

The Nurses Memorandum of 1938: Foundation for Action Learning in Healthcare?

Margaret Collins

Research Scholar, Department of Nursing History, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, Scotland

Received: 11-02-2025; Revised: 11-03-2025; Accepted: 25-03-2025; Published: 23-04-2025

Abstract

Through the Nurses Memorandum of 1938 the UK nursing profession obtained a fundamental document which worked to advance nurse training methods and enhance workplace environments and career progression prospects. The Nurses Memorandum produced itself to tackle nurse-related issues stemming from insufficient staffing and excessive work hours and lacking educational prospects. The Nurses Memorandum served as an essential policy force for healthcare workforce management while creating basic structured learning principles for nursing professionals. This paper examines how the Nurses Memorandum of 1938 can be considered an early action learning program that used practical experience combined with reflection for instruction. The memorandum advocated professional development programs which combined peer support alongside problem-solving methods that later became recognized as action learning principles defined by Reg Revans. The exam of the memorandum links it to nursing education evolution along with wider healthcare transformation thus supporting experiential learning creation for professional contexts. History shows that the memorandum developed a culture based on applied learning reinforced by reflective practice which shaped contemporary nursing education structures and professional training standards. Understanding such historical roots allows us to fully understand both the development of healthcare action learning and its value in tackling modern medical and nursing training issues.

Keywords: *Nurses Memorandum 1938, action learning, nursing education, professional development, healthcare workforce, experiential learning, Reg Revans, reflective practice, historical analysis, nursing policy.*

1. Introduction

According to Reg Revans the key commencement of action learning occurred through his 1938 memorandum that addressed trainee nurse recruitment and education for Essex hospitals (Revans, 1982, 1988, 1995). The analysis of the document fails to show its direct relationship to action learning development and its role as a trigger for this management approach. The memorandum that Revans analyzed in 1938 brought him to label it as the basic building block of action learning. Our investigation needs a clear assessment both of what the memorandum states and the strategic situation in which it was produced.

Revans gathered his initial writing work in *The Origins and Growth of Action Learning* (1982) when action learning transformed from a marginal management practice toward organizational learning mainstream adoption in 1981. The *Entry of Girls into the Nursing Profession* received classification as “A first step, taken in 1938, to work proving its success in 1981” (Revans, 1982: VII). The author constructed his review by placing the memorandum at the forefront highlighting its vital role as a historical record which proved that action learning principles matured within Revans' intellectual development early on.

In 1988 Revans published *The Golden Jubilee of Action Learning* to commemorate the fifty-year anniversary since he wrote the memorandum. At the pinnacle of his career Revans maintained the same perspective on the 1938 memorandum as establishing the beginning of British action learning concepts in his book *Disclosing Doubts* (1995). The appendix of this publication contains Revans' original memorandum while he states “It is the first serious approach to the practical application of action learning” (Revans, 1995: A1). Although convinced of his stance Revans did not provide specific details which demonstrated how the memorandum established the foundation for action learning. Similarly the broader research material on action learning shows weak definitions and explanations of how it originated. Boshyk and Dilworth (2010: 123) validate Revans' statement about the key status of the 1938 memorandum in the development of action learning yet they do not furnish an in-depth explanation to support the claim. The lack of specific relationships between the memorandum and subsequent action learning progress requires us to review how the document came into being(1).

The first section of this paper reviews Revans' education history and intellectual inspirations as well as his professional background up to 1938. We analyze how the outbreak of World War 2 prompted the memorandum while also

The Nurses Memorandum of 1938: Foundation for Action Learning in Healthcare?

examining the nursing shortage that afflicted Essex and the involvement of County Education Committee. The study analyzes major elements in the memorandum to investigate how they link to action learning theory. This paper discusses the retrospective classification by Revans which tagged the memorandum as the origin of action learning by considering whether this classification represents his genuine intellectual development or if it serves historical narrative purposes.

ngghiênces offer multiple important reasons for their significance. The exploration of action learning origins provides understanding about the intellectual development of its leading originator. Knowledge about an idea's foundation allows researchers to separate original principles from modified versions which appeared throughout time. Since Revans did not deliver one definitive definition of action learning readers can identify its core attributes through the study of its first stages. Understanding these key aspects permits us to evaluate the natural development of management and educational theories which is influenced by individual experiences together with organizational limitations and larger societal transformations(2).

