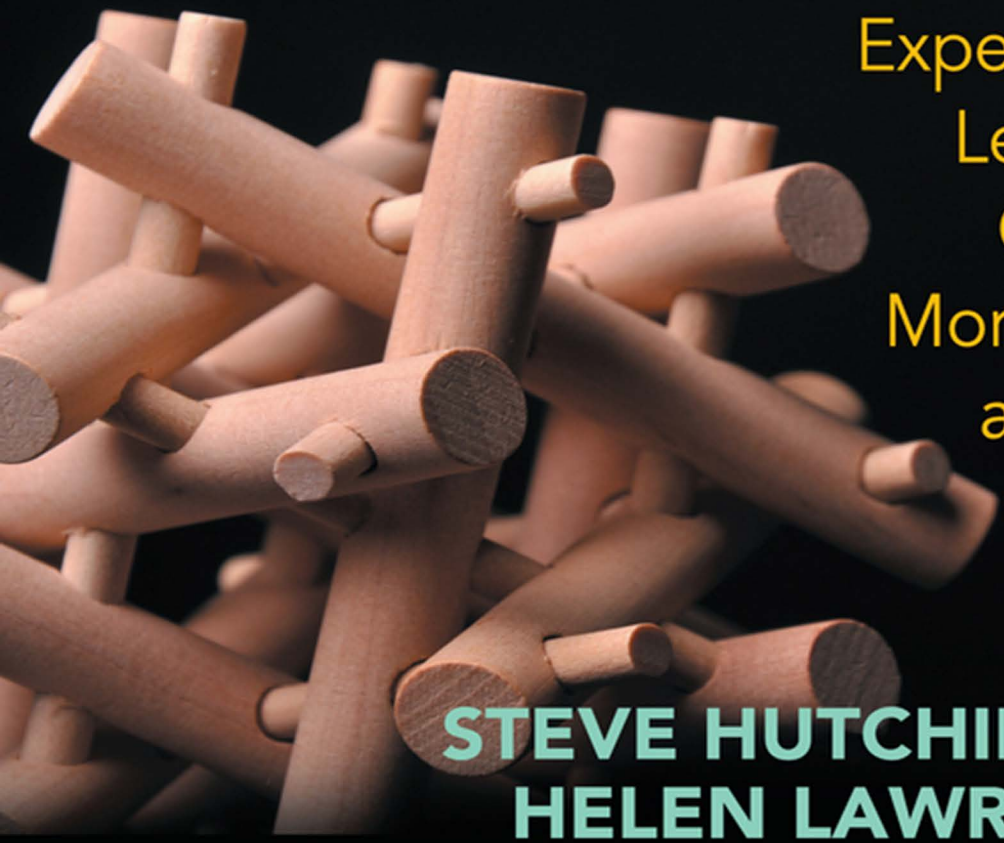
Playing with Purpose

How Experiential Learning Can Be More Than a Game



STEVE HUTCHINSON
HELEN LAWRENCE

ROUTLEDGE

A Gower Book

Playing with Purpose

SH
For Lisa and for Charlie and Eliza:
True inspirations of creativity and curiosity.

HL
For Thomas, Katherine and Peter:
My reminders of what, and who, is important.

Playing with Purpose

How Experiential Learning Can Be More Than a Game

STEVE HUTCHINSON

HELEN LAWRENCE

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The only source of knowledge is experience
Albert Einstein

About the Authors

After completing his PhD in Behavioural Ecology and working in academia, Dr Steve Hutchinson led development programmes at the Universities of York and Leeds. He now owns and runs his own development consultancy and has designed and led acclaimed courses and events for a huge range of organizations and institutions, both in the UK and abroad. A highly skilled facilitator and trainer, he is both a Vitae GRADschool national course director and a programme director for the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education. He is a qualified trainer, coach and practitioner of Neuro-Linguistic Programming. He writes articles and chapters on a range of topics from creativity to leadership and motivation. *Playing with Purpose* is his second book.

Dr Helen Lawrence completed a PhD in Sociolinguistic Variation and worked in the academic sector for a number of years, publishing, teaching and lecturing. Discovering a passion for helping people realize their potential she moved into the field of training and development. For five years she worked at the University of York, taking a lead role in developing and delivering training programmes for staff and students. In 2008 she set up her own training and development business, and works with individuals, teams and institutions in the research, educational and not-for-profit sectors. Helen is also a local and national Vitae GRADschool tutor; an accredited Myers Briggs Type Indicator practitioner; and a trained Coactive Coach.

