Touching Base at Brathay

What are the theoretical foundations of Brathay's mainstream work?

An investigation for the Brathay Academy by Roger Greenaway, Reviewing Skills Training

Abstract

This paper sets out to describe the theoretical foundations of Brathay's mainstream work. It is informed by interviews with Brathay staff, by several research studies about Brathay's work and by reviews and critiques of experiential learning theory. After a discussion of issues about how to identify 'baseline theory', a skeleton model is proposed and described. The model provides a foundation of theories, principles, values (and some examples of strategies) that appear to be at the heart of Brathay's mainstream work. The paper concludes with an explanation of why some 'usual suspects' were not included in the model, and suggests why Complexity Theory may provide a suitable methodology for further research.

What is a baseline theoretical model?

What is a baseline theoretical model? Is it something that is so infused in everyday practice that it colours every event and is readily apparent? Or is it more like the foundations of a building - an essential feature, but one that is only visible on closer inspection? Is a baseline theoretical model fixed and unchanging or dynamic and evolving? Is 'best practice' most likely to be found at the heart of the model or at its edges? Does the model already exist, or is it something to be created? Is Brathay's baseline theory likely to apply to many other kinds of experiential learning, or will it have a distinctively Brathay flavour?

Brathay's mainstream work includes personal development, social development, team development, leadership development, management development and organisation development. Participants range from disaffected young people to senior managers. Events can take place in the home territory of participants, in a rural residential setting, or in both locations.

A baseline theory that applies to all of this mainstream work cannot logically include theories that are exclusive to particular aspects of this work. This means (for example) that *organisation development theory* does not qualify for inclusion in a baseline model, despite its obvious importance in Brathay's work in organisation development (such as courses, seminars and publications). On the other hand, a common factor throughout Brathay's mainstream work is *personal and social development in a group setting*, so this aspect features prominently in the baseline model, even though it may not be the top priority on all mainstream courses.

But a baseline theory cannot simply be what happens to be left over when all differences are removed. Somewhere amongst these 'leftovers' there should be a set of principles that have

substantial coherence, integrity and significance. Researchers at Brathay have tried in various ways to find this essence. Their ways of doing so are described next.

Searching for Brathay's baseline theory

What investigative procedures will reveal the theoretical foundations of Brathay's mainstream work? These are some of the strategies that have been followed by researchers:

1. Ask trainers to describe the theories that most influence their work. Perhaps the baseline theory would be an organised collection or synthesis of the most popular theories in use?
2. Find out what guides trainers' own choices when under pressure or when facing new dilemmas. At these critical points are they guided by theory, by instinct, by experience, by values, by new possibilities inspired by the unique situation or in some other way?
3. Ask trainers to describe significant 'model-free' practice in their work - to discover what practice looks like when they are not knowingly following any theoretical model.
4. Find out what is happening when Brathay facilitators feel that they are working at their best.
5. Ask participants for their own theoretical insights. Participants' own explanations of how Brathay courses work could give valuable inside views about Brathay's core model.
6. Discover how theoretical debates in the broader field of experiential learning might help to identify theoretical orientations that are a close match to Brathay's own approach.

This paper is informed by all six approaches outlined above. Option 1 was carried out as part of this project. Options 2 and 3 were followed (in part) by the author (Greenaway, 1995). Option 4 was followed by Stuart Wickes (Wickes, 2000). Option 5 is found in all three doctoral theses about Brathay's work (Greenaway, 1995; Donnison, 2000; Tucker, 2003). Option 6 is based on a review of experiential learning theory by Tara Fenwick (Fenwick, 2001) and a critique of experiential learning theory by Miriam Webb (Webb, 2004).

How are theory and practice related in Brathay's work?

Some of the possible relationships between theory and practice in Brathay's work are outlined below.

A. Theories that explain facilitators' practice. (These may or may not be known to the facilitator.)
Example: An observer thinking that a facilitator's intervention is best explained by Gestalt theory.

B. Theories that influence practice. (These may or may not be known to the participant.)
Example: A facilitator using her insights from Transactional Analysis to avoid being a 'rescuer'.

