

Not knowing, or “knot knowing”? Can a Blackstar help us?

By Mark E. Taylor

“Marker” is a regular column in Coyote, hoping to encourage debate, questions and a certain regard. Written with the hope that 2016 will get better soon...



Tied up in nots and knots

In experiential learning, one of the roles of the facilitator is to act as a mirror to participants. To describe processes from the outside and sometimes even to suggest possible interpretations. It is no joke to say that this *mirroring* can help in *reflection* about what is happening both in the group and at an individual level. One of the main aims here is to help participants recognise both the moments in which they are learning AND to learn from, yes, the experience.

One of those moments is variously described as the time of “not-knowing” or even “stuckness” (a nice bit of international English). A time when you are confronted with a problem or a dilemma and you really do not know what to do or which way to proceed. To put it mildly, the feelings associated with this moment are pretty uncomfortable, even painful: confusion; frustration; fear of being laughed at; embarrassment; nervousness; being out of balance and so on. As such, most people want to pass this stage as quickly as possible and get back to their comfort zone.

I am grateful to Saskia Nauwelaerts, a colleague from Belgium, who raised the issue in a working group of practitioners, as she had noticed that this time is also a challenging one for facilitators themselves. In a nutshell: what to do if you notice (or at least think you do!) that one or more members of the group are at this stage of “not-knowing”? Do you leave it and maybe refer to it in a debrief after the exercise? Or give in to the temptation not to touch the difficult emotions involved? She had been experimenting with halting the process, describing what she saw and encouraging participants to have “a quality dialogue” with themselves about what they were going through. In that way the emotions were reframed and from “not-knowing” or “stuckness” they were able to move on with some feelings of relief and a change of perspective, like feeling more hope for how to proceed. Exploration of these ideas will continue, especially in attempting to connect with such moments through the use of metaphors.

As we were discussing these points the word “not” kept jumping up and down in my emmenthal-formed brain. What about changing “non-knowing” for “knot-knowing”? How about describing those moments metaphorically? When you don’t know what to do, all your competences are tied up in knots. All knots can be untied, eventually. So, little by little, participants will learn how to untie their own knots and create new ones. Together with facilitators they would become “knot knowers”.

What do you think?

David Jones's locker

So much has been written about David Bowie. Why to add more? Maybe because he was an educator without being one. Comparisons with him abound as a kind of human Internet-before-there-was-Internet,¹ refracting thousands of different influences and introducing those who had eyes to see or ears to listen to everything from the Velvet Underground to kabuki to William Burroughs. His synthesis was an open one – he was happy to share where all those things came from. As the Blackstar blinks at us in our courses, seminars and other activities, do we give sufficient credit to our sources? What’s hidden in your locker today?

Odd quotes

“The issue is less one of originality than of utility – a party with more photographers than dancers will never look as good as the other way round”.² This came to mind when being in an activity where there were nearly more in the “team” than the invited participants; so the majority of the team are participating, or not? Who is doing? Who is watching?

Excerpt from a recent youth exchange grant application, in the part talking about risk assessment: “We will give every group a First Aid kid.”³

Think about it.

And finally

Thanks to those who write or give informal feedback. Next time we consider the “pataphysics of egg registries for clown faces”...

¹ See, for example, the immediate reaction of the artist Momus: <http://mrstsk.tumblr.com/post/137085985233> (accessed 10.2.2016)

² Brown, Britt (February 2016), “Collateral Damage”, WIRE magazine, London

³ No reference given, out of respect for the whistle-blower.

