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Playing with Purpose

How Experiential Learning Can Be More Than a Game

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1 *Optimizing Artificial Experiential Learning*

Pleasure is the flower that passes, remembrance the lasting perfume.
Jean de Boufflers (French Statesman and Writer)

Learning is grounded in experience. As trainers and facilitators, then, we must seek to create experiences from which people can learn. Challenge, success, failure, conflict and harmony can all provide powerful opportunities for experiential learning.

We believe that it is essential, in this creative process, to strike a balance between challenging realism and memorable stimulation or fun. Unless both components are addressed, it is unlikely that any real benefit will be gained from any intervention. In addition, unless any learning is reviewed and fully discussed, realized and deconstructed, much of the value of the experience may still be lost. As such, any experience does not need to be expensive to be powerful and in fact often the reverse is true.

Training and Human Resouces (HR) departments are bombarded with advertisements for a wide array of the different kits, registered techniques and materials available. It is easy to become dazzled by beautiful packaging and shining testimonials about the value of professionally produced resources, and for the primary purpose of the intervention to become lost. More significantly, training resources which are purchased 'off the shelf' will by their very nature not fit the learning needs of a specific group or individual so well as a tailored activity created for the purpose.

In short, the primary aim of any teaching or training intervention must be for the participants to learn and not to simply have an experience, however glossy.

Yet in our field, many professional educators seem to have lost sight of this core truth. For instance, do you as a teacher, trainer or manager start a session with an 'energizer' because your colleagues all do, or because you want your participants to enjoy a fun activity; or is it because you need your participants to be thinking clearly?

Focusing on the learning first, instead of the beautifully wrapped training game, gives far greater sustainable return:

- Educational sustainability – with lessons that last long after the intervention has ended.
- Financial sustainability – all the new learning activities suggested herein are commonplace and cheap/free, and the questions and insights here can breathe new life into activities already in your store cupboard.
- Creative sustainability – by focusing on the learning possibilities that objects offer you'll avoid staleness as a teacher or trainer, as there are *always* new objects around.

If we could first know where we are, and whither we are tending, we could then better judge what to do, and how to do it.

Abraham Lincoln (US President)

Why Play Games?

Activities and games are used in training and development settings because human beings learn from experience. Introducing an activity into a training session guarantees that each individual experiences the same event, so the learning which can be extracted in the group has a common point of reference. It is also quicker, cheaper and more convenient than using real-life experiences as source material. Therein, however, is both the activity's blessing and its curse, because for all the advantages it provides, in the eyes of the participants it isn't real. The skill of the facilitator here is in extracting real learning from artificial situations.

It's important to keep the perceived *unreality* of the experience at the front of your mind when designing and offering the activity to a training room (as this can help you to overcome potential pitfalls and challenges from groups), but it's also vital to keep in mind the reality of the exercise (after all it was real, insofar as it actually happened) in the review and learning extraction.

While we were writing one of the full-formed exercises that appear in this book, I mentioned to a colleague of ours (whom we rate and respect as a trainer) that we had written a brand new exercise. Her response surprised me: 'Wow. I wouldn't have the first idea where to start with something like that.' But there is no mystery, no magic that needs to be woven in to the fabric of a powerful learning tool. Rather, at the foundation of every new activity, there needs to be a clear understanding of what the learning point is. The key to success of any activity or scenario is this:

First, focus on the learning.

If the learning intentions and outcomes are foremost in your mind right from the start then the chances of success are far higher. Get it the wrong way round (game first, learning second), and you run a very real risk of creating a pointless distraction.

Probably the best way to explain how this process works in practice is to describe our creative process in the design of a new activity. Generally, when we take an inventory of our training creations, we've taken the following steps:

- inspiration;
- realism based on experience;
- theoretical understanding and criticism;
- testing and piloting;
- adaptation and reconsiderations.

These steps feed into one another and can be visually represented in Figure 1.1 opposite.
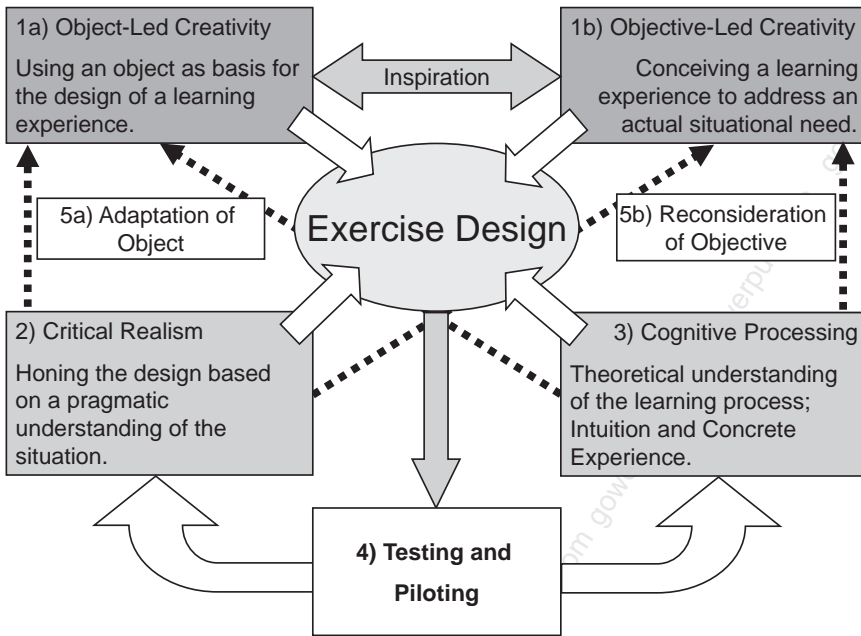
Figure 1.1   Overarching experimental exercise design process