C. Theoretical models which participants knowingly use during a training event.
Examples: Participants completing a team role inventory or following a learning cycle.

D. Theoretical models that participants are trained to apply after their training.
Example: Participants practising the use of a decision-making model as a takeaway skill.

E. Theories that are offered to participants as explanations of their behaviour.
Example: The Abilene Paradox might help to explain why everyone made false assumptions.

F. Theories developed by participants (with or without facilitator involvement)
Example 1: Participants generate their own explanations as action researchers or as active learners.
Example 2: Participants explore and adapt theoretical models to make them their own

In any discussion of this paper it may be helpful to use the above list as a map on which theoretical models can be located. The model proposed below belongs near the top of this list,

but it could, *in addition*, be used for a purpose that would also place it at other locations on the above list.

The proposed baseline theoretical model

The model proposed below is not a comprehensive model. It is offered as a foundation model that aims to describe the theoretical baseline from which Brathay operates. It is proposed as the skeleton structure that is fleshed out in many different ways in Brathay's mainstream work. From this point it is referred to as 'the skeleton model'.

The skeleton model

1. The core value is optimism in everyone's potential.

2. The core task is to create the circumstances in which each individual can develop their potential (as individuals, team players, leaders, managers, facilitators - depending on the objectives.)

3. These circumstances include:
   3.1 Freedom and encouragement to make choices
   3.2 A facilitative group environment that is person-centred
   3.3 Frequent opportunities for full, intense engagement

4. These circumstances are brought into play by facilitators who are:
   4.1 Flexible, responsive and able to improvise and 'reflect on action in action'
   4.2 Alert to exceptions to theoretical models in use
   4.3 Alert to the many different ways in which individuals and groups develop

5. Objectives are achieved by all of the above as well as by:
   5.1 Customising: involving participants and stakeholders in refining the programme
   5.2 Renegotiating: re-evaluating decisions as new opportunities or issues arise
   5.3 Empowering: participants taking responsibility for their learning and development

6. Results are characterised by the diversity of participant experiences and outcomes.

7. Transfer of learning to the 'real' world is assisted by:
   7.1 Elements already contained in this model (1, 3.1, 3.3, 4.3, 5.2, 5.3)
   7.2 High level change and aligning the forces for change

The paragraphs that follow add further details to the skeleton model. They follow the same numbering as in the model.

1. Optimism in everyone's potential

The words 'Freedom and Encouragement' were used to sum up the essence of Brathay's approach in a promotional film in the 1950's. Fifty years later, the slogan 'Inspiring People to Excel' continues much the same tradition. The intervening years promoted similar messages such as 'Identifying and Releasing Human Potential'. This optimism in people's potential has always been central to Brathay's approach.

2. Developing Potential

There are many ways of helping people to find, use and develop their potential. The most optimistic strategy is to leave people alone and trust that development will happen. Slightly less optimistic (but a little more helpful) is for the facilitator to create conditions that are favourable to the development of potential - by reducing barriers or creating opportunities. A

more direct strategy for nurturing potential is to provide and facilitate appreciative feedback drawing attention to what works well. Coaching would be a further step in the same direction. But too much intervention is a sign that the facilitator's optimism is waning. At Brathay there seems to be a general preference for providing only as much encouragement as seems necessary so as not to take too much initiative or responsibility away from the participant or from the group.

However, patiently waiting for potential to appear is by no means the only strategy in use - especially if time is short. Brathay trainers have a wide range of interventions to accelerate learning that are perfectly consistent with this optimistic philosophy. A typical strategy is to present individual or team challenges which at first look impossible. Participants soon discover that they can achieve more than they think they can. Brathay reviews often highlight and encourage potential. [Examples of such strategies are described in 'Reviewing Success' (Greenaway, 2000)]

3.1 Encouraging Choice

An optimistic philosophy readily leads to a belief in the value of encouraging choice. There are also other reasons why learner choice is important. For example:

1. Learners have the *right* to choose (which includes the right to opt out).

2. If learners do not see themselves as being responsible for (choosing) their own actions this limits *what* they can learn as well as *how* they can learn.