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Acknowledgements

If I see a little further it is because I have stood on the shoulders of giants.
Attributed to a variety of sources including
Bernard of Chartres and Sir Isaac Newton

For the ideas, ethos and styles within this book, professionally we both owe a great deal to similar sources, including, but not limited to:

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Note to the Reader

Training and facilitation is often a very personal experience, with you and the learning group cosseted out of sight of prying eyes. However, this book was a joint venture and the concepts and philosophies presented herein are shared or collective. As such we've shamelessly alternated between the use of 'I' and 'we'. So, to help the reader, the use of 'I' is often found in the solo anecdotes and 'we' binds the more abstract material.

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Preface: Why Read this Book and How to Use It

In every real man a child is hidden that wants to play.
Friedrich Nietzsche (Philosopher)

Some time ago I was on a departmental 'away day'. There had been a number of presentations about our organization's strategic vision for the future and there had been a similar number of dry SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) discussions about how our department would react to the vision. Collectively we were then tasked with forming team reactions and action plans for the future and asked to prepare a presentation for the rest of the department. Our team kicked about a number of ideas and we were in the process of putting together a standard flipchart-led presentation of all the extra activity and work that we were going to undertake. At this point, someone decided that having an away day to land ourselves with more work was pointless, and what we really needed to do was simplify.

Inspired by the SWOT analysis, we decided that we'd been buzzing round like flies for too long and we were in danger of being 'swatted'. So we took the insect metaphor and developed it into how we as a team should be more like bees and less like flies. We put together five key principles (which even now I can restate) and instead of a presentation we prepared a skit which involved the whole team hovering round like bees with paper cups on our noses, and acting out the five new strategies.

Come presentation time, the other groups gave many bullet points and we had a natural history documentary with everyone from team leader to office administrator involved. Needless to say this was probably viewed in less-than-ideal terms by our boss. However, months and years later, everyone present could still restate the key apian principles and still talked about that part of the day. The challenging of process had had a profound effect on the team involved, and the fun experience had changed the way the team engaged.

All it took was paper cups and courage to challenge the process.

This book is written with that spirit, and asks how can you as a trainer, manager, people developer or coach get powerful lessons from the simplest of objects and situations? We hope that it will act as an inspiration for anyone interested in people development and is prepared to risk livening up office meetings or encourage people to talk and honestly engage with each other.

Over the past decade, both of us have spent a great deal of our professional lives playing games. As professional trainers and developers we've had groups building towers,

rolling balls, blowing whistles and balancing buckets to supposedly illustrate and teach vital 'real-life' principles and concepts. What became clear to us both is that most human resource departments or staff development sections have a training cupboard full of this type of store-bought experiences. And, despite the sometimes massive financial outlay for these toys, they are in the minds of the learners involved, often little more than games. They roll balls, balance buckets and learn something about teamwork and tolerance. Then the training day ends and they go back to business as usual.

We believe that real learning can only be said to have taken place when, back in 'the office', something changes as a result of the intervention. Balls, buckets and ropes can provide a new experience; but only if that experience is mined for the full impact (physical, mental or emotional) will learning take place and change occur. This book is about how you as a facilitator, coach, manager or trainer can invent or reinvigorate an artificial learning experience and have it be more than a game. Or, in the form of a short question:

Is it possible to facilitate and extract real learning from artificial situations?

We believe that the answer to this question is, of course, 'yes'; but it leads to three others:

- How can you do this more effectively?
- How can you create new games/studies/scenarios that can access the kind of learning you're interested in?
- How can you reinvigorate old games to facilitate real learning?

We hope this book provides some answers to these questions.

The book is constructed in three main sections:

Part I provides an examination of the concepts and skills required by the creator and facilitator of experiential learning opportunities. This section deals with how to take an idea into an exercise or an experience that will be effective in the training room.

Part II offers an overview of the skills and techniques associated with helping participants to extract, translate and transform any training-room learning back into day-to-day reality.

Part III presents a series of eight development issues; each presented in a separate chapter with our approach to the issue and suggested activities suitable to that scenario.