Sources of Inspiration

Inspiration for us comes from two main places: 1) having a clear idea of a desired outcome and asking 'How could that be achieved?' and then being on the lookout for kit that would be useful in achieving that outcome; and 2) seeing something, anything, and asking 'How could that be used?'

Practitioner's Exercise

Take a blank sheet of paper and a pen. Your objective is to enable a group to explore issues around *customer service*. List ten different training possibilities or activities that you could run with each of the following resources:

A teapot

Toilet paper

Paperclips

Don't reject any of your ideas out of hand. Everything around you has some sort of learning potential. Apply the words attributed to Charlemagne,* 'Let my armies be the rocks and the trees and the birds in the sky.'

Note: * In the film *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, Henry Jones attributes these words to the Roman emperor, though we can find no evidence that Charlemagne actually said it.

Practitioner's Exercise

Listing 20 for each, consider what learning outcomes of *any type* might be served by using the following objects:

Leaves

Ten mobile phones

A pair of socks

By focusing on quantity you will find yourself less concerned about the quality of the ideas you are generating – thus allowing your creativity free rein to think of possibilities rather than restricting yourself to the uses expected of an item or the typical way of meeting learning objectives.

Object-Led Creativity (1a)

In order to use objects as inspiration it is useful to notice possibilities in all manner of different contexts, and then become a collector of oddments. In order to illustrate this point, we went through the training bags that we carry *every day* to find out what we both saw as *essential* kit. This is what we found:

Elastic Bands	Post it® notes	Treasury tags
Sticky labels	A selection of 10–15 mixed holiday postcards	Balloons
Coloured pens	Drinking straws	Standard playing cards
Paper clips	Marbles	Tennis balls
Red, green and blue plastic milk bottle tops	Dice	String or wool
BluTac®	Masking tape	A blindfold (or square of cloth suitable for same purpose)

In addition, the following can usually be found in any office, seminar room or training venue:

Office paper (A4)	Wooden or plastic drinks stirrers	Sweets
Drinking cups	Paper plates	Spoons
Toilet roll/paper napkins	Flipchart paper and pens	Old newspapers or magazines

Having a reserve of interesting objects at your disposal offers constant possibilities and keeps your creative juices flowing. In addition to this, learners can often find their mental faculties are stimulated by their tactile senses. I ran a team review recently where a quiet and reserved team came almost immediately to life when asked to explain their departmental dynamics and given a box of sweets with which to do it.

Practitioner's Exercise

Take an object, any object, from within arm's reach. Pick it up and, perhaps for the first time, really notice it properly. Now consider the following:

Use your Senses

What colour is the article you're noticing? What size, weight, texture? What might these properties provide or represent in a learning situation?

Be Metaphorical

Could your pen represent a person? Could your ruler be a bridge? Could your desktop mouse-mat be a map? Can a paper cup be representative of a department in your organization?

Incidentally, a twist on this is to take a large number of different objects or pictures into a room and ask participants to choose the one that best represents something else (for example, how they feel about their team, how their boss operates or how their career is working out so far). You'll be amazed by the insight that they give when an innocent object becomes a conduit for what they already know, but can't or won't articulate.

Scale Up or Scale Down

Is something possible with many of the same article that might not be with one? What about isolating one paperclip from your stationery pot?

Distinctiveness

Is the article particularly unusual in some way?

Current Use and Purpose

What do you know of that article? How might this link with activity? For example a drinking straw is long, rigid, flexible, hollow, coloured and light. What might these characteristics allow you to do? What would it be totally ill suited for? Could asking a learner to carry out a task with an object completely unfit for purpose pique their creativity?

For instance, in one minute, this is what we came up with for *training possibilities with drinking straws*:

• plumbing pipework (to transport water/air/sound);

• building rods;

- multiple straws could represent multiple people;

- representation of flexibility or rigidity of role;

- pipette;

- loadbearing (for rafts or bridge-type builds);

- resources (use them as currency in a trade game);

- use for spelling letters;

- blowpipes;

- cut to different lengths (for drawing lots);

- stuck down as a collage;

- stems of artificially create foliage.

For any given learning outcome, most of these ideas probably would be rejected at some stage in the design process. However, all of them offer *something* if you're thinking creatively.

