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Facilitating learning: mine, yours and others' :gaining insight into the facilitation of corporate experiential learning programs through the lenses of personal experience and the learning styles analysis

Tracey Dickson
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Facilitating Learning: Mine, Yours and Others'

Gaining Insight into the Facilitation of Corporate Experiential Learning Programs through the Lenses of Personal Experience and the Learning Styles Analysis

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of:

Doctor of Philosophy

from

University of Wollongong

by

Tracey Joy Dickson

B Com *UNSW*, G Dip Ed *UoSA*, M Ed *UTS*, M Com *UoW*

Faculty of Education

2003

Certification

I, Tracey J Dickson, declare that this thesis, submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, in the Faculty of Education, University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. The document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

Tracey J Dickson

14th December, 2003

Acknowledgments

A PhD is a combination of a range of experiences and interactions and the journey I have experienced could be referred to as an adventurous exploration involving many moments of ‘geographic embarrassment’. To have been able to continue this journey, without having to follow the many “Lonely Planet” type guides to PhDs has been achieved through the support, and at times, mere tolerance, of supervisors, colleagues and friends.

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Like any journey, not everyone is there at the end, some choose to leave and others were in the wrong place at that time. I have had a wide range of supervisors, each having contributed in their own unique way: Dr Stephen Linstead, Dr Mike Gass, Dr Lorraine Smith and Dr Will Rifkin, who saw me through the midst of this PhD.

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NRG

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Abstract

Writing and research on facilitation of experiential learning, including corporate programs, predominantly focuses upon *what* the facilitator is to do, with little or no consideration for *where* the facilitation occurs. Using a heuristic research process that involves an immersion in the dominant literature on experiential learning (with an emphasis upon North American literature), and through the use of the ‘lenses’ of personal experience and the use of the Learning Styles Analysis, this thesis follows a journey of exploration into the world of experiential learning. The journey includes forays into deconstruction of a popular article on facilitation as well as exploring literature from other areas such as urban planning, human geography and organisational aesthetics. Other places ‘visited’ along the way includes surveys of the learning styles of 73 post graduate students as well as the professional practice of 76 facilitators of experiential learning from diverse countries and cultures. The destination at the commencement of the journey while unknown, had a motive to enhance the effectiveness of the facilitation of corporate experiential learning programs. However, by continuing to honour the role of personal experience, as supported by many feminist writers, and by being willing to reflect upon the writings and practice of facilitation of experiential learning, the final destination ended up being a place called *Place and Space*. Prior to arriving at the final destination, a creative synthesis of the journey is expressed through a weaving of a photo essay with the words of a poem. The final destination of this journey, *Place and Space*, begins to raise questions about what the impact of the physical environment, natural/wilderness or built, may have upon the individual and/or the group’s learning experience. These questions form the beginnings for another journey.

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Preface: I am different, this I know, because my reflection tells me so.

I am left-handed. All my life I have been left-handed. My mother related a story to me about when, as a child, colouring in I would use my right hand (possibly mimicking the rest of my family) but when I needed to colour-in near the lines I would ask if I could use my left-hand (no postmodern colouring in for me, got to keep within the lines!). Left-handedness is not new in my family; I have a Grandfather, a Great-aunt and cousin who are also left-handed.

Even though I am left-handed I believe I see the world much as anyone else does: I see people demonstrating skills in a right-handed way, eating in a right-handed way, living a right-handed way. I even learnt to crochet with my right-hand because my sister could only show me how to do it with her right hand. When I look into the mirror when cleaning my teeth it looks like I am right-handed, even though I use my left-hand. The reflection is not true of my experience. It is merely my reflection, it is not necessarily my reality. What we think we see may not be what we experience, nor may it be our reality. What we don't see may be more real. This is well expressed by J. K. Rowling describing Harry Potter looking into the Mirror of Erised:

There he was, reflected in it, white and scared-looking, and there, reflected behind him, were at least ten others. Harry looked over his shoulder – but still, no one was there. Or were they all invisible, too? Was he in fact in a room full of invisible people and this mirror's trick was that it reflected them, invisible or not? (Rowling, 1997: 208)

In looking for answers about the Mirror, Harry consults Professor Dumbledore:

Harry thought. Then he said slowly, 'It shows us what we want ... whatever we want...'

