

Raiders of the lost arts: Provocation one

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Writing in 1978, Russell Ackoff drew attention to the origins of modern problem solving in the *praxis* of classical Greece, and asserted that the Greek model of learning, with its holistic and aesthetic dimensions, remains comprehensive today. The search for knowledge (truth), resources (wellbeing), harmony and beauty remains relevant today. Working from Ackoff's notion of aesthetics as expressions of aspiration, creativity and spiritual uplift, this paper considers action learning (AL) through prism of art, mainly performance art, and raises such questions as:

- Could conscious applications of specific forms of art (e.g., music, drawing) improve AL effectiveness and/or better align it with neuroscience findings on emotion?
- What are the implications for organisations of AL “performance as art” versus AL “performance as compliance (in terms of meeting a standard)”?
- If working on a problem proves not to be uplifting, is it poor compliance, a definitional problem, or neglect of the artistic dimension of performance?
- What are strategic and brand implications of rehearsing in front of a live audience (who may only “pay/invest/commit” on the strength of the original improvisation)?
- Who is the “audience” for AL, and is this same as “who knows?” or “who cares?”
- What are implications of choosing a poor frame/context, for an AL performance?
- If props help performances, does AL have recommendable props?
- If art is not about who we are, but about who we think we are (Keith, 2007), or might be, how might the adoption of AL in an organisation impact on identity?

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We experiment with situating AL in the quantum physics-influenced modernist tradition of 1930s-1940s art and architecture. Like them, AL seeks a new beginning in a world increasingly coming to terms with Schrödinger's kittens and the behaviours of entities at the nano level, where everything is interdependent, the relationship between the parts is not simple and predetermined, and attempts at measurement are frustrated by the intervention of its subject. Relevant modernism for this resiting of AL does not grow organically out of its landscape like Wright's *Fallingwater*, but confronts it, like McConnell Ward & Lucas' *High and Over*. It seeks sparse elegance and simplicity, a functional, aesthetically pleasing sharing of quality with the mass of ordinary people for whom it was previously unaffordable. It is efficient, nothing is wasted, and everything possible is re-used. There is a separation of form and structure, or “skin and skeleton” in Le Corbusier's terms, where the underlying methodology of structure can support many outward forms. It is always surprising, but at the same time inevitable. There is a unity of process

and experience, which is satisfying, and understanding the process does not diminish that satisfaction. There is no unnecessary ornamentation and it has an essentially democratic thrust.

Just as the modernist creed, with its assertion of the primacy of the individual, opposed the beliefs of totalitarian Europe, whose buildings in the 1930s and 1940s were imposing and dominant expressions of the power of the State over the individual, so AL eschews complex and difficult forms in favour of simple and affordable processes that empower the ordinary working in the organisations and the individual in society. Finally, AL, like modernist architecture, has not proved to be the instant revolution anticipated by its visionary pioneers, rather, it has experienced a slow process of acceptance (Seidler, 1954). If AL is thus inextricably tied to the modernist tradition, what are the productive points of dialogue and the implications for us as practitioners and partial proselytisers?

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