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

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Chapter 7: Now What?: A Creative Synthesis

“To be surrounded by beautiful things has much influence upon the human creature: to make beautiful things has more” Charlotte Perkins Gilman, 1898, writer, poet, lecturer (Partnow, 1993:470).

7.1. Introduction

The creative synthesis can only be achieved through tacit and intuitive powers ... This usually takes the form of a narrative depiction utilizing verbatim material and examples, but it may be expressed as a poem, story, drawing, painting, or by some other creative form (Moustakas, 1990:31-2)

This is the final aspect of the heuristic research process, the pulling together of the quilt, the final stage for the bricoleur. The creative synthesis reflects the “researcher’s personal knowledge, tacit awareness, intuition, and understanding of meanings and essences of the experience” (Braud and Anderson, 1998:198). This provides great possibility to ‘walk my research’ and to implement activities and generate products that touch different learning styles and emphasise the use of the right-hand side of the brain, the creative side. This is inspiring, but I also feel fearful as I consider putting, what I consider, my lack of creative side on the line. This is the revelation and the result of the creative synthesis. Continuing with the theme of the What?, So What?, Now What?, the creative synthesis draws together the insights I have gained as well as incorporating the more traditional recommendations one may expect from a dissertation and is triggered by the stepping stone of the broader consideration of literature in Chapter 6 and the explication process, particularly through the conferences at SEA and NA. It is the signpost for the future, the suggestions for future research, ideas for enhancing mine and others’ learning and questions that may continue to be asked, but left unanswered.

7.2. Facilitating Learning: Insights from Personal Experience and LSA

The process of reaching some insights, some perspective through this thesis has not been a straightforward process. At times, I have been unclear of where I was heading, how I was to ‘navigate’ my way through the questions, my concerns and the data. Ultimately I came upon the heuristic research process, a process that upheld the
possibility to involve “self-search, self-dialogues, and self-discovery; the research question and the methodology flow out of inner awareness, meaning, and inspiration” (Moustakas, 1990:11). There are many more experiences and insights that have been gained along the way, but it has not been possible to effectively and efficiently include them in this study. Any PhD has its limits, and one limit of this one is the self-imposed limits of the research questions I chose to pursue.

In Chapter 1, I introduced the following questions as a broad framework of the thesis:

1. What are the themes and foci of the current literature on the facilitation of experiential learning?
2. What insights do I gain from reflecting upon my own experience of learning?
3. What connections are there between my experience and my Learning Style Analysis™ (LSA)?
4. What insights are gained from looking at the LSAs of a range of adults?
5. What are facilitators of experiential learning doing in their practice?
6. What other theories or perspectives may provide alternative directions and/or reflections upon the practice of experiential learning?
7. What recommendations could be made about professional practice in the facilitation of corporate experiential learning?

7.2.1. Themes and foci of the current literature

Question 1 was considered in Chapters 3 and 6, where it was proposed that the dominant literature (e.g. Kolb, 1984; Priest, 1987; Priest and Gass, 1993; Priest and Gass, 1997; Priest and Gass, 1997/8; Priest and Naismith, 1993) present models of learning that give the appearance that learning is rational, logical, linear and somewhat controllable by the all-knowing facilitator. The primary focus of these
perspectives link closely to Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning cycle and incorporate elements of:

- having an experience;
- reflecting upon that experience;
- seeking to generalise that experience to transfer and apply in other contexts

Alternative perspectives from the realms of psychology, creativity and innovation, as considered in Chapter 6, suggest that thinking and learning are not necessarily so linear and prescriptive, and that there is a substantial component of randomness and lack of logic in some thought processes (e.g. Asimov, 1977; Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson, 1990; Nisbett and Wilson, 1977; Polanyi, 1964).

### 7.2.2. Insights from reflecting upon my experience of learning and connections with the LSA

The consideration of Questions 2 and 3 are interwoven throughout the autoethnography of Chapter 4. However, as it is my personal experience of experiential learning that was the trigger for this thesis, that theme has continued throughout, even in the context of the search for an appropriate methodology as explored in Chapter 2. From more than a year’s reflection the themes of ‘place’ and ‘space’ kept emerging, both as themes of physical ‘place’ and ‘space’ as well as emotional and mental ‘place’ and ‘space’. These themes would emerge again in Chapter 6 as my search of the literature moved beyond the traditional and entered into other realms and traditions from areas such as urban planning and human geography.

