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Thought for the Month is now a regular feature of the Experiential-CPD newsletter. This collection of thoughts from 2013 is a celebration of another year of monthly thinking and is also an invitation (and possibly an inspiration) for you to share your own thoughts in 2014.

Roger Greenaway and Bill Krouwel, Editors



Roger Greenaway



Bill Krouwel

Thoughts for the Month 2013

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DARKNESS MY OLD FRIEND

The long dark nights have prompted us to think of the benefits that darkness can bring to experiential learning.

A miserable muddy camping trip was transformed by a moonlight walk in the snow ... plus the question 'Why are there more stars in the Brecon Beacons?'

The old 'sitting round a fire in the dead of night' experience still seems to bond people in a rare and uncontrived way. The elements are not only light (my fire), but also darkness (my old

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friend ...)

The kind of hill walk that rarely excites teenagers became a big adventure in the darkness. Every sound, shape and movement captured their imaginations.

The imagination has free rein in the dark ... in a full-drama clue-search, approaching a tent which may be occupied is a much more exciting process if the tent is pitched in woods on a dark and windy night ... come to think of it, how many stories start with "twas a dark and windy night ..."

Total darkness in a cave is a strange sensation. But how can the absence of light be so stimulating?

When meeting in a candle-lit barn for a review, everyone seemed to pay more attention, listen more carefully and think more deeply. (Maybe the absence of visual aids is sometimes an asset?)

Why do we ask participants to close their eyes or wear blindfolds? To experience the world differently?

Why do we close our eyes when trying to remember or trying to imagine? Do we think better in the dark?

Darkness draws our attention to the light. In developmental work we look for the spark that can be kindled into positive energy.

Even so, I am looking forward to the summer and the long light evenings. It's already on its way.

Roger Greenaway and Bill Krouwel
January 2013

WHEN WINTER WORKS WELL

Which is the best season for outdoor experiential learning? Extreme weather (hot or cold) creates extra risks and problems, but does it also create opportunities? Can cold weather add value?

Fans of skiing, ice-climbing, snow-holing, curling, ice-skating, sledging etc. have their own ideas about perfect winter conditions - something like "extremely cold yesterday, but not quite so cold today" or "lots of fresh stable snow - last week".

Us fans of outdoor experiential learning may have similar preferences...

Yesterday's snow transforms hills into mountains, makes woodland more picturesque, turns a simple walk into a challenging journey, and creates limitless opportunities for play.

But what about plain cold weather without any snow - such as sleety rain and cold gusting wind? Are such conditions of any benefit for experiential learning? In my experience, yes ...

1. Providers and participants think more deeply about the 'why' of the activity.
2. Participants pay more attention to each other's comfort and welfare.
3. The novelty value is higher - because people will have rarely experienced being out in such conditions.
4. The challenge is higher - for leadership, for motivation, for decision-making and even for accomplishing simple everyday tasks.

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5. A one hour journey in foul weather creates more opportunities for learning and development than a three hour journey in pleasant weather.

Maybe you have points to add or a story to tell about winter working well? Or you have a more favourite season?

Roger Greenaway

February 2013

WALKING AND LEARNING

Did you know that **children who walk or cycle to school learn more than those who arrive by car?**

A recent Danish study demonstrates that children have less concentration if they do not exercise on the way to school. The beneficial effects for learning can last for four hours. The study by Professor Niels Egelund is in Danish but you can read a summary of it [here](#).

It was a study of thousands of 5-19 year olds. But I can see no reason why the findings would not apply to people of all ages.

So if you start every day with a walk, you will be better at concentrating and learning - for at least the next 4 hours.

Just in case people have arrived at your training event the lazy way - start by going for a walk. I happen to have been doing this for a some time in my own workshops. The benefits for learning are now underpinned by evidence-based research - assuming that the findings can also be applied to over-19s.

You will notice in the Experiential-CPD calendar for June that this principle has been taken to the extreme with 'A Walk on the Wild Side' - what must be the most energetic opportunity for CPD in the calendar.

