

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.

Where do methods come from?

"I'm looking for new methods for my work", "we need new approaches for our training" – such are the types of things to be heard often at the beginning of training courses. Sometimes it feels like that is the only thing or, at least, the main thing that interests people nowadays. Forget the contacts with the other people, forget the experiences, forget the self-questioning – just give me the recipe book! Then I can put it together with all the other methods I have collected and I will be better prepared than you are. Even better, give it to me on a diskette and I can change it a little bit and then put my own name on it for distribution as a handout at my next course.

Maybe this sounds a little bit cynical so far. It is. But only to come to some questions and ideas about these things some of us call "methods". Others refer to them using such words as "activities" or "exercises" or "games". It is important what you call them, as participants will react very differently depending on the descriptive context. A really "nice" way to look at this is to divide the participants into two groups and introduce a short activity; to the first group, just call it "a game" and to the second call it "an exercise developed within several multi-national companies such as IBM or Shell for their introductory senior management training". Then compare the seriousness with which people participate... This method about methods came to me in a dream, but I don't claim any ownership over it. Maybe someone told me about something similar and I just forgot who it was or when it was.

Is there such a thing as "method ethics"? A couple of possibly fictional stories

These stories might help a more general reflection about discovering the origins and original aims of methods; giving credit where it is due; and in raising questions about the difficulties in trying to do it even when you want to... You may even come to the conclusion that none of this matters. See what you think.

A friend tells me of a workshop on group dynamics he attended. The trainer arrived, sat down, looked at the group and said nothing for 40 minutes. Then he and the participants spent the next hour discussing what happened in the group. A wonderful, courageous idea! Sadly, I forget the name of the trainer but, my heart pounding like mad, I use the idea a couple of months later in a workshop on "the role of the trainer working with international groups". Reactions of the participants range from confused giggling to rather violent cries of "what the hell do you think you are doing?!" The discussion afterwards is very fruitful.

Do I owe anything to the trainer? or to my friend?

Working in an educational centre in Germany, I find the description of an intercultural simulation game next to the photocopying machine. It seems to be really interesting. There are no references to the game's origin on the photocopy. Questioning all of the educational staff in the building produces no concrete results. The general opinion is that a participant from somewhere must have left it there. In my next course, I introduce the game to my team colleagues and they are excited about it. "Ooh, that's new! Let's try it! It would fit very well into our aims

for Thursday." So we adapt it a bit and it works very well. Participants want a copy of the game and we give it to them. They don't seem to be worried about the lack of references. And, over the next year, the game appears in training course reports all over the place.

What did the game's creators intend to achieve with the game? Does anybody owe anything to anybody?

As a trainee trainer in an outdoor education course, I work with a more experienced colleague called Ellen. She introduces a lovely team-building exercise which she calls "Matthias' Stick". A trainer called Matthias taught her the method and she feels that calling it by his name gives the stick she uses special qualities. It gives the activity a certain mystery and she likes the idea of bringing in the collegial connection. When I use the activity in future courses, I always refer to it as "Ellen's Magic Stick". Apparently this activity is sometimes referred to as the "Helium Stick" as the stick seems to fly away all by itself.

Do I owe Matthias something? or the tree?

A group of trainers is working on a publication for the educators in their organisation. After looking through all their files, they have quite a collection of methods covering introduction sessions, warm up games, presentation techniques, conflict resolution, etc etc. Nearly all of them are known to the editorial team as they have been working on seminars and courses for years. Apart from two or three methods, they have no idea where they have been published before. (Or they have been published in so many collections that giving one reference would be silly – example? the "Gordian Knot"). They decide to include a phrase similar to this in the introduction: ***Many of the methods and reflections in this publication belong to a kind of international method pool. We have given references where we can.***

Is that enough?

Where are the limits?

Whenever trainers from different backgrounds get together there is a wonderful opportunity to compare how they work, what kinds of approaches they use, to question and to think. Does it help us to know that, for example, the BafaBafa intercultural simulation game was invented to raise awareness of cultural differences among American GI's before being posted overseas? Maybe there is no such thing as original thought and everything we do

just builds on what has been before. I still feel that we should at least try to find out some of the origins of the tools we use and give credit to that. Sometimes it is just not possible, or we just discover the tip of the iceberg. Speaking of which: who was the first person to use the idea of an iceberg when trying to explain a concept of culture? My researches only take me back as far as an old report from AFS (American Field Service). Do you have a better reference?

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