



## IT'S NOT ALL FUN AND GAMES – Organising and Debriefing Experiential Activities

Part of *The Essentials* series of articles and resources for facilitators.  
By Rhonda Sparks-Tranks  
Revised 2023



As a participant in a recent training program, I experienced a profound emotional response in an experiential learning activity and it wasn't good experience. It was a stark reminder of how important it is to properly prepare, set up and debrief structured learning experiences and how training facilitators can unwittingly undermine learning. It prompted me to revisit this resource to reflect on how the activity was run, why it went so "wrong for me".

Trainers and facilitators use these approaches (sometimes called "training games" - a term I abhor), because of their effectiveness for individual and group development. But the learning can be limited or undermined by poor: choice; entry, conduct; exit and reflective integration. There's much more to ensuring the effectiveness of the learning than just running the "activity" part of the event. See below for my own comments and suggestions into how things could have been better.

This article / resource was inspired by and adapted from the *Handbooks of structured Experiences for Human Relations Training*, edited by J. William Pfeiffer & John E. Jones. The first volume was published in 1974 and continued for decades. I still refer to my old handbooks. They are now collector's items and rare as hen's teeth- worth trying to get at least one volume or anything by Pfeiffer.

Nowadays much of my work with groups is as a process facilitator and team coach. However opportunities for learning continue regardless of the context and learning still happens if the event being able to properly debrief what the group has experienced is important regardless of one's "brand" of facilitation.

### SOME BACKGROUND - SOURCES AND THEORIES

Experiential learning occurs when a person engages in some activity, looks back analytically, draws some useful insight from this analysis, then translates the learning into new behaviour. This is a natural process: we all experience this spontaneously in our day-to-day lives. It's an inductive learning process: proceeding from observation, rather than deductive learning wherein a general concept is followed by examples and application. The distinction is sometimes referred to as "chunking up" (inductive learning) and "chunking down" (deductive learning). Both are valid and their use depends on the context, content and circumstance. These two approaches have been discussed through time immemorial. Aristotle had a lot to say on the subject.

Underpinning experiential learning is the concept of cognitive dissonance.

### Lewin and Festinger

Kurt Lewin has been an influential figure in social psychology and organisational development. Lewin advocated that that learning occurs best when there is tension between an action and reflecting on that action, and experience and abstracting from that experience.

The concept of “cognitive dissonance” was introduced in 1957 by Leon Festinger a student of Lewin, to explain changes in beliefs and opinions. It’s based on the idea that when we experience tension or conflict between two mental states (cognitive dissonance) it leads to a change in one of the two mental states, or both. This is the intention of experiential training activities – to create tension. If a person is presented with new information that contradicts their existing beliefs or opinions (creating cognitive dissonance), they may seek to change one of their mental states to reduce the conflict and tension experienced.

A formally designed, structured experience provides a framework in which we can speed up and facilitate the inductive process and help people work through their cognitive dissonance.

### ICA and ORID

The Institute of Cultural Affairs’ ORID framework (Observation, Reflection, Interpretation, Decision). It has many applications for learning, meetings, evaluation and more.

**Kolb’s Experiential Learning Cycle (ELC)** published in 1984 was also inspired by the work of Kurt Lewin

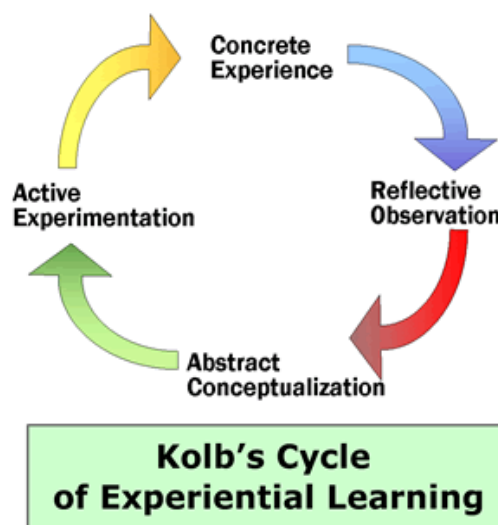
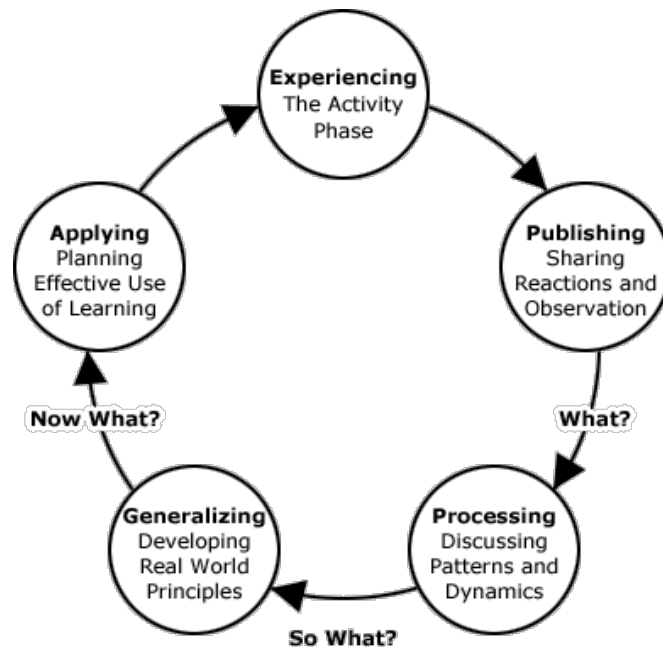


