Transformational Community Development through Emergent Learning
Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt

Abstract
This article applies the concept of ‘emergent learning’ (Taylor, 2011) to action learning and action research (ALAR) in general, and to lifelong action learning (LAL) in particular. It discusses Taylor’s conceptual framework of leadership development in the new context of community development, aiming for community development that is transformational and sustainable, through and with learning that can be cascaded to others. The article illustrates this theoretical model in practice with a community–university partnership program in Australia where participants were cognisant of action learning but not of the theory of emergent learning. The program data shows alignments and linkages with the model of emergent learning which suggests that it is relevant to transformational learning personally, professionally and in the community. Our research also suggests that readers may usefully apply this model not only to community development, but also to ALAR projects or programs in other areas such as education, higher education, health, and professional and leadership development in government and industry. By analyzing the new theoretical model of emergent learning and validating it through data collected for a different purpose, this study helps to extend the emergent paradigm and methodology of both ALAR and LAL.

Keywords
Emergent learning, lifelong action learning, action research, community development
Introduction

Recent literature abounds on action learning and action research (ALAR). It has inspired literature on related concepts in this emergent paradigm and methodology, such as lifelong action learning or LAL (Zuber-Skerritt and Teare, 2013), critical participatory action research or PAR (Kemmis et al., 2014), participatory action learning and action research or PALAR (Zuber-Skerritt, 2011, 2012), and so forth. The challenge for scholars and practitioners is to select or adapt the approach most appropriate to their own value system/worldview and to the purpose and aims of their projects or programs. This is certainly true when trying to change or improve our practice and to facilitate organizational or community development. This article therefore introduces a new concept of ‘emergent learning’ developed by Taylor (2011) and relates it to ALAR in general, to LAL in particular, and to transformational, sustainable community development specifically. The third concept is explained by Zuber-Skerritt and Teare (2013: 230):

Transformational, sustainable community development means engaging with the people at grassroots level, understanding their cultures, traditions and oppression and empowering them to find their own solutions to problems of poverty, health and learning to learn by developing their confidence and skills in LAL and action leadership. In the present times when most of us live ‘connected’ lives in a global community, we need a new mindset of people power and self-directed, collective behaviour towards a better world with a just and equal global society. Instead of rationality, control, technical efficiency (rather than effectiveness), neo-liberal managerialism and national competition (sometimes leading not just to conflict but to war), we need a better and more sustainable world for the common good of all people for present and future generations.

In May 2013 I had the opportunity to meet Marilyn Taylor at the Royal Roads University in Canada, author of the book entitled *Emergent Learning for Wisdom* (2011). We had never met before and
were amazed at the similarities in our thinking and writing, developed independently at opposite sides of the world. Although we have been influenced by many of the same theorists, such as Dewey (1938), Kelly (1963), Freire (1972), Argyris and Schön (1974), Schön (1983) and Kolb (1984), we have contributed to different literatures and used slightly different terminologies. For example, ALAR includes Taylor’s ‘Emergent Learning’ as one of its characteristics, for both wisdom and a better world. Although Marilyn contributes mainly to the literature on ‘Leadership Development,’ her concept of emergent learning is also relevant and applicable to ‘Transformational Community Learning and Development’. Both fields need new ideas about how to create a shift in ways of thinking as a change process, a transformational consciousness, and a new perspective/approach to action in this 21st century world. As Taylor (2011: 3) defines:

Emergent learning arises from our direct experience of the practical world; it is triggered by an unpredicted event. The process that follows has the possibility to create not only knowledge but also wisdom we need to engage productively and effectively in a world of uncertainty. Learning that leads to wisdom involves the whole person and new dimensions that have been banished from public life in the modern era. It requires attention to our right-brain processes – sensing, feeling, imagination, metaphor, and context – as well as left-brain processes – analysis, logic, strategy, and application.

