

UNLEASHING THE POWER OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

AUDREY TANG

CLICK Training Consultancy, United Kingdom

Abstract- While many customer/client-facing professionals undergo a high level of training, nothing quite prepares them for performing the skills within the classroom. Experiential learning is one of the most pure and basic forms of learning, and when used within training it develops creative thinking, self-confidence, and self-reflection. Practice of skills in a safe environment enables delegates to reflect on their performance and understand that they have a) been through it once before should they face it again, and b) experience to draw from. This will enable greater confidence when performing the skill at a later date. This paper discusses the effect of experiential learning, as well as imparts ideas for teaching staff wishing to incorporate such techniques into their sessions.

Key words- Experiential learning, professional development, training

I. INTRODUCTION

STOP – before you go any further, visit:

<http://businessmatters.freeforums.net/thread/8/push-button>

...further instructions await you there...

Many staff members feel “well trained but unprepared” (1) often because their training has been largely classroom/powerpoint driven. The same is true of other professions.

This often results in them, when being faced with a situation they find troubling, not being able to respond. In short, they are “oppressed”. (2)

The advent of social media has made us more aware of what is going on but ever more passive. We feel outraged, upset or elated by what we see, but rather than engage directly with the issue we choose instead to “share” it (assuming we even do that). This makes us feel as if we have done something, but the reality is, we have really only let a few more people know (who might have found out from reading the direct source, or from their own social network) and done little to affect it. Thus the oppression continues.

Oliver Sachs (3) wrote a moving reflection published by the New York Times, after learning he had terminal cancer, through which he concludes:

“Above all, I have been a sentient being, a thinking animal, on this beautiful planet, and that in itself has been an enormous privilege and adventure.”

We are lucky to be in a position to impact on those around us, yet we have somehow learned not to do so. We prefer to engage in “Buzzfeed quizzes” (4) because we find enjoyment and community in mock personality tests – while not looking for anything deep or life changing. Yet, we are not necessarily happy where we are.

The Mental Health Foundation (5) predict that “1 in 4 people will suffer some sort of mental health problem (commonly anxiety or depression) within the course of a year”, that “Depression affects 1 in 5 older

people.”, and self-harm statistics are one of the highest in Europe “400 per 100,000 population).

A classic school of thought with regards to depression and anxiety is that both can be due to a “perceived lack of control” (6). Such behaviour is reinforced every day through our interactions with social media – so many things happening, few of which we can do little about. However, it has also long since been instilled in our institutions – school, and later, work.

In school, learning has historically been passive, the teacher speaks, the pupils listen. With the introduction of more interactivity, many teachers chose to stick to what they knew rather than embrace new skills, and now, the changes in the curriculum and focus on targets means that even those who engaged in experiential learning can no longer do as much because of the amount of material learners need to take in, and the amount of testing that needs to be done.

“I have A-level students who cannot do a practical Science experiment because we’ve not had the chance to teach them – we have to just lecture at them in order to get the information in so they can be tested...again!” (Head of Biology) (7)

However, recent research keeps impressing that active or experiential learning (8) is the best method not only for understanding the material, but also for holistic education (9) and (10). Unfortunately, the same research also revealed that although this was known “theoretically”, few trainers and teachers of the samples studied were comfortable engaging with it beyond an icebreaker or a flipchart activity, which in turn did not engage the learners.

This leaves us with a “Catch 22” situation. People who use experiential techniques might be doing it wrong, which is putting both teachers and learners off using them. When it is done well, the evidence is also significant.

Smith et al (10) ran a programme for Kent Constabulary where actors played the role of the public and staff were videoed and able to reflect on

their performance, and airlines and hospitals are now introducing this sort of dynamic methodology (eg. (11) and (12)).

However what can an organisation do if they fear this style of training due to the expense of bringing in an outside specialist or because they are uncomfortable delivering in this way?

The remainder of this paper gives you some ideas for incorporation of experiential learning into your own classrooms. The author has a background in both academia and theatre, and understands that interactive learning is not just “role play”. She realises that some “ice breakers” work better than others depending on those involved, the topic and the size of the group – whoever thought putting a shoe in a circle and asking delegates to guess who it belongs to was a good idea for a group of managers? She is aware that learning is holistic and the choice of activity can either just be fun, or deliver at numerous levels – for example, what can aerobics teach you about leadership? (In her experience – more than any session on theory!)

II. CREATE CURIOSITY

The engaging learning environment is as important for the training room as it is a classroom (13). Bright pictures, or even blank flip charts on the walls, a question already put up, training toys on the desk and music can all contribute to stimulating learner curiosity.

However, learning is also a frightening experience (for children as well as for adults (13)) so having the agenda up somewhere may put nervous minds at ease.

III. CHOOSE THE RIGHT ICEBREAKER

An icebreaker for a group that does not know each other needs to get them speaking, but not be too personal (McGrath and Crawford, (2008) (14) – please do read their article for a list of awful icebreakers to avoid!). Further it should enable your delegates to learn each other’s names and start talking without them feeling bored...the icebreaker where you introduce each other is an absolute no-no in a group of more than 10!

IV. ENERGIZING MOMENTS

An energizer is not an ice-breaker. The Energizer is a good way to get your delegates focused when they come back from a break and usually involved moving around. A Quiz based on what has been learned in the earlier section can also work – as long as you give your delegates buzzers, or something (ideally noisy) to “buzz in” with their answer – otherwise, it’s just a test!!

IV. EVERY INTERACTIVE TRAINING TECHNIQUE CAN BE RE-APPLIED (WITH A TWIST)

Question and answer sessions can be enhanced by getting all questions written on post its and placed on a wall, then asking other delegates to pick them up and answer them. Simple quizzes can be made more interesting by getting the delegates to write the answer but guess the question (again using the buzzers). Flip chart work can be developed by having some answers written on a brainstorm then passing the chart around each group to add.

Training for organisations can also include delegates identifying the problem and generating their own solutions – as well as a “call to action” to ensure the momentum continues outside the classroom.

V. IF YOU HAVE THE LUXURY OF ACTORS

Use the “forum”. This is a technique developed by Augusto Boal (2) where the actor plays one of the characters in a problem scenario and the delegate “performs” as s/he would when faced with the situation. It is possible for the facilitator to stop and start the action, and get suggestions from the floor as to how the delegate should proceed. The technique allows the delegate to practice and reflect on their skills in a safe environment, and they leave the session armed with new ideas, and the knowledge that they’ve done it once, they can do it again!

These are just some of the ideas which make teaching more interactive. The ones mentioned above are extremely easy and require little more preparation than you would already do. Experiential learning is not just about making the learning experience more “enjoyable”, it is about engaging your delegates to care about the issue and empowering them (because you have stimulated their creativity) to find their own solutions.

...and if chosen for presentation, I hope that delegates will enjoy using some of these techniques first hand!

Audrey Tang (PhD) is a qualified teacher, actor and specialist in experiential learning techniques. All her workshops are CPD Standards accredited.

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