

Towards an application of learning in the new world of business and politics: Keeping your head when all around seem as though they are losing theirs! (With thanks to Rudyard Kipling)

Jennifer K Bowerman

Action Learning International, Emerald Insight
MacEwan University, Edmonton Alberta

This presentation reflects on and is intended to offer insight into the paradoxes of being a business professor and academic scholar in a world that is changing so fast that status quo thinking is no longer an option. It is founded on the author's personal experience of being a continuous learner in a number of careers starting as a civil servant educator, investigator and regional manager in human rights and employment and safety services. As well as serving to demonstrate how organizations really work, this experience led to an opportunity to explore organizational change and career resilience and leadership in the form of a doctorate based on action learning. With fifteen years of experience as editor of a major academic journal (Leadership in Health Services published by Emerald), and simultaneously fifteen years as professor of organizational development, culture, leadership and regional international business in universities in Switzerland and Canada, together these have served to further reinforce the need to consider change, particularly as it impacts academic scholarship and endeavour and life-long learning.

At a recent conference management conference in Prague, where I co-presented a paper on the value of action learning in post Brexit, (and as it turned out post Donald Trump presidential election), conference participants had the pleasure of listening to Dr. Henry Mintzberg of McGill University, writer on topics such as strategy, management and leadership, and Thomas Hanson, former American Ambassador to the Czech Republic. Both spoke about their reactions to the election result that had been announced the previous day and was quite unexpected. Their reactions and insights were chilling in terms of the global uncertainty we were suddenly confronted with. The macro issues dominating our world today including the global threats to international security posed by the continuing flow of refugees and asylum seekers, a new armaments race, and the threat of the familiar international trading agreements such as NAFTA and the EU having to be renegotiated, amongst others, had turned our familiar political and business world into a fearful and precarious minefield of unknowns. It is to both their credits that neither of them pretended they had answers to the global and regional problems that were suddenly confronting our world.

The more familiar world we all knew had emerged out of the chaos of the second World War, when governments had to work closely with business to rebuild society. This world had withstood a Keynesian intervention in its economics, and a cold war which had come to an end in 1989 with the fall of the Berlin Wall. In England, we had learned to enjoy the implementation of the National Health Service and a new vision for publicly funded education with grammar schools and new red brick universities. Here in the US, Americans experienced the New Deal and Medicare and Medicaid. Challenged and shocked by the horrors of the dirty thirties, depression and war, politicians facilitated and worked together with business to build a more just society. Governments invested in social programs and infrastructure, encouraged a redistribution of income, providing health care, pensions and free education. Together, these helped to make society a fairer and nicer place to live providing communities with a sense of hope, and progress.

But all good things must come to an end. The promise of greater economic equality in society has died. In its place we have increasing economic inequality and a declining middle class. As Thomas Piketty (2014) has painstakingly documented, the equalizing decades following World War II were but an anomaly. In the United States, Robert Reich, former Secretary of Labour under Bill Clinton demonstrates, economics, politics and business have intersected in such a way that we are

witnessing the greatest wealth disparity and income inequality in 80 years (Reich, R. 2015). Politics and business as they have become increasingly synonymous have allowed the interests of business to play an overarching role in our society. Privatization and the interests of shareholders have put profitability ahead of government and the public good culminating in unexpected populist decisions.

The recent Brexit vote in Britain, happening in June, 2016, and the November American election of Donald Trump, a business man not a career politician without any public service experience, have shaken our confidence. One of the reasons people voted for Donald Trump to be President was because he was a business man and not a career politician. He could swing deals, and promised to return America to his vision of greatness. The recent selection of the Trump cabinet who are, like President Trump, business people with little or no history of public service, and who often have very different ideas to many of us in the public domain, means that our knowledge of what business is and how it is supposed to work has changed. Suddenly it is self-evident that politics, rather than providing the context for business to benefit us all, is beholden to business, where the large and powerful interests of the private sector dominate the public domain! According to Adam Smith, it always was about the market, but there always was a public domain. Today the market would appear to be the dominant, if not the only interest, fiscal austerity is a preferred political dogma, and the public good is low on the political totem pole of priorities.