In other words, wisdom gained through emergent learning provides both experiential richness and logical cohesion, as well as conscious and unconscious processes. Taylor (2011: 31–32) argues that:

*Emergent* learning means more than acquiring knowledge over a lifetime; it means that we create new knowledge continuously as we encounter new conditions and challenges. This implies two other qualities of the new learning. Learning emerges in relation to a specific context; so what we come to know is *embedded*, and its meaning and value are linked to a particular time and place. (original emphasis)
In this sense, Lifelong Action Learning (LAL) is also emergent, creating new knowledge continuously, and embedded in a particular context. In addition, LAL is developed collaboratively with others in groups, communities or organizations, in an intentional and systematic way, and is then cascaded to others. Taylor’s generic model of emergent learning can also be applied usefully beyond its original application to leadership development, for example to community development as well as organizational development in industry and government, health, education and higher education. This is because of its utility for learning through experiences that challenge us with double- and triple-loop learning (Argyris and Schön, 1974).

In brief, single-loop learning means that the learner has changed action strategies, but has not identified or digested the principles of the process for application elsewhere. Double-loop learning involves changes in goals, assumptions, values and/or standards for performance through mindful appreciation of the change process. Triple-loop learning or ‘third-order learning’ (Bateson, 2000) is the deepest kind of learning through triple-loop feedback generating a transformation in one’s awareness of self and life purpose or ‘autobiographical awareness’ (Torbert, 1972). In other words, single-loop learning takes a mechanical, technical or surface approach to learning, whereas double- and triple-loop learning take a deeper and transformational approach that enables positive personal, professional and organizational change. In the context of twenty-first century accelerated or exponential change, learning must be more than technical and superficial; it needs to be transformational, emergent and lifelong through critical reflection and meta-reflection on action and experience registered at a deeper level. This requires a shift of mind or consciousness, a self-transforming mind, and a new perspective/approach to acting in this world. We are reminded of Albert Einstein’s frequently quoted statement: “No problem can be solved from the same level of consciousness that created it”.

My process of inquiry in this article starts with Taylor’s (2011) theory, then applies the theoretical principles of each phase and
stage of the conceptual model of emergent learning to practice in community development through my experiences and insights gained from a LAL program for my own new and emergent learning. This process validates theoretical and practical statements with comments from participants in this LAL program in Australia, through their feedback on their actual experiences, learning and insights gained. This program was a Griffith University Community Partnership program with a community organization called the ‘Voice of Samoan People (VOSP), which is a disadvantaged community group in Logan City, adjacent to Brisbane in Southeast Queensland. The article’s conclusion includes questions for critical reflection and possible action readers might consider.

**Taylor’s Model of Emergent Learning Applied to Transformational Community Development**

In this section I briefly outline the process model that consists of four transitions and four phases, each of which I then apply to **transformational community development** (in bold). To exemplify Taylor’s conceptual model, I have included illustrative commentary (in italics) from ten participants (P1–P10, in bullet points) in an Australian community development program with and for VOSP. Participants’ comments refer to their GULL projects because in this LAL program we used a learning process and system developed by the Global University for Lifelong Learning (GULL – www.gullonline.org). These participants’ comments are indicative of how participants’ thinking develops and discourse changes throughout the process of an effective action-learning program. The data used are based on Kearney and Zuber-Skerritt (2011, 2012) who had obtained permission to use the Samoan voices for publication purposes. Taylor’s model is reprinted here as Figure 1 with the author’s permission (©Taylor, 2011).
Following the process model, we start with Taylor’s Equilibrium Phase, that is, the well-balanced condition of mind and heart/feeling in which we can anticipate events and navigate our experience by using our existing constructs (Kelly, 1963) and mental models (Senge, 2006) of the world. The blue zone stands for conservatism, stability, consistency and unchanging, stable conditions.

**First Transition: Disconfirmation**

Double-loop learning begins with disconfirmation of our set of beliefs and basic assumptions of reality and with a challenging surprise, such as a breakup or loss of relationship or a sudden loss of employment. Triggered by such an unexpected event, the shock or unease comes to us as an intuitive sense that something is
deeply wrong or has been altered in a damaging way. As one of the Australian participants put it:

Inequality of learning experiences and insufficient attention to ethnic differences continue to blight the Queensland education system. But there is at least some awakening to the nature of these issues, brought about by participants in Griffith’s community development program with the Samoan community, and this is surely encouraging. (P10)

In Transformational Community Development, this sense is the opener of dialogue, negotiation and identification of issues and concerns. These issues provide the basis for planning a LAL program that is urgently needed and wanted by the community, because it is relevant to and focused on the community’s particular problem(s) and enables the community members themselves to address these problems in an inclusive and sustainable way.