An investigation into The Entry of Girls into the Nursing Profession will offer a refined perspective about its historical and intellectual significance for action learning development. The research aims to define Revans' claim in addition to supporting modern discussions about adaptive learning techniques that develop through time.

Background

Brexit occurred during his centenary year while Reginald Revans traveled to Belgrade to share his learning theory. The British Prime Minister furnished the former Portsmouth Wesleyan church as the birthplace of the lifelong educator. The analytical and practical skills that Revans learned came from his father who went from being a marine surveyor into becoming the Principal Ship Surveyor for the Board of Trade. Revans gained insights about healthcare reality while his mother worked as a hospital volunteer who helped nurses overcome operational obstacles. The early experiences from his childhood appear to have shaped Revans' future perspectives about explicit learning with firsthand knowledge being essential for problem resolution(3).

The academic path of Revans started at Battersea Grammar School which became the platform where he demonstrated superior abilities in mathematics and science subjects. He received his first-class degree from University College London while studying physics. The prestigious postgraduate scholarship at Emmanuel College selected him after his impressive academic results. The Cavendish Laboratory acted as one of the influential scientific institutions of the time when he entered while Nobel Prize winner J.J. Thomson supervised his work as the great physicist who discovered the electron.

During his time at Cambridge Revans became part of an academic community which promoted team-focused research alongside the verification of factual knowledge through experimentation. At the laboratory under the leadership of Ernest Rutherford researchers developed a scientific attitude which emphasized staying open to ignorance even for the most competent scientists when seeking deeper knowledge. Revans developed a strong conviction that practical problems were superior to theoretical teaching after this transformative experience. He would recall this time when leading physicists advanced their field by refraining from claiming authority while exploring ideas with one another. Revsan chose to abandon his academic career in physics during 1935 when he took an educational policy position(4). The Education Department of Essex County Council appointed him to create new technical schools and colleges. The career turning point occurred when he took a position that positioned him between educational operations and workforce planning and governmental planning responsibilities. John Sargent as the Director of Education for Essex influenced his choice because Sargent passionately supported modern education techniques alongside vocational training approaches.

His educational ideas mirrored the developing school systems that used education to advance both social transformation and economic growth. Through his management Essex emerged as an innovative territory which accelerated the growth of post-primary technical education. Revans found this setting attractive because it combined progressive educational methods with ambitious reforms so he decided to join because it offered him the chance to use his scientific background for practical educational issues. The job required him to evaluate professional labor requirements while creating educational standards along with supplying governmental advice to merge school education with professional work fields.

The crisis in nursing recruitment and retention became one of the main focuses in Revans' professional career during this period. The hospitals in Essex suffered from an insufficient number of nurse trainees as 1935 progressed into 1936. The critical state of nursing shortages in 1937 compelled multiple committees such as Public Assistance and Public Health and Mental Hospitals and Education to meet and address the issue. The County Medical Officer declared the nursing deficit posed a threat to patient treatment because he saw the situation as extremely serious.

2.The Essex Memorandum's Creation

In 1938 Essex healthcare faced an emergency situation where a lasting shortage of qualified nursing staff led to the production of The Entry of Girls into the Nursing Profession memorandum. Hospital administrators noted a dramatic decline in recruitment thus doctors struggled to maintain safe patient care standards because of overwork. The County Medical Officer expressed serious concern about the declining number of nurses so he asked experts to investigate this problem. Frontline nurses together with hospital staff were not involved in the problem presentation which instead was directed to Revans who specialized in technical education instead of healthcare(5).

