

marker

"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, whether as a participant, trainer, observer or something completely different.



"Leave them alone!?"

All that input – where does it go? What do they make of it?

Let's talk in extremes. At one end of the scale there are those trainers who talk of "measurable learning outcomes" and "SMART objectives" (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Timeable), at the other end of the scale there are those trainers who talk only in terms of "processes" and the insurmountable difficulties attached to any type of measurement or assessment. Wherever we may place ourselves between these two extremes, we still face the question: how do we know if anything we have done in the training course actually changes anything in the behaviours, skills or knowledge of the participants? All those inputs, lectures, exercises, discussion groups, etc – what do they amount to? One part of the answer can be found in an increasing number of training courses...

Participants prepare workshops for each other

Sometimes near the end of a training course, participants are invited to choose a subject related to the theme of the course they would like to develop for a workshop. Once the ideas have been aired, then the team works with the participants to collect similar ideas together and this then leads to the formation of groups who have the task of creating a workshop for other participants. During the preparation time, the team act as a resource of information and methodological or practical tips for the participants. The reasoning behind this approach is

logical: participants thereby have a relatively safe environment in which to try out the ideas they have learned during the course and to go through an intensive experience of team work. It is a sort of controlled laboratory situation. Once preparation time is over, then comes the running of the workshops with other participants and ...

Participation (or observation) and then feedback from the team members

Some training teams decide to participate themselves in the workshops run by the participants, others decide it is more appropriate to observe. Choosing to observe is usually based on the premise that participating would unbalance the group process as the trainers already have a fairly fixed role in the course. Choosing to participate is often the result of a belief that trainers and participants are "equal" (we learn as much from them as they do from us). Whatever the choice, it would seem to be fairly natural or even obvious that the team should have a close look at what the participants have produced; and the participants should have the benefit of their trainers' feedback and evaluation in addition to those of the other participants.

But, maybe....

Maybe there is yet another way to go about things. Why not just set up the process and the time frame and then LEAVE THEM ALONE... Hearing this idea from a team member I was working with recently on an Alliance training for trainers seminar was a bit of a surprise/shock



to some of us. How will we know what the participants have done? Where is our responsibility as trainers? When are we going to be able to give them our feedback? Behind these questions, I began to realise, lay a few trainer doubts, fears and insecurities, some of which are also questions in themselves:

- Aren't we doing ourselves out of a job?
- Are the participants really able to manage things without us??
- We'll be left out, excluded, not important any more...
- We have managed everything so far - for the participants' benefit – and now we are not even going to be able to see what that all means to them (or to us)
- We won't learn anything from their workshops.

Still, the rest of the team were won over by the idea and the more we discussed, the more it seemed like an exciting thing to try. So, once the groups had been formed and had prepared their workshops, we left them to it. They ran their workshops and they evaluated them and then they evaluated the process. Team members only became involved after it was all over in the daily evaluation groups (see "Marker" in Coyote 1). And the participants produced a report about their workshops and their own evaluation. So...

What did the participants think about it?

After initial surprise, they found the absence of team members to be a liberating experience – even though the team members were great and supportive, it was also "great" not to feel the possible pressure of being scrutinised and judged. This is an important point to think about in the training we do because, even if we call ourselves "trainers", participants have all spent a large part of their lives being taught and graded by teachers. So, although this is often not talked about, participants have an inner expectation to be judged and given a grade in any educational setting. Here they felt increased responsibility for their own learning, especially as they were trainers wanting to be able to see how they could put things into practice back home. The feedback they received was from their participating trainer peers and that was very important for them. And, the obvious question...

How were the team in all of this?

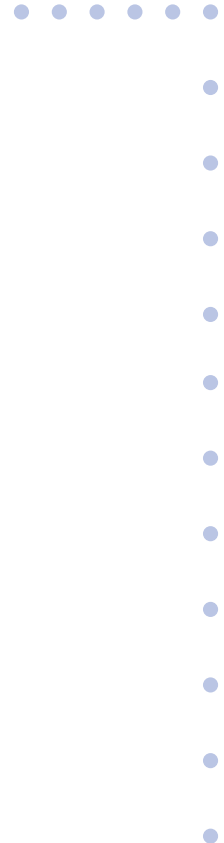
Excited, curious, feeling a bit "left out", but generally comfortable in their new role. After discussions in the daily evaluation groups, team members were able to compare impressions from the whole group about the experiment. Both training extremes seemed to be satisfied: the participants had created successful products in their workshops and they had learned from the process. Such positive feedback left us feeling that this approach could be devel-

ped further. Maybe this approach would not be appropriate for all target groups, and at least one crucial question remains open: what should the team do if one or more of the workshop groups get into extreme conflict with one another. Still...

What do you think?

And, finally

Thank you to Sam, Xenia, Joanne and Peter of the Alliance team and thank you also those of you who took the time to write to me about my last article – we're still in the Long Now....



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