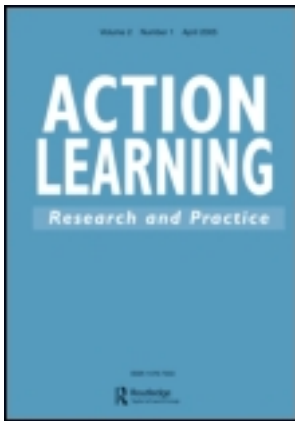


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Action learning: Workbook mit Praxistipps, Anleitungen und Hintergrundwissen für Trainer, Berater und Facilitators

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BOOK REVIEWS

Action learning: Workbook mit Praxistipps, Anleitungen und Hintergrundwissen für Trainer, Berater und Facilitators, by Bernhard Hauser, Bonn, ManagerSeminare Verlags GmbH, 2012, 304 pp., €49.90, ISBN 978-3-941965-43-0

Are you interested in getting acquainted in the German language with Action Learning (AL), with a comprehensive overview over AL basics, along with new sorts of AL like ‘Critical AL’ (CAL) and ‘Virtual AL’? In 2008 Bernhard Hauser published *Action Learning in Management Development – A Comparative Analysis of Action Learning Programmes in Three Different Companies*. This book has been written very much with a research orientation.

The new workbook appeared at the end of 2012 on the market and is thoroughly composed according to principles of user-friendliness. So readers can enjoy, for example:

- a practical guide for quick readers, specifying the topics for each of the main parts of the book ‘Introduction’, ‘Philosophy’, ‘Action’, ‘Learning’ and ‘Design’ (making it a pleasure to find what interests you right away)
- easy to find answers for urgent questions of both AL starters and experienced AL practitioners confronted with tricky problems in their work with AL
- downloading from the Internet 16 checklists presented in the book which allow the user to print them in any number and desired quality
- an up-to-date list of literature
- a helpful glossary of major terms.

The book grew out of his professional practice. Bernhard Hauser originally studied both economics and psychology. He gained first experiences with AL as trainer and HR officer in big German companies. Later he established a successful consultancy and network where AL up to today is a main feature. His being embedded in an international network of experts allows him to promote AL in combination with Action Research. The very practical hints and insights which he offers in the workbook in a nicely ordered way he draws from his practice of developing AL facilitators and workings as a faculty member of a university for applied management near Munich.

What is an appropriate way to present the topic of AL? Hauser chooses, in good congruence with the essential character of AL as a way of discovery learning, the image of a discovery tour, in structuring the book. What are essential features of walking the path of discovery? Mike Pedler emphasizes in his preface to the book that AL needs courage, commitment and readiness to meet substantial problems on the way. Understanding AL as an attitude and philosophy rather than a pure technique Pedler insists: ‘One has to **do** AL, everywhere where people in their organizations and communities are confronted with urgent challenges’ (p. 14) and ‘AL comes to happen exactly through the people who are confronted in such a way.’ When reading this, Ralph Waldo Emerson’s description of ‘self reliance’ comes to my mind, as ‘the need for each individual to avoid conformity and false consistency and follow their own ideas’.¹ That is easily said but quite a task to develop:

A man should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within, more than the lustre of the firmament of bards and sages. Yet he dismisses without notice his thought, because it is his. In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts: they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty.²

By practicing AL we can help each other tremendously, to develop self-reliance.

Daily we can notice people in search of liminal experiences (the German ‘Grenzerfahrungen’, experiences mentally pushed to one’s limits), such as in bungee jumping and in even jumping to the earth in free fall from the stratosphere as Felix Baumgartner has done recently. Now, where can we find convincing examples of daring to deviate from the mainstream in learning processes, finding one’s own resources, ways and insights? For example, in questioning the way we run micro- and macroeconomics. How do I achieve authenticity regarding a certain issue? Those seem to me questions to keep in mind when reading the book’s chapter on CAL (p. 75). Hauser presents it as a fundamental complementary to ‘Classic Action Learning’, explains the additional aspects, refers to relevant literature from German-speaking authors and offers an interview with Kiran Trehan, where she explains key features of CAL – one of the chapters which have a lot of potential for further investigation and commitments! ‘How can questioning be promoted under the influence of power structures?’ is one of the main questions to be addressed, in order to assure learning which does not limit itself to single-loop learning but achieves a breakthrough into double-loop learning. So, here, there is shown a way to get out of the box of ‘more of the same’, at least where this appears to aggravate the problem, and to bring about a breakthrough to solutions which lead to genuine improvements instead of a treatment of symptoms. Who would like to deny that we are badly in need for such learning in nowadays economy?