This consideration of random objects as tools to facilitate learning soon takes on a life of its own and you'll find yourself becoming more lateral, creative and flexible in your trainings and in other areas of your life and work. If you feel your creativity needs a tune-up, Edward de Bono's classic *Lateral Thinking* (1990) offers a great place to start. A further bonus of your new creative approach is that you can start to reinterpret old shop-bought existing activities for new audiences and objectives and in ways that aren't obvious if you stick to the given instructions.

Objective-Driven Inspiration (1b)

As we mentioned at the opening of this chapter, alongside the object-driven inspiration it is absolutely vital to consider the *point* of the interaction. Without such consideration even the most beautiful, tactile and well-conceived exercise is no more than a game. These considerations could include those listed below.

Practitioner's Enquiries

What is the underlying issue, problem or situation that this exercise will address?

What need *must* I meet? What is essential, and what is desirable?

Is there one desired outcome or several?

What would success be? What are the lessons I want these people to learn?

How do I want the people to interact with the materials?

How do I want them to ideally engage with each other?

What will allow these people to embed the learning?

What would I, personally, like to get out of this session?

If the session were perfect, what would change as a result of it?

How specific are your objectives and outcomes? Are they clear, or do they need refining?

What scenarios, situations, case studies or simulations have I already seen that I could tweak to meet these differing objectives?

Critical Realism (2)

Having enthusiastically created and developed new ideas, it is of course essential to integrate a reality check into your design process. You may have a fabulous idea for an exercise using planks and ropes, but if your training room provides insufficient space then all the learning potential of your activity will evaporate. A dose of critical realism here is essential and the following questions provide a framework for this:

Practitioner's Enquiries

Are there restrictions I need to consider? (For example, time/space)

How flexible is the space? How elastic is the time allocation?

How many people is this exercise for?

What might go wrong? Do I have a contingency plan?

How could a difficult participant sabotage this? (Through both their words and behaviour.)

How long will this take a) to do, and b) to review properly? (See Part II, pages 27–44 of this book regarding unpacking and reviewing the learning.)

How portable is the activity and equipment?

What is required from me as an instructor? Would I need an assistant?

How established are the group and does this matter in relation to this exercise?

What am I going to be doing while the people are busy? How will this impact my ability to fully notice what is happening and so lead a review?

> Is this activity suitable for anyone or does it discriminate? (See Chapter 10 – Exploring Diversity Issues.)
>
> What instructions do I need to prepare?

At these initial stages, regardless of objective or object-led inspiration, it is important not to reject an idea too quickly. Even a seemingly 'poor' idea can often be adapted to function perfectly well. We find it useful to ask the question:

How could we make this better?

rather than 'What's wrong with this idea?', thus placing our focus positively and productively.

Design and Cognitive Processing (3)

I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand.

Confucius (Philosopher)

In order to create a learning experience that has real impact, you need to know *why* you want the impact in the first place and what sort of intellectual or theoretical knowledge you need the learners to gain. As such you'll need to know some of the theory behind the objective of the exercise (that is, to make an activity suited to leadership outcomes you need an understanding of some of the current leadership theories). This is necessary in part to run an effective review and in part to satisfy the needs of the learners who may need a theoretical foundation to help embed the experience.

THEORETICAL KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF THE EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING PROCESS (3a)

There is a wealth of theoretical information available and the aim here is to replicate as little of it as possible. However, it is necessary to have a general understanding of experiential learning theory and a working knowledge of the differing learning styles that people have, in order to create a fully rounded and comprehensive learning experience. We find that David Kolb's *Experiential Learning Theory* (1984) is essential to underpin the design of our learning activities.

Over many years research (best captured in the book *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development* (1984), David Kolb set out a seminal learning styles model which is widely recognized by practitioners as being a key tool to help understand practical learning.