What is highlighted in the autoethnography is not just where the experience occurs, but what the impact of that location is upon the experience. My LSA connects with many of my learning experiences in relation to aspects such as sensory modalities (e.g. visual and kinaesthetic) and my preferences with respect to sound, light, movement and formality, but does not extend to the depth of that interconnection with place, nor the emotional and mental ‘space’ that emerges from my reflection upon learning through the autoethnography. While focusing upon learning styles, via the LSA, may begin to help create a more effective ‘place’ and ‘space’ by reducing some
of the barriers that are highlighted by the key categories of the LSA, more work needs to be done to consider what an individual needs to create a more effective learning 'place' and 'space' for them.

7.2.3. Insights from the LSAs of 73 Adults

Question 4 was explored in Chapter 5 with an analysis of 73 LSAs collected predominantly through postgraduate classes I have taught. Through the application of statistical tests such as ANOVA and independent t-tests, some learning preference differences emerged between key categories. The limited sample size as well as the non-discrete categories of preference makes these 'findings' non-generalisable, but they act as 'sign-posts' for future research.

The following considers the preferences of the 73 students (Table 5-10) with respect to the LSA categories that would seem to have relevance to the facilitation of experiential learning:

- Sensory modality preferences support that there is some preference for Auditory External (talking, 64%), but this is at a similar level to Internal (visualising, 63%), External (doing, 65%) and External (feeling, 64%) which may provide some focus for pursuing alternate, non-verbal, reflective activities;

- 64% of all participants have a preference for quiet (75% female, 46% male);

- 84% are self starting along with 80% who have a high sense of responsibility, while 50% still have a preference for being 'other directed'. With this level of self-starting and responsibility there may be the possibility to build upon these preferences to increase the level of self-facilitation;

- 45% prefer working with peers, while only 32% prefer teams which may influence how groups are constructed and who is sent to a training (i.e. individuals versus intact work-groups).

While these results are inconclusive if one were to be looking for grand-theories on the facilitation of learning, what they do indicate is the difference that can exist
between individual learning preferences. With 73 responses, there were some significant differences noted via an analysis of variance.

The results of the analyses of variance (ANOVA) of the data indicated significant differences between:

- Australian students, aged 26 to 32 years and those aged 33 years and older in their preference for ‘seeing’, with those aged 26 to 32 years having a higher preference for ‘seeing’

- Australian students aged less than 26 years and those aged 33 years and older in their preference for ‘self starting’, with the older students showing a higher preference for self-starting

- Female students and male students with regard to their preference for being ‘stationary’, with female students having a higher preference for being ‘stationary’. Consistent with this finding is that there is also a significant difference between females and males’ preferences for ‘mobility’, with the males having a higher preference.

No analysis could be conducted to consider the impact of nationality due to the small sample size of the individual nationalities of the non-Australian students. However, given the differences noted in Chapter 5 (Table 5-9) between Australian students and non-Australian students, particularly with preferences for Auditory External (talking) in contrast to the findings of the Workshop Surveys, especially in relation to the use reflective activities (Table 5-20), it would seem beneficial to further investigate the learning style preferences of other countries at a much greater depth.

Two people who completed LSAs, who were members of NRG, also contributed insights via interviews. ‘Lane’ and ‘Anne’s’ interviews highlight their lack of a linear experience of learning. This was consistent with my own experience in Chapter 4, as well as the additional literature explored in Chapter 6, whereby learning, and especially creativity and innovation, occurred, not at the programmed time, but at moments outside of the experience at times when others things may be occurring. The ability to provide ‘space’ for this, as Anne identified via having manuscript paper next to her thesis, emphasises how people can take greater control of their learning
when they are aware of how they actually learn. This contrasts with the facilitated-directed models deconstructed in Chapter 6 (Priest and Gass, 1993).

7.2.4. Facilitators’ Practice

Question 5 was addressed via the surveying of 76 conference workshop attendees regarding their facilitation practice. The survey results support my instinct that was the impetus for the thesis, that the primary method used is large group discussions (77.6% ranked this activity as number one or two), followed by small group discussions (67.2% ranked this activity as number one or two) (Table 5-20). In conjunction with the demonstrated lack of study about learning styles that was indicated by the surveys responses, with 37% having no previous study of learning styles (Table 5-17) there seems to be a gap between what people prefer as learners (as indicated by my autoethnography, the LSAs, NRG interviews and literature on creativity and innovation) versus what they do as facilitators. This raises a further research question that may be pursued regarding facilitators’ espoused theories and their theories-in-action, particularly in the context of experiential learning. What is the relationship between people’s motives for using experiential learning and the ways in which they are facilitating them?