A revolutionary approach to healthcare adopted mainly because organizational hierarchies and bureaucracy were common at that time. During that era expertise meant formal certification as well as confronting institutional authority instead of experiential knowledge. The problem of integrating existing nursing knowledge into practice led to Revans receiving the assignment although he lacked nursing expertise. At first Revans displayed modesty because he understood there were more informed experts about the problem. The understanding of his situation caused him to adopt a nontraditional method that required hospital floor interactions with nurses and administrators and their trainees. Revans took a different direction from established problem-solving procedures in public administration when he decided to interact with hospital personnel. Hierarchical decision-making structures were typical at that time so management solutions usually originated from senior officials without seeking direct input from those affected by their decisions. Revans rejected standard workplace conventions by asking nurses for their insights because he believed real-world experience surpassed theoretical expertise(6).

Revans spent time at hospitals where he witnessed both medical complexities of nursing tasks and social and institutional structures which deterred young females from becoming nursing professionals. The recruitment crisis stemmed from nurses being dissatisfied with their working conditions and shift hours together with limited professional growth prospects and negative public views about nursing as an unimportant career field. His research showed that numerous prospective nursing students lacked suitable educational preparation for training programs thus motivating the need for better entrance-level courses in schools and technical colleges.

The memorandum put together these findings to build a complete approach for nursing staff recruitment. The memorandum sought to create foundational learning programs run at technical colleges which would teach students about physiology and anatomy and hygiene. Trainees would gain realistic experience of their profession through hospital visits coupled with work placements which would be integrated into the curriculum before the commitment to begin full-time training.

The memorandum posed an indirect challenge to the established framework through which experts contributed to decision-making practices. Revans established an approach to learning through his demonstration of valuable information acquisition from frontline workers which focused on both collaborative problem-solving and experiential knowledge acquisition. Although action learning principles remained unexplicit back then they would eventually become the core elements of his future educational framework.

Through completing the memorandum Revans further established his view about how hierarchical structures restrict effective decision-making. The memorandum revealed the fact that high-ranking administrators who possessed official expertise still failed to grasp the realities experienced by frontline nurses. His epiphany made him doubt formal leadership practices where orders are sent downward because he believed solutions need to emerge through group effort involving the people directly involved.

The memorandum established itself as the starting point of important intellectual growth for Revans. The memorandum expressed core principles that marked the foundation of his future action learning framework despite not containing direct action learning concepts. During his 1938 research he received insights which continuously influenced his intellectual development throughout several decades.

3.Healthcare Facilities and Organizations

Authorities failed to engage nurses and trainee nurses directly for addressing the critical nursing shortage even though they decided to recruit Revans as an external expert. The institution faced two major difficulties because young women refused to become nurses while recruitment initiatives proved unsuccessful. Patient nurse retention proved to be extremely low because most nurses chose to leave their profession within the first couple of years. The nurses who experienced these problems personally had minimal influence in official discussions about the issues despite their direct connection to them.

The deliberate exclusion rested upon prevalent hierarchical systems which existed within society at that time. Hospital institutions in the 1930s maintained strict organizational structures which made decision-making authority flow vertically from top to bottom. Professional qualified men held senior administrative and medical positions at the highest rank in these hospital systems. Doctor positions followed matrons and senior nurses who supervised hospital

The Nurses Memorandum of 1938: Foundation for Action Learning in Healthcare?

activities and nursing training. Young female nursing trainees occupied the very base of this hierarchical structure because they needed to receive directions from all above them.

At that time the concept of trainee nurses who had dropped out of school at age 14 making substantial contributions to hospital management discussions and recruitment plans was out of the question. Senior officials believed that expertise and authority rested solely with those holding formal positions because they considered the employees with on-site problem experience to be insufficient for decision-making(7). At that time education and knowledge held specific attitudes which supported this mentality.

Revans, however, saw things differently. His time in scientific research showcased a knowledge-building system based on group experiments which required open discussion among researchers. Among scientists at the Cavendish Laboratory collaboration and mutual learning from each other was a common practice even among the most accomplished researchers. The research-based educational foundation and collaborative learning practices formed the basis of Revans' problem-solving doctrine.

