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... now comes with ...

Thought for the Month

is becoming a regular feature of Experiential-CPD. This collection of thoughts from 2011 is a celebration of one year of monthly thinking and is also an invitation (and even an inspiration) to share your own thoughts.

Roger Greenaway and Bill Krouwel, Editors

Feedback, Questions or Thoughts: please write to roger@reviewing.co.uk

Thoughts for the Month 2011

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2012 *Whatever you are thinking*

It could be you!

Thinking about hybrids...

I've recently been reading Britta Sweer's excellent inquiry into English Folk-Rock - you know, Fairport Convention, Steeleye Span, all that stuff. It's a deeply researched book as befits one that started life as PhD dissertation for a very serious (German) University - although the book itself is in English.

Early in the piece, Britta makes the point that folk-rock is strengthened and weakened by being a hybrid. She then

deconstructs the two roots of the music and concludes that, although this hybridisation causes friction (purist folkies walking out of electric concerts etc.), that friction can be creative, as when, in a glorious moment in 1969, Fairport discovered that the murkier waters of English folk could be transformed into excellent and dark rock music...

... all of which naturally led me to the thought "Is outdoor learning ever a hybrid?". Further pondering led to a realisation that, although there is a sort of fundamentalism that seeks to see the outdoors - and the outdoors alone - as the cure for all our social ills (and even physical) ills, large tracts of the outdoor world are indeed hybrids. Certainly development training. Most certainly outdoor management development. Probably therapeutic approaches to the outdoors. To be fully effective, these all rely on theory and practice from areas other than (and sometimes an apparently long way from...) the purely outdoor.

So what?

The danger is that if we don't understand the more-than-nuanced differences between these different corners of our field, we are in danger of making all sorts of wrong assumptions and, so to speak, may find ourselves walking out of the concert.

All of which is to support such things as the Lindley Festival of Outdoor Learning, which tries (sometimes successfully, always interestingly) to bring the corners of the field together - to the benefit of all.

Bill Krouwel
January 2011

Guess what I'm thinking?

Having accidentally driven at 38 miles per hour on an urban dual carriageway with a 30 mile an hour limit, I attended a 'speed awareness' course the other day in lieu of points! It was basically a powerpoint presentation but the trainers style could have been summed up in simple phrase - "guess what I'm thinking?".

It was a 'questioning' style of presentation with questions ranging from "how can you tell when you are in a 30mph limit area apart from the signs?" to "do we think a person's life is worth less than the cost of a speed camera?".

If a response was elicited that was not exactly what the trainer wanted to hear, it was attacked with a barrage of closed questions such as the last one.

How did this leave the participants feeling? Absolutely exasperated by the end in the main!

In my opinion, it is crucial when asking questions of delegates that you are actually interested in their responses to, rather than wanting them to guess what's in your head. In our field of work, I'm sure we do this successfully most of the time, but this experience has certainly made me put my questioning techniques under extra scrutiny.

Shirley Gaston
<http://www.azesta.co.uk>
February 2011

Paradigms Lost

We all remember the John Cleese character in "The Life of Brian" who asks the rhetorical question "What have the Romans ever done for us?!?" and keeps getting unwanted answers - "Roads!", "Sewers!", "Education!". It's a good example of how people see the world in different ways, and how sometimes high-falutin' oratory can be brought down to earth by more mundane concerns. It is also perhaps an underpinning explanation of why there are different research paradigms - to reflect the different vantage points from which we see the world - what academics might term our personal ontology...

I recently experienced a good example of how different answers can both be right when, in the course of a discussion on constructivism I asked the question "Why are carrots orange?"

Someone responded with the perfectly correct scientific answer "because they contain carotenes".

That stopped me in my tracks because the answer that had been in my mind - and for which I'd been looking, in a kind of "guess what's in my head!" way - was "because the Dutch selectively bred them that way so as to have a national vegetable....". Also perfectly correct, but coming much more from a historical / political perspective - and highlighting perhaps the only example of a socially-constructed vegetable known to history.

Truth is often dependant on where you stand ... and can be different things to different people without ever not being the truth ... I rest my (metaphorical) case ...

Bill Krouwel
March 2011

Mantle of the Expert - or Novice?

In 'The Mantle of the Expert' participants are placed in the role of experts and are spoken to as if they are experts. Participants are spoken to by someone in the role of client who wants the group of experts to solve the client's problem.