In this context, our business knowledge is likely outdated, our text books and their case studies require careful attention, and teaching students about business requires that we must rethink our chosen fields of expertise and operating paradigms. Business and our economy are changing because the context in which they occur is changing. How to keep up, how to make our knowledge more relevant, how to innovate where to innovate? All these are essential questions in a crazy world of change. The events of this rapidly changing economic and business environment are testing our decision making skills. It would appear that the information we carried in our heads that helped us to make sense of our world is no longer so relevant. As business teachers and scholars, our text books and their case studies are dated, and our theories about global change and the common good are challenged. Too often our research reflects a Newtonian view of the world, an external scientific, positivist, and ontological orientation made up of literature reviews, survey analysis and quantitative data processing. It suggests that the concrete world is outside of us and all we have to do is discover what is wrong, what the causal relationship is between facts in order to fix things. This kind of research, although potentially important for individual scholarly careers, may fail to address the essential business and social questions that our new politicized world is raising. Such questions based on spiritual and dialogic foundations, can only emerge as we, in our role as business professor, scholar and researcher, start to move beyond our traditional frames of thought, to engage in the societal and business changes we are all experiencing in meaningful and creative ways. Rapid change often creates fear – fear of the unknown, it can be paralyzing in its effects. Taking action to move through the fear may be energizing, even if emotionally draining. The rest of this essay provides some potential solutions as we move forward in this new world. The suggestions are perhaps familiar but can bear to be repeated. They are the product of this writer's experience as a lifelong learner, writer and thinker and shared with you as aspects of business and scholarly practice that have implications for your own academic practice.

The power of academic role models! The value of questions

The present, and therefore the future may be uncertain. Times of rapid change are unsettling and act as an impetus for us to rethink our sense making paradigms. Indeed, as the global paradigm shifts, perhaps the question to ask is how are we as academics and scholars shifting our own paradigm? Given events, it could be argued that we are stuck in an academic rut. One way of moving forward sometimes can be to reflect on those thinkers and scholars from the past who have had an impact on our lives and careers and who remind us of the power of life-long learning. There

is always at least someone who has made an impact. Here, three scholars are cited, whose works and ideas perhaps coincidentally synchronize with each other. In a world of rapid change, they have served to provide a direction for approaching current events.

Dr. Reg Revans was a brilliant writer, scholar, and thinker, best known as the Father of Action Learning. He died in 2003, at the age of 95. His story is one of science and query. Originally a physics researcher at Cambridge University, a student of Einstein's, and an Olympic athlete, he originated his thinking in the Cavendish Laboratories under the famous Ernest Rutherford in the 1930s. Here he recognized that the atomic physicists who were working with him, were grappling with problems that had never been experienced before. The suggestion from Lord Rutherford that they meet regularly to trade in their ignorance about what they did not know about each other's research, and the requirement to ask insightful questions of each other, led not only to breakthroughs in nuclear physics, but to his famous equation $L = P + Q$ (or Learning equals Programmed Knowledge (such as lectures and books) plus Questioning). The story of the Rutherford breakthrough in nuclear physics is a powerful reminder that though today's problems may appear to be immense, they were equally so in the 1930s. Only through application of the learning equation, by asking dynamic questions and taking action can we drive knowledge forward to actually lead change and not just become passive and troubled followers of it. As long as the rate of learning is ahead of the rate of change, then we can stay ahead and maintain a leadership role. But if the rate of change is greater than the rate of learning, then as Revans wisely noted, "we are in trouble."

Revans took his formula of action learning to the management of the coal mines in the UK and to the health system, to the Manchester Business School, and today is most notable for his work in the Belgium steel industry which he succeeded in bringing back from the brink of collapse. For learning to occur, Revans believed that groups of workers from the shop floor had to come together in the form of sets, comprising 6-8 persons, ask each other good questions and take action as they moved toward the resolution of the problems they were facing. Revans was an outspoken critic of modern business schools because they separated theory from action. He described regular academic case studies as examples of 'flatulent self-deception,' believing that the only way to learn in times of great change was through questions, leading to action followed by reflection.