7.2.5. Alternative Directions from Other Perspectives

Question 6, regarding views from other theories or perspectives, is explored in Chapter 6 with the consideration of literature from urban planning, human geography and organisational aesthetics. Each of these connects with the emerging themes of ‘place’ and ‘space’ as well as the learning style categories of physical environment. With the emphasis upon using the ‘lens’ of learning styles, what this process obscures has been the consideration of any connection between ‘place’ and ‘space’ and other categories from other perspectives. These other perspective could include as the Myers-Briggs personality categories such as intuitive and sensing which may have more connection to connection to place than does learning styles. This is another potential research direction.
7.2.6. Recommendations

Which brings us to the final question, Question 7: What recommendations could be made about professional practice in the facilitation of corporate experiential learning?

A traditional thesis would probably move now to a neat paragraph or two summarising the key outcomes and suggesting changes to practice as a result of the research. Well not in this thesis! As the heuristic research process concludes with a creative synthesis, and because this thesis is about facilitating experiential learning, then the conclusion for this thesis is a facilitated experience about facilitating experiential learning. An expression of my experience of place provided through a range of photos I have taken over the years I have been enrolled in this PhD. However, I must also make reference to the ultimate aim if this study, as noted in Chapter 1, which was the achievement of more effectively facilitated corporate experiential learning programs. To this end I have two offerings, the first is a series questions that I now, as a facilitator, seek to answer as I facilitate CELPs and secondly directions for future research that may assist the development of the theory and practice of facilitation of CELPs.

a. Questions for Reflection Upon My Practice

While I do not want to fall into the trap of making potentially prescriptive recommendations for professional practice, what I do suggest is that facilitators ‘walk their talk’ and do what they ask others to do: reflect upon your practice. The following questions that have emerged for me as a result of this study, may help others to reflect upon their practice:

- Why do you, as the facilitator, do what you do?
- What are the assumptions you are making about how people learn?
- How are you creating ‘space’ for people to learn?
- Are activities (i.e. doing activities rather than being in the activity) taking up ‘space’ in the experience?
- What impacts upon a participant’s ‘space’ for learning?
b. Further Research

Before moving on I will recap some of the other questions that emerged from this study that may provide direction for further research. These are in addition to those questions mentioned in the previous sections related to the answers to my original research questions. The other questions that emerged as this study evolved include:

- What is the impact upon the learning experience of the organisational culture, economic and social environments and the climate of change? (Section 1.8);

- What would experiential learning programs (including PhDs) look like if they were structured to meet the needs of the learner? (Section 1.10);

- How have the writings of Milton Erickson influenced the current models of facilitation of experiential learning? (Section 2.3.1);

- What difference does it make if theories and models are developed from working with dysfunctional behaviours as distinct from building upon functional behaviours? (Section 2.3.1);

- What is the impact of space, place and nature on the experiences, emotions, thoughts and learnings of other people? This could include reference to Garnder’s eighth intelligence related to connection with the environment and/or nature (Sections 3.4 and 3.6);

- Where are the voices of the ‘others’? Where are the insights from the rest of the world? Who is being excluded from listserves (and thus debate) by the use of the English language? How can we begin to search out and hear other views? (Section 6.2.1);

- Does it matter that our field seems to lack academic rigour? (Section 6.2.2).

These are the questions that arose as I wrote, other questions may arise as others read my words or as they reflect upon their professional practice.
7.3. Weaving Together a Photo Essay and Poem

In Chapter 2 I introduced the concept of researcher-as-bricoleur, who is the artisan or quilt maker. Drawing upon this imagery the following seeks to weave together two sources of inspiration: a poem and photos, into a 'quilt' that expresses, at least for me, something of the meaning of 'space' and 'place'. This becomes the creative synthesis, the final phase of the heuristic research process.

As I think about the creative synthesis, two things come to mind: one is my enjoyment of making photos, particularly of places that 'speak' to me, and the other is how often the words of songs or poems seem to come to mind as a way of expressing my thoughts or feelings. When thinking about space and place, and my own connection to nature, a phrase from the Dorothea MacKellar's poem, My Country, comes to mind: “I love a sunburnt country, a land of sweeping plains” (MacKellar, 1986:39). I have chosen to use these two diverse 'voices': the photos and the poem, together as a way of expressing myself.