The 'Walk on the Wild Side' announcement reads:

"Are you interested in the future of education and up for an adventure along the West Highland Way? This is an opportunity to walk, explore, share and create different ideas about how education could be!

"The five-day creative walk will begin from the Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum in Glasgow on Thursday 13 June, along the West Highland Way, arriving in Fort William on Tuesday 18 June. Two young people who have completed Columba 1400's leadership course will lead a group of lecturers, teachers, creative educators, all from diverse backgrounds and with varied interests in education. They will be joined on each day of the walk by 'a creative catalyst' who will bring a different viewpoint or challenge to the walk. The accommodation will be in hostels along the way.

"The aim is purely to provide a unique time and space to explore the ideas that could improve the educational experience of young people. As philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche once said: 'All truly great thoughts are conceived while walking'.

"We are looking for active people from various curriculum areas and different educational settings who are willing to commit to this five-day adventure."

Roger Greenaway

March 2013

BUBBLE ARMOUR

My uncle drove a bubble car. He was so big that the car was like a suit of armour. My uncle never looked comfortable in his bubble-armour. It was not his 'comfort zone': he was cramped and squashed in his bubble. He came to life - and was a wonderful uncle - when he came out of his bubble.

A teacher was driving a group of young people past a forest. He said: "Those trees are all plastic". His story about the plastic trees became increasingly implausible until a young girl spoke up and said the trees were real. "Prove it" said the teacher. So the whole group got out of the van and took the teacher down to the woods and they tried every which way to convince him that the trees were real.

Eventually the students convinced the teacher and he said, "You are special - most people drive past here and they wouldn't know whether the forest is real or plastic - because they just stay in their bubbles all day. They see nothing new. They feel nothing new. They do nothing new. They just stay in their bubbles where the knobs and dials and switches and controls are all in their usual places doing their usual things."

"Remember: Don't believe what you are told. Get out of your bubbles and find out for yourselves."

New experiences are like new bubbles. It is difficult to have a new experience if you don't first climb out of your bubble-armour and come to life.

Roger Greenaway
May 2013

WHAT DO WE DO?

If you are a member of The Experiential Learning Exchange on LinkedIn you may well have been following the recent discussion that Bob Larcher started with the question:

"If trainers train, teachers teach, instructors instruct, tutors tutor and coaches coach what do Experiential Learning Practitioners do?"

Most of the 46 responses so far fall into one of two categories: 'short' or 'long'. Here are some of the short answers offered in response to the question: *"What do we do?"*

- Practise
- Inspire
- Learn - & help others learn from experience
- We get out of the way
- Enable
- Empower
- Act as a catalyst
- Dysgu (a Welsh word that means both teach and learn)
- We help people to be better at what they can do
- Enable people to be more effective in their interactions with others.
- Trust the process
- Experiate

I like the succinctness of these answers but I needed a few more words: "We encourage people

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to experiment and reflect on their experiences in ways that seem most likely to enhance their learning and development."

What do you do? And how many words do you need?

Roger Greenaway

June 2013

HOW DO YOU DO WHAT YOU DO?

If this question sounds familiar, it is simply a variation of last month's question ('What do we do?'). Both questions come from the LinkedIn Experiential Learning Exchange group where Bob Larcher is getting us to think hard - while the sun's out ;-)

So (to save time) I took a short cut and copied this brief and tantalising section from my article about facilitating outdoor education:

Sivasailam Thiagarajan (Thiagi) spent 15 years in field research in what he admits was 'a futile attempt' to discover the secrets of 'effective facilitators' (who were rated highly by their peers and participants). Thiagi reported:

"I did not find consistent, common behaviours among these facilitators. Further, even the same facilitator appeared to use different behaviours with different groups, even when conducting the same activity. To make matters worse, the same facilitator sometimes used different behaviours with the same group within the same activity at different times."