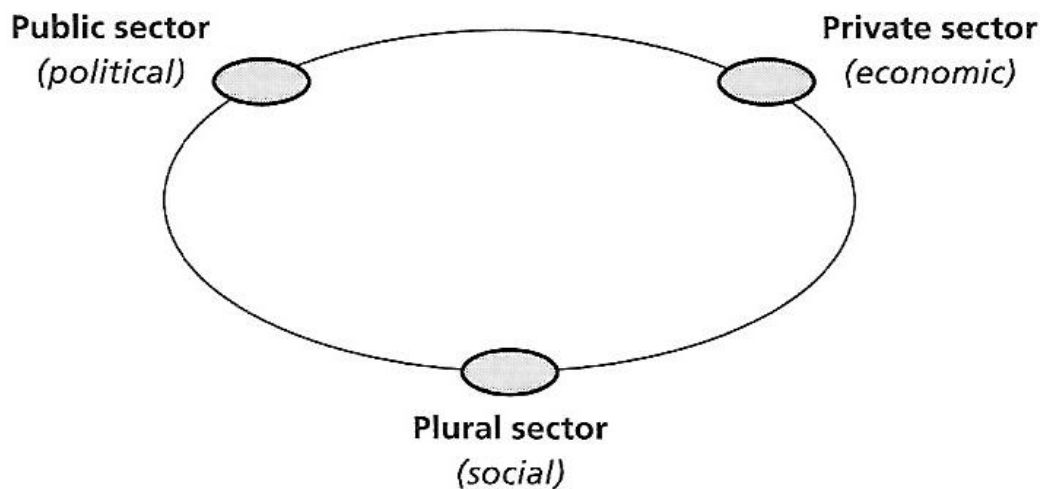
Today, the value of action learning programs is being realized in organizations facing significant organizational issues - for example the British Civil Service, where the results of the Brexit vote, in addition to demographics, austerity, and technology, have led to management problems that simply cannot be solved by business as usual processes (Bowerman and Hale, 2016) and top down intervention. Some British Universities and business schools have actually become involved in such programs, accrediting the rigorous learning that happens when participants learn through addressing questions about the business whose value is determined by the business and not by the business professor. Today's chaotic or chaotic new business and organizational context means that action learning is a natural fit for people who have ideas and who want to test them through action.

Other theorists who may have worked with Revans or who have been influenced by his work include E.F. Schumacher whose book of essays entitled *Small is Beautiful*, (subtitled *Economics as if People Mattered*), was written in 1973. German born, and an Oxford scholar and lecturer, he was influenced by Keynes, and quite possibly also Revans since he was the chief economist for the National Coal Board in England for many years. Schumacher's ideas have become a major inspiration against what he saw as the excessive consumption of the modern industrialized world. His essays can be seen to support such movements as buying locally, and fair trade. He understood the difference between income and capital, and that capital in the form of natural resources must be conserved to produce income. He believed that the best economies are built around the needs of communities not corporations.

Schumacher's ideas have been an important influence on my thinking. On a recent visit to southern Brazil, I was fortunate to visit to a small Brazilian technology company in Florianopolis. The Brazilian company founder, schooled in artificial intelligence, had developed a people system

for his company where employees were treated as not only as if they mattered but also in terms of how they could best contribute to the development of the company and to their own personal development. He called this system ACDC, an acronym for Amore, Consciousness, Discipline and Commitment. ACDC demonstrates how the powerful concept of 'small' when intertwined with 'human intention' can create a fluid and human system of values having enormous implication for the complexity of the greater world surrounding us (Bowerman and Reich, 2017). Small as Schumacher eloquently describes, can indeed be beautiful and even profitable! There is much to learn about how to find a balance between conventional economic and commercial wisdom that only emphasises size and power and monetary value, and the gentler more idealistic format for business that puts people, their well-being, their spirits, and their hearts first.

The question of size brings us to the question of how large things have to be. Dr. Henry Mintzberg is the famous management theorist, perhaps influenced himself by both Revans and Schumacher who believes that big today is simply too big. In November of 2017, in Prague, he spoke to the main theme of his latest book *Rebalancing Society: Radical Renewal beyond Left, Right and Center* (2016). Here he reminds us of what a healthy society is – not one which puts the interests of shareholders above all else, where massive corporations are considered to have the equivalent rights of humans, but one where governments are responsible and respected, businesses are equally responsible without unchecked monopolistic tendencies, and where the communities we live in are vibrant and robust. Diagrammatically this looks as follows: (Mintzberg, 2016, p.28)



Mintzberg notes that the public and the private sectors are to the left and right in the upper part of the circle, because their "institutions function mostly as hierarchies of authority, off the ground". The plural sector, on the other hand, is demonstrated at the bottom because "its associations tend to be rooted on the ground." The plural sector on the ground incorporates all of us. As Mintzberg emphasizes, "**a democratic society balances individual, collective and communal needs attending to each adequately but none excessively**" (p. 28).