Kolb's work clarifies four distinct learning areas, based on a four-fold cycle of learning (see Figure 1.2). In lay-speak, these four areas could be classed as 'do and feel', 'watch and review', 'theorize and think' and 'plan and do' (or 'experimenting' leading back into 'do and feel'). In Kolb's terms, an 'immediate or concrete experience' gives foundations for 'observations and reflections'. These are processed and filtered into abstract concepts giving rise to an understanding that can be actively tested in new experiences.
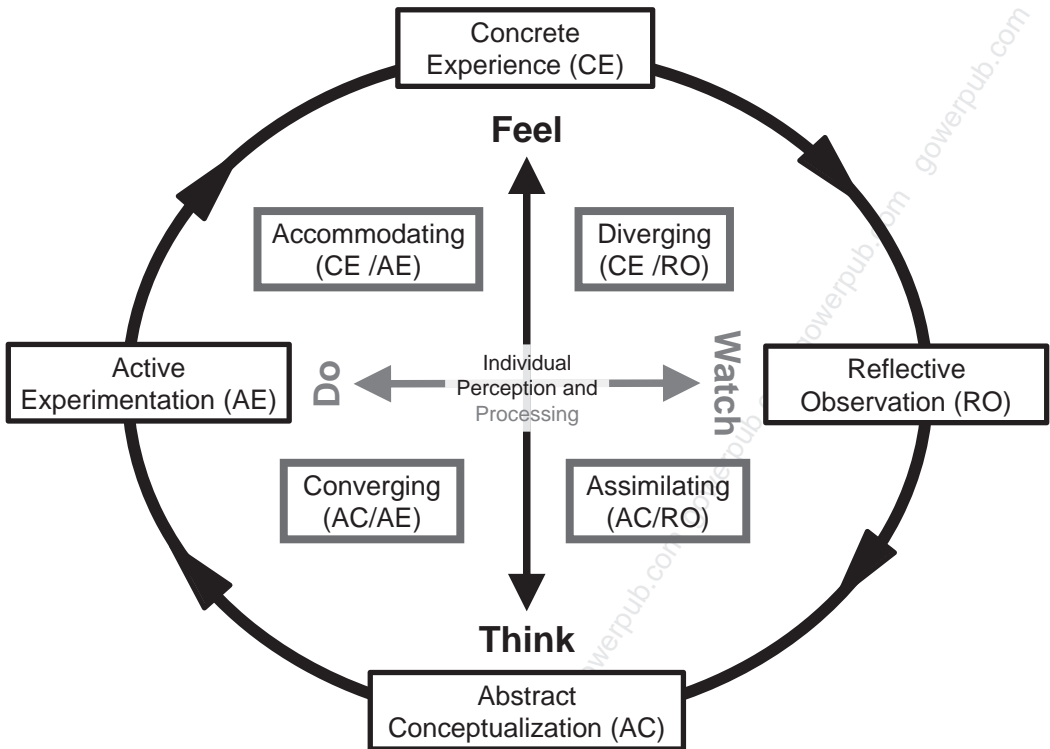
Figure 1.2   The experiential learning cycle (adapted from Kolb)

Kolb's work is clearly far more complex than this, but this core essence seems to contain the key information that a training practitioner needs to know. Kolb says that ideally (and so by omission, not every time) the learning process needs to visit each step of the cycle. It is thus vital that a learning activity contains space and opportunity for participants to be in each place.

Kolb provides an explanation that each individual will have a unique learning style, developed from birth, through adolescence, to specialized adulthood; and shaped by communal, organizational and educational experience. Our individual learning styles are affected by choices that we make, which are represented here as two continua ('perception' and 'processing') with conflicting modes at either end: 'feeling' versus 'thinking', and 'doing' versus 'watching'.

Kolb proposed that an individual cannot simultaneously do both ('think' *and* 'feel', or 'do' *and* 'watch') but the *urge* to do both creates conflict. This conflict is resolved through the choices we make as individuals when confronted with a new learning circumstance. We internally decide whether we wish to do *or* watch, and at the same time we decide whether to think *or* feel. The result of these choices, Kolb said, produces a preferred learning style.

An individual primarily will choose a way of grasping the experience (either to watch or to do), and then choose a way to transform it into something real and useable (either by thinking or feeling).

Practitioner's Enquiries

How could you manipulate the opportunities for these types of decisions in your exercise design?

Could you enforce an initial period of planning and no action?

Could you insist on a quick and early sub-deadline to prevent any extended planning?

What effect would these manipulations have on the individuals' and groups' engagement? How would it affect any learning opportunities?

Could you 'fishbowl' an activity, so one group/individual can learn by observation from the mistakes of another?*

Could you provide a great deal of structure to an activity, providing a long list of rules and necessary back-story, or would it be better to leave the objectives vague and nebulous?

Could you use familiar theories or practices to help a group think through a new type of task?

Could you arrange it so that a group were deprived of prior theoretical knowledge and had to feel their way through an exercise?

Note: * See Chapter 5 for a full description of this technique.

Learners will opt to either observe or reflect on what happens in an exercise or just to jump in and play around. In addition, they will choose to translate the meaning by either thinking in an abstract sense or by using their senses and feelings of the reality.

Building on to this simple core, Kolb's work also contains a four-way definition of personal learning styles (each comprising of a combination of two individual choices) for which he uses the terms: 'diverging'; 'assimilating'; 'converging'; and 'accommodating'.

As with the translation of any theory to actual human beings, the next level should be taken more as guidance than gospel. Most people exhibit obvious preferences for a certain learning style and these do not change a great deal from situation to situation. So it is worth considering the characteristics typical to a generic individual with a preferred learning style. This overview of the topic is adapted from *A Handbook of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education – Enhancing Academic Practice* by Heather Fry, Steve Ketteridge and Stephanie Marshall (1999), which also provides much food for thought in other areas.

Diverging

Kolb called this style 'diverging' because people with a preference in this area tend to excel in situations that require divergent processing, such as idea generation and creative thinking. Generally, people with the diverging style prefer to work in groups. They tend to listen well and respond to personal feedback.

Assimilating

An 'assimilating' learning preference is for a concise, logical approach where ideas and concepts take precedence over people. Generally, individuals with this style value time to think things through rationally and analytically. Learning experiences that are not clearly structured are often more challenging to an individual with an assimilating preference.

