for improvement, such as "The funders Board is responsible for ensuring effective use of donor's funds. A lack NGO performance measures has resulted in increased Board pressure on the funder's President to demand ever tighter oversight and control of NGO activity. Attempts at increased control further damages funder-NGO relations and communication, leading to even more funder demands for control." An understanding of this cycle could lead to development of outcome measures useful to both the NGO and the funder, while avoiding a cycle of increasing control, miscommunication, and mistrust. Systems thinking also means seeing one's own self or organization as part of the system which contributes to a particular problem. If a person or organization sees its place in a cyclical system, it can change the system by changing its behavior. If a person or organization sees itself only as acted upon, and not as an actor, there is no point in changing behaviors.[22] Seeing one's own NGO or CBO as a system of which one is a part, or as part of a larger system, can empower organization members and encourage more creative thought and action from people low in the organizational hierarchy.[23]

By surfacing and valuing the knowledge of ordinary people, dialogue fosters transformative inquiry and reflection in AL. Unlike other methods of learning, AL treats people's experience and traditional wisdom as valid. In dialogue about their experience people develop concepts with which to "name" (to use Freire's term) and make sense of their experience. This naming and understanding then permits them to actively transform their reality through action. Dialogue is a way of both producing and reclaiming knowledge that comes from people's everyday experience and can be used to transform that experience, rather than coming from experts whose knowledge is often intentionally or unintentionally biased to reinforce the status quo.[24]

Through dialogue, people can create shared frameworks for understanding their past and present realities. The frameworks include but often move beyond the commonalities of each person's own view. This common ground is the best possible place from which to create a shared vision of a desired future for an individual, organization, or larger collective.

The Contributions of "Insiders" and "Outsiders"

Given the emphasis in AL on empowerment, valuing people's knowledge, democratic dialogue, and the importance of locally developed theories, what possible role is there for "experts" or outsiders in AL? Most AL literature believes that it is possible and desirable to integrate the skills and knowledge of outsiders and insiders in AL efforts.

Insiders (by which is meant NGO and CBO employees, leaders, and community members), bring their experience and local knowledge to an AL effort. And as has been discussed this is some of the most important input to the process.

Insiders also bring an ability to adapt AL principles to their own culture and situation, knowing what will be most easily understood and accepted by key individuals and groups. Finally, insiders, especially in CBOs and NGOs in developing areas, are often quite knowledgeable about the dynamics of power, oppression and poverty, even if they are less knowledgeable about the organizations and systems necessary to accomplish complex learning goals.

On the other hand, outsiders from elite groups, may be naive about the realities of power, oppression and poverty but knowledgeable about processes and systems for fostering and disseminating AL. The outsider's main role is to establish the initial conditions for participants learning from one another, and to eventually become unnecessary as they are replaced by insiders. Outsiders may also have access to resources that may be useful. These resources may include financial resources, conceptual models based on the experience of other NGOs or CBOs, and certain social science research methodologies. Each of these resources must be carefully considered, and on occasion rejected. Examples of resources which should be rejected include financial resources that come with disempowering strings attached, conceptual models that have not been explicitly requested, and research methodologies that cannot be made understandable to the people involved or which create dependency on the outsider. Outsiders who have broad experience in a region may also be in a position to help link local AL efforts nationally and regionally, to exchange learning about process and content.

The Southern AL tradition has the most well developed ideas of how insiders and outsiders can build collaboration on the basis of a shared commitment to social change, and over time develop a shared means of communication between the experiential base of one and the conceptual base of the other.[25] The approaches of some Northern versions of AL (such as Senge and Argyris and Schon) espouse the importance of organizations self-managing their AL efforts, yet seem to initially require very sophisticated kinds of skill development and interventions that could probably be delivered only by outside consultants.

It should be evident how reflection and inquiry can result in individual learning, but how does individual learning relate to "organizational learning: or to building organizational capacity?

SECTION FOUR: INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE LEARNING

In AL, individual and collective learning are inseparable, and not simply because of AL's heavy reliance on dialogue. Individual and collective learning are **both** essential for producing action that can change experience and reality.