And the extraordinary thing is that when people are spoken to as experts, they experience being treated as experts and they respond as experts - even tapping into knowledge and ideas that no-one knew they had. And it is yet more extraordinary if these experts are at the younger end of primary school - which is where Dorothy Heathcote first developed this technique.

In the words of a critical evaluation of Mantle of the Expert:
"This approach provides a safe environment in which to take risks and make mistakes which might have far-reaching effects in the real world. They give children ownership of their work, an opportunity to make decisions and engage in activities which are found in the 'adult' world and seldom experienced within a standard curriculum."

This could almost be about the 'initiatives' or 'simulation games' or 'problem-solving activities' or 'command tasks' so often found in the world of experience-based learning.

In training environments, especially when participants are trying new activities, participants are often addressed and treated as novices. I am not saying it is wrong to treat novices as novices, but I wonder how we should choose when to use 'The Mantle of the Expert' and when to use the 'Mantle of the Novice'?

Roger Greenaway
April 2011

References:

<http://www.mantleoftheexpert.com>

<http://digbig.com/5bdsbk>

(critical evaluation: pdf)

Who needs models?

Somewhere out there beyond the far beyond and a little bit further, perhaps there is a land in which there are no models - just reality?

Reality is supposed to be the strong point of experiential learning. Our learning environment is more real. And there are consequences to actions. And we experience the natural or social world through all our senses. We are more alert, alive and active when learning through experience. We have real experiences and leave mere models of reality behind.

Or do we? Models simplify reality. But through experience we leave the model world and get closer to how things really are. If we hold on too tightly to our models we may not get beyond them.

I could be talking about any kind of models, but the ones I really have in mind are learning models.

Perhaps mistake number one is claiming to work in a holistic way while using a sequential learning model that breaks things down into a one step at a time learning process?

If working in a holistic way, with experiences and with whole persons, does it make sense to use a model that implies that we cannot think and do at the same time, or that we cannot have abstract thoughts while also having experiences?

Our brains and bodies can do several things at once. If it is difficult to model such complex processes, then why hold people back by pretending that learning from experience is a linear one step at a time process?

Who's for 'postmodelism'? - learning without models.

Roger Greenaway
May 2011

Who needs models? - Reply

Although I can see you are fishing for controversy in your latest 'thought of the month', I can't help but take the bait, feeling the need to try and balance the argument you present with a case for models! Anyone who knows me will find that ironic as I am not shy in my critical views of them, as I too find people get snagged up on the models and fail to 'go beyond' them.

If these concept models give us access to our leading thinkers, (access by the many to the few), it's just an accepted way to communicate an idea at that particular time. In this way a model is not absolute, just a visual way to represent an idea and like art, another method to visually represent an idea, it is the interpretation of the model which should spring board you into the concept being modelled. These models try to explain a concept, it's perhaps our own thinking that limits them.

So, next time your faced with a model don't be confined to the visual construct being represented, try and think of what the wider implications associated with it are, what else could be implied, what does this mean for my reality. To my way of thinking, these 'models' are invitations to think and not blindly regurgitate, if you will, a scaled down version of the concept, a way to help others physically see the abstract process and perhaps open a door into a whole new thinking room. If we are to get to this place far, far beyond and a little bit further, I bet it will be because a model helped us!

To finish with a thought! Are all models always right some of the time?

Nev Smith
June 2011

Whose Preferences?

I was talking recently to a friend Louise who has a swim school. We were discussing her preference of having one key teacher to take a class the whole way through their colour group (up to thirty weeks of 30 minute to 1 hour lessons), we discussed the relationship they build with the child, the trust that develops, the opportunity for them to spot patterns in both swimming and character that they can support and manage and the joy of seeing them develop.

My question to her was 'What would be the benefits of having a different teacher work with the class at intervals throughout their journey?' The conversation turned to preferred style of the teacher and learning preferences of the pupils (which was a new concept to Louise) and opened up a whole avenue of exploration and excitement around Visual, Hearing and Kinaesthetic channels and how they might be brought in different measure by different instructors or might be more purposefully applied by the key teacher to support different learning preferences more effectively.

The conversation served as a reminder to me of the power of understanding your own preference (and how that translates into the activities/reviews you choose), how that impacts on a group of learners, the opportunity that the different channels present to be creative in your approach and to engage with more of the audience and they with each other. What's your channel preference and how can you add more of other preferences to enhance engagement in your reviews?