3. Encouragement to make "choices in the moment" intensifies the learner's sense of responsibility and ownership, and their level of engagement and aliveness.

4. Making mistakes (poor choices, or risks that don't pay off) is OK. It is a sign of a willingness to experiment, and creates the possibility of learning from mistakes.

5. Choice-making is a valuable takeaway skill both in its own right and as one of the skills needed for problem-solving, decision-making, action planning, etc.

6. The more that learners are encouraged to exercise choice during a course, the greater the chances that they will transfer their learning after the course.

There are many references to the importance of learner choice in Brathay research. This is one of many points of connection with Carl Rogers' 'Freedom to Learn' (Rogers, 1969) which includes the principle that self-initiated learning is the most lasting and pervasive. 'Freedom to Learn' is a much broader concept than 'Challenge by Choice' - a term coined by Project Adventure and typically applied to a limited menu of choices. The value of learner choice is also well represented in more recent theories about learning organisations and the application of complexity theory in organisations. Learner choice continues to be a strong value throughout Brathay's mainstream work - but the nature of the choices, the manner of choosing and the main rationale for encouraging choice will vary according to the situation and the goals of a programme.

3.2 A facilitative group that is person-centred

The group is the primary arena in which learning happens. The group can be such a powerful influence that the facilitator is likely to be more effective working via the group than by relying on one to one facilitation. If a lot of one to one work seems necessary, it is a sign that the group is not serving its primary function of supporting each individual's learning and development. Not only does the group provide support to each individual, it also provides opportunities for participants to develop interpersonal skills, to influence group development,

to learn about group dynamics and to give and receive feedback from each other member. The facilitator needs to ensure that the group is providing high quality opportunities for learning and development for each of its members.

For the facilitator to work effectively at the group level he or she needs to keep in touch with what the group is actually like when it is 'alive' and unencumbered by exercises that might artificially shape the group to the exercise. There should be times when the group can find its own shape and be its own animal so that the group can have a life and identity of its own. This tends to bring out unscripted, genuine behaviour that is not influenced by the temporary rules of a training exercise. Providing some unstructured (or loosely structured) group time is also a manifestation of the optimistic belief that neither individuals nor groups need shaping. But the facilitator can often accelerate the process by providing suitable opportunities, challenges and encouragement. Just as for individual development, the facilitator has many ways (other than patience) of bringing about the situation in which the group actively supports individual learning and development.

One of the core tasks of the facilitator is to create a group that supports individual learning. It is because group influence can be so powerful (especially when its power exceeds the sum of its parts) that the facilitator needs to keep his or her fingers on the group pulse and ensure that the group's energies are well directed in support of each individual's learning. Using the power of the group in ways that support the desired learning outcomes is found throughout the spectrum of Brathay's mainstream work.

3.3 Frequent opportunities for full, intense engagement

This is a more sophisticated version of the advice that "the more you put in, the more you get out". For ethical reasons, as well as to comply with the principles of self-development, each individual is asked to choose their level of commitment and is always allowed to opt out. The importance of feeling that it is OK to opt out is illustrated and discussed in Phil Donnison's thesis (Donnison, 2000). Greenaway's study of 'Powerful Learning Experiences' at Brathay (Greenaway, 1995) confirmed that participants determine the level of intensity themselves and also that they frequently like to push themselves. Full engagement does not simply arise from the 'classic' story of an individual conquering a fear. Full engagement also arises from a heightened sense of commitment to the group, as well as from the ways in which a varied 'curriculum' of activities can awaken the senses and enliven 'the whole person'. Longer courses provide opportunities for harnessing all intelligences and learning styles. A stimulating variety of activities also increases the chances of discovering hidden potential. But perhaps the most important outcome from variety and intensity is the heightened sense of reality that it creates. It may be a different reality to the person's normal real world, but it can seem (and actually be) much more real as people invest, commit and engage more fully in the process. The learning laboratory of a Brathay course can (on occasion) provide more testing conditions and a higher quality of feedback than is likely to happen back in the (normal) real world. Learning of such quality is highly favourable for the transfer of learning.