The Inseparability of Individual and Collective Learning

All the various streams of AL believe it is necessary for individual persons to learn in order that larger groups and systems may increase their capacity to learn. But the different streams have different reasons for maintaining this belief. Senge and the organizational learning theorists offer two reasons for basing organizational capacity building on individual learning. First, the organization capacity to learn can be no greater than that of its individual members. An organization can create systems and cultures which support learning, but ultimately it is only individuals who in fact learn. Second, there is strategic leverage to be gained by personally understanding one's role in creating the reality one hopes to change. Without learning about oneself it is not possible to understand one's systemic role, and the power to change which is embedded in that role. (For example, an NGO social worker who sees her role as helping CBO members understand the value of the NGO's programs for infant and maternal health, may miss the value of seeing her role as a conduit for information from mothers in the village back to NGO strategists.)

Argyris and Schon, and Revans, have other reasons for emphasizing the importance of individual learning as part of building organizational capacity. Individuals who employ what Argyris and Schon call "defensive routines" are unable to see reality clearly because they hang on to inaccurate mental models of themselves or the world out of self-protection. Take for example an NGO leader who sees herself

as open to critical feedback from NGO members. The leader may truly believe she is open to feedback, and take the absence of criticism as data that all is well, when in fact the leaders' behavior suppresses negative feedback. Such flawed perceptions inevitably lead to flawed action strategies. Learning about and correcting ones defensive routines becomes key to effective personal and managerial behavior. Revans highlights the fact that new ways of seeing the world may challenge one's sense of self, and force reconsideration of one's own actions or responsibilities. Individual willingness to change the self-concept can improve organizational capacity, while unwillingness to change one's view of oneself can diminish organizational capacity. The personal challenge inherit in valid, open feedback about oneself and one's beliefs is what makes the creation of safe, supportive settings for AL so essential.

For Freire (and AL writers who draw on Freire such as Fals-Borda and Rahman), individual conscientization is the foundation on which any larger collective or social transformation must be based.[26] This is in sharp contrast to historical materialist theories of social transformation which believe that a vanguard of people with advanced consciousness can lead others to a more liberated existence.[27] Rahman argues convincingly that "people cannot be liberated by a consciousness and knowledge other than their own, and [even progressive vanguard movements] invariably contain seeds of newer forms of domination." (Rahman, in Fals-Borda and Rahman, 1991, p.14.)

Strategies for the Retention and Dissemination of AL

Collective learning within AL can happen across a broad range of levels or settings, and each has different implications for how learning gets shared.

At the **individual level**, AL relies primarily on learning among people in groups or "learning sets" in which key leaders or individuals from different organizations meet periodically to help each other analyze problems, plan actions, and assess the consequences of previous actions. This is the level at which most of Revans' AL was aimed. At this level, dissemination of learning happens directly between members of the learning set, and is thought to spread by natural diffusion among people involved in the set member's organization or "field of action."

At the **work group level** people with responsibility for different aspects of a similar task--but from the same organization--meet to analyze problems from a systemic perspective, plan coordinated actions, and collaboratively assess the consequences of prior action. Dissemination of learning happens directly between members of the work group, and by natural diffusion among people involved in members' field of action. Dissemination to other organizations, or other work groups within the same organization, is aided if the work group takes the time to document the content and process of their AL efforts, and to share it with others.

At the **organizational level**, collective learning is designed to change the way "inferences about past actions are translated into routines, processes and procedures to guide future behavior, more or less independently of the particular individuals involved." (Kreiner, et al, p.4) In other words, no matter who is involved, there will be supports and incentives in place that encourage each individual to learn from their experience, and to make sure that learning is retained by others in the organization. Creating this kind of "learning organization" requires a commitment to creating an organizational culture and leadership style that will foster continuous learning by people at all levels, and to making the resources available to support AL.

At the **inter-organizational** level, AL takes the form of networks composed of key individuals from multiple organizations, all working to learn about and solve a particular social problem. The projects may involve tightly engineered, interorganizational collaboration, or loosely organized groups of organizations with similar interests. Dissemination of learning happens directly between members of the network, and by natural diffusion among people involved in network member organizations and communities. The "future search conferences" described by Weisbord are extremely efficient forums for

dissemination of learning, in which large numbers of people can develop a shared understanding of a problem. Many large scale project budgets have included funds for developing case studies and other methods to disseminate content and process learnings.