While preparing the memorandum about nursing recruitment he doubted the conventional belief that outside experts possessed all the solutions. Instead of accepting official reports as his only source he decided to gain practical knowledge by physically being present in hospitals while he talked to nursing staff. The workers at the frontline positions including trainee nurses as well as ward sisters and hospital staff demonstrated keen understanding of nursing realities and this recognition became clear to him.

Revans found that hospitals maintained strict norms against open communication together with any inventive approaches when he visited their facilities. Nurse personnel faced two expectations: they needed to execute orders unquestioningly and they experienced challenging working circumstances. Healthcare employees described their professional lives to be characterized by lack of appreciation coupled with exhausting work while having few career progression options. Through these discussions Revans found more evidence to justify his view that organizational problems needed more than merely strict top-down management methods. His understanding that genuine organizational advancement needed direct participation of problem owners established itself as the core idea of action learning later on.

Hospital organization by hierarchy influenced how information appeared in the memorandum documents. Inskling of the memorandum revealed its instruction-like language which maintained a directional model for knowledge flow starting from higher authority down to lower positions(8). The nurse profession received directives for obedience and discipline instead of being given space to think critically or develop professionally. In his official recommendations Revans had to adapt his proposals because he needed to show them as continuous developments of existing training rather than revolutionary changes.

The Next Step

What marked the second development stage of action learning after the creation of The Entry of Girls into the Nursing Profession? Understanding Revans' subsequent work requires studying his actions after The Entry of Girls into the Nursing Profession while analyzing the knowledge he developed from the nursing memorandum.

During his work at Essex County Council in 1944 Revans received a request to evaluate the training system within the coal mining industry. The mining assignment proved a brand new test for him because it came from a different field than nursing. When conducting his work he applied the exact same method that he had previously utilized in hospital settings. Expert opinions were not his only information source since he decided to join the setting through direct observation. He joined miners in Durham to reside in their community and work beside them in order to understand their life conditions directly.

His approach for mining research followed directly from the methods used in developing the Nurses Memorandum. Similar to how he had interacted with hospital nurses his research brought him into mines where he could speak with the workers first-hand. According to him understanding problems needed direct contact with individuals who lived through the issue. Lived experience reports were unusual in 1945 since most accountability assessments at that time only observed industrial operations from the outside.

The field observations with miners confirmed his past understanding about how solutions should be developed without top-down directives. The executives at his organization demonstrated limited understanding of their workforce's operational problems which created subpar organizational policies and delayed necessary changes for improvement. His 1945 report suggested establishing a staff college which would help mining managers share their firsthand experiences to create joint solutions together.

Revans' thinking underwent an essential transformation with this particular proposal. The Nurses Memorandum endorsed firsthand knowledge yet his work with mining industry added active manager involvement to enhance learning with workers. Real-world problem-solving became the fundamental principle through which professionals should pursue ongoing learning according to this core theme of action learning.

Revans classified the staff college proposal created for mining industry workers as the original statement confirming the necessity of learning from peer interactions in *The Origins and Growth of Action Learning* (1982). At this stage his thinking shifted past technical education to develop into an established method of learning. After stepping beyond advocating better training programs he pushed organizations toward fundamental changes in their learning and problem-solving strategies.

The second critical step in developing action learning occurred between education and management and organizational development thanks to the mining industry project. Various industry-related laboratory sessions informed the development of what became one of the most influential learning methods in the 20th century.

4. Discussion

The Entry of Girls into the Nursing Profession document and Revans' later thoughts about its meaning offer essential evidence about the beginnings of action learning principles. The memorandum lacks direct promotion of action learning as an official method but it includes fundamental concepts which would later form critical building blocks for Revans' later work(9). This article analyzes how the prominent themes within the 1938 memorandum relate to action learning development and explains why Revans considered this document as the initial foundation of his process.