4.1 Flexible facilitation

The more that participants exercise choice (3.1), the more the provider needs to exercise flexibility. In 'The Complete Facilitator's Handbook', John Heron provides a detailed matrix that helps facilitators think through the nature of choice-making they expect from learners at different stages of a programme (Heron, 1999: 9). This interplay of choice and flexibility (on

any of John Heron's levels) is the productive edge where Brathay facilitators like to work. Just as inflexibility can be brittle or unyielding, so can flexibility be weak or strong. Flexibility is a powerful and empowering strategy if the reasons (or theory) behind it are well understood. Four key reasons why flexibility is important are:

1. A flexible approach helps to ensure continuing relevance and engagement.

2. A flexible approach allows facilitators the freedom to find the most effective ways of achieving the desired outcomes

3. A flexible approach allows facilitators to respond appropriately in the ever-changing and unpredictable nature of courses that are a mix of accelerated group development, continual experimentation, boundary stretching, emotional intensity and a stimulating variety of activities (which may include creative arts, drama and outdoor adventure).

4. A flexible approach that involves participants in decisions about the course helps to break through any lingering consumerist expectations that they are passively receiving delivery of prefabricated training. By getting participants to see themselves as 'Creators not Consumers', they become responsible, active partners in making the most of this opportunity for their learning and development.

Reviews provide a breathing space in which (amongst other things) facilitators learn more about emerging issues, needs, goals and choices and are able to respond in appropriate ways. Just as facilitators are encouraging participants to be responsive to each other, so are facilitators responsive to the group. An appropriate response does not necessarily mean conforming to the group's wishes. Brathay trainers can (and do) use a model such as John Heron's Six Category Intervention Analysis (Heron, 1977) to guide their choice of response.

4.2 Awareness of exceptions

Every model has exceptions. If a model is a simplification of reality, then reality is *always* an exception to the model. But it is also possible to contain some exceptions within a model. It seems especially important to do so where practitioners frequently find themselves exercising their own discretion and making exceptions. Some aspects of Brathay's approach can be expressed in a way that incorporates exceptions. For example:

1. Be optimistic and trusting *except* when this would be naive or irresponsible.

2. Ensure respect for individual choice *except* where expression of individuality becomes a barrier to learning.

3. Encourage the group and individuals to be self-facilitating *except* where they seem unlikely to resolve difficulties unaided in the time available.

4. Provide contrast and variety *except* where sustained commitment to one mode of learning would be more engaging and rewarding.

The inclusion of exceptions within a model underlines the importance of facilitators using their on-the-spot judgement in the best interests of participants' learning and development.

4.3 Being alert to the different ways in which individuals and groups develop

Some familiar patterns of individual and group development have been represented in the form of models that predict particular sequences of stage by stage development. Knowledge of such models is useful background information, as is learning from the experience of working with a range of different groups and knowing that each group and each individual have their own unique story to tell. This is part of the rich tapestry of life. It may seem as if

some groups or individuals conveniently conform to a particular model or stereotype. But listening to the uniqueness of each individual's story (or each group's story) will nearly always reveal significant ways in which the story does not conform to the model or the stereotype. Individuals and groups readily sense when their uniqueness is not recognised or respected. Lack of such recognition is a barrier to development. Background models about types and patterns should illuminate the foreground, not obscure it. Alertness to exceptions applies to relationships as well as to theories (see 4.2 above).

5. Making adjustments: customising, renegotiating, empowering.

The fifth section of the skeleton model is about strategies for keeping on track or for changing to a better track. It is about making adjustments during a programme. The need to make adjustments could be a sign of poor initial design, but a certain amount of built-in flexibility can increase the effectiveness of a course. This happens to be a design (and operational) feature that is characteristic of mainstream Brathay courses.

'Customising' (5.1) and 'renegotiating' (5.2) are examples of how flexibility can be applied during programmes. The rationale for flexibility was presented in section 4.1.

'Empowering participants' (5.3) is a strategy that shares common principles with 'encouragement to make choices' in section 3.1. If empowerment includes training people in *learning how to learn*, the strategy can be even more effective. It is one that Kolb has found to be a particularly effective strategy for transfer (Kolb et al., 1986).