Amanda Stott

<http://www.facilitatethis.co.uk>

July 2011

CPD & cpd

Hopefully your summer is not a story of cuts and cutbacks. And if it is, perhaps belt-tightening has led you to rediscover the value of some simple inexpensive pleasures? Perhaps you have been surprised about how little you can spend and still have a really good holiday.

My triumph when an impoverished student was hitching to the Alps with several bags of dried food that I had bought wholesale. This fuelled me for four weeks of wild camping, bivouacking and climbing. My limited funds were spent on fresh bread and vegetables and not much else.

So adventure on the cheap is possible, but what about CPD on the cheap (or "cpd")?

In a listing which advertises events that mostly involve some investment (yes the list does include some free events!) it may seem odd to suggest that cpd can be achieved without spending much.

Have you noticed how some people learn, grow and develop through their work, while others stagnate? Some people seem to learn through experience every day while others seem stuck in a groove. Why this difference?

Amongst the many possible explanations is the habit of review and reflection. My own period of cpd 'on the cheap' (for improving my facilitation) was when I used to make notes during and after every session together with a simple graph showing my own ups and downs during the session. I would often show the graph and the notes to a colleague to talk them through.

This habit has led to another habit which is that when I invest

in my own 'CPD' (the more expensive kind) I will be making notes and reviewing them afterwards and communicating with others about my CPD experiences.

I was reminded of the value of cpd (on the cheap) on reading about how Mr. Liu, chief executive of Lenovo, became such a successful decision-maker: "At the end of every week, going back now more than 20 years, on Friday afternoon, he sits down with his direct reports, his top team ... and they take time to review everything they've done that week -- what decisions were good, which ones were terrible."

* Source (of Mr. Liu's story): Michael Useem's 'The Go Point': Knowing When It's Time to Decide: Knowledge@Wharton <http://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/article.cfm?articleid=1566>

Perhaps 'cpd' is investment of time and 'CPD' is the investment of money, and the best possible results come from the combination of both: CPD + cpd.

In my case, if I hadn't invested in a climbing course at Plas y Brenin I might never have hitched to the Alps for one of the cheapest (and best) months of my life. And I'm still reviewing it several years later!

Roger Greenaway
August 2011

Working on the Edge?

The field (or universe?) of experience-based learning seems to be full of references to working on the edge - starting with 'edge work' and including terms such as 'stretch zone', 'frontier adventure', ZPD 'Zone of Proximal Development, or simply taking risks and trying something new.

Consultants using experiential methods have adopted 'edgy' names for their business such as: Threshold, Arete, Leading Edge, etc.

The 'edge' seems to be where optimal learning and change takes place. Some people seem to need nudging closer to the edge, whereas others need coaxing back. Some people just love the edge zone and thrive there.

Finding a productive edge for each individual seems to be the essence of this kind of work. How do you help people find their most productive edge? And how do you find yours?

Why not take a look at the listings below for inspiration!

Roger Greenaway
September 2011

What an Experience! :-)

If you are reading this you probably place a high value on working in a way that produces memorable experiences. You probably also believe that memorable experiences can lead to significant learning.

So to what extent do you treat yourself to a taste of your own medicine when you are looking for CPD opportunities? How much emphasis do you place on looking for CPD opportunities that you expect to be a source of memorable experiences?

Whenever I spot an interesting-looking CPD opportunity I soon find myself dividing the CPD time available by the number of objectives or by the number of items in the list of contents. A programme that promises 53 tools and tips in 5 hours (yes they do exist!) works out at an average of one item every 5 or 6 minutes.

Crammed programmes may appear to offer value for money, but if too much is on offer I would prefer to read a book. That is a less sociable option, but how much time will there be for socialising when you are being presented with 53 items? And how many will you stay awake for?

Both as a consumer and provider I first pay attention to the experience - because I do not expect the learning to be of much value unless the right kinds of experiences are happening.

When providing training my first evaluation question is about the experiences. And as a participant I like to be able to look back and say 'What an Experience!' - with a smile on my face and some valuable stuff in my head. :-)

Roger Greenaway
October 2011

Mantle of the Expert: part two

The innovative and influential teacher of educational drama Dorothy Heathcote (MBE) sadly died in October. I had the good fortune to attend a lecture she gave at a NADA (drama advisers) conference. It was a truly inspirational event (even though my main activity was sitting and scribbling notes). One of the approaches that really excited me was 'Mantle of the Expert' - which I wrote about briefly in April's monthly thought.