image by Karin Kirk

Other influences include Donald Schön and his concept of reflective practice and double loop learning.

**Pfeiffer and Jones Experiential Learning Cycle** includes a 5<sup>th</sup> stage – that of publishing. This stage allows people within the group to share what happened for them during the activity and their reactions and feelings associated with that.



I was fortunate to have been taught the Pfeiffer and Jones framework in the late 1970's on a 2 week residential "Advanced Train the Trainer" program which took us on a deep dive into experiential learning. It was a major immersive experiential activity in its own right, with all the group dynamics to explore along the way. I was taught how powerful these activities can be and also the ethical implications of exposing people to what can sometimes be a deeply emotional and profound experience.

Together with a colleague from those days in the 1990's we established a "training trainers" business: The Learning and Training Alliance. Programs included a 4-day program (2 x 2-days) on design, preparation, conduct and debriefing of experiential activities, training "games" and role plays.

Since then, I continue to come across people who say they have been damaged by a poorly facilitated activity. Some trainers and facilitators still run a training activity or "game" based solely on what they saw someone else do with little knowledge of all that's really involved. Worse is running an activity because it seems like fun from the facilitator's perspective without thinking through the purpose, aligning it to purpose and aims and not considering the ethical implications.

What makes the Pfeiffer and Jones handbooks such a valuable resource for facilitators and consultants is the clear instructions for the activities including: goals, recommended group size, time required, materials, physical setting and the step-by-step process to follow. Worksheets, references and caveats are also often included.

The 5 stages of the Pfeiffer cycle are listed below together with useful questions to use as a guide during each stage. Before we explore these 5 stages I stress the importance of choosing an appropriate activity aligned to purpose of the event.

## STAGES AND HELPFUL QUESTIONS WHEN DEBRIEFING EXPERIENTIAL TRAINING ACTIVITIES.

### Experiencing Stage

The initial stage is the data-generating part of experiential learning. We often associate this stage with some event, game, or fun. This is the experience that must be processed through the stages of the Experiential Learning Cycle to maximise the learning applications.

This is sometimes called the “entry” phase and is just the beginning of the process. Obviously, if the cycle stops after this stage, all learning is left to chance and there is a risk of negative reactions, not insights and personal development. The facilitator must take the group through all stages of the Experiential Learning Cycle.

The following questions can be raised at this stage to help people fully participate, particularly when people seem hesitant about engaging in the activity.

- What do you need to know to participate / engage?
- What is going on?
- How do you feel about that?
- Could you be more specific?
- Could you offer a suggestion?
- What would you prefer?
- What are your suspicions?
- What is your objection?
- Can you say that in another way?
- What is the worst/best that could happen?
- What else?
- Could you say more about that?



### Publishing Stage

In the second stage of the cycle, people that have experienced an activity, are invited to share what they saw and how they felt during the activity. The intent here is to make the experience of each individual available to the group, so an environment of trust and safety is essential. This step involves finding out what happened within individuals, at both cognitive (knowledge and perception) and affective (emotional and feeling) levels, while the activity was progressing. You may find the following methods helpful to facilitate sharing of reactions and observations of individual group members:

- Recording data during the experiencing stage.
  - rating of such things as productivity, satisfaction, confidence, leadership, communication, etc.
  - adjectives capturing feelings at various points.
- Quick free-association go-arounds on various topics concerning the activity.
- Subgroup sharing - generating lists such as "What we saw/how we felt."
- Posting round robin lists - total-group input recorded on flipchart paper.
- Ratings - developing ratings of relevant dimensions of the activity, tallying, and averaging these measures.
- Go-around - systematic interviewing of individuals about their experience during the activity.
- Role-identification - asking group members to identify roles they played during the experiencing stage.
- Interviewing pairs - asking each other "what" and "how" questions about the activity.

