THE ART OF REVIEWING

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Introduction

Learning is a creative process. Facilitating learning is at least as creative. It is an art. When reviewing experience it sometimes pays to follow clearly sequenced models, but the best reviews often flow from intuitive judgements about what will work best. This paper aims to help you develop the quality of your intuitive judgement without abandoning your favourite model for reviewing.

What is reviewing?

Reviewing is any process in which the purpose or effect is to enhance the value of a recent experience. This includes reflection, communication, analysis, feedback and any looking ahead that arises from such processes. Alternative terms for 'reviewing' are 'processing', 'debriefing' and 'reflection'.

A little confusingly, the term 'reviewing' applies both to what the learner does (e.g. when interpreting experience) as well as to what the facilitator does (e.g. when facilitating the interpretation of learners' experiences).

In a group setting there are many extra opportunities for reviewing. This paper is about reviewing in groups, but much of what follows is also relevant to reviewing one-to-one.

I will first describe some key turning points in my own development as a facilitator of learning.

Knowing what not to do

When I changed career from a teacher to a trainer, I was introduced to the world of 'non-directive facilitation'. My initial understanding of this principle was that I should never give away any answers, any opinions, any advice, any anything... until one day, one particular group of learners dragged me out from my 'non-directive' shell and insisted on getting to know more about this mysterious facilitator who gave so little away. So I had succeeded in learning how to be 'non-directive', but I now needed to learn how to be so in a more friendly, open and facilitative way.

Through non-directive facilitation I had learned to step back and vacate the space traditionally reserved for teaching. But I was forgetting about other important principles. One was about setting an example (serving as a role model of an effective learner). Retreating into my own shell did not necessarily make others want to come out of their own shells. I now felt that I needed to come out of my own shell to demonstrate that it was safe, enjoyable and beneficial to do so. If I expected participants to take risks and learn from their risks, perhaps it would be helpful if I could show the way, or at least join in as a learner. So I would say something like this:

"I am here to learn as well. Some of my learning goals are similar to yours, some are different. I would like us to work in a way that allows us all to learn from each other. The more we each learn (including me), the more we all learn."

I was much more comfortable with the idea that I was a learner rather than being a 'non-' something. I now found it more helpful knowing *what* to do, rather than knowing what *not* to do.

Making learning difficult

I settled for some time with the idea that I was a 'facilitator of learning' - someone who makes it *easy* for others to learn. But I was then awoken from this very comfortable idea by a colleague who insisted that his job was to make learning *difficult* for others! His argument went something like this:

"It is questions and curiosity that drive learning. Once learners think they have the answers, they stop asking questions and soon stop learning. As facilitators of learning we

shouldn't let certainty or complacency stifle curiosity. We shouldn't provide ready-meals of learning in easily digestible chunks. Our job it to ensure that participants are <u>fully engaged</u> in the process of learning. The more that participants work at their learning, the more they will learn ... the more they put in, the more they get out ... no pain, no gain. Our job is to maximise learning, not to make learning easy."

What follows is not a step by step guide to make reviewing easy. It is more of a collection of signposts indicating ideas and issues worth visiting (or re-visiting).

Sequencing

There could be as many good reviewing sequences as there are ways of having good conversations. Unfortunately, many people stick to one or two favourite methods or models. However good these favourites are, the art of good conversation and the art of good reviewing are unlikely to be discovered or developed if they are based around only one or two patterns or 'proven formulae'.

Sometimes it pays to start a review and see where it goes. At other times participants will benefit from a carefully sequenced review. Both strategies have their place. Both strategies can also work well in combination - for example by having a sequenced conclusion to a free-flowing discussion. But without any sequencing at all, even the most able groups and individuals will readily fall into traps that get in the way of learning.

Here are some of the common traps that appear when reviews are poorly sequenced:

- ♦ jumping to conclusions - and making false assumptions
- ♦ not getting anywhere - unproductive meandering
- ♦ clichéd conversations - superficial, repetitive
- ♦ post mortems - spiralling down into negativity and ignoring achievements
- ♦ paralysis by analysis - and perhaps also not seeing the wood for the trees

- ♦ jumping ahead - moving into the future before learning from the past
- ♦ limited focus - typically on the last thing that happened, or following the interest of the most dominant participants
- ♦ scattered focus - with different people at different stages of reviewing - causing needless confusion and conflict

Sequencing is not the only answer to all of the above problems, but having an understanding of sequencing can certainly help you identify the problem and find a solution worth trying.