At the **Societal level** the Southern tradition of AL aims at collective learning as a result of organic growth in dialogue and consciousness, beginning with the individual. Dissemination of learning happens naturally, using indigenous cultural mediums, social organizing, and political action. Because of restricted political space in some Southern countries, dissemination is often through cultural rather than political movements.

In addition to natural diffusion, the literature suggests several strategies for diffusing content and process learnings from AL. Learning about the **process** of AL can be fostered by the creation of learning networks of people involved in otherwise unrelated AL projects. Second, institutional bases or support organizations devoted to both action and learning can be used or created. The literature does not go into any detail about how these AL support organizations can or do function. Documenting individual, group, organizational and intergroup experiences with AL through case studies and making these available to others planning AL efforts seems to be the most common method of intentional diffusion of process knowledge. Southern and Northern writers alike caution against simply copying either the process or results of another organization's AL experience, since every system is an open system, subject to great variations in culture, politics, personalities, and other factors.

Knowledge about the **content** or outcome of an AL project is more likely to spread if the project results in changes in strategy or policy, rather than in just operational changes. (For example, using AL to discover ways to build self-reliant development institutions rather than to improve charity or relief services.) Strategic and policy changes are more likely to be of interest to other similar organizations, and to funding and support organizations looking to make substantial improvements in organizational effectiveness.

The Crucial Role of the Organization Leader in AL

The organizational leader has a critical role to play in creating the conditions which will foster an organization's ability to learn and change. The leader can be active in at least five key areas to support AL. First, the leader can help develop a shared vision among CBO or NGO members. A shared vision among members encourages long term commitment and interest in being an active learner and problem solver. Also, a shared vision allows organization members to see how their area of responsibility fits into the larger picture of the organization's activities. Having the "big picture" is essential in order for organization members to identify learning agendas and take responsible action.

The organizational leader can help the AL process by encouraging other kinds of systems thinking as well. This could include helping organization members develop research and analytic skills so they can develop accurate explanations of cause and effect, rather than relying on ideological, second-hand, or traditional explanations. Encouraging systems thinking would also include helping organization members see how the organization and each individual in it contributes to creating and maintaining the status quo.

The leader is also uniquely able to establish the AL process itself. The leader does this by making time and resources available to allow members to participate in AL, by establishing links outside the organization to get needed financial or facilitation support, and by establishing policies to encourage participation in AL. For example, since AL requires that organization members periodically take time out from their day-to-day activities for reflection and dialogue, the leader may need to change member's schedules to allow participation. Or the leader may need to obtain travel funds to permit creation of interorganizational AL networks.

Fourth, if the organization is hierarchically organized, the leader may need to re-examine the way authority and responsibility for decision-making is distributed. AL is most effective in increasing organizational capacity when people participate in dialogue about organizational issues over which they have some influence.

Organizational capacity to learn and change is enhanced by pushing authority and responsibility down as close as possible to where the actual work is being done. (For example, in a micro-enterprise making handcrafts, people who actually have contact with the buyers may be in a better position than the head of the organization to make decisions about how many and what sorts of handcrafts should be produced.)

Finally, the leader can encourage AL by being willing to have his or her own assumptions and mental models scrutinized by others and, if necessary, changed. A leader who is willing to have his or her own views questioned can set a powerful example of learning and changing for others in the organization.

We have examined the principles of the first three parts of the four part AL cycle-- experience, inquiry and reflection, and individual and collective learning. But what does the AL literature tell us about the fourth part of the model, taking action?