### Questions to ask at this stage

- Who would volunteer to share? Who else?
- What happened?
- How did you feel about that?
- Who else had the same experience?
- Who reacted differently?
- Were there any surprises?
- How many felt the same?
- How many felt differently?
- What did you observe?
- What were you aware of?



For an activity that lasts 45 – 60 minutes I would allow at least the same amount of time or more for this stage of the debrief. For example: I ran a “systems” activity on a recent program. No materials were needed but group size and space needed to be taken into account. It took 5 minutes to give the instructions. The activity went for 7 minutes and the publishing, processing and generalising phases took about 45 minutes in total and the applying phase 40 minutes (in sub-teams). So, a 7 minute activity generated around 90 minutes of group discussion through the publishing and other stages below.

### Processing

This stage is the pivotal step in experiential learning. Group members systematically examine their common shared experience. This is the group dynamics phase of the cycle where group members essentially analyse what happened. Group members try to determine why it happened the way it did. This talking-through part of the cycle is critical. We must include it if we want to develop useful learning. The facilitator needs to plan carefully how the group will carry out processing and focus the processing toward the next stage, generalising. Group members may experience unprocessed data as unfinished business, or even be distressed. This may distract them from further learning. Below are several techniques we can use in the processing stage:

- Process observers - reports, panel discussions. Note: Observers are often unduly negative and need guidance or training in performing this function.
- Thematic discussion - looking for recurring topics from the reports of individuals.
- Sentence completion - writing individual responses to such items as "The leadership was...," "Participation in this activity led to..."
- Questionnaires - writing individual responses to items developed for the particular structured experience activity.
- Data analysis - studying trends and correlations in ratings and adjectives elicited during the publishing stage.
- Key terms - posting a list of dimensions to guide the discussion.
- Interpersonal feedback - focusing attention on the effect of the role behaviors of significant members in the activity.

We should thoroughly work through this stage before going on to the next. Group members need to look at what happened in terms of dynamics and meaning. What occurred was real, of course, but it was also somewhat artificially contrived by the structure of the activity. An awareness of the dynamics of the activity is critical for learning about human relations outside of the artificial training setting. Group members often anticipate the next step of the learning cycle and make premature generalisation

statements. The facilitator needs to make certain that the processing has been adequate before moving on to generalisations about the "real world".

### Questions to ask at this stage

- How did you account for that?
- What does that mean to you?
- How was that significant?
- How was that good/bad?
- What struck you about that?
- How do those fit together?
- How might it have been different?
- Do you see something operating there?
- What does that suggest to you about yourself/your group?
- What do you understand better about yourself/your group?



### Generalising

At this point in the overall process, we move from the reality inside the training activity to the reality of everyday life outside the training session. The key question here is, "What is the relevance?" Group members focus their awareness on situations in their personal and work lives that are similar to those in the activity they experienced. From the processing stage, they form principles they can apply outside. This step is what makes structured experiences practical. If we omit or gloss over it, the learning is likely to be superficial. Some strategies for developing generalisations from the information generated in this stage:

- Fantasy - guiding group members to imagine realistic situations back home and determining what they have learned in the discussion that might be applicable there.
- Individual analysis - writing "What I learned," "What I'm beginning to learn," "What I re-learned."
- Key terms - posting topics for potential generalisations, such as leadership, communication, feelings, etc.
- Sentence completion - writing completions to items such as "The effectiveness of shared leadership depends on...."

The facilitator needs to remain impartial about what the group is learning by drawing out the reactions of others to generalisations that appear incomplete, absolute, or controversial. Group members sometimes anticipate the final stage of the learning cycle also. They need to keep on the track of clarifying what they learned before discussing changes.

In the generalising stage, the facilitator may introduce information to link theory and research to the generalising stage to the real world. This practice provides a framework for the inductive learning and checks the reality orientation of the process. However, this practice may lessen commitment to the final stage of the cycle and group members won't "own" the outside information - a common occurrence in deductive processes. It is not the facilitator's role to tell people what they have learned.

### Questions to ask at this stage

- What might we draw/pull from that?
- Is that plugging into anything?
- What did you learn/relearn?
- What does that suggest to you about ..... in general?



- Does that remind you of anything?
- What principle/law do you see operating?
- What does that help explain?
- How does this relate to other experiences?
- What do you associate with that?
- So what?

### Applying



The final stage of the experiential learning cycle is actually the purpose of the structured experience. The central question here is, "Now what?" The small group leader helps group members apply generalisations to actual situations which they are experiencing. Ignoring such discussion jeopardises the probability that the learning will be useful. It is critical that we design ways for group members to use what they have learned during the structured experience to plan more effective behaviour. Below are some strategies to use in this stage:

- Consulting groups of two or three - taking turns helping each other with "back home" problem situations, applying generalizations.
- Goal setting - writing applications according to such goal criteria as performance, involvement, realism, and observableness.
- Contracting - making explicit promises and commitments to each other about applications e.g. "what I will stop, start and continue doing ..."
- Subgrouping - in groups with common interests discussing generalizations in terms of what they can do more effectively.
- Practice session - role playing actual situations to attempt to change behaviour.