**First Phase: Disorientation (Red Zone)**

Disorientation or mental confusion can be caused by a significant, unexpected and challenging event and evidenced by a crisis of self-confidence, a sense of inadequacy and anxiety or even anger and aggressive behaviour. The red zone symbolizes a strain in relationships, defensiveness, and negatively focused alliances that create solidarity in complaints and reinforce a culture of blaming. Red stands for an ability to see in the dark, a tendency toward negativity and destructiveness. It often signifies ‘stop’ or ‘danger’. It is interesting to note that the Chinese character for crisis means both ‘danger’ and ‘opportunity’. For example, one of the Australian participants realized this when reflecting:

I have learnt that I am not as good as I thought I was. In fact I have come to discover how little I know and how much I need to learn. I have also come to learn that no man is an island and the world does not revolve around me. So this is really a self-discovery and the beginning of a new era in my self-development. (P2)

In Transformational Community Development we must try to turn a negative situation into an opportunity for positive change,
and anger, blame or aggression into creative thinking, hope and vision for a better future. How can this be done?

**Second Transition: Reframing**

We may easily become stuck in the red zone by failing to recognize or opting out of the emergent learning process and being locked into hopelessness in a culture of fear and suspicion. In a global context, the implications of this negative pattern of attitude and behaviour are enormous. Therefore, it is important to find a way out of the red zone by reframing the distressing experience as a process of learning and addressing the challenge in a positive way. Taylor (2011: 69–70) observes:

>This moment in the sequence is the watershed between being stuck in psychic discomfort and moving forward into the domain of new possibilities. The decision to move forward changes the landscape radically from the glass half empty to the glass half full.

Two Australian participants expressed this transition as follows:

- **I am sure that action learning is the way forward for our community. It liberates people, since at the outset participants might have relatively low self-esteem and as they journey with this, they can move forward and strengthen their self-image and self-worth. I think action learning also offers the prospect of liberation from poverty, because it facilitates a change in mindset. I believe that unless and until people are liberated from what holds them back, they will not develop and progress and I have discovered that the GULL action learning process does liberate us from what holds us back. (P2)**

- **I have re-learnt the value of not giving up and the importance of stepping out into the unknown – however daunting that may be! My involvement in the GULL project has motivated me to pursue harder than ever the goals we set for our business to teach second language learners. I know there is a huge need in this community and I am excited by the avenues that are starting to open up in schools and churches to teach English to parents/adults. Each bridge crossed and obstacle tackled has produced a new phase in my learning. (P5)**
Our openness to affirmation from a significant person of credibility and recognition can help us in the reframing. As observed by one of the Australian participants, a senior academic at Griffith University who was simultaneously being coached and being a personal coach to other participants:

I have learnt about learners through my coaching of GULL participants. Each had distinctive circumstances and learning goals, requiring different forms of support. In some cases it was to capture their ideas in writing. In others it was to shift from a descriptive to a reflective style of writing. I found questioning to be effective with all participants. They always had information, but needed me as their coach to ask the right questions to help them express this information. (P4)

In Transformational Community Development we encourage the use of a personal coach selected by each participant and of a mentor selected by the program leader for each action learning team. Coaches and mentors are respected within and beyond the community for their knowledge, skills, wisdom and personal influence. Therefore, they are well positioned to help in the reframing as a learning process.