Converging

People with a preference for a 'converging' style like to experiment with new ideas, to simulate and to work with practical applications. They tend to be drawn to technical tasks, and are often less concerned with people and interpersonal aspects of tasks.

Accommodating

Individuals with an 'accommodating' preference commonly act on 'gut instinct' rather than logical analysis, and prefer a practical trial-and-error approach. As such, huge quantities of written rules and task information may frustrate them. They may tend to rely on others for information than carry out their own analysis.

Practitioner's Enquiries

Do the activities you design typically cater to a certain learning style over others?

Is *your* personal learning style obvious from the way you tackle exercise design?

Do your games include a mixture of 'task' and 'people'; 'divergent' (what could we do?) and 'convergent' (what will we do and by when?) processing; theoretical and practical, or is it better to deliberately limit the types of experience that an exercise will provide?

How could you encourage (or coerce/rule) individuals or groups to experience different types of learning to their comfortable norms?

Will your task need *all* of a group to cooperate in order to succeed (whatever 'success' means in this context), or is it possible for one or two group members to (for example) solve the puzzle without the input of the rest of the group?

PRACTICAL LEARNING STYLES

Often the work of David Kolb is known to people through the model of Peter Honey and Alan Mumford (1982), who worked on learning styles from an industrial and management perspective. To describe the steps of the learning cycle they use the terms 'activist', 'reflector', 'theorist' and 'pragmatist'. For more information on this, see Honey and Mumford's work from the early 1980s (referenced at the end of this book). Their

model does not quite overlay Kolb's, but has clear similarities and provides a helpful shortcut to enable groups to quickly understand, for example, the theory behind the review of an activity.

Honey and Mumford's Learning Style	Roughly equates to Kolb's Learning Style	In a Nutshell	Broad Descriptor
Activist	Accommodating	'Get stuck in'	They seek (team) challenge and thrive on immediate experience, open-minded but bored with repetition and extended implementation.
Reflector	Diverging	'Stand well back'	They gather data, ponder and analyze, delay reaching conclusions, and listen thoughtfully before speaking.
Theorist	Assimilating	'Think it through'	They process in logical steps, assimilate data into cogent theories. Rational and objective.
Pragmatist	Converging	'Plan practically'	They relish problem-solving and quick decision-making. Practical and innovative they tend to be bored with long discussions.

Practitioner's Enquiries

Do your exercises provide scope for learners to do some or all of the above?

How will different individuals react to the task you set them? How might the differences here strengthen the learning experience?

Note: We firmly believe that 'liking' or 'disliking' an exercise on the part of a learner has very little to do with the learning inherent in it. Of course you'll want to design supportive and positively challenging exercises and experiences, but don't be tempted to confuse *liking* with *learning* on the part of the participant.

AN ADDITIONAL LAYER OF VARIETY

In addition to the various learning styles and models already discussed, it is also worth considering the modality of processing that an individual learner will prefer. A helpful simplification here is to consider whether an individual has a preferred 'visual', 'auditory', 'kinaesthetic' or 'textual'[1] learning modality.

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1   For more information here you may wish to consult VARK learning styles material, (http://www.vark-learn.com) where VARK stands for the Visual, Aural, Read/write, and Kinesthetic sensory means that are used for learning. Alternatively a brief understanding of Neurolinguistic Programming theory (try Knight (1995) as a useful guide) will give similar insight.

Visual

Learners with a visual preference use and value the depiction of information in maps, charts, graphs, labelled diagrams and other symbols that are used to represent what could have been presented in words.

Aural/Auditory

Learners with a preference for auditory information value content that is spoken or heard. Often people with this preferred modality want to talk in order to think, not to think first and then talk. Group discussions and aural briefings are ideal for aural processors.

Kinaesthetic

People who prefer this mode of learning are often the hands-on doers who thrive on the reality of case studies, games, practices and applications. As such it is important to remember that there will be certain advantages (at least in terms of familiarity) for them in any sort of experiential learning situation.

Textual

Learners with a textual modality preference value information displayed as words – both input and output. Often, when we write a new activity the concept is very simple, but we surround it by (often extraneous) written material. This is partly to represent the reality of most work-based situations, but partly to stimulate the theoretically-driven and textual learners.

Practitioner's Enquiries

For any given exercise how are you providing 'input' of information to the participants? Textually, graphically or audibly? What outputs do you require from any given task? How do these suit different learning modalities? (For example, asking for a skit or news-anchor style presentation of the captured learning will appeal to a very different sort of learner to a text-based report, or group discussion.)

Does your designed experience consider a balance of learning modalities, or does it heavily favour one? Balance or imbalance is neither good nor bad – just different. Success in design is that any difference has been considered rather than being accidental.

LEARNING STYLES AND MODALITIES – THE BOTTOM LINE

In any given group, team, collective or even individual there will be an unknown (initially to you and, almost certainly, to them) distribution of learning preferences, styles,

modalities and types. It is vital that any exercise or experience that you design is built on a clear understanding that people learn in different ways. Care is needed to ensure that even a well-executed design is not wasted because it suits only those individuals who happen to learn in the same way as you! If it is possible to work out the designer's preferred learning style, modality or type from an exercise, the design could probably be considerably improved by the application of fresh eyes with a different personal style.