SECTION FIVE: THE PLACE OF ACTION IN ACTION LEARNING

Of the four parts of the AL cycle, the literature says the least about action. But action is what connects the individual and collective learning part of the AL cycle to changing reality. AL focusses on the **processes** which lead to action (such as dialogue, tapping into people's experience, creating new social learning systems, etc.), rather than on the specific content or methods of action. The focus is on **learning** in much of the AL literature not because action cannot be taken without learning, but because without learning it is possible to miss "high leverage"interventions (i.e., interventions where small changes can have big impacts). This is especially true in situations of rapid change and complexity. The systems literature and organization learning literature is the most explicit about the ways in which a deep understanding of underlying patterns can allow seemingly small interventions to have large impacts.[28] (For example, Rosa Parks' refusal to abide by the segregationist rule requiring Blacks to ride in the back of a bus in Montgomery, Alabama touched off a boycott of the city bus service. The effects of the boycott rippled throughout the city's economy, and drew national attention to the civil rights movement.)

Just as learning is critical to effective action, the AL perspective maintains that there is little learning without action. This is not simply a philosophical belief, but a proven principle of adult learning. By linking learning to action on real problems, there are real consequences and risks for the learner, and so his or her motivation to learn is heightened.[29] This is another reason why AL is most effective in organizations where responsibility and authority is pushed down to the lowest possible level.

Action is also essential to AL since the validity of one's perceptions cannot be fully tested simply by the scrutiny of others in dialogue. The final test of any theory of causality or mental model is in its ability to inform action which influences the world. Most of the AL literature maintains that there can be no transformation of reality without action, and in fact each stream explicitly states that a major purpose of AL is to enhance individual and organizational capacity to act, especially under conditions of uncertainty.

Perhaps because of the Southern tradition's expertise about power and domination, Southern writers are more likely than others to point out that conscientization is but one aspect of making change, and that it must be accompanied by activities such as organizing, mobilization and struggle. (Freire, 1970)

Once action is taken, it can be evaluated by beginning another cycle of reflection and inquiry. Evaluation of the impacts of action marks the close of one AL cycle and the beginning of the next.

BASIC PRINCIPLES GUIDING EACH STAGE OF THE AL CYCLE

PHASE	PRINCIPLE
EXPERIENCING	o Attend to actions and feelings (not just thoughts), as sources of knowledge o Involve enough risk to make learning worthwhile o Explore diverse perspectives to generate new ideas
INQUIRING & REFLECTING	o Use dialogue for understanding and learning, rather than winning points o Encourage mutual respect as a basis for joint learning o Build partnerships between insiders and outsiders when beneficial o Articulate and suspend your initial assumptions o See self and your own system as cause of present and future experience o Organize to support joint learning o Control less to learn more
LEARNING	o Design organizations to gain from individual learning o Support individuals to be open to the threat of learning and change o Document for both learning and sharing o Lead by catalyzing action learning
ACTING	o Use systems thinking to identify high leverage interventions o Learning is no substitute for organizing and acting
RE-EXPERIENCING	o Use new experience as catalyst for evaluation, new ideas, and action o Use new experience to ask generative questions

SECTION SIX: IMPLICATIONS FOR ACTION LEARNING IN NGOS AND CBOS

Many NGOs and CBOs share certain characteristics which may influence the way AL principles and methods are best applied. The purpose here is to highlight some of these characteristics and explore some implications and questions for applying AL in NGOs and CBOs.

First, NGOs and CBOs often operate on multiple levels simultaneously (such as individual empowerment, program design and implementation, group and community organizing, coalition and network building, and national and regional policy influence).

Given that most NGOs and CBOs operate with very limited resources, where should an organization first apply AL principles and methods?

In the early stages of experimenting with AL, it may make sense to apply it where it is most likely to have visible success within a relatively short amount of time. This will generate interest among others in the organization and allow exploration of the full AL cycle sooner. Using AL at more complex and higher levels (such as for strengthening coalition and network building activities among NGOs and CBOs) might best be done by organizations that have acquired some experience with AL in more contained, less politically charged settings.

Second, NGOs and CBOs vary dramatically in their organizational cultures, leadership styles, governance structures and other features. So

where is AL most likely to succeed? As an organization-wide strategy, AL will be most easily introduced in organizations with characteristics that are already compatible with AL principles, including those with i) participatory decision-making systems in place throughout the organization; ii) leaders who are open to self-reflection and change; iii) a history of collaborative partnerships with outside resources; and iv) non-bureaucratic, flexible governance structures.