Second Phase: Exploration (Green Zone)

Stepping into the green zone of the Exploration Phase shifts our mind from the known to the unknown and to being relaxed with uncertainty – and without resolution. Green signifies ‘go’ or moving forward. Taylor (2011: 70) explains:

The Green Zone represents the shift from an analytical, deductive mind to an intuitive, inductive mind, from an emphasis on left-brain thinking to an emphasis on right-brain thinking. We begin with our experience, primary knowledge, knowledge from experience …

The journey in this phase is guided by intuition and starts with step-by-step emergent learning, building a rational bridge from the known to the unknown and using analogies and metaphors. In this phase, people tend to find like-minded others with whom to pursue mutual interests and questions through collaborative
inquiry. These like-minded people can be found in print, film or online articles and online discussions. ‘Insight episodes’ they experience through these connections are like previews of the next phase and are embedded in ongoing exploration. “Insight episodes occur when we are able to connect our experiences to ideas that explain or help us understand them.” (Taylor, 2011: 74) They then lead to growing self-confidence and personal satisfaction, as we create primary knowledge on the basis of concrete experience and accumulated insights. This emergent learning was confirmed by Australian participants:

- **The sharing of ideas and points of view has provided us so much learning and has built and strengthened teamwork. It is like having new eyes to see and to analyze issues and events in life... Many hands make light work and that is certainly our experience of teamwork. Sharing ideas and responsibilities really consolidated teamwork, and it resulted in great achievements. (P2)**

- **I have been blessed and privileged to be part of this great experience. Since I was introduced to the GULL program, I have met and worked together with great people. I have learned from them how to reflect on my past experiences, to develop a positive outlook not only for myself but for other people as well. My involvement in the GULL program has given me the courage and the urge to help others, especially our young Samoan people, through mentoring and counseling, so that they can become great leaders for the future. (P1)**

- **We have discovered that the power of the learning process lies in our self-directed journeying, together with the wider team of participants and supporters. When we come together as a team, we feel empowered to sort out our own issues and we have learnt to work and learn together as a team. ... The progress of our projects and the bonding we have formed between us have empowered me to tackle future challenges confidently. Our collective sharing and the chance to hear from these university-educated people about their passion and commitment and to have their knowledge to help us Samoans made me so humble to**
In *Transformational Community Development*, this Exploration Phase is most important, because participants need to learn that knowledge is not definitive, given and static, but continuously developing and emergent, and that they themselves can create knowledge collaboratively through trial and error, reflection and exploring the unknown. To reach this state of mind (relaxed with uncertainty) and to develop the ability to collaborate with others, it is also extremely important at the very beginning of a community development program to introduce activities (e.g., relationship building) that develop in participants the values and principles of lifelong action learning (LAL), including openness, trust, honesty and clear communication.

**Third Transition: Reflecting**

This transition is a shift from exploring interaction with others to more intensive reflection. This reflection is a retrospective review of the learning journey – and an introspective appraisal of the accumulated insights we develop on this journey, and the connections we make among these insights. The type of reflection we speak about here may be unfamiliar to some people. It is not simply recalling or thinking back. It is also thinking through, thinking over, thinking critically, unpacking – questioning how, why, by and for whom, and what are the connections among people, events, decisions, outcomes and other parts of the picture that weren’t clear to us earlier. And what is the significance of all of this? The reflection process is something like drawing and mentally reconstructing the small picture/s and coming to see the big picture by recognizing how/why/for whom these small pictures fit, or don’t fit, together. Some Australian participants expressed the importance of strategic reflection:

- *The activity of reflecting daily, weekly and monthly deepened and broadened my knowledge and understanding of an issue, and in turn, expanded my learning ability. I have learnt the importance of writing and recording events or daily happenings as part of my ongoing learning and for future reference.* (P2)
I am aware from colleagues that often, in an “aha” moment, we come to appreciate that the process of reflection is not just incremental but in fact integral to the whole structure of understanding. (P10)

Regular reflection on these interactions has advanced my learning. I have needed to think strategically about the most effective and efficient means of achieving outcomes and then sustaining these outcomes. In particular, my coach has modeled and encouraged strategic behaviour. (P4)

I have gained an understanding about the importance of strategic daily reflections. Using the GULL concept of action learning, and using it with passion and strength, has built my self-esteem and confidence. Reflection has helped me to be aware of priorities. ... Once the concept is clear and your mind is set in an appropriate way, honest and personal daily reflections begin to make sense. Thereafter, the weekly summary is easier to compile and the process of reflection becomes a habit. (P7)

In Transformational Community Development reflection is essential for lifelong action learning, and for the personal development and growth that transforms into community development. How to reflect effectively can be learnt by keeping a daily, weekly and monthly reflection diary and through discussions with peers and a personal learning coach.