[Source: Thiagarajan, S. & Thiagarajan, R. (1999:48) Facilitator's Toolkit. Bloomington, Indiana: Workshops by Thiagi.]

Inconsistency appears to be what effective facilitators have in common! Thiagi eventually concluded that effective facilitators are: flexible, adaptive, proactive, responsive and resilient.

I can't help noticing that 4 of these 5 commonalities are reactive. So perhaps it is helpful to have events that are 'big enough' in some dimension (eg reality, risk, rights, conflict, chaos) to give us something worth reacting to? If nothing much is happening perhaps that is the time to be proactive and make things happen?

One way of being proactive is joining [LinkedIn](#) and joining in the discussion (in this or any other LinkedIn group) - giving you direct access to CPD whatever the weather.

Another way is to share your thoughts here next month!

Roger Greenaway

July 2013

DESIGNING RICHER LEARNING EXPERIENCES

This is the theme of a new report on designing experiential learning. Here is my summary of the report's recommendations:

- Select authentic locations
- Make the learning more engaging
- Design rules to guide towards desired behaviour
- Use realistic questioning techniques
- Give meaningful choices
- Introduce an element of risk

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- Build feedback into the activity so that the learner sees the impact of their action
- Provide learners with the opportunity to review their progress, reflect on their journey and develop their own conclusions

I especially like that last bullet point. It may or may not surprise you to know that all of these recommendations come from a report on online experiential learning. The research was carried out by '[Towards Maturity](#)'

What I find intriguing is that the processes of online experiential learning have been studied so closely - and arguably with a far more critical and creative eye than is customary when experiential learning is outdoors.

Outdoors there is a tendency to sit back and let nature do the work - at least for some of the time. So if we want to design better outdoor learning experiences, maybe we could pick up some interesting design principles from online experiential learning?

Roger Greenaway,
August 2013

THE 'UNDESIGNABLES'

These thoughts follow on from last month's thoughts on 'Designing Richer Learning Experiences'.

Graham Cook from rsvpdesign.co.uk points out two critical features that are missing from self-paced learning online:

1. a skilled facilitator who can intervene in face to face learning to help individuals and teams practise more effective behaviours.
2. learning and practising behavioural change with real people.

The presence of other people in the learning environment makes things more real. Other people are the 'undesignables' in experiential learning.

But there is an argument that facilitators are dispensable and that facilitators can be designed out of the experiential learning process.

For example, in their book 'Experience AI', Ricketts and Willis redefine the role of the facilitator - by replacing facilitators with work books! They explain that in Self-facilitated Learning™ it is the Learning Journal™ that guides the process. The Learning Journal™ (they say) contains everything that participants need to facilitate their own learning processes - activity frontloading, rules and debrief questions. The trouble with facilitators (they say) is that each facilitator may provide a wide variety of interpretations and may even stall progress by providing distractions. Whereas workbooks speed up the process, reduce variation, increase accuracy and produce a more comprehensive result.

How do you like to strike the balance between between the 'designables' and the 'undesignables' in experiential learning?

Roger Greenaway
September 2013

PS To read more on the above topics you may like to see more from RSVP: Geoff Cox's '[Towards the development of guidelines for the design of experiential learning environments](#)' or my [full review of 'Experience AI'](#)

FINDING INSPIRATION

I am sure you inspire other people in your work, but where do you find your inspiration?

- being in places that inspire you?
- being with people who inspire you?
- reading books or articles that inspire you?
- taking part in conferences and networking events?
- receiving feedback about the value of your work?
- continuing to enjoy the activities and experiences that attracted to you to your work in the first place?

Last week I was at a conference that included an hour long Skype presentation and discussion with Richard Louv - who warns us about 'nature deficit disorder'. I found this inspiring on many levels.

Last year I attended the European Outdoor Film Festival in Glasgow. And because I found these mad adventures so inspiring I have included the dates of the UK part of the film tour below.