When there is no balance, as our current global situation would indicate, institutions become big. Size and power are corrupting, as they impact the manner in which business is done, and the societies they touch. Mergers and acquisitions are profitable for shareholders, but destroy the value of smallness. Small enriches local communities helping to make them vibrant so they can help to provide a fair balance to the excesses of both government and business.

Mintzberg brings us hope because of his insistence that we can move beyond the old arguments of left versus right (all government versus all business and market, which take us nowhere), to a balanced society where our individual, collective and communal needs are addressed.

His earlier work (2006), where he was extremely critical of traditional MBA training and the Harvard case study method it is based on, reminded us as business teachers, of what it takes to become a good manager in today's troubled world, not least of which is the ongoing need for constant learning on the job. He echoed Revans and his call for action learning through group collaboration. The need for continuous learning through a questioning stance and ongoing action is an essential attribute, especially in times such as these, where the political and business pendulum is swinging further and further to the right. Under such circumstances, business is no longer the stuff we are used to. The paradigm has changed.

From gurus to action? Becoming better at our scholarly practice

Revans, Schumacher, and Mintzberg are important because they provide us with a sense of the importance of foundational values around more than just business and politics. They remind us that the people who make up our world are important as well. And through their voices, heard via elections and demonstrations, these people are telling us that they matter and that the world they live in matters. Our values impact how we go about thinking of the world we live in, and help to provide a framework for the economic and business systems that permit us to live healthy and fulfilling lives. All three of these men demonstrate wisdom in action: they are scholars, philosophers and thinkers. They have impacted the lives of others through their work, their speeches and writings. Mintzberg, although in his 80s now, is still lecturing and participating in workshops around the world spreading his message of the importance of critical thinking, hope, and some of the actions we can take to bring back a sense of balance to our lives.

How can we emulate such scholars in our daily work of professorial duties? Because even though as cited here, these men were old, they were wise before they were old! How can we as university professors, known to be progressive thinkers, be equally wise? To build our wisdom both for our careers, and for the students whose lives we impact through our teaching is a worthy goal. Only then will we, as Revans wrote, "stay ahead of the change curve" and be truly continuous learners. We will become more resilient and we will, to borrow the words of Rudyard Kipling, 'keep our heads'. This is a more important quest than merely voting for a different government or a different president. True wisdom and insight can help us start to address some of the root causes that behind the very real issues confronting us today. The market has become simply a metaphor for greed, an end in itself. We require an expanded scholarly practice that moves our thinking from the idea of business as normal to a vision where business really can work to make our world a better place.

Continuous learning is an integral component of our profession

What does continuous learning mean for you, as business professors, and researchers? Which of you will be the equivalent of Revans, a Schumacher, or a Mintzberg? What does it take to become the equivalent scholar, researcher and teacher? Who are the management theorists and business scholars who have influenced your thinking and thus the insights that you provide to your students as you teach business? What are those aspects of the profession you have chosen that can continue to drive you forward? What else do you have to do, on top of what you are already doing, to sharpen the saw, as Stephen Covey suggested (1989)?

Continuous learning requires flexible thinking, effort and will. It requires not only the effort of attending international conferences or participating in educational tours, but also the need to interact with, and act as a coach and collaborator for other scholars. It requires research. There are two main approaches to research, quantitative and qualitative. Our favoured research approach is often dependent on the one we used for our doctoral research and is driven by our interests as students. However, there are some topics that are best addressed by one approach rather than the other. In rapidly changing times such as now, a qualitative approach is most fitting; to actually engage with the organizations being researched, involving the subjects as 'active and interested co-researchers, so that it is possible to understand better and start to address the problems people are

truly facing on the ground” (Bowerman and Hale, 2017, p.103). As business academics, we do have influence. A famous statesman and change agent, Mahatma Gandhi, is reputed to have urged us to “be the change we wish to see in the world.’ This is possible through the types of issues we choose to address and the methods we use to study them through our own research.

