

Old Traditions and New Trends:
Examining what is Continuous and what is Changing
in Young People's Lives and Outdoor Experiential Learning
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Playing the Joker: Workshop report by Roger Greenaway

Playing the Joker



The Joker is the wild card that you can play at any time.
The Joker does not take any 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.

The 'Joker' began life as a wild card that I added to the four stage reviewing cycle. The reviewing cycle arose from my observations of how colleagues were facilitating reviews at Brathay in 1982. I recently added the Joker because I found that some facilitators (in other organisations) were being too routine and inflexible in how they were applying the four stage cycle. The choice of the Joker was a natural one given that the four stage reviewing cycle already used the symbolism of playing cards - with diamonds representing facts, hearts - feelings, spades - findings and clubs - futures. A full explanation of this cycle is at <http://reviewing.co.uk/learning-cycle/index.htm>

The addition of the Joker as a wild card has opened up many unexpected possibilities that go well beyond the playing card model from which it originated. Most importantly, the Joker stands as a reminder of what models are: useful simplifications of what happens in the real world. If we rely too much on models we risk losing sight of what is really happening and of what really matters. Overuse of models may tempt us to try making reality conform conveniently to a model-centric view of the world. And if we rely on just one model these risks become infinitely greater.

On hearing my explanation of the Joker some people nod wisely while others look intrigued but puzzled. Someone soon asks: "Could you just explain again what the Joker is and how you use it?" I sometimes give the straight answer: "The Joker can be anything you want it to be. You can use the Joker any way you like." But this answer on its own does not win friends - neither for me nor for the Joker. So I often give examples of how people have played the Joker: some people use the Joker as an overview, others play the card to pause and review the current process, others use it to skip stages or to reverse the process, others play the Joker when they are lost or confused.

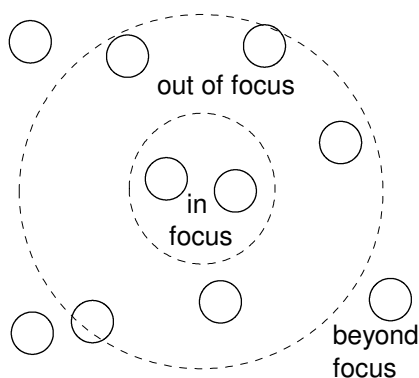
Some people become much happier when they can see a specific use of the Joker. But this is where the Joker really comes into play. This is because *as soon as a purpose is created for the Joker, another totally blank Joker must be introduced*. The original Joker will have temporarily fulfilled an important function - it will have got people thinking about how a model could be adapted or improved. And the proposed use for the Joker is likely to have fulfilled an important need or opportunity. But when a particular use is found for the Joker, it is important that a new Joker *with no implied function* is introduced as soon as possible.

The idea is not to strive for a more and more perfect model that will eventually not need a Joker. The value of always having a Joker present is more about accepting the nature of what a model is - not perfection but a useful approximation. There is actually an implied purpose for the Joker in the above description which could be stated as: "The purpose of the Joker is to keep people thinking about the ways in which a particular model is limited and can be changed". Although this might be a common purpose for the Joker, there should always be a wild card introduced that allows for *any* purpose or use - even questioning the whole basis of the model to which it is attached, and even whether the Joker is more trouble than it's worth.

Some find the Joker to be an annoyance, while others find the Joker to be an opportunity. I would like to see a Joker with every model - simply add one to the 7 habits, the 6 hats, the 4 learning styles, the 8 multiple intelligences - just to keep people thinking and learning. The spirit of the Joker is not to poke fun at models but is to maintain a critical view - particularly of the models we most cherish. The Joker is not a model in its own right. Its existence depends on a symbiotic relationship with an existing model. 'Playing the Joker' resembles 'Playing Devil's Advocate' in some respects, but Devil's Advocate is simply one of an infinite number of roles that could be played by the Joker.

To use any model responsibly we need double vision - to simultaneously see what's in the model and what's not in the model. The Joker helps us notice what is not in the model. But any presentation about the Joker must finish with a blank Joker that has no implied purpose whatsoever.

Is facilitation like spinning plates?



The spinning plates exercise provided a practical demonstration of the Joker at work. Our starting point was not a theoretical model but a common metaphor: people often talk of their work as having to keep a number of plates spinning. For example, whether a manager or an outdoor leader or a group facilitator (or almost any multitasking role) people will readily recognise the metaphor or it's close relation: a juggler having to keep many balls in the air at the same time. For practical reasons, spinning plates was the metaphor we explored because it is easy to write on paper plates!

The exercise started with everyone in a circle, holding a blank plate and writing down one thing that a group facilitator should pay attention to. I then chose one plate at random and that was the starting point. The starting point might be 'my emotional state' (as a facilitator). I then ask, "What does a facilitator attending to their own emotional state risk *not* noticing?" Everyone looks around the circle and suggests one of the other plates. I then ask the same

question about the new plate: “What does a facilitator attending to x risk *not* noticing?” This process continued for several moves. If there were no suitable ready-made opposites, participants suggested an opposite and wrote it on a new blank plate. If more than one opposite was offered, each suggestion was included and explored.

We now had lots of plates with things that group facilitators should attend to. But this was not simply a brainstorming exercise. Firstly, it was more structured than a brainstorm. Secondly, we now had a dynamic model to play with. I started telling the story of a fairly typical scenario in group facilitation and as I did so, each person would choose a plate and move in towards the centre of the circle to indicate that the fictional facilitator was now paying attention to what was on the plate. As the story developed other participants would bring in their plates. Plates already in the centre would move away from the centre (and out of focus) as they ceased to be the centre of attention. We had developed a crude but dynamic model of how a group facilitator pays attention to different ‘plates’ in the course of their work.

How was this like the Joker? At the making stage, each blank plate was a wild card until it had writing on it. Throughout the second stage blank plates were always available if needed. Also, while walking through the scenario we all exercised ‘double vision’ - paying attention to what was already part of the evolving model as well as paying attention to extra elements that we needed to include. ‘Playing the Joker’ (or simply being aware of the possibility of doing so) increases all round awareness of a model’s strengths, weaknesses and potential.

In the spinning plates exercise, the starting point is a metaphor. After running through the spinning plates exercise several times, participants may notice interesting patterns emerging. This could be the making of a new model of group facilitation. Whatever happens, the Joker should always be present so that this dynamic model does not stay still. Frequent use of the spinning plates exercise could help facilitators increase their awareness of the variety of patterns that occur when facilitating groups. In this way, spinning plates can be used as a reviewing tool for accelerating facilitators’ own learning from experience.

Postscript. ‘Old Traditions and New Trends’ was the very first occasion on which I used the Joker to explore the Spinning Plates metaphor. I have now used the same process several times with different groups of trainers and with similar results. The Joker is proving its value both as a challenge to existing models and as a creator of new ones. The Joker is a creatively critical force. Playing the Joker gives identity and life to easily forgotten principles about exceptions and flexibility and the essential nature of models. Playing the wild card helps practice to develop and helps facilitators stay ahead of the game. The value of going to the wild country would be wasted if the wild card gets left behind.

References

The meanings of the playing card symbols are described in ‘The Active Reviewing Cycle’ at: <http://reviewing.co.uk/learning-cycle/index.htm>

‘Playing the Joker’ was first described in ‘The Art of Reviewing’ (Journal of the Institute of Training and Occupational Learning Vol 3, No 1 pp47-53 ISSN 1469-977X). Available at: <http://reviewing.co.uk/articles/the.art.of.reviewing.htm>