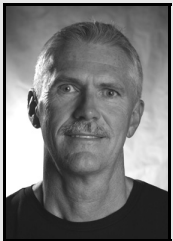


“Nothing is so well learned as that which is discovered.” - Socrates

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Interviews and article by Randell Jones



Twenty-five years ago Malcolm Knowles outlined the basic principles for “discovery learning.” He believed that adult learners needed to: know why they are being asked

to learn something, learn through experience, approach learning as problem solving, and see the immediate value of what they are being asked to learn. Adult learners want to apply their past skill and experience when acquiring new knowledge. They want to be problem solvers. To meet that desired outcome effectively, one has to provide a structured, safe space where experimentation, failure, and learning can occur.

At Discovery Learning, Inc. we have spent the past 15 years researching and experimenting with the process of learning by discovery to maximize the benefits of training programs. One of the insights we have gained is that the skill set that defines a good trainer is not the same as the one that defines a good facilitator of the process of learning by discovery.

This issue of *Excursions* outlines some guidelines that contribute to the effective use of the “discovery learning” process. We have asked some veteran trainers and facilitators to share their insights about what works best and why. I hope you find this information useful. Perhaps this presentation will generate an ongoing dialogue on best practices for creating an environment for “discovery learning.”

- Chris Musselwhite, President

Well-facilitated Discovery Learning

A well-facilitated simulation expands and enhances the learning of participants. Expert facilitators share their thoughts on what to do and not do to help create a successful simulation experience.

Today, behavioral simulations are most appropriately used as learning laboratories. They are most effective when used in a supportive environment to create a learning opportunity. Through them people can discover for themselves what they are doing well and what areas of their leadership and teamwork they might want to improve.

The collective experience of several facilitators is offered here in a list of “Dos and Don’ts” to help every simulation go as well as possible and to create the best possible outcome for the participants. In addition to the comments of Chris Musselwhite, president of Discovery learning, three consultants experienced in conducting and debriefing simulations offer their recommendations. Ancella Livers, Ph.D., is Group Manager of Open Enrollment, Center for Creative Leadership. Mike Rosenthal is a consultant and trainer who specializes in experiential learning, and Don Gunther is a senior program associate at the Center for Creative Leadership.

“The facilitator’s job is not simply to run the activity, but to help make meaning of the experience.”

– Ancella Livers

Set up the simulation as a valid learning opportunity. Simulations can and should be enjoyable experiences. Research shows that people are more receptive to learning when they are relaxed, laughing, and solving problems; but participants also want to know the real-life applications that will come from their participation. The facilitator should tie the simulation experience to what they do in their jobs as individuals, as teams, and as organizations.

“Many of our participants,” says Dr. Livers, “have had ‘the play’ beaten out of them. Sometimes a few will think any learning has to be so serious,

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and they start devaluing the simulation right from the beginning. This is when the facilitator needs to help them understand that this experience is indeed valid learning.”

“A host of issues can be discussed after any simulation,” says Don Gunther, “and a good simulation has strong application into the workplace. Tell participants beforehand what issues they will be focusing on and how it ties to what they do everyday.”

Know what you are looking for.

“Before beginning any simulation,” says Musselwhite, “It is helpful if participants have been through some sort of discernment of their strengths and developmental needs. This gives participants an opportunity to practice a new or different behavior during the simulation. Effective facilitators emphasize this opportunity beforehand.”

“You definitely have to know what you’re looking for,” adds Livers. “Values, communication, diversity. It could be any number of issues. But if you don’t know where to direct the discussion during the debrief, you are going to get a hash.”

“A facilitator needs to know what insight and learning the simulation is intended to deliver,” adds Gunther. “All simulations can’t be all things to all people; and, you can’t milk the experience for something that’s not there.”

Know the simulation and follow the rules. The effective facilitator knows the intricacies of a given simulation. “You can’t do these simulations on the fly,” says Livers. “The participants are looking to the facilitator to be the expert, to know everything about all aspects of the simulation, and they are right to

expect that.”

“The rules are important,” Livers continues, “because they direct the flow of the simulation in some direction that will build the experience for the best learning. In a simulation, we as facilitators are creating a different world, creating conditions for other things to happen. Those interactions and behaviors that need to happen or need not to happen host the teaching points around which the learning is taking place.” A well-run simulation makes that possible.

“The death knell for the debrief is for the facilitator to start talking about what he or she saw.”

- Chris Musselwhite

Follow the participants’ lead.

Livers says, “The wonderful thing about simulations is that we can debrief just about anything. Each group will find different connection points between their behaviors and issues they want to discuss; each group will do different things with the experience. That’s okay.” It is the facilitator’s job to help the participants get the most benefit from following one path or another.

Musselwhite adds that the participants have to set the pace. “The death knell for the debrief is for the facilitator to start talking about what he or she saw,” he says. “The facilitator may be absolutely right, but that doesn’t matter. The participants have to see it for themselves. They have to have that ‘a-ha’ experience.”

Use questions. “Questions are more important than statements in the debrief,” says Musselwhite.

“Questions enable the facilitator to help the group get at what it wants to talk about but may not know that it does. Facilitating the debrief is like starting with a ball of twine that is tangled. When you pull against resistance, you just make the knot tighter. However if you gently pull on other threads, that is, ask other questions and probe the matter from a different direction, you eventually find the thread that untangles the knot. The facilitator’s job is to help the participants unravel their issues.”