Returning to the overarching schematic of exercise design (from page 5), we now arrive at Experience and Intuition.

Concrete Experience and Intuition (3b)

As your expertise builds, you'll start to instinctively sense what will 'work' in an exercise and what won't. In order to help you to gauge this, it is worth keeping a log of information to help the redesign process or to create new materials.

LEARNING FROM YOUR EXPERIENCES OF GROUPS' EXPERIENCES…

In order to catalogue your trialled materials and improve and build upon them, the types of information that you may want to be keeping records of are:

Practitioner's Questions

How long did that activity actually take? Did it need more or less time than you'd planned?

What surprised you? What unforeseen issues did the activity reveal?

What went well/badly?

What would you change and what might the impact of that be?

Where were the points where an activity might have taken a whole new direction?

Were there lines of activity or approach that were taken that surprised you? Did you see new possibilities that the groups missed?

Were there *accidental* ambiguities in any rules or briefing materials?

What formal feedback did any activity solicit from the people involved?

Note: Beware of taking feedback from participants at face value. Sometimes a negative comment can be indicative of a participant who has been stretched intellectually and has found the experience uncomfortable. Such discomfort may be indicative of learning. Or it could indicate that an individual has moved from being intellectually or emotionally stretched into mentally shutting down. Of course, repeated similar negative feedback is a clear sign that the activity needs to be revised.

It is often these insights that give the activity far more impact. For instance, we once wrote an activity with a very simple set of rules. So simple in fact that some learning groups decided to start breaking them. Instead of revising the activity, however, we allowed this to open up discussions of 'values' (that is, why were some rules breakable and some sacrosanct) which made the long-term value of the simple exercise increase dramatically.

Alongside this personal experience, there is a great deal of wisdom to be gained by learning vicariously. Watching other people running exercises and case studies, talking to other trainers and managers and listening to coffee-break conversations about what the participants *really* thought are all helpful ways of building your expertise.

TRUST YOUR GUT – HOW INTUITION CAN HELP

Intuition comes from a variety of sources: empathy with the participants; experience of other situations; the 'big picture' which comes from the wealth of small details that you have in your mind as you consider a possible activity. Warning bells can ring as you consider a possibility which seems feasible – never ignore these, but revisit the critical realism section (above) to pinpoint why specifically the bell is ringing. Similarly, you may sense that a rather ordinary idea will have sparkle when tried out in a learning environment. It may be that you have picked up a facet of an activity that you struggle to articulate at first. If in doubt, go with your gut feeling and ask other people for comments before piloting the idea.

For example, I once watched a very common, simple and well-tested exercise die in the hands of an in-house trainer. The participants (a fairly senior management team) were required to roll small balls down tracks in order to build collaboration, planning and teamwork. This had 'worked' as an exercise many times in the past, but on a whim the trainer decided to move the group from the hidden safety of the training room to a very public grassy space right outside the main administrative centre of the organization. My guts told me that this was probably a mistake, but I held my tongue in case the trainer had consciously chosen to put the group under observation and stress. The team, that had been functional and bonded, promptly fell to pieces because their juniors, seniors and management colleagues came and watched from their various windows. The group decided not to engage with the task for fear of looking foolish, and rather than review with them around this discomfort, the trainer took them back inside for another 'game'. My senses, intuition and experience had combined here to tell me that the environment was wrong for an otherwise solid exercise. Yet even in this case, some good learning could have been extracted with a well-run task review. (For more on reviewing a task, see Chapter 2 'Extracting the Lesson: How to Review, Capture and Amplify the Learning'.)

The more you notice your 'sense' of an activity in the design phase the more you will be prepared for potential problems and conversely the fewer ideas you'll reject out of hand.

Returning to our conceptual schematic of design above, once you have the inspiration, theoretical underpinning, experience and intuition, you can now try running the exercise. Each main chapter of the book deals with a certain type of reason for learning, and so here is probably a good place to bookmark, and then revisit when you've read the main chapters that are of interest to you. Then come back to this place and pick up the fine-tuning process once more.

Practitioner's Enquiries

What do your guts and intuition tell you about how your exercise might work?

What would be the worst that could happen? (How could you pre-empt and mitigate against these risks?)

How could you sabotage your own activity?

How could you extract learning from any eventuality?

What will you do if the team don't understand the brief?

What will you do if they solve or complete the exercise in a quarter of the time allocated?

If you want to continue here, let's assume for a moment that you have a prototype idea. It's now time to test and review it before it goes live.

Testing and Piloting (4)

Fall seven times, stand up eight.

Japanese Proverb

An idea will only ever be a possibility until you try it out. Our advice is to pilot a new activity with a critical but friendly group, one you can be fairly sure won't deliberately sabotage the activity and will provide useful feedback. In some ways the advice to pilot a new endeavour before it counts seems like common sense. However, when the raw materials are 'amateur' it is vital that the learning outcomes and mechanisms are *better* than if the kit is completely 'professional' and polished.