Individuals are more likely to implement their planned applications if they share them with others. Volunteers can report what they intend to do with what they learned. This can encourage others to experiment with their behaviour also.

It is important to note that on the diagram of the experiential learning cycle there is sometimes a dotted arrow from "applying" to "experiencing". This indicates that the actual application of the learning is another new experience for group members to examine inductively. What structured experiences teach, then, is a way of using one's everyday experiences as data for learning. We sometimes refer to this as re-learning how to learn. Actually, there are other ways to learn. For example, skills are best learned through best practice toward an ideal model, knowledge of results, and positive reinforcement. Also, experiential learning activities do not easily develop large-scale perspective. Lecture-discussion methods may be superior for such a purpose. What experiential learning does accomplish is a sense of ownership over the learning that occurs. We achieve this most easily by making certain that we develop each stage of the learning cycle adequately.

## Questions to ask at this stage

- How could you apply/transfer that?
- What would you like to do with that?
- How could you repeat this again?
- What could you do to hold on to that?
- What are the options?
- What might you do to help/hinder yourself?
- How could you make it better?
- What would be the consequences of doing/not doing that?
- What modifications can you make work for you?
- What could you imagine/fantasize about that?



## **So What?**

There's much more to training activities than fun and games. Although they can be tremendous fun, they can also be emotionally challenging for some when tension (cognitive dissonance) is created and people struggle to resolve that. Facilitators need to be mindful of the knowledge and skill involved to maximise these powerful learning techniques. I've personally continued to reflect and learn from experiential activities I was involved in decades ago: the "gift that keeps on giving" as I continue to develop as a human being on life's journey.

Returning to the scenario mentioned at the beginning of this article. It was conducted virtually – which sends up red flags for experiential activities. We have limited information about what is happening for group participants. In this case, everyone was on mute and some of us had cameras off, so the facilitator had no idea how people were reacting. We were thrown into the activity with little warning or introduction of how it might be relevant to the program. It was presented as something that would be fun – but it wasn't fun for some of us, in fact it triggered a deep and distressing reaction within me but the facilitator was oblivious. There was some limited "sharing" when the trainer asked specific individuals who had cameras on to comment, then she left to generalising, thus missing the pivotal processing stage. Discussions focused on those who had a positive experience and there was no seeking of alternatives.

Overall I was reminded of the importance of ethical considerations and what is really involved in conducting an experiential activity that leads to useful learning and application for participants. It was a lost learning opportunity.



## In Conclusion

Thank you to Pfeiffer and Jones whose books inspired and guided me through decades of training and process facilitation. They are still an invaluable resource for anyone who leads any sort of experiential activity or “games”.

Thank you to the late Ian Polley and late Peter Strachen (Strachy) who introduced me to this way back when, and who so thoughtfully helped me learn why it is so important. You were both way ahead of your time. All of this is a relevant now as it was then.

Thanks also to Ian Laing and Andrew Mountford, my previous business partners and colleagues. We trained others in how to run and debrief experiential activities, and worked alongside each other in so many programs that involved experiential activities. I treasure having worked with you both.

There is so much more on experiential learning that’s not covered in this article in this article, including Chris Argyris and Donald Schon. Perhaps a future article.

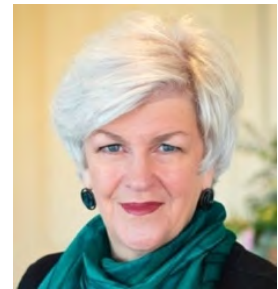
*This is part of my “ESSENTIALS” series of resources and guides for Facilitators and Trainers. They are generally only available to alumni of my development and mentoring programs. Contact me for more information on facilitator training and mentoring.*

### **Rhonda Sparks-Tranks,**

B.A. Certified Professional Master Facilitator

Rhonda has decades of experience as a process facilitator, trainer and coach working with major corporations and organisations around the world. Her training focuses on leaders, middle managers and process facilitators.

As a facilitator she focuses on navigating organisational change; strategic direction setting and alignment, and team development - particularly when work relationships have become dysfunctional. She also coaches individuals and teams.



**RHONDA SPARKS**

facilitator | coach | celebrant

*illuminating pathways for change*

e [rhonda@illumiconsulting.com.au](mailto:rhonda@illumiconsulting.com.au) t +61 (0) 410 510 720 w [www.illumiconsulting.com.au](http://www.illumiconsulting.com.au)