It is nicely summarised by David Farmer in his Drama Resource newsletter which takes you to a page from which you can view a video of Dorothy Heathcote demonstrating Mantle of the Expert:
<http://dramaresource.com/resources/newsletter#teachingtip>

My take on the method is that it involves treating people as if they are experts right from the start of the activity. They receive no special training to be experts: the idea is that if they are treated as experts they start to feel like experts, and they then think and behave like experts. Once the mantle of expertise and expectation is laid upon them, they also feel a special responsibility to help others, solve problems, provide a service or make the world a better place.

My favourite examples of this approach come from a joint project with the Gog Theatre Company when when I was working with teenagers from special needs schools. These young people are normally treated as needing help - not as experts. So how would they respond if they were treated as experts with the capacity to help others? How would they respond if given 'The Mantle of the Expert'?

To cut a long story short, a band of clowns (actors from Gog) turned up to entertain the young people. But the clowns suddenly disappeared soon after the entertainment began - running off in all directions. The young people were told that if they could find all the clowns and bring them back together they would try to put on the full show for them.

Once each small group of young people found their clown (eg on a small island, at the bottom of a gorge, or deep in the forest) they then had to find out what it would take to get their clown back. Most clowns had lost their confidence and a key ability. In one case a clown had forgotten how to play games and got quickly bored. So the young people needed to keep teaching the clown games on the journey back, working hard to keep him entertained.

On a separate occasion, a similar group of young people came across the Gog actors as two family groups from 400 years ago involved in a long-running family feud. The young people were treated as experts in peace-making, in calming people down, in helping the families understand each other's situations and helping them make friends with each other.

This may sound like a tall order for young people with special needs, but treated as experts they rose to the occasion and demonstrated their hidden talents within the frame of the drama. All of which was witnessed by their teachers and helpers who had little idea that these young people could be quite so responsible and resourceful.

There is something quite magical about Mantle of the Expert. Thank you Dorothy Heathcote for this gem in particular.

I would have been even happier if the education authority had paid for me to attend this conference. I felt it was important for my own CPD and was definitely worth the investment.

If you have stories to tell about worthwhile investments of time and/or money in your own CPD, please let us know if you would like these to appear in a future 'Thought for the Month'.

Roger Greenaway
November 2011

Whatever happened to Brian?

Do you ever wonder what happened to people you worked with?

Did those young people rise above their problems?

Did those trainee leaders become really effective leaders?

Did all those teams you were building achieve great things together?

What stuck longest: the experience, the learning, the friendships, the trivial or the profound? How many promotions have those first line managers received and how much do they really owe to that intensive week of challenge, turmoil, performance, feedback and friendship?

Perhaps you have an excellent long term evaluation system? Or maybe you have heard snippets of long term news about 'Brian' on the grapevine? Do any of us really know about the lasting impact of our work. Even if we are conscientious evaluators, how sure can we be that a participant's later success owes something to our work with them? The longer we leave our evaluation, the more that other factors will come into play.

Do not despair! You are not alone. There is a limit to what any individual can learn from their own experience about what works well in the long term. We should still try to find out, but we should also keep in touch with the bigger picture that research provides, and keep in touch with what other people are doing in similar or related fields.

So perhaps a good CPD experience should bring together:

- learning from your own practice
- learning from what others are doing
- learning from what the research says

Practice informed by regular CPD experiences that include these three ingredients will give you confidence that whatever happened to Brian, you did your best - and Brian is probably doing OK.

Roger Greenaway, December 2011

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6th December 2011

Making the Most of MTa Materials

London Heathrow

MTa workshops are examples of experiential learning in action. They are a dynamic mixture of activities, thinking and discussions.

<http://digbig.com/5becha>

9th December 2011

METALOG® training tools Workshop

Manchester

METALOG® training tools are multifaceted interaction activities and learning projects for indoor and outdoor use

http://www.metalogtools.co.uk/en_gb/workshops/

6-8th January 2012

Adventure Therapy:

Exploring professional issues in working therapeutically outdoors

at Blue Peris Mountain Centre (Snowdonia, UK)

Led by Dr Kaye Richards (Liverpool John Moores University)

<http://www.outdoor-learning.org>

9-13th January 2012

The Reflective Practitioner

Ambleside

University of Cumbria

<http://digbig.com/5begpy>

12-13th January 2012

Facilitation Fundamentals

Ripley Castle, North Yorkshire

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