Sequencing requires two kinds of decision. One decision is about what to include in the sequence. The other decision is about the order in which these items are considered. There is also a third kind of decision which is about whether the items in the sequence are simply 'for discussion' or could be tackled more productively using other reviewing methods (see the website reference at the end of this paper).

What to include

It may not be realistic to include all of the features listed below on every occasion (especially when there is not much time for a review) but over a series of reviews it would usually be important to include all of these aspects:

- ♦ past and future - and also the experience of the review itself
- ♦ positive, negative and interesting aspects - suitably balanced
- ♦ individual and group perspectives - both 'I' and 'we' statements
- ♦ feedback to everyone or to selected individuals - 'you' statements
- ♦ something for all learning styles - however these are defined
- ♦ some negotiation about the process and purpose of the review
- ♦ a sense of importance and a sense of humour
- ♦ support and challenge in a spirit of inquiry and a review of the review!

No list can be complete and comprehensive. Other writers on the subject of reviewing (or 'processing' or 'debriefing' or 'reflection') emphasise different aspects. For example, Thiagi (http://www.thiagi.com) recommends drawing up seven lists as a starting point for reviews. Such thoroughness seems to require a particularly high commitment to reviewing. The collection and displaying of such information clearly makes it easier to recall key moments or key aspects during subsequent discussion. Such lists can also be particularly useful, according to Thiagi, in helping learners to make connections to the workplace.

If I use lists, it is usually when I ask participants to create a list of all the topics or questions they are interested in exploring after an event or exercise. This is the first part of an agenda setting exercise. But what next? In what *order* should these topics or questions be tackled and how should they be tackled?

Order! Order!!
Here are five general principles about sequencing in reviewing, whatever particular sequence you happen to be following.

► VARIATIONS
Don't spoil a stimulating training event with a predictable and one-dimensional approach to reviewing. There is no single 'best' or 'correct' sequence for reviewing. There are an infinite number of sequences that will work well. There are also common traps awaiting poorly sequenced reviews (see above). It is therefore useful to use a sequence that avoids common traps, while being open to variations and adaptations.

► ASSUMPTIONS
Be careful not to assume that a review begins at the start of the 'official' reviewing session. Some important informal or independent reviewing may have already taken place. For example, if participants have already spent time independently on stage 1 and stage 2 (of your particular sequence), they may be ready

to dive into stage 3 at the start of your review session. Also, the more that participants get into the habit of reviewing, the greater the chances that they will be doing reviewing (formally or informally) *during* the training exercises. So even if you start your review immediately after a training exercise, you may still find that plenty of reviewing has already taken place. The best starting point is not always stage 1.

► TRANSPARENCY
There may be occasions where you want to take full responsibility for the sequencing of a review (and keep your cards close to your chest). But it is usually helpful if participants are aware of the general principles that you are using for sequencing reviews, as well as knowing the particular sequence for the current review - if you have one in mind. This is partly to avoid chaotic situations such as when:

♦ one person is talking about the future
♦ another is still preoccupied with what happened
♦ two others are engaged in giving and receiving feedback
♦ someone else is really excited about a personal insight that has popped up
♦ another is trying to steer things back to the original purpose of the review.

► TRANSFER
There is another important reason why you should generally try to be transparent about the sequence, and this applies especially if you are asking participants to take responsibility for their own learning. The point is this: whatever the overall purpose of the training, the *transferability* of what people learn will be enhanced if they are also learning about how they are learning. Participants will be more effective learners during and after the course if you can make the learning processes transparent. *Transparency about learning processes assists transfer* - especially if further learning from experience will be necessary when

participants are trying to implement changes back in the workplace.

► PACE

Sequences are sometimes presented in the form of a list - as for an agenda. Sequences can also be represented in the form of a cycle. So one decision you need to make is whether the whole review is to be structured as one giant cycle (or list), or whether the goal(s) of the review would be better achieved by making several journeys round a cycle. This raises the issue of whether a learning cycle is the equivalent of a 'lesson plan' for the facilitator, or whether each participant is travelling around their own unique learning cycle - and if so, do they do so each at their own pace or in unison with others? Whatever your plan, you certainly need to pay attention to the stage at which each individual actually is in the learning process. For example:

- ♦ Is anyone so immersed in feelings that they are not ready to stand back and take a more objective view?
- ♦ Is anyone so anxious about relevance to work that they are not paying attention to the here and now?
- ♦ Is anyone so committed to thinking that they overlook feeling?
- ♦ Was anyone so inattentive or so unmoved that the 'experience' has passed them by?