I am now being re-inspired by re-reading Bernie de Koven's 'The Well-Played Game'. It gets down to the essence of what makes a good game. I love his clear insights - refreshing and (yes) inspirational!

I wonder where you find your inspiration?

Roger Greenaway
October 2013

EXPERIENCES FOR ME

We give a lot of thought to the kinds of experiences that will be of benefit to those we work with. Would it be selfish or developmental (or both?) to pay more attention to the kinds of experiences that will benefit us? For example, how would you want to re-order or change this list of experiences to suit your own priorities?

1. Doing my favourite activities at my own level.
2. Taking up at least one new activity each year.
3. Celebrating my achievements with others.
4. Celebrating team achievements with others.
5. Receiving feedback from clients and colleagues.
6. Trying new ways of working.
7. Taking on a new challenge.
8. Helping others take on a new challenge.
9. Learning how to achieve more in less time.
10. Meeting people from other organisations and sharing ideas and enthusiasm about my work.

If you choose wisely, you can achieve all of these by selecting suitable events from the list

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below. If your budget for 2013 is already spent, then look ahead to the events already listed in the [Experiential-CPD Calendar for 2014](#).

If you have a 'Thought for the Month' you would like to share with fellow experiential educators or trainers, please write to roger@reviewing.co.uk It could be your way of achieving 2, 3, 7 or 8 from the list above.

Roger Greenaway
November 2013

SHARED EXPERIENCE OR UNIQUE EXPERIENCE?

Was it 'Shared Experience' or a 'Unique Experience'?

When we want to create a sense of *community* we focus on *shared* and *similar* experiences we seem to have in *common*. And when we are encouraging people to transfer learning from one situation to another we emphasise *connections* between experiences - between what we think they may have in *common*.

But on matters of personal development and identity we prefer to highlight how each person experiences the same activity differently - in their own unique way.

Arguably, each and every experience is *unique* - and even the same person cannot have the same experience again. Heraclitus pointed this out some time ago:

"No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and he's not the same man."

Respecting the *uniqueness* of experience is also a way of respecting *individuality*. It helps us to resist the temptation to label experiences or people.

So perhaps an emphasis on *uniqueness* is another way of building community - the kind of community that respects and celebrates *individuality* by providing an arena in which *individuals* share their *unique* stories.

There are precedents for this way of thinking: [Michael White's Narrative Therapy](#) draws communities together through the sharing of unique stories, as does the work of the [Scottish Storytelling Centre](#) and that of the South African [Truth and Reconciliation Commission](#).

There is also a risk that if we do not notice the *uniqueness* of each experience we throw away opportunities for learning. In the words of Mr B. Oom:

"... Every experience, every moment, is unique. What if we could keep the freshness of the intelligent, untouched mind, and see it that way? There is no learning when we stuff new experiences into old memories. There is no flow when our past determines what we can see in the present." (Oom 2007)

OOM, B.: [Learning and flow, blog posting](#) (accessed October 2007, since flowed away down Heraclitus' river)

Fortunately we do not need to decide where we stand on this issue (of whether experience is *unique* or *shared*) because there is no contradiction in choosing both options. You can review both 'common' and 'unique' experiences. And you can build a learning community by giving space

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for both. BUT if any individual does not feel sufficient support to share their own *unique* experience, it is not a learning community (for that individual).

And if we emphasise uniqueness too much, there is a risk that individuals may feel like outsiders who lack a sense of belonging.

Sharing your unique thoughts is good for your CPD and ours - so why not make it one of your new year's resolutions?

Roger Greenaway
December 2013

Experiential-CPD - opportunities for your continuing professional development

Free monthly news of opportunities to develop your:

- facilitation skills
- groupwork skills
- activity and design skills
- skills for working with specific groups

Keep up to date with:

- conferences
- publications
- research
- networks
- local and national CPD events

Announce or discover training events for UK outdoor educators and experiential trainers with Experiential-CPD. Enjoy and/or share 'thoughts of the month' in 2014.

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