Third Phase: Transformation (Purple Zone)

“This phase is characterized by a heightened consciousness, hyperalertness, and an awakening” (Taylor, 2011: 76). We participate in and simultaneously observe the present moment. Focusing on values, purpose and ideals, we gain a new perspective. We are transformed (double-loop learning) in a significant aspect of our life and we gain a new understanding of ourselves and our life purpose (triple-loop learning). This learning is based on a synthesis of our experiences and insights to this point in the process and leads to a new perspective. Purple signifies power, richness, abundance and strong emotions.
• I feel passionate about my role, responsibilities and duties while making a difference in people’s lives within our community. (P9)

• I have now regained the passion I had for many years to work with second language learners here in Logan City. I have re-learnt the value of patience as well as the qualities of perseverance and persistence. I have been encouraged to continue this type of work. (P6)

• Now I have a strong will to do better and this gives me the power to help Pacific Island youth not just in Logan but even more widely in Queensland. My GULL work has equipped me to help my people and has added value to my life. It has extended my horizons in education and will help me to definitely reach my goals. (P3)

• We are using action learning to address the main challenges our community is experiencing, in particular the under-performance of our youngsters in educational attainment. It won’t be easy and it will require a sustained effort by many people, with the active participation of our community leaders. But we are determined to mobilize our community so that we can advance and improve together. (P8)

• GULL has been like an open door inviting me to build my confidence and restart my studies. I had said to myself, “You have no more chances to study”. ... I am now a better person with improved communication. It is like having a light to show me the way in my journey and to give me the hope to do better. What is happening for me now is exceeding my expectations. (P3)

In Transformational Community Development this feeling of elevation, joy and heightened consciousness is usually expressed at the end of an action learning program on the occasion of the ‘Presentation and Celebration Day’, and evidenced by feedback as written commentary or in video recordings (e.g., Zuber-Skerritt and Teare, 2013, Chapter 6).
Fourth Transition: Naming

This transition is characterized by communicating (naming) the synthesis of our experiences and insights to relevant others in a way that is intelligible and meaningful to them. We own and want to share our perspective and its significance in a social context of shared understanding with others, “but also in our own memories as a turning point [in our life]. The conceptualization becomes a framework to which earlier insights and later refinements can be meaningfully integrated” (Taylor, 2011: 78). Like reflection, conceptualization is not easy to learn and needs to be facilitated. Naming in its wider sense means communicating not only in written but also in oral form, especially in indigenous communities where written form has weaker or no tradition. We also use the term cascading for passing on our learning, experience and insights to others. Here I include the voices of two action leaders recorded on video by Richard Teare at the end of the Griffith University community partnership program (Kearney and Zuber-Skerritt, 2011: 33–34).

- **GULL has enabled me to re-connect with my training as a theologian and this helps me to reflect on the question ‘Who am I?’ – as a father, a husband and a leader of the community. I have realized that if my answers are the same today and tomorrow, it means that I am not progressing on my action learning journey. The journey to greater self-awareness and improvement drives me onwards and it is my hope that by trying to do better and discovering more about myself that I’ll be able to help others by sharing my experience of this process. For me, GULL is a vehicle and a light to help illuminate my journey. I have spoken with so many people about my experience – even those from our community who are in jail. I have been telling them that jail is not the end of the road for them; when you come out, the GULL program will be waiting for you. President of VOSP – the Voice of Samoan People.

- **The GULL concept is a revolutionary idea. I always want to learn and this model for active or action learning will help us to think differently and explore new aspects of community**
development. I know that by re-discovering myself, I can do a better job and find new ways to learn. In terms of my community and a proposal that I should like to make to the President, Voice of Samoan People, I plan to involve the Ministers of all the Christian churches in Logan in an action learning group and thereafter to cascade our experience to the members and congregations of these churches. A notable celebrity in Samoa, who is now a radio presenter and prominent senior pastor living in Logan City.