Additional suggestions for continuous learning may sound trite, but can have enormous impact on scholarship. Becoming a peer reviewer for articles submitted for potential publication in professional journals is one way of sharpening one’s skills as a writer and idea generator. It is surprising how few people, even those who have submitted their names as peer reviewers, actively participate in the process. Peer reviewing is the equivalent of academic coaching. Sometimes we will get ideas that we would never have thought of simply because of the way they have been expressed in a paper. For example, a recent review of a paper about the value of university classes around entrepreneurship and enterprise offered this author some real insights about the real value of this kind of education which is becoming increasingly popular, (perhaps because it is viewed as a money maker rather than having real world impact for future entrepreneurs). The paper provided a wonderful opportunity to suggest to the authors how to expand their future research into a format that was more action oriented to more actively track the impact of entrepreneurial education on small business.

The journal, *Leadership in Health Services* is a quarterly journal, and we have collected a robust number of peer reviewers but too many fail to follow through. There is no remuneration for being a peer reviewer so it can be viewed as an additional and unrewarding drain on our precious time. The idea of payment for peer reviewing, which has been proposed by some, would not have been generated had there been a huge groundswell of enthusiasm for peer reviewing as a voluntary activity. But surely ideas and how well they are expressed are the cornerstones of our profession? We are in the knowledge creating business and learning is an integral component. What better learning process can there be but to work with others on how better to express their ideas about our world? Equally, consider volunteering to lead a special issue on a topic of choice offers a huge learning opportunity. Recent and upcoming special issues for *Leadership in Health Services*, include Action Learning, Medical Leadership and our latest suggestion on leadership training in a value based data driven environment!

Finally, as professors and scholars, we must consciously become collectors of people and their ideas. Not everyone does this as I have discovered. However, research, relationships, observations, and interactions are the essence of core business knowledge building. My recent travels, in particular to Brazil, to Prague, and to Europe, have resulted in relationships and sources of actions and knowledge that allow me to continually stretch my thinking. Reading about the learning organization, and then seeing one in action by means of an acronym, ACDC, still seems serendipitous but it is amazing and could never have been predicted. In discussions about the concept of ACDC, whether as applicable to business or even to the classroom, some professors have been known to shake their heads in bewilderment. Such ideas do not belong in the classroom and certainly not in education! These comments reflect on the difficulty of implementing change in changing times. A ‘why not’ attitude, noted by Mintzberg as present in Brazil, (despite its ongoing difficulties), is both innovating and refreshing. We cannot afford to have our brains become stuck in the one gear. Changing times demand new modes of thought, only possible as a result of constant effort and consciousness.

The conclusions to this monograph are simple. They amount to prescriptive recommendations for scholars in a profession that is stressful, sometimes not highly regarded, and perhaps at risk of being an anachronism because the speed of events is threatening to outrun our theories.

- Remember one’s role models. Our thoughts and ideas will always rest on the shoulders of others who have gone before us. In this case, the writer’s personal role models are scholars whose ideas relate to the increasing complexity and speed of change in today’s world. Revans, Schumacher

and Mintzberg in particular reflect important values about the nature of our world and the role of its people.

- Values matter. Business may be our passion, but we must never forget the importance of involving real people themselves in helping to solve the complex problems they face.
- Theories and practice come together in particular as we work through complex situations using action research, and in particular action learning. Asking questions is a central component to learning and moving forward. Expertise in theory does not translate into expertise in action without effort and awareness.
- Doing the personal work is important. Being a lifelong learner imposes a requirement to seek out opportunities for learning wherever they may be and to be conscious of those opportunities as they present themselves. It means being a collector of ideas and a builder of relationships, a writer, an editor, a peer reviewer, a scholar and a coach.

The business world is changing as our political world changes, but not always for the better! There is big, there is small. We need to be familiar with both. Remembering our foundations and always growing our knowledge can only help us to be stronger in a world where values, strength in the form of ideas and new knowledge matter.

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