How can you promote the practice for AL in German-speaking countries? A chapter of the book is explicitly dedicated to this question, complementing the text of the author with a contribution of a manager for HR development in a major German machine factory. It is a peculiar phenomenon that in German-speaking countries (Germany, Austria and Switzerland) there is a well-established system of apprenticeship (*Lehrlingswesen*) for young people between 16 and 20 years of age, which brings forth a labor force with solid practical abilities and knowledge, most of them being highly effective in their work. On the other hand, there is a very reluctant use of AL in German-speaking countries. Fortunately this is improving in the last decades but remains a tough issue and often is loaded with misunderstandings, for example, identifying activating learning methods with AL. The South-Western State of Germany, Baden-Württemberg, has initiated quite an unusual and unique type of university, the dual university. There, students enroll on the basis of a working contract they have with a company and take turns in working three months in their company and studying three months in the dual university for the time of their enrollment. You would expect that this system, which has spread over large parts of Germany in the meantime, makes use of AL. It does not as a matter of fact, at least not explicitly.

Let us hope that the line of the book will be continued by further publications about AL, in the German language. It certainly is worthwhile if AL users get a chance to share their most recent experiences, questions and insights, of Action Research, in collaboration with their learning partners. In the present book, a short section (pp. 136–138) is dedicated to the issue of applying AL in the field of Civil Society initiatives. Why hesitate to follow up this topic with a publication which shows encouraging examples in this field? Like learning in the movement of ‘*Gemeinwohlökonomie*’ (economy of the common good). It started in Austria, spread to Germany and Switzerland and thrives now in Spain, Portugal, Northern Italy, Honduras and Argentina. It explicitly uses methods of learning collaboratively out of ongoing actions and developments.³ In Germany, surveys by the well-known Bertelsmann Foundation recently revealed that more than 80% of those who were questioned experienced the necessity for a change in the economic system. *Gemeinwohlökonomie* (economy of the common good) is one of the movements who take up this issue; concepts are offered which replace principles of maximizing the monetary profits by principles of putting entrepreneurial initiatives in the service of the common good. Instruments are on the way to being developed, such as for measuring in a more appropriate way economic results (a new sort balance sheet) and in setting up a new sort of bank; all this is done by enhancing an initial concept step by step, in trying and testing it in practice, in ever-growing learning communities, based on democratic principles. When looking at the list of literature in the new workbook, you can see that only a few contributions by the German-speaking academic world, directly addressed to AL, are mentioned. So there is a challenge to invite more of those, in Austria,

Germany and Switzerland, engaged in research about action-oriented learning, to contribute to a following publication about AL in the German language.

Bernhard Hauser's workbook on AL has the objective of stimulating the reader to get a kick out of AL. I would like to see the reader who would not enjoy the book. In any case, the book certainly enhanced again my interest in AL which I have practiced for 25 years.

Notes

1. Opening statement in <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Self-Reliance> (15 December 2012).
2. <http://www.emersoncentral.com/selfreliance.htm>.
3. <http://www.gemeinwohl-oekonomie.org/>, a website where texts are offered not only in German but also in English, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese and French.

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You and your action research project, 3rd edition, by Jean McNiff and Jack Whitehead, Perth, UK, Routledge, 2013, 271 pp., £26.99, ISBN 978-0-415-48708-5 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-415-48709-2 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-203-87155-3 (e-book)

This third edition of *You and Your Action Research Project* updates and revises previous editions of the book providing a comprehensive and practical guide for those embarking on an action research project. The authors present the book as a resource for practitioners across different professions who are studying on an award-bearing work-based learning programme. However, the style of the writing is not 'text-bookish' and engages the reader rather than 'lecturing' the reader which can happen with some traditional books aimed at students on varying degree programmes.

Action research has boomed over the last decade and much has been dedicated, both in the academic and practitioner worlds, to the research and understanding of action research. The authors cite a number of reasons for the increased interest in action research including the current economic situation and the need for improved professionalisation of the workforce in order to address the changing global economic environment. Alternatively, action research may be a vehicle for developing individual lifelong learning skills enabling citizens to make positive contributions to their respective societies and help the global goal of worldwide sustainability.