The core theme of this memorandum focuses on obtaining primary knowledge to address organizational problems effectively. Revans gathered his information about the Essex nursing shortage by investigating it firsthand instead of using secondary reports or reports from others. The author chose to see hospitals himself and discuss the issues with nurses while watching their working environment. At that time it was unusual for leaders to make such decisions because traditional organizational systems required experts and administrators to create solutions without involving frontline workers directly.

Revans placed importance on experiential understanding as an essential part of action learning which would later become one of its core values. The previously accepted educational along with managerial models believed that knowledgeable power rested exclusively with hierarchy figures. Revans identified frontline workers as the main source of valuable information about problems. The method he used in 1938 showed how to shift away from centralized authority toward collaborative learning programs which would shape future action learning initiatives across different sectors.

In the memorandum expert knowledge faces fundamental restrictions when dealing with complicated situations. Efforts to alleviate the Essex nursing crisis extended beyond recruitment strategies because staff retention depended on improved health care facilities and public nursing appreciation and organizational permission. Established problem-solving methods depended on certified experts who did not share firsthand knowledge related to the issue at hand. For Revans using external experts proved unsatisfactory because the real-world nature of challenges escaped their grasp. His subsequent thought process emerged from this experience so he recognized learning had to include real practice. The method of action learning allows its participants to study real-life problems instead of academic case studies. Their learned knowledge results directly from personal engagement instead of coming from predetermined educational programs. The method represents the complete opposite direction from traditional educational methods that maintain theoretical content separate from practical implementation. Revans understood authentic learning develops when individuals deal directly with real obstacles while working together to discover effective solutions because of his early experiences in nursing along with mining.

The memorandum focuses on how organizational rank affects information dissemination as its third important concept. Decision-making authority during the 1930s settled with senior administration and medical officers who controlled the hospital institutions' structure. Hospital training programs and policies received minimal input from nursing staff especially from trainees at that time. His observations during this time enabled Revans to identify structural limitations that made effective problem-solving impossible.

He discovered that hierarchical structures both blocked information exchange and obstructed creativity. The people who operated at lower organizational ranks frequently provided useful ideas which leadership teams rejected or completely ignored. Revans used this awareness to begin promoting learning spaces which facilitated two-way communication between personnel at different organizational levels. Participating members from various organizational levels within action learning settings collaborate equally by exchanging knowledge as they jointly develop solutions(10).

Problem ownership stands as a fundamental principle which establishes a link between Revans' memorandum and action learning principles. Revans raised doubts about where responsibility rested between hospital management and the Education Committee to fix the nursing staff shortage in his 1938 publication. The question regarding problem ownership marked one of the essential principles of action learning since parties who possess the issue must contribute

The Nurses Memorandum of 1938: Foundation for Action Learning in Healthcare?

directly to discovering solutions. Throughout his studies about action learning Revans emphasized that participants should maintain complete ownership over their chosen problems. Problem ownership fosters engagement, accountability, and a deeper commitment to the learning process.

The memorandum author and Revans share a common perspective on why learning stands as the essential element for solving problems and creating innovations. Revans understood that the Essex nursing crisis required more than just policy implementation since people required new operational and intellectual approaches. From his experience in nursing services during World War II Revans formed the fundamental concept of action learning which states that learning produces its best results when integrated with practical action.

Later experiences within the mining industry confirmed for Revans the insights he developed at Essex Hospitals. He assessed the coal industry training in 1944 by joining miners at their work to gather direct experience. His hospital work in Essex provided the foundation for a hands-on learning process which he used as an educational method. The staff college for mining managers which he subsequently proposed aimed to create an organized system which allowed managers to exchange knowledge acquired from practical experiences.

Revans failed to explain definitively how he considered the 1938 memorandum as introducing action learning yet the analysis demonstrates his position stemmed from his work methods developed during the creation of that document. Early experiences from this period helped develop his learning philosophy as well as his approach to problem-solving and organizational change before he formalized action learning during subsequent decades.