Sample Practitioner's Questions for Test Groups

Was it clear what you were supposed to be doing?

Was it clear why you were supposed to be doing it?

At which point was the information unclear?

Did you feel that you needed more time on any given part?

Did you notice any errors?

What did you like? Dislike?

What do you think the point of the exercise is?

After the test run, rather than ask a group 'What do you think?', you may get more helpful feedback with some more targeted questioning. Remember that a group's feedback is just feedback – not absolute truth. For instance, if they say the brief was 'unclear' that could be a good thing, providing that the brief was written with ambiguity in mind.

Trust your intuition again, make the necessary changes and re-pilot. We both find that dinner parties and family gatherings are good for this sort of test-flight. The evenings just fly by…

SETTING AN EXERCISE UP IN THE *RIGHT* WAY

Also at this point, it is worth considering (and with a friendly audience) how you are going to introduce the exercise. By this, we mean not the formal brief that the participants will receive, but what you will say prior to providing this. This is particularly important if your materials are home-made and lack the instant authority of a shop-bought package.[2]

Practitioner's Exercise

Consider the effect the following five introductions would have on you *as a learner*:

'Now, this next thing is just a bit of fun!'

'We're going to do an exercise which will test your communication skills to the limit.'

'In all of your performance reviews, you all needed huge improvement in your interpersonal skills so we've written a game to bring you up to scratch.'

'You all know that managing diversity is the biggest challenge facing our organization. This next hour will demonstrate where you're going wrong.'

'I'm sorry about this: it's new so I hope it will work…'

We have heard these, or variants of them, in real training situations and the effects are catastrophic. Even the best exercise can be undone by a poor warm-up.

Our experience is that the less said in setting up an activity, the better. The exercise should speak for itself and its purpose should be self-evident. In addition, if the experience has been well designed (see above) the participants' full engagement is far more likely and disengagement will have been mitigated against.

Reviewing and Improving Your Designs (5)

I am, as I am; whether hideous, or handsome, depends upon who is made judge.

Herman Melville (Writer)

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2   On issues concerning trainer and training credibility, Alison Hardingham's *Psychology for Trainers* (1998) comes highly recommended.

After your activity has been piloted, take some time to revisit the Practitioner's Enquiries in the sections above. Don't give in to the temptation of judging an activity too soon; leave it for at least 24 hours before reflecting on your experience and objectively considering how the task/activity/exercise could or should be amended.

Even after a live run with a 'real' group, remember also that the purpose of any given intervention is almost certainly to effect a change in behaviour. As such, you may need some insight into how the learning has been embedded in reality before changing the exercise. *The proof of the pudding here is not in the eating but in the resulting energy and growth.*

Be sure, however, when reviewing the activity, that you do consider both the learning *objective* and the learning *object*.

REVIEW AND ADAPT THE OBJECT (5a)

If there were problems with the materials of the exercise, simulation or game, could you adapt the object (instructions/rules/materials) to achieve the objective? Or do you need to go back to the drawing board?

For instance, some years ago, I wrote a simulation where participants had to use sewing pins to join other components of the exercise together (I pretended they were steel beams in a scaled-down construction project). This had a number of flaws, not least the health and safety aspects, and the fact that it was difficult to collect them in and reuse them. The rest of the exercise was sound, and so I experimented with split pins, drawing pins and thumbtacks until I found a solution (straightened paperclips) that kept the integrity of the exercise while avoiding the logistical issues and bloody fingers.

REVIEW AND ADAPT THE OBJECTIVE (5b)

If the mechanics and logistics of the game worked but it didn't deliver the desired learning, could you just reconsider the objective and use the same game for a different purpose? For instance, a game that we designed to promote team cooperation and harmony in fact caused considerable conflict amongst the participants. With good quality review, this conflict gave rise to a valuable discussion which ultimately strengthened the team. We realized that the exercise had exposed key differences in the visions and values of the team members and so in future we used this exercise deliberately to promote discussion in these areas.

So far, we've spent a great deal of time and attention focusing on the materials, and what the learners may or may not be doing, and very little time focusing on what you as facilitator or trainer should be doing. So what *is* your role when the exercise is running?

> *When the best leader's work is done the people say, 'We did it ourselves!'*
>
> Attributed to Lao-Tsu (Chinese Philosopher)

TO BE PRESENT OR NOT

Should a facilitator necessarily be present during a group activity? Our feeling is that there are many factors at play that are affected by your presence. Whether you are merely in the corner of the room, or silently taking notes, or interjecting every two minutes or simply whether or not you are paying attention to what your participants are doing, all potentially have different impacts. The sole important concern however is:

Do you need to be present while your group does something in order to help them extract learning from it? And if so, how 'present' do you need to be? This section provides some thoughts and questions on this conundrum.

Option 1: Leave them alone

Facilitation of experiential learning is not about you. It is not about what *you* know, what *you* have seen, or about giving *you* an opportunity to try out *your* latest teaching technique or talk about the model *you* have just discovered. At its essence, we believe that our facilitation is concerned only with the participants' learning.

