



By Mark Taylor

MaRKER

CAN WE **PUSH**
DYNAMICS?

HOW
FORMAL
ARE WE?

HAVE YOU
GOT YOUR
COAT?

«Marker» is a regular column in Coyote, written by Mark Taylor, looking at issues in training and hoping to encourage debate and reflections. Dynamic feedback, in/formal comments and used clothing will be really welcome.

► The dynamics of group dynamics

So there we were in a training for trainers. Second day of the second time we meet. Odd feelings that relationships are governed by saving face, staying superficial, people wearing different kinds of armour or masks. And all the while, most people are there with the idea of being open to one another and learning from each other. Very confusing signals being sent around. What to do about it?

In the team we also looked hard at ourselves – where were we in the “group dynamics”? We chose to open up the process (*especially important, we felt, in a setting where training is the topic*) and begin the next day with examining how people felt to be in this group. A slightly risky undertaking. And a challenge for all to speak and be heard and listen and feel. Maybe the “topic” was becoming the “issue”. [See Arturas Deltuva’s article on Spirituality in Training in Coyote 8].

We talked then of theory, of different models of group dynamics, including the classic forming, storming, norming, etc.

And we talked of how some groups do not go through all the stages and some even go backwards at times. Small “miracles” began to appear almost immediately: shy smiles instead of the over-confident laugh; putting real needs and opinions on the table; setting up concrete agreements; jokes without an edge of spite. Two days and self-run workshops later, the evening is given over to a bike ride in the surrounding countryside and an old-fashioned sauna.

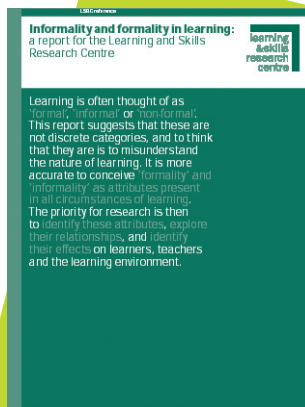
Great atmosphere! On the way home, one participant voices the opinion “ah, if only we could have organised that evening at the beginning – then everything would have been so much easier”... Reminds me of the time when we came to the final evaluation round of a seminar and one of the people recommended us to put the farewell party half way through the programme – because “you get to know people better then!”



► Why did I have to read that?

So there I was, thinking I had finally got it sorted out. Put simply, (and that's part of the problem!), formal learning; non-formal learning and informal learning are different from each other and I could give some definitions to support that idea. Yes, everything depends on the context and the aims of the learner. In the family (*informal*); in a youth project (*non-formal*); in school (*formal*).

Where I was beginning to get confused was in the whole question of whether you could distinguish specific methodologies which applied to one form of learning provision. [See Marker in Coyote 8 for an example of doubts about the term «teaching and learning» applied to training.] Still, I thought, I work in non-formal education, and we don't lecture people, we give «inputs»...



Then I read the report called Informality and Formality in Learning and it shook up my world by giving me a much more differentiated view of what we are trying to do.

What Helen Colley and her colleagues make quite clear to me is that we are too anxious to separate the different forms of learning into little boxes. The temptation is obvious: if we put them in boxes then we can easily say one form of learning is better than the other; then we can put up arguments for more resources and funding and recognition.

It is difficult, if not dangerous, to try to summarise the report in this small space and the authors are very careful in framing their conclusions. Nevertheless, it seems useful to highlight some of the points which made me put my thoughts into question, in the hope that you might go and have a closer look:

- One of the major findings of the research was that it may well be more sensible to see attributes of informality and formality as present in all learning situations. Attributes can be looked at in four clusters: process; location and setting; purposes; and content.
- Those attributes and their interrelationships influence the nature and effectiveness of learning. Changing the balance between formal and informal attributes changes the nature of the learning.
- All forms of learning have the potential to be either emancipatory or oppressive. This depends partly upon the balance and interrelationships between attributes of in/formality. However, the wider contexts in which that learning takes place are crucial in determining its emancipatory potential.

So, we need to look very carefully at the aims of the learning we are encouraging, look at the context and reflect more on the balance between the different attributes present in our planning. The report can help us to analyse what we do and be more explicit about what we are combining – and the authors are currently busy designing an analytical tool to give us further assistance.

If we go deeper into this analysis, it helps to see that, for example, when we add attributes of formal learning to non-formal learning (such as certification) we change the nature of the learning.

Even though I have read the report a few times and thought about it a lot, I'm still not completely clear about all of the consequences of looking at different attributes of learning in this way. But it sure is liberating to break open the box I had constructed for myself! Discussing these ideas with a friend as I wrote the draft of this article, we thought it could be helpful to think of learning as a stream. A stream whose flow also depends on the conditions surrounding it. Maybe we can find some nice ways to extend the metaphor in the future... Or, like Bob Dylan, just sit here and watch the river flow.

► A code or a coat?

Do trainers need to reach agreement about a code of ethics?

As one trainer put it to me a while ago:

“I’m fed up of this discussion never getting anywhere further than the old argument about whether or not it is acceptable to fall in lust with a participant”

Ethics comes up as a topic from time to time, with things like an optional working group at a pool of trainers meeting making suggestions, or an organisation which even devoted a complete study session to ethics in training. And there it stops, with the process never completed. Maybe we believe it is just important for trainers to be aware of their own ethics. Maybe we believe that any code will just become a coat for trainers to wear and then take off after the training session.

What do you think?

References and contacts:



Etienne Daho and Charlotte Gainsbourg: If,
*Virgin Records [with the lyrics
“If intrusif, plus combatif, sous sédatifs en soins intensifs,
cherche le motif”*

Helen Colley, Phil Hodgkinson and Janice Malcom (2003):
Informality and Formality in Learning, *Learning and Skills
Research Centre. ISBN: 1 85338 872 6*
*(Also available, free, for download:
<http://www.lsrc.ac.uk/publications/index.asp>)*

St Germain: Rose Rouge, *Blue Note Records
[with the lyrics “I want you to get together”]*

brazav@yahoo.com