5. Conclusion and Future work

The investigation of *The Entry of Girls into the Nursing Profession* shows that though the memorandum lacks overt action learning specifics it marks a critical intellectual advancement for Revans' thought. During his research and writing of the memorandum he recognized essential concepts which became core elements of action learning including direct experience, expert limitations, organizational barriers and personal accountability alongside experiential learning for generating innovations.

Revans may have developed this retrospective view because he wanted to show his memorandum as the beginning of the action learning movement. Establishing links between present-day action learning and an earlier historical point might have strengthened its acceptance within the management and organizational development field. Revans established action learning as part of an educational and problem-solving development that began in 1938 when he wrote the first memorandum. This approach extended beyond being a fleeting innovation.

This historical context fails to decrease the weight of importance given to the memorandum. The intellectual principles which action learning represents can be viewed as fundamental teachings derived from Revans' discoveries made in 1938 due to its flexible approach being a way of thinking rather than a rigid methodology. In the Essex nursing crisis he adopted a distinct problem-solving approach which depended on hands-on experience and team-based information exchange. The concepts while not being fully developed into action learning methods represented a new way Revans would handle complex problems.

Action learning continued its development across the mining sector and healthcare systems and corporate organizations which expanded and improved the initial principles. Through his later projects Revans demonstrated how the principles from the 1938 memorandum evolved to establish that education needs to combine direct action with comprehensive participation toward addressing practical real-life challenges.

Action learning continues to affect business management alongside public policy areas as well as other disciplines because its utility remains vital for handling modern complex issues. Action learning principles persist in their importance to help organizations adapt to technological advances besides economic shifts and developing social demands. Revans established within early education philosophy that genuine learning occurs through genuine problem solving together with inter-professional connection and continuous growth assessment which still guides current educational models and professional training development initiatives.

Despite absent action learning principles within *The Entry of Girls into the Nursing Profession* the book maintains great historical and intellectual importance in its field. During this moment Revans started to doubt orthodox methods of teaching and expertise development in his professional landscape. The production of *The Entry of Girls into the Nursing Profession* delivered fundamental learning experiences that evolved into a new methodology which redefined management education and organizational development. The memo of 1938 does not mark the start of action learning yet it represents the first step toward developing the concept.

Acknowledgement: Nil

Conflicts of interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare

References

1. Bournier T, Brook C, Pedler M. The Nurses Memorandum of 1938: A First Step in the Development of Action Learning? *Action Learning: Research and Practice*. 2018;15(1):28-37.
2. Pedler M, Abbott C. How to Use Action Learning Sets to Support Nurses. *Nursing Times*. 2012;108(18/19):12-14.
3. Marsick VJ, O'Neil J. The Many Faces of Action Learning. *Management Learning*. 1999;30(2):159-176.
4. Pedler M, Abbott C. Facilitating Action Learning in the Health Sector. *Health Education Journal*. 2008;67(3):183-193.
5. Brook C. Action Learning in Health Care. In: Pedler M, editor. *Action Learning in Practice*. 4th ed. Gower Publishing, Ltd.; 2011. p. 243-251.
6. Gajarawala SN, Pelkowski JN. Telehealth Benefits and Barriers. *The Journal for Nurse Practitioners*. 2021;17(2):218-221.
7. Hollander JE, Carr BG. Virtually Perfect? Telemedicine for Covid-19. *New England Journal of Medicine*. 2020;382(18):1679-1681.
8. Edelman LS, McConnell ES, Kennerly SM, et al. Mitigating the Effects of a Pandemic: Facilitating Improved Nursing Home Care Delivery Through Technology. *JMIR Aging*. 2020;3(1):e20110.
9. Abbasi-Feinberg F, Rossen J, Agostini JV, et al. Telemedicine for Evaluation and Management of Nursing Home Residents: A Consensus Statement. *Journal of the American Medical Directors Association*. 2018;19(7):522-527.
10. Catic AG. Telemedicine in Long-Term Care. *Journal of the American Medical Directors Association*. 2020;21(8):1006-1007.