Being absent from an activity is a way of forcing oneself into a more facilitative frame of mind. You cannot be there, taking notes of who said what to whom and what the impact was in order to demonstrate your powers of observation in the review discussion. Instead you are relying on the participants' ability to tell you the important parts of what happened and to draw out for themselves what the impact was. It is a risk; yet it can be immensely powerful in terms of others' learning.

It also offers a marked opportunity for learning in that groups may well behave more realistically knowing that you're not there watching over them like some Orwellian sentinel. However, concerns over whether a group can be trusted to behave ideally and keep the right focus may well outweigh the benefits of group independence.

Option 2: Be fully immersed

If you choose to remain during the activity so that you are able to see what took place, be sure to be alert to *all* that is going on.

Listen to what is being said – to *exactly* what is being said. Who came up with an idea first? Who said, 'I have an idea' but was completely ignored? Who is checking that everyone is committed to the activity? Listening and observing while the group are engaged in a task is fundamental in helping a group to successfully unpack the learning experience *after* the event. Picking up what is really important to an individual member involves listening not just to the words being said, but to the tone of voice and, sometimes, to what is *not* being said as well. Any one of these cues can be vital to pick up and the skilled facilitator will focus on exactly the right word or phrase if they are listening well.

Notice what you feel. Not in terms of physical sensation so much (although this may sometimes be relevant) but in terms of your sense of how things are going. Prepare observations based on these feelings too, so later you can offer these as catalysts for discussion; such as: 'So, I started to feel a bit uncomfortable when X happened, how did any of the rest of you feel? What was going on then?' If you are honest with your own feelings and reactions, the impact will almost always be positive.

What is the 'elephant in the room,' the subject which the participants are not addressing? Sometimes there is a glaring concern that emerges during a task and this, for whatever reason, does not get mentioned by the group. Be ready to address the big issue at the end of the exercise, or maybe to interject while the exercise is 'live'.

When to speak and when to be silent

If a group is getting the exercise 'wrong', should you interrupt them? What are the pros and cons of interfering with a group who are in the middle of an activity?

If the group are struggling, an intervention can help them get started again, and may well facilitate real learning. On the other hand, often our pivotal learning comes as a result of our failures. There may well be multiple routes through an exercise and a group may have creatively found an unforeseen hidden path, interrupting them to tell them the right way can crush this entrepreneurship, however, they may just be collectively wasting each other's time. Before you speak, count to ten and consider the following questions:

Practitioner's Enquiries

Should a group be allowed to fail and sink splendidly or would a little swimming lesson help?

What effect will it have on the group dynamic if I butt in?

What effect will my intervention have on task progress?

How can I make an interjection in a neutral and not a leading way?

How bad is it *really* if they fail?

Am I interjecting because of an attachment to my game, or because I have their learning as my prime concern?

Will my interjections benefit only one or many learners?

Could I interject in a more subtle way? (Sometimes a well-timed cough or glance can be sufficient.)

As a further note of caution, there is a mammoth difference between asking a group: 'Are you sure that's correct?' and saying 'You don't want to do it like that, you want to do it like this!' and showing off the 'right' answer. Be careful that your interjections are timed well and neutral insofar as the task is concerned.

During a task, a group may ask questions of you. You need to think very quickly but very carefully about whether you answer them, how you answer them and what effect your answers will have. If the exercise is well tested there should be no need to answer task-clarification questions and the rebuttal 'Everything you need is in the brief' should suffice. However, occasionally clarification is required and so ensure you do so in a way which maintains the integrity of your exercise and the independency of the group.

Another, final, possibility for the physically-present facilitator is the creation of a timeline which can then be used to stimulate discussion. This could provide a note of any events of interest: the time when the first encouraging comment was made; the time when the most reticent group member contributed; duration of a planning phase; periods of silence and so forth.

Option 3: Both present and absent – start and finish

Having described the two possibilities, it is clear that a third option exists, that is, that the facilitator is present for the start and the finish of the task, possibly with a short visit during the course of the activity as well. This allows you to develop an impression of what has been taking place, a 'feel' for how the group has been working, but without so much information that you are tempted to take over during the review discussion.

After providing your impressions from your sampled moments, a useful conversation can ensue based on the participants providing missing information, or discussing how the task and the team, as well as each individual, had developed in your absence.

Regardless of your personal preference, two things should steer your actions:

First, that the group should understand exactly what your role is. This is sometimes obvious, but sometimes needs explaining. For instance, telling a group that 'Everything you need to know is on the brief; and I'll be back in five to see how you're getting on' is very different to simply leaving the room.

Second, the major focus again must always be on their learning, not your comfort.

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This part provided a general and theoretical underpinning of the design, set-up and running of artificial experiential learning activities. As we mentioned at the start of the chapter, the real learning comes in the extraction, translation and transformation of these experiences. The art of facilitating these transformations and conversations is dealt with in the next section of the book.

I am always willing to learn. I do not, however, always enjoy being taught.

Winston Churchill (Statesman)