'Yes and no' said Dumbledore quietly. 'It shows us nothing more or less than the deepest, most desperate desire of our hearts. ... However, this mirror will give us neither knowledge or truth. Men have wasted away before it, entranced by what they have seen, or driven mad, not knowing if what it shows is real or even possible. It does not do to dwell on dreams and forget to live, remember that (Rowling, 1997:213-4)

Dumbledore's advice could well apply to doing a PhD!

“The left-hander finds his way with difficulty in the forest of right-handed technology” (Serres, 1991:14)

As a left-handed person I experience the world differently. The photocopier button is always on my right side, so as I stand and photocopy pages from a book I place the book with my right-hand and press the button with my left. Why don't I change? You try and do it with your other hand! Turning on a tap can be a risky business as I use my dominant hand, my left hand, and reach for the tap – which usually is the left-hand tap, the hot tap. Computer mice are designed for right-handed people, the numeric pad on the keyboard is on the right, scissors and knives are for right-handed people. There seems to be a right-handed conspiracy against me and my minority left-handed brethren, even to the extent that they could be limiting our learning by simply having desks in lecture theatres designed for right-handed people. We are not encouraged to question the correctness of this right-handed world. Technology is produced for the masses, not for individual need.

Historically left-handedness has been derided and as Edwards (1979:33) notes:

Throughout human history, terms with connotations of *good* for right-handed/left hemisphere and connotations of *bad* for left-handed/right hemisphere appear in most languages around the world. The Latin word for left is *sinister* ... The French word for 'left' ... is *gauche* ... for right is *droit* ... in English, 'left' comes from the Anglo-Saxon *lyft*, meaning 'weak' or 'worthless' ... the Anglo-Saxon word for 'right', *reht* ... meant 'straight' or 'just'.

Derogatory terms such as cack-handed and goofy-footed convey the image that we are evil or not normal, a position that has existed for centuries; we are the original 'others' as acknowledged by Edwards (1979). Teachers have tried to 'correct' our ways by tying left-hands behind backs, or hitting students over the knuckles. Even as a student in 3rd class my sewing teacher told me that if I had been at school when she was a student I would not have been allowed to remain left-handed. But why? That is how I was born. No one made me that way, so why should I change? Yet, as we look at the world of learning, and of particular focus in this context, experiential learning, it would seem that the dominant forces are trying to control the less powerful minority. The ones with the loudest voices, the ones with the most political, academic and/or publishing muscle are telling us how to learn. But maybe I and others were born to learn differently from their way. Maybe, by just being me I won't fit into their models.

What follows is my journey of exploration of how I learn and a consideration of the implications for facilitating experiential learning programs for those of us who don't fit the dominant models (e.g. Gass and Gillis, 1995; Kolb, 1984; Priest, Gass and Gillis, 2000; Priest and Naismith, 1993). This is a chance for the 'others' to rise and be the 'ones', the dominant voices. But even as I seek to raise the voice of the 'others', it is in the knowledge that the context within which I write and operate may not be interested in listening to those voices, for as Edwards notes when recalling Archimedes' moment of insight in his bath:

This, then, is the right-hemisphere mode: the intuitive, subjective, relational, holistic, time-free mode. This is also the disdained, weak, left-handed mode which in our culture has been generally ignored. For example, most of our educational system has been designed to cultivate the verbal, rational, on-time left hemisphere, while half of the brain of every student is virtually neglected (Edwards, 1979:36).

Springs Within – Reflections on a Dam

The mighty Snowy River has been dammed for years; dammed by a wall of good intentions and scientific models. The good intentions have created much success and wealth with the substantial hydro-electric scheme, but the scientific models forgot to look at the others who do not fit the model - those who do not want their life source dammed and redirected. The beauty of Lake Jindabyne that I see before me as I sit in my study is a result of that damn dam. The structure was built to make some lives better, but at the expense of others. It is too late to remove the dam, but if we acknowledge the impact of the dam and begin to see what negative effects occur downstream with decreased water flows impacting upon the environment, farmers and communities, we can begin to change.

Models of learning can also be well-intentioned structures that may stop the flow of creativity and limit the way people see the world. The models need to be seen for what they are, but they must also be seen for what they are not. Within each of us lies a deep spring. Fresh, clean water full of ideas, creativity and new life. Into that spring is thrown the refuse of good intentions and bright ideas. Models and pseudo-science applied to a source unbound by theories. To let the spring flow, to allow the creativity and new ideas to emerge into the light, the refuse and wastes of past lives, bad experiences and imposed models need to be removed, the dam needs to be broken to let the spring flow.