

marker



It's about Time

Marker is a regular column in Coyote, written by Mark Taylor, looking at issues in training and hoping to encourage debate.

Feedback from you will be really welcome, today, tomorrow or if you just have the time one day...



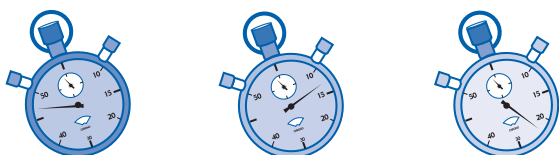
One of my favourite little activities is called 60 seconds equals 1 minute, or does it? In essence, you ask participants to stand up, close their eyes, count up to a minute in their heads and then sit down silently. Results can be fairly spectacular and I've seen people sit down after 19 seconds and after 160 seconds. We all know that time can be a very personal thing, the activity just illustrates this in a direct way. What is more important is the kind of discussion you can have afterwards about how time (and our perception of it) affects so much of what we do. For a training course team, this issue can be worth spending some time on.

Programming time

Around 300 BC, the Greek philosopher Theophrastus came out with the statement "Time is the most valuable thing a man can spend". When you are designing course programmes, how do you organise how time will be spent, how do you work out timings? Do you recognise a day that starts something like this:

- 9:15** Energiser
- 9:25** Programme of the day
- 9:30** Divide up into groups for activity facilitated by trainers (based on the objectives of the activity)
- 10:05** Debriefing in the groups
- 10:35** Report backs from the groups in plenary
- 10:55** Coffee break
- 11:15** Presentation by an expert
- 12:00** Discussion
- 12:30** Lunch

Yes, it is a little exaggerated. But not much. Every minute counts. Little space is left for unplanned reactions, for late arrivals or for errors. Facilitating groups in such a case means: get them back into the big group at the agreed time so they can share their results. What some trainers I have worked with call "the dictatorship of the kitchen" has even more



impact on the running of the programme than the invited expert. Even the coffee breaks are so short they feel more like work.

Contrast the above with this (again slightly exaggerated) approach:

After breakfast, clear up and wash the dishes.

Meet together and divide into groups

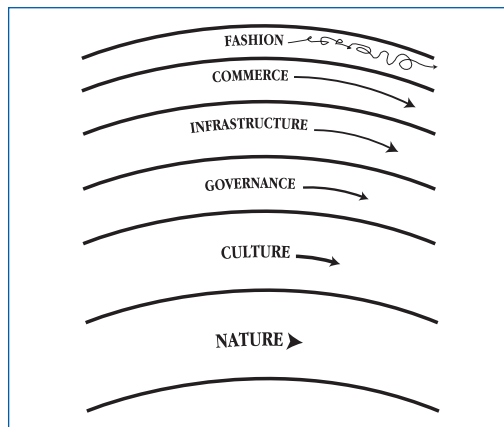
Activities and debriefing facilitated by trainers (based on perceived needs of the group)

Lunch is made by the first group to finish

Sounds perhaps a little bit loose, this morning, doesn't it? Until fairly recently I would have agreed with that statement. I was sure that I had it all sorted out in my head: our job as trainers was to create an environment for learning and this environment was also based on quite a strict respect for time and timing. This was only natural, seeing that we were organising courses which only lasted for a week or two. Working in multicultural teams with multicultural groups I had realised that, of course, one had to be reasonably flexible with time. But there were limits, and if a team had agreed that they would bring sub-groups back together at a specific time, then I would do my utmost to respect that and would expect my colleagues to do the same. We know when we start and when we finish. For me, these were "quality indicators" for the course and for the team. Now I am not so sure.

Step back into time

Within the limits of this column, as usual, there will be things I leave untouched. Within the limits of a training course, there will be things which are left untouched. That's the way it is. Outside the training field, there are some crucial developments which have recently caught my eye. One of these is the concept of "The Long Now": a concept which fights for a different way of looking at time, arguing that we should be taking a much wider view, taking responsibility for the fact that our actions will have consequences for the generations to come. The following graphic illustrates perceptions of time and change, ranging from the slowest (nature, at the centre) to the fastest (fashion, at the outside). Where do you think "training" should be placed?



(Illustration by Stewart Brand and Brian Eno, from <http://www.longnow.org/about/speedlayers.htm>)

Do you remember all the publicity there was in the last couple of years about the "Millennium Bug", or "Y2K" – the Year 2000? We were told that all our computers would stop working because they had only been programmed to recognise the years from 1901 to 1999 and once they reached the year 2000 would "think" that we were back in 1900. Look at us today: have we really learnt anything substantial from that episode? If we were really living in a "Long Now", we would be worried about the fact that our computers do not show this year as "02000" – yes, we would already be preparing for Y10K! Jem Finer's musical composition Longplayer has started being performed at the beginning of this year and will continue without repetitions until 31 December 02999. None of us, including the composer, will ever be able to hear more than a part of it. One of the Long Now thinkers used to be a rock musician: Brian Eno. His article, The Big Here and Long Now, says something which could be important for trainers to think about:

"Since the beginning of the 20th century, artists have been moving away from an idea of art as something finished, perfect, definitive and unchanging towards a view of artworks as processes or the seeds for processes – things that exist and change in time, things that are never finished. [...] Artworks in general are increasingly regarded as seeds – seeds for processes that need a viewer's (or a whole culture's) active mind in which to develop. Increasingly working with time, culture-makers see themselves as people who start things, not finish them."

What could well be vital for us as trainers is to look at whether or not we see ourselves as part of Eno's "culture-makers". If so, then we need to analyse the programmes we construct and ask ourselves a further question: how far are we taking the time necessary to start things well and not deluding ourselves into thinking that we can ever finish something in a packed short-term course?

The great French Marshall, Louis-Hubert-Gonzalve Lyautey, once asked his gardener to plant a tree. The gardener objected that the tree was slow growing and would not reach maturity for 100 years. The Marshall replied, 'In that case, there is no time to lose; plant it this afternoon!'

Sources

The Long Now Foundation: <http://www.longnow.org>

Jem Finer: <http://www.longplayer.org/>

Brian Eno's article:

<http://www.longnow.org/about/articles/BrianEnoLongNow.html>

Contact address :

brazav@yahoo.com