Four suits and a joker

It is time I showed my cards. I often follow a four stage reviewing sequence that is compatible with most of the principles outlined above. It has evolved from many sources - originally from my own informal research while working at Brathay as a development trainer, and more recently as a training aid when training facilitators. The fullest account of this cycle is published on my website (http://reviewing.co.uk) in the form of a tutorial about the 'reviewing cycle'. I will give a brief account of it here - in a way that emphasises the differences between the red and the black zones. These two zones can

be overlaid on any model of experiential learning.
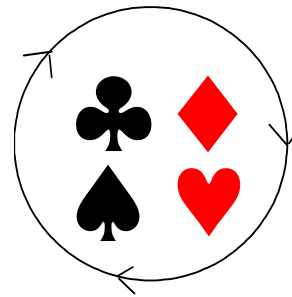
The first two stages of this four stage reviewing sequence are represented by the red suits: diamonds and hearts. Stages 3 and 4 are represented by the black suits: spades and clubs. The Joker is the wild card that allows exceptions and variations at any point on the cycle. The colours red and black have a special significance. Red represents what happened (DIAMONDS - a precious stone with many faces/perspectives) and what was experienced (HEARTS). The red side represents the experiences from which the learning may be drawn. The red side emphasises communication of the experience. The black side represents what is learned or gained from the experience. The SPADE is a tool for digging - for analysis, investigation, interpretation, etc. The CLUB represents future growth - in many possible directions that may involve predictions, choices, plans, rehearsals or 'keeping dreams alive'. Red represents experience; black represents learning.

Playing red cards

Some facilitators are most at home in the red zone. There could be many reasons why they prefer red to black. An important benefit arising from spending 'quality time' in the red zone is that participants become more aware of self and others and of the nature of the event. They become much better acquainted with personal and shared experiences from which their learning will be drawn. Spending 'quality time' in the red zone increases the chances that any subsequent learning will be well grounded in a rich appreciation of the original experience. 'Quality time' in the red zone helps to ensure that subsequent learning is substantially based on what was actually experienced. Time in the red zone also tends to develop attentive listening, empathy and

mutual understanding. These are valuable achievements in themselves. They also generate rich data and enhanced levels of communication to feed into the rest of the cycle.

Playing black cards

Some facilitators are most at home in the black zones. This is what facilitators are (generally) paid to produce: the learning outcomes and the changed behaviour back in the workplace. But there can be many other reasons why black gets most attention. The benefits of the black zone tend to be more self evident. This is where the more tangible results are generally found. The consequences of moving into the black zone too soon can readily be worked out by referring back to the benefits of spending 'quality time' in the red zone. Learning that is poorly grounded in experience tends to be less dependable, less valued and less memorable. Rushing through the black zone would mean learning very little of substance. The experience might have been highly memorable, but any learning would be easily forgettable.

The joker
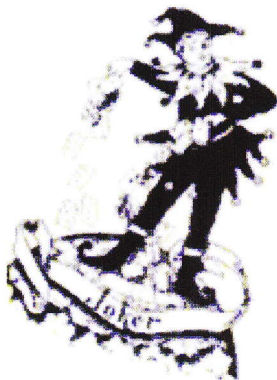
The joker is the wild card that you can play at any time.

The joker does not take this (or any other) model too seriously.

The joker gives the system a human face.

The joker keeps you alert to contradictions.

The joker challenges procedures.

The joker is sharp, quick and perceptive.

The joker brings fresh perspectives.

The joker is alive and dynamic.

Above all, the joker lets you trust your judgement and play your own game.

Every game needs a joker.

Every model has exceptions.

Playing the joker

Some facilitators are most at home playing the joker. Again, there may be a whole host of reasons why this is so. In the context of this paper, let us see the joker as a reminder that reviewing is an art. Whatever model or theory you use to guide your facilitation of reviewing, remember to balance RED and BLACK, and remember the JOKER - for any or all of the reasons listed above. Learning is a creative process. Facilitating learning is also a creative process - an intuitive balancing act between models and jokers.

The author

Roger Greenaway provides trainer-training in reviewing skills in the UK and in many countries around the world. These events draw on Roger's extensive background in experience-based training, trainer-training and research - which includes his doctorate in management learning.

Roger is the author of several articles and books about reviewing. He also publishes the email newsletter 'Active Reviewing Tips' - part of a comprehensive website which is becoming an encyclopaedia of reviewing methods.