I am using MacKellar’s words to give ‘voice’ to places that have meaning for me. The images of these places, represented via the photos, have reached out and ‘spoken’ to me. What the images have said to me will be different, I imagine, to what they may say to the reader or another who may have been in that same place and at the same time as me, or even a different time. As Fine (1992) suggests:

Nature is filled with hidden beauties – objects that are figuratively, and occasionally literally breathtaking. These experiences, known to ... photographers, mountaineers ... and dozen of ‘nature lovers,’ demonstrate the possibility for emotional response to nature – responses that might make little sense to those outside the community (Fine, 1992:168-9).

These photos represented special places for me. To support these photos I have chosen verses one, two and five of the six verses, each of eight-lines, of My Country (MacKellar, 1986:39-40). While MacKellar’s words are particularly about Australia, I have drawn upon images from my experiences around the world over the last few years; years that have coincided with my enrolment in this PhD. The photos of fire and fire damage are from the period of January-February, 2003 during and after a three week period when bushfires ravaged the Snowy Mountains area and particularly Kosciuszko National Park, a place close to my heart, my home and my own ‘sense of
place'. The place I withdrew to in the year 2000 as I sought to find a place I could effectively reflect, write and, hopefully, complete this PhD. A place and space that, in the end, helped me to learn.

My Country
The love of field and coppice,
Of green and shaded lanes,

Of ordered woods and gardens
Is running in your veins.

Strong love of grey-blue distance
Brown streams and soft, dim skies -
I know but cannot share it,
My love is otherwise.

I love a sunburnt country,
A land of sweeping plains,

Of ragged mountain ranges,
Of droughts and flooding rains.

I love her far horizons,
I love her jewel-sea,
Her beauty and her terror –
The wide brown land for me!
...

Core of my heart, my country!
Land of the Rainbow Gold,

For flood and fire and famine,
She pays us back three-fold.

Over the thirsty paddocks,
Watch, after many days,
Mackellar’s final verse is:

*An opal-hearted country,*

*A wilful, lavish land –*

*All you who have not loved her,*

*You will not understand –*

*Though earth holds many splendours,*

*Wherever I may die,*

*I know to what brown country*

*My homing thoughts will fly.* (Mackellar, 1986:40).

As Mackellar notes, not everyone will have the same love of country, not everyone will have that same connection to ‘place’ and ‘space’, but that is not a reason to ignore the essence of that experience for those who have that close connection. The concept of connection to country or place is not new, as has been noted in this thesis, in relation to indigenous cultures, creation of ‘space’ and ‘place’ in urban planning and human geography and also the aesthetics experience of organisations. However the consideration of that connection to the location with respect to the facilitation of
corporate experiential learning is somewhat new. Predominantly, as demonstrated in the review of the dominant literature, the focus of many writings has been upon what to do, with little or no consideration of where. As this journey of exploration ends at a place called Place and Space, other possible journeys may open for me and for others.

7.4. The End of One Journey; The Beginning of Another

When I commenced this journey nearly eight years ago I was unsure about where I would end up. If it had been suggested that I would arrive at a 'place' that focuses upon people's experiences of 'place' and 'space', I would not have believed it. I began the journey due to my dissatisfaction with what I was reading and what I saw about how to facilitate corporate experiential learning programs. In searching for a method and a direction for my research I began to honour my learning experience as I sought to write about and reflect upon those experiences. This process took me to a new place, with respect to research, that of autoethnography and a heuristic research process. By considering how to facilitate corporate experiential learning through the lenses of my own experience and the Learning Style Analysis I also passed through other experiences that included deconstructing a popular model of facilitation as well as exploring other perspectives on the emerging themes of place and space. These explorations took me to perspectives such as human geography and urban planning. As I have reached the end of this journey in the creative synthesis that weaves together a photographic essay and a poem, I begin to see new signposts ahead that indicate new journeys that I, or others, may travel.

The signposts ahead begin to point out the need to explore, at greater depth, the individual and group experiences of 'place', whether that is a natural or built environment, and how those experiences of place impact upon the learning experience. While the LSA opened up other aspects of the learning experience not often considered (such as social groupings, time of day and physical environment and needs), other instruments, paradigms or other 'lenses' such as personality may lead the next researcher down a very different journey when exploring facilitation of experiential learning. Even if the next researcher writes from a strong sense of their own frame of reference, their journey will be different, with the possibility of arriving at another place. And if I were to begin this journey again, I too would probably end
up in another place; such are the intricacies and the risks of honouring a journey that follows individual experience and voice.

As noted in Chapter 2: this experience ends, but the journey continues.