But what about using AL to build organization capacity in NGOs and CBOs that do not have these characteristics, or which have strong leader-centered cultures in which one or a few people set organization direction, and make most of the strategic and operational decisions? Rather than introducing fundamental changes in structure, process, and leadership at the same time as experimenting with AL it may be more effective to convene AL sets composed of organization leaders from multiple organizations. This format could provide leaders with access to feedback and support from peers. It might make sense to compose AL sets of leaders from leader-centered organizations as well as from more participatory ones, as a way of exposing leaders to alternative governance forms by peers who they respect and with whom they share organizational and role-based problems.

Third, as this discussion indicates, the design of effective AL strategies are highly dependent on the particular features of specific organizations. An AL strategy must emerge from the particular characteristics of an organization's learning goals, structure, culture, leadership style, and political, social, and economic environment. No "one size fits all" strategy is possible. This implies that outside help in designing and launching an AL strategy may be necessary in some instances, and that one should be wary of "canned" or "cookbook" approaches.

Also, NGOs and CBOs, and the Southern tradition of AL, understand power, oppression and poverty, but have given less thought to the organization and systems needed to accomplish complex learning goals. The Northern tradition of AL is very sophisticated about processes and organizational systems involved in fostering and disseminating AL, but is often naive about the political realities of poverty, oppression, and power for deprived people. So what is needed to foster partnership and mutual learning among these traditions, in ways that do not compromise the NGO's or CBO's mission or integrity?

NGOs and CBOs may increase their chances of establishing mutually beneficial relationships with "elite" outsiders by considering issues such as i) selecting partners based on shared values and proven track record of respect for indigenous thought and action; ii) clear contracting ahead of time regarding who has final say in problem definition, and in decisions about methods and ownership and use of data; iii) rejecting any methodology which cannot be made understandable to most participants; iv) examining one's own ideology and assumptions about the problems of partnership with "experts."

Fourth, NGOs and CBOs exist in environments that are **similar** in some ways to the environments in which Northern AL developed (e.g., carrying out complex tasks in turbulent and fast changing settings). Other aspects of NGO/CBO environments are **different**, such as a) resource scarcity; b) loose organization boundaries; and c) constrained political space. So how can NGOs and CBOs create AL processes under these conditions?

By observing the suggestions for working with "outsiders" discussed above, NGOS and CBOs might be able to obtain external resources to support AL while maintaining an acceptable amount of autonomy. Several organizations might wish to develop a joint proposal for funding of an AL set in which each organization participates.

By creating AL groups composed of multiple organizations, organizations that were disconnected previously, may be brought together in networks that would foster cooperation and mutual learning.

The genius of AL is its ability to make use of local knowledge about many realities, including political realities. Under conditions of constrained political space, informal AL activities spread by word of mouth stand the greatest chance of successfully

promoting change without inviting retribution by threatened parties.

Finally, different NGOs and CBOs will have varying desires and abilities to engage in full-fledged AL processes. However, organizations at different levels of readiness to engage in AL can still learn from one another. Designing the documentation and dissemination of AL efforts into every AL project will accelerate experiential learning in the organization conducting the project, and will provide data and case studies for use by other organizations.

BIBLIOGRAPHY OF KEY RESOURCES

(References which may be of particular interest to NGO and CBO leaders are annotated)

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Brown, L.D. "Participatory Action Research for Social Change: Collective Reflections with Asian Non-Governmental Development Organizations" forthcoming in a special issue of Human Relations, 1993. Explores differences between Southern and Northern conceptions of Participatory Action Research, and examines key issues in joint reflection activities including managing differences in values and ideologies, degrees of participation, and organizing joint inquiry.

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Tandon, R. "Dialogue as Inquiry and Intervention", In Reason, P. and Rowan, J. (eds.) Human Inquiry: A Sourcebook of New Paradigm Research,

ENDNOTES

1. While it is not the purpose of this review to discuss the academic theory underlying AL, some readers may be interested to do some additional reading in several theoretical areas important in AL [These are not methods for AL as much as theories supporting the methods]:
   - Systems Theory: Bertalanffy; Bohm; Katz and Kahn
   - Experiential learning theory: Kolb;Lewin; Ortega y Gassett; Gramsci; Knowles.
   - Individual and Organization Change: Argyris and Schon
   - Holographic Organizational Design; Morgan and Ramierez
   - Turbulent Organization environments: complex, rapidly changing environments: Ashby
   - Social Construction of reality: Berger and Luckman;

2. This summary was derived from a longer case study by Alec Lewis, "An In-Company Program", Ch. 10 in Pedlar, M. (ed.), Action Learning in Practice, pp. 111-123.

