

WHY ACTIVE AND CREATIVE REVIEWING?

by Roger Greenaway

This is my Foreword to 'Reviewingtechnieken' (2009) a handbook on reviewing by Ammy Kuiper and Jeroen Galama. My foreword is in English. The rest of the book is in Dutch. The foreword is my latest presentation of the case for active and creative reviewing and the value of this more dynamic approach to facilitation.

Learning from experience is an old way of learning that is gaining new respectability. Learning from experience is learning from the university of life itself (and even universities are bringing life to their courses by adopting and adapting ideas from experience-based approaches to learning).

Trainers and educators are continually creating new and better ways of facilitating experience-based learning and development. The authors of this handbook are making their own valuable contribution to developing practice in one of the most neglected aspects of experiential learning: the art of reviewing. This book describes ways of enabling people to reflect productively on their experiences, especially when they are learning in a group setting.

The primary skill for helping other people to reflect on their experience is the skill of asking good questions. But if reflection is nothing more than a discussion driven by questions, such a process of reflection would reveal a narrow and limited view of our capacities for thinking and learning. A quick flick through the pictures in this book will show you many alternatives that can replace or complement reflective discussion.

Why be imaginative about how you review? Why not just have a reflective discussion? Well, sometimes that is a good option. The very best discussions can be engaging, meaningful and highly rewarding for each individual. But does this describe your typical review sessions? However near or far you may be from achieving such excellence in reviewing, you will find plenty of ideas for further improvement by exploring the new dimensions that the activities described in this book can open up for your participants.

An able crafts person uses the best tools for the job and has the experience and ability to use them well. The same is true for the craft of reviewing. One big difference is that when you are working with people, every person is a crafts person and you can help each of them learn by helping them to develop their own tools and skills for reflection. In many of these methods you are the provider of tools that will help people learn from their own experience. When tools are primarily for learners to use, the facilitator's primary role is to help participants use the tools well.

Using active and creative methods during reflection is a way of making the learning process more fun. At a deeper level, the wise use of a variety of reflection methods can help people to think, learn and communicate in deeper and more meaningful ways. For example ... Many adults are highly eloquent and articulate. So much so, that straight after an experience they can *immediately explain everything!* They are often the first to speak and their eloquence can quickly make their story the main story through which everyone else 'sees' their own experience. And the person who has first presented their version of what happened will quite often defend their version of events if challenged by others. Once established, this pattern is difficult to change. It is true that change can be achieved through skilled questioning, but how much easier it is to change patterns and habits by shifting out of the habitual medium (of talking).

In conversations, people can readily get stuck in ruts and patterns that discourage new or reflective thinking. But if people are asked to communicate in *pictures* or *patterns* or through *mime* or through *drama* or through *verse* or *music* or *metaphor*, people readily get *unstuck* from their ruts. Replace or complement conversations with other ways of communicating and people discover new ways of thinking, new ways of expressing themselves and new ways of understanding and explaining things. Yes, it is true new angles can be discovered through astute questioning. And it is at least equally true that new angles can also be discovered by changing the means and method through which people create, tell and compare their stories about their experiences.

- **For talking about group dynamics**, it can be better to do so by arranging (and continually rearranging) objects into patterns showing how people are relating to each other.
- **For sharing an emotional experience**, it can be better to do so by first creating a storyline showing the ups and downs of their emotions. This provides the storyteller with some thinking and preparation time. And the storyline becomes a visual aid that help listeners to see the story while following its ups and downs and twists and turns.
- **For examining a critical moment** it can be better to recreate that critical moment through action replay. This gives all participants the opportunity to discover new information by interviewing people about the thoughts and feelings they were having at that precise moment. This restaging of key moments tends to bring out greater honesty and understanding.

Not every review method in this book is designed for greater depth, greater honesty or for working with conflicts. Because experiences can be so infinitely variable, so can be the reasons for reflecting, and the reasons why you (or your participants) might prefer one method over another. While it is important to be open to the infinite range of possibilities that arise when facilitating learning from experience, it is also helpful to have some kind of system or guidance for deciding which methods to use in which situations. The authors have provided a useful matrix for quick reference. And once you are familiar with the techniques and their uses, you will be able to make you own judgments and variations based on these starting points.

I have myself been been developing active and creative reviewing methods for some years and I am happy that a number of my own designs are included (or adapted) in this collection. The authors have also included many methods from their own practice. The methods described in this handbook have been developed and tested in a wide variety of settings with many different age groups and many kinds of people. But this does not guarantee success – because the method itself will only be one of many variables influencing the outcome.

These methods have been developed in the field. And in many cases, the method seems more sound than the theory on which it is based. In the field of experiential learning it is my view that theory lags well behind the practice. Theories and models known to practitioners are not necessarily the most suitable theories for explaining what they do. There is an uncritical acceptance of a number of theories that are known to be flawed. As this is a preface and not a thesis, I will simply outline two theoretical problems.

It is common to see experiential learning theory presented as a '*cyclical sequence*' – as if the component parts of the sequence happen one at a time. For example, it is common to see a clear separation between 'experience' and 'reflection', or between 'doing' and 'thinking'. The visual appearance of these cycles and the typical structure of a programme design makes it very clear whether the learner is either 'doing' or 'thinking'. Kolb's theory (which is the most referenced theory of experiential learning) was more about the tensions between the opposites in his model. I interpret his model as one in which all parts are always present and are always in tension with each other –

and that if you pull too far in one direction there will be a counterbalancing force pulling in the opposite direction. This is very different to the popular understanding and application of such theories as simply being step by step sequences.

The ultimate for some kinds of learning is '*unconscious competence*' – something that has been learned so well that there is no need to think about it – it just happens. This may be helpful for some basic or routine skills, but not for more advanced skills where it would be a mistake to run on 'automatic pilot'. Do we want bosses to fire people without consciously thinking about it? Hopefully we are trying to develop *thoughtful* performance, not *thoughtless* performance. We need people to reflect about what does and does not work well and to keep on reflecting – during and after the training event. We may also want to people to think outside of this 'effectiveness paradigm' and reflect on values, qualities, relationships, priorities and motivations as well as on effectiveness.

Shifting from talk only methods to more active and creative methods is the equivalent of shifting from a dial-up modem connection to broadband internet access. Both kinds of upgrade support greater breadth, depth, speed, interactivity and all round quality. Some of these activities may at first look like games without serious purpose, but with experience and practice you will find many tools in this book that will allow you (and your participants) to combine the best of both worlds – becoming fully engaged in stimulating and effective enjoyable learning experiences.

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If you can also read Dutch then you may like to know that Reviewingtechnieken by Ammy Kuiper and Jeroen Galama is available from these online bookshops:
<http://www.thema.nl/product/reviewingtechnieken/>
<http://www.desda.eu>
<http://www.managementboek.nl>