6. The diversity of participant experiences and outcomes

How do participants experience 'the Brathay approach'? This question has been asked in various ways by three Ph.D. studies at Brathay. Greenaway (1995) and Donnison (2000) interviewed participants from corporate programmes; Tucker (2003) interviewed young people. All three studies showed a diverse range of valued experiences. Greenaway's study showed how the most powerful learning experiences arose more from chance events than from exercise design; Donnison's study highlighted the significance of the emotional dimensions of processes and outcomes and the importance of experimentation by participants; Tucker's study emphasised social learning and how a Brathay course is very much a group experience. All three studies challenge the relevance of Kolb's much referenced theory of experiential learning (Kolb, 1984). For Tucker the important social dimension is missing from Kolb's theory; for Donnison the important emotional dimension is missing; for Greenaway the role of experience is too diminished and the sequence of learning is too limiting.

It is difficult to make reliable or useful generalisations across such diversity. Where it is possible to generalise about participant experiences (such as experiencing a supportive learning climate) such features have already been incorporated into the skeleton model. Some experiences (changes in perception - as if seeing things through a new pair of eyes) are fairly common, but are not common enough for inclusion in the skeleton model. The skeleton model can be fleshed out in many different ways. The diversity of experiences and outcomes is clear evidence that this is possible.

7.1 Factors favouring the transfer of learning to the 'real' world

Many features described in earlier sections of this model are highly favourable for the transfer of learning. Their absence would diminish the chances of change happening back in the 'real' world: transfer is less likely to arise from training that has less faith in potential (Section 1); that has less trust in people making choices (3.1); that draws on fewer personal resources (3.3); that is less responsive to individual needs (4.3); that involves learners in fewer decisions about the programme (5.2); and in which participants take less responsibility for their learning and development (5.3). But these factors favouring transfer are unlikely to result in significant change without the further help of a fully developed strategy for transfer. The literature on the transfer of training, reviewed in 'How Transfer Happens' (Greenaway, 2002), is packed with ideas about how transfer can be enabled, but the main question here is whether there are any other transfer strategies that qualify for inclusion in the skeleton model.

7.2 High level change and aligning the forces for change

Models of learning and development are often presented in the form of layers or levels. The higher levels are more enduring and more resistant to change (e.g. who I am, what I believe, how I feel about myself) and the lower levels are more easily changed (e.g. what I do and how I do it). Traditionally, 'Development Training' has been based on the belief that achievements at the lower levels will boost feelings of confidence at the higher levels, which in turn will lead to more achievements at the lower levels (back in the 'real' world). This kind of learning often takes the form: "If I can do this I can do anything!".

There are many strategies at Brathay that focus on high level change. This is clearly the case with the use of challenging activities that encourage people to leave or extend their 'comfort zone'. It is also the case with non-incremental programme design in which there are abrupt contrasts from one activity to another (making it difficult, or even impossible, to apply what is learned from one training exercise to the next one). The lack of obvious connections at the doing level encourages (but does not guarantee) connection-making at higher levels. This kind of strategy tends to promote 'versatility' (all round development) rather than 'mastery' (involving repeat practice and specialisation). There is evidence of both strategies in Brathay's work.

Questions are asked about whether 'high level' change is enough, most notably by Nicholas Emler in his study of self-esteem (Emler, 2001) but also by customers who are eager to see behavioural changes after a programme. However, when the focus is mainly on behavioural change, the big question is whether changes will last if they are not aligned with higher level beliefs and values. One response (to both questions) is to design training so that it keeps moving both ways through the levels. This promotes change that is well aligned and fully integrated with the whole person - including their beliefs and values.

This process of alignment can be extended into the 'back home' culture of the participants. One such strategy is to provide an extended model of training that includes time between training to try things out in the 'real world'. Brathay has been developing various extended models since the 1980's, initially in the youth social work field and increasingly in corporate work - which now also includes coaching as a transfer strategy. Such opportunities may not exist in all of Brathay's mainstream work, but the principle of alignment combined with 'high level' change does seem to be an integral part of Brathay's baseline theory - even if it is not always articulated in this particular way.