In **Transformational Community Development** we ensure from the very beginning that participants record their project activities and reflections on these activities throughout the LAL program, so that in the end (on Presentation and Celebration Day) they are able to present the results and learning outcomes publicly to an audience of all participants and stakeholders, community representatives and members, as well as invited colleagues, family, friends and sometimes the media. I am always astonished at the amount of time and effort that participants spend on their presentations, making them rich in ideas about project and learning outcomes, and clear in meaning, message and language – and usually also very creative. We often use video self-confrontation in workshops as participants practise their presentation style to improve their ability for reflection and conceptualization.

**Fourth Phase: Equilibrium (Blue Zone)**

This phase is less intense than the Transformation Phase. Participants find it more detached and peaceful because they have developed a certain confidence about their new perspective and the beliefs, assumptions, and expectations related to it. The focus now is on elaborating, refining and applying the new conceptual framework, using logical analysis rather than analogical thinking and generating new concepts, as before. Taylor (2011: 79) explains:

> More structured logical thinking now plays a role in elaborating, generalizing and applying the new perspective. The beginning of the Equilibrium Phase is marked by a shift from insight to concept, from interpretation to definition.
with a centre of gravity moving from direct experience to conceptualization.

Blue represents calm and coolness and, as mentioned before, conservatism, sophistication, consistency, and unchanging, stable conditions. Participants further increase their self-confidence to feelings of personal strength and independence. Involvement with others is determined only by mutual interest and purpose.

Comments from the two VOSP action leaders mentioned above illustrate this fourth transition well. Since LAL is concerned with all participants, I also present comments from other participants in that same LAL project in Logan City to illustrate the diversity and richness of personal experience and finally wisdom through this typical LAL program.

- *I am wiser now. In my view, wisdom is a special form of understanding that underpins strategic behaviour. Wisdom is acquired through experience and reflection, especially when seeking answers to challenging questions in collaboration with others. Wisdom becomes the foundation for strategic behaviour.* (P4)

- *I have learnt how to communicate better with others, especially in English. I learnt new words every time we had our meetings and I can now relate to others easily, regardless of their cultural background. I also learnt to deliver the truth to people and how to stay away from corruption and political interference. I am now very confident that I can work in any environment, especially ones with problems, and this is why I am not afraid to voice my concern when we have community meetings or meetings with local government leaders.* (P8)

In **Transformational Community Development** we have arrived at sustainability. This means we – the community development professionals – can retreat. Members of the community are now confident in their ability to solve their community problems themselves, to proceed to new cycles in the spiral of emergent learning, as and when they believe necessary, and to help other communities on the same lifelong action learning journey. Figure 2
models the features of the emergent learning process in this discussion, and it is reprinted here with the author’s permission (©Taylor, 2011).

![Diagram of emergent learning process features](source: Taylor, 2011: 81)

I refer readers seeking further detailed explanation to the source: *Emergent Learning for Wisdom* (Taylor, 2011).

**Conclusion**

This article has presented a new conceptual model of emergent learning that is consistent with the theory and practice of action learning and action research generally and of lifelong action learning (LAL) in particular. To illustrate this model in action I have presented commentary provided by participants after their experience in a community–university partnership program.
conducted in Australia using LAL methodology. The participants’ recorded observations of their experiences, reflections and insights exemplify this process model at work for enabling, promoting and sustaining community development and show clear alignment with each of the four transitions and four colour phases of the model of emergent learning. At the time the program was conducted, neither the participants nor the facilitators (of whom I am one) were aware of this model.

My reflection on the community development program and insights formed while preparing this paper has generated the following questions. I conclude by encouraging readers to critically reflect on these questions for possible action:

1. What have you found intriguing or significant in this article?
2. What have you learned from this research and what would you like to inquire about further?
3. What implications can you see for your own research and development activities?
4. What would be your action plan for the next ALAR project you are part of, meaning: What is your focal question? Why is it important/significant? Who will be your co-researchers and participants? Why would they be interested in your issue, concern or focal problem? What would you anticipate your mutual vision/dream to be? How do you plan to achieve your goals? And by when: What is your timeline?

By answering these questions, you have just set the stage for action for your next ‘Transformational Community Development’ program!

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