Create an atmosphere

of trust. The key to effectively debriefing a simulation exercise is in getting the participants to open up with each other in sharing honest feedback and observations. That means the facilitator must create an

atmosphere and environment in which the participants feel safe. They need to feel that they will not be criticized or attacked.

Model good feedback. “I think a good facilitator models good feedback,” says Mike Rosenthal. “Be specific with the timing and the behaviors noted. That puts others on notice that what is acceptable to discuss in the group are specific instances of behavior related to the simulation rather than generalities about personalities and the like. Another key practice is to clarify. State back to the participant what you as facilitator hear them saying or asking. And give participants the option to share or not. You can always probe with a question; that can open up a reluctant participant.”

Push, but not too hard. Some key

learning usually comes from openly discussing some tough issues. The effective facilitator knows how to probe a difficult issue from several angles. “During the debrief, it is important to affirm and to praise what was done well,” says Rosenthal, “but it is equally important not to let the group escape talking about problem areas.” Questions strategically asked are the key to opening up the group. But an effective facilitator also knows when to back off. “If you push too hard,” warns Musselwhite, “you can become the common enemy of the participants who are uncomfortable talking about their own issues.”

Manage the naysayers. When starting to debrief the simulation, facilitators may occasionally get a defensive participant who points out that his or her behavior would have been different in real life. Musselwhite says, “Deal with this by flip-charting two lists. One lists ways the participants think the simulation is similar to their real work and the second lists ways that it is different. When both lists are completed, put a big ‘X’ through the list of differences.” The facilitator should acknowledge the differences as legitimate and then point out that there is nothing to be learned from discussing issues on that list. The debrief should then focus on the opportunities for learning from the similarities.

Pay attention. “The participants are responsible for playing their roles and for engaging in the simulation,” says Gunther. “The facilitator is responsible for observing individual / group behaviors and identifying

learning opportunities for the debrief. The more the facilitator observes, the richer the debrief can be.”

In addition to things that every effective facilitator should do there are things they should avoid doing..

Don’t let the discussions get personal. “I diffuse comments that could potentially get personal by asking for specifics of observed behaviors,” says Rosenthal. “Then we focus on incidents, not personalities.”

Don’t just give negative feedback. Rosenthal adds, “I like to start off by asking people to tell about some behaviors they observed that were helpful to the team working its way through the simulation.”

Don’t rescue. Facilitators sometimes see their groups struggling. Some are tempted to intervene so that the participants will have a more positive simulation experience. “Don’t intervene in the participants’ struggles. There are a host of issues to

debrief regardless of what happens in the exercise,” says Gunther. “If you are comfortable letting the simulation evolve and emerge within the parameters of the simulation, you’ll

have a successful effort.” The participants’ objective performance in the simulation itself is not as important as the learning that comes from the debrief of the experience.

Don’t let reality obscure the learning. The simulation needs to parallel critical issues in the participants’ jobs but not be too

similar. When a simulation is too close to participants’ realities, they may overly focus on the details of the job and miss the learning opportunities. Regardless of what the participants do day-to-day, the facilitator should assure that participants see the connections between the simulation and their daily work regarding effective and ineffective behaviors and attitudes.”

“I think a good facilitator models good feedback.”

- Mike Rosenthal

When Said and Done

The key point,” says Livers, “is that when you are done, the participants understand that the simulation was not just a game, but that this experience has meaning for their lives. The facilitator’s job is not just to run the activity, but to help make meaning of the experience.”

Musselwhite adds, “If the facilitator is doing the job well, the participants will not even notice it. When they are finished, they will think they uncovered all the learning by themselves.” ●

Is That a Question?

- When I find myself making statements of three or four sentences, I stop and get back to asking questions.
- When I find myself pushing my pet theories, I know it’s time to stop analyzing the group and to get back to asking questions.
- When I find myself getting emotionally involved, I step back, refocus on my role as facilitator, and continue asking questions.

What's happening at DLI?

Online ordering is now available from our website at www.discoverylearning.com. Just look for your product's order form on the left side of the screen of each individual product page. We've made the process quick and simple for you.

As always you are welcome to email us at sales@discoverylearning.com or call us at 336.272.9530.

New Product Launch:

We are pleased to announce the release of the online-only assessment; Public Sector Leadership Profile. This new addition to our 360 series is focused on fifteen leadership categories identified as most important to managers and executives in the Public Sector. By responding to 62 items, using a five-point scale with a "do more/do less" section, respondents are able to provide important feedback to the participant. Upon completion the participant receives a four color



report with breakout reports for self, combined others, peers, direct reports and others. If you have an interest in seeing a sample of the survey please feel free to give us a call to set up a demonstration.

Two Train the Trainer sessions scheduled:

We will be holding Train the Trainer sessions on October 26-28, 2005 and March 6-8, 2006 in our office in Greensboro, NC. The sessions offer a chance to become certified in Decision Style Profile and the Discovery Leadership Profile and to begin the certification process for the *PressTime* simulation. Participants completing the training will receive facilitator guides for each tool and will be listed as certified trainers on our website.

Call our office for more information or to register. Seats are limited.

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