3. This summary was derived from a longer case study by Morten Levin, "Creating Networks for Regional Economic Development", forthcoming in a special issue of Human Relations, expected publication Spring, 1993.

4. Kreiner, P. et al, p. 3-4, 1991.

5. See Fals-Borda and Rahman's discussion of this in their footnote #2 to Chapter 1 of Action and Knowledge for further references about this idea of immediate apprehension of experience.

6. See Fals-Borda and Rahman, 1991, p.11, for origins of this term in Gasset's work.

7. Lewin, in Kolb, 1984, p.11.

8. Aristotle, in Revans, The A-B-C of Action Learning, p.49.

9. Kolb, 1984, p.26.

10. Knowles, 1990, p.11.

11. Revans, The A-B-C of Action Learning, p.13 and 64.

12. See Fals-Borda and Rahman, Knowledge and Power, for further discussion of the subject-object dichotomy in maintaining systems of dominance and subordination.

13. See Argyris and Schon's work for further discussion of the conditions for adult learning under possible threat or embarrassment.

14. See Revans, The A-B-C of Action Learning, pp.36+ for further discussion of learning sets.

15. Revans, 1983, p.36.

16. See Freire, Ch. 2 and 3, 1970, for in depth discussion of problem posing education and the concept of dialogue.

17. See Peter Senge's The Fifth Discipline for in depth discussion of the organizational uses of dialogue.

18. See, for example, Mort Levin's "Creating Networks for Regional Economic Development", for a discussion of the connection between action research and the creation of large scale social problem solving networks.

19. For further discussion of the search conference methodology for intergroup learning and action planning, see Marvin Weisbord's Discovering Common Ground, and Eva Schindler-Rainman's and Ronald Lippitt's Building the Collaborative Community.

20. There is a philosophical and metaphysical framework for dialogue in the work of the physicist David Bohm, who explores the holistic nature of thought and the production of ideas through collective consciousness. Peter Senge touches on these ideas in The Fifth Discipline (esp. pp. 240+).

21. Chris Argyris and Donald Schon have written extensively about methods for testing and revising the mental models of managers, especially with regard to discrepancies between their stated values, beliefs and perceptions, and their actual behavior.

22. Peter Senge discusses systems thinking and diagnosing patterns of causality in The Fifth Discipline pp.57-67 and pp. 93-113.

23. See Senge, 1990, especially chapters 2, 4, 5 and 9.

24. For further discussion on the philosophy and practice of the democratic production of knowledge, see Orlando Fals-Borda, Knowledge and People's Power, 1988.

25. For further discussion of collaboration between insiders and outsiders in AL, see Fals-Borda and Rahman, Action and Knowledge, and Tandon, "Social Transformation and Participatory Research" , in Convergencia, Vol. XXI, No. 2/3, 1988.

26. In this regard, the Northern and Southern traditions are in agreement, but with the Northern tradition focussed on organizational transformation and the Southern tradition focussed on societal transformation.

27. The "vanguard" approach to social transformation has an interesting parallel in economic transformation in the "trickle down" theory of classical capitalist economics. This trickle- down approach relies on giving additional resources to the already advantaged as a way of eventually raising the incomes of the less advantaged through overall economic growth. Alternative approaches to poverty alleviation (parallel to individual conscientization) rely on the supply of credit to the poor and fostering entrepreneurship and micro-enterprises.

28. See especially, chapters 4-7, and Appendix #2 of The Fifth Discipline. Other sources of information on system dynamics suggested by Senge in Note #1 of chapter 4 include:

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29. For more discussion of this principle of adult learning, see Revans ABCs of Action Learning, pp. 16 and 50, and Knowles Andragogy in Action, Chapter 1.

42/R-8