This concludes the descriptions of the elements in the proposed skeleton model.

What is missing from the skeleton model?

Missing practice?

A skeleton model does not provide a complete picture. For example, there is very little in the skeleton model that is specifically about reviewing, even though Brathay's reviewing practice is considered to be a defining feature of Brathay's work. A paper about Brathay's mainstream *practice* would look very different. This is a paper about the *theory* underlying Brathay's practice. When Brathay staff are facilitating reviews, they would do so in a way that is consistent with the skeleton model (if this proposed model is valid). In fact, if the skeleton model is valid it should inform all significant areas of practice: briefing, debriefing, goal setting, programme design, activity design, action planning, evaluation, etc.

Missing theory?

Where is Maslow's triangle? Kolb's theory of experiential learning? Theory X and Theory Y? Left Brain, Right Brain? Accelerated Learning? Comfort, Stretch, Panic? Gestalt Theory? Flow Psychology? Frontier Adventure? Emotional Intelligence? Tuckman's group stages? Or any other theoretical model that informs or inspires Brathay practice?

These and other models (some more valid than others) make an important contribution to the melting pot of ideas at Brathay. But there is a difference between the melting pot and the theoretical foundation on which the pot sits. Readers of this paper will no doubt have their own preferences about which theories are foundational (and mainstream) and which belong in the melting pot of optional extras. The most controversial omission from the baseline is probably Kolb's theory of experiential learning, so additional reasons for its omission are outlined below.

Although Kolb's theory has become embedded into the fabric of many training organisations, it has many shortcomings particularly in relation to Brathay's approach. Could other models be somehow added to Kolb's theory to make up for these shortcomings? For example, could a theory of experiential *development* be added to experiential *learning* theory (as Kolb himself tried to do)? Perhaps 'Emotional Intelligence' theory could add an important missing ingredient to the Kolb cycle? Perhaps social learning theory could be added to account for the huge significance of the group dimension? But this pick and mix approach would not produce a satisfactory theory, especially if the central model (Kolb's theory) is itself seriously flawed. John Heron (1992), Tara Fenwick (2001) and Miriam Webb (2004) have each made different fundamental criticisms of Kolb's theory of experiential learning. It is clear from these criticisms that a theory of experiential learning

- should pay more attention to the nature and quality of the experience

- should recognise the existence of intuition and non-reflective learning

- should incorporate greater diversity in how people learn

- should recognise that both learning and experience are happening throughout the process of experiential learning, and

- should not assume that the process of experiential learning is wholly controlled by rational thought.

Experiential learning theory is not a theory of facilitation, nor is it a theory of Development Training. Even if it is used to inform facilitation, it provides very few choices and very little

guidance. The skeleton model is consistent with the principles listed in the above paragraph and is therefore more consistent with these critiques of Kolb's theory than it is with his original theory.

An alternative way of modelling Brathay's baseline theory

Reducing a complex holistic process to a simple model is fraught with methodological problems. Some promising solutions to such problems are being developed in the emerging field of Complexity Theory (Lucas, 2003). Its origins are in the natural sciences, but it is now being developed and applied in the fields of organisation development and personal development. It is a combination of systems thinking, organic thinking and connectionist thinking. It includes useful concepts about emergence (how the sum is greater than the parts), synergy, self-organisation, upward and downward causation (from parts to the whole and vice versa), attractors (choices), boundaries and the 'edge of chaos' (frontier adventure). Complexity Theory provides an alternative way of modelling dynamic holistic processes. This emerging methodology may well provide a useful alternative perspective on Brathay's theoretical foundations.

Conclusion

The skeleton model proposed in this paper provides a foundation of theories, principles, values (and some examples of strategies) that appear to be at the heart of Brathay's mainstream work. The skeleton model is just that - it needs fleshing out differently on each occasion it is used. I hope this paper has identified and clarified the common theoretical base across Brathay's mainstream work and that it will contribute to the continuing development of Brathay's research and practice.

Roger Greenaway
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