This is not a book about 'how to be a trainer' – we assume that you have some experience in doing this already. As such we don't cover furniture layout, welcoming participants, having breaks, PowerPoint-craft, storytelling or any of the other facets of being a professional developer.[1]

It is our hope that you will find the suggested ideas and activities useful. Sometimes we've presented fully working ideas – please feel free to use them exactly as they are presented. Sometimes we've presented partially formed ideas and possibilities, our intention being that if we can inspire you to do it for yourself this is a far more valuable

1 If you need a great overview of professional training practice, we'd recommend *How to Run a Great Workshop* by Nikki Highmore Sims (2006).

resource. Hopefully, by seeing our approach to the dilemmas explicitly laid out, you'll feel confident to develop your own solutions. Finally, we are aware that many of the ideas presented here are based on activities that have passed into the 'received wisdom' of the training and development field. Where we are able we will acknowledge the authors or creators of these; please forgive us if we have missed references and do contact us if you can fill any of the gaps.

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PART I

The Concept of Experiential Learning

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CHAPTER 1

Optimizing Artificial Experiential Learning

Pleasure is the flower that passes, remembrance the lasting perfume.
Jean de Boufflers (French Statesman and Writer)

Learning is grounded in experience. As trainers and facilitators, then, we must seek to create experiences from which people can learn. Challenge, success, failure, conflict and harmony can all provide powerful opportunities for experiential learning.

We believe that it is essential, in this creative process, to strike a balance between challenging realism and memorable stimulation or fun. Unless both components are addressed, it is unlikely that any real benefit will be gained from any intervention. In addition, unless any learning is reviewed and fully discussed, realized and deconstructed, much of the value of the experience may still be lost. As such, any experience does not need to be expensive to be powerful and in fact often the reverse is true.

Training and Human Resouces (HR) departments are bombarded with advertisements for a wide array of the different kits, registered techniques and materials available. It is easy to become dazzled by beautiful packaging and shining testimonials about the value of professionally produced resources, and for the primary purpose of the intervention to become lost. More significantly, training resources which are purchased 'off the shelf' will by their very nature not fit the learning needs of a specific group or individual so well as a tailored activity created for the purpose.

In short, the primary aim of any teaching or training intervention must be for the participants to learn and not to simply have an experience, however glossy.

Yet in our field, many professional educators seem to have lost sight of this core truth. For instance, do you as a teacher, trainer or manager start a session with an 'energizer' because your colleagues all do, or because you want your participants to enjoy a fun activity; or is it because you need your participants to be thinking clearly?

Focusing on the learning first, instead of the beautifully wrapped training game, gives far greater sustainable return:

- Educational sustainability – with lessons that last long after the intervention has ended.
- Financial sustainability – all the new learning activities suggested herein are commonplace and cheap/free, and the questions and insights here can breathe new life into activities already in your store cupboard.
- Creative sustainability – by focusing on the learning possibilities that objects offer you'll avoid staleness as a teacher or trainer, as there are *always* new objects around.

If we could first know where we are, and whither we are tending, we could then better judge what to do, and how to do it.

Abraham Lincoln (US President)

Why Play Games?

Activities and games are used in training and development settings because human beings learn from experience. Introducing an activity into a training session guarantees that each individual experiences the same event, so the learning which can be extracted in the group has a common point of reference. It is also quicker, cheaper and more convenient than using real-life experiences as source material. Therein, however, is both the activity's blessing and its curse, because for all the advantages it provides, in the eyes of the participants it isn't real. The skill of the facilitator here is in extracting real learning from artificial situations.

It's important to keep the perceived *unreality* of the experience at the front of your mind when designing and offering the activity to a training room (as this can help you to overcome potential pitfalls and challenges from groups), but it's also vital to keep in mind the reality of the exercise (after all it was real, insofar as it actually happened) in the review and learning extraction.

While we were writing one of the full-formed exercises that appear in this book, I mentioned to a colleague of ours (whom we rate and respect as a trainer) that we had written a brand new exercise. Her response surprised me: 'Wow. I wouldn't have the first idea where to start with something like that.' But there is no mystery, no magic that needs to be woven in to the fabric of a powerful learning tool. Rather, at the foundation of every new activity, there needs to be a clear understanding of what the learning point is. The key to success of any activity or scenario is this:

First, focus on the learning.

If the learning intentions and outcomes are foremost in your mind right from the start then the chances of success are far higher. Get it the wrong way round (game first, learning second), and you run a very real risk of creating a pointless distraction.

Probably the best way to explain how this process works in practice is to describe our creative process in the design of a new activity. Generally, when we take an inventory of our training creations, we've taken the following steps:

- inspiration;
- realism based on experience;
- theoretical understanding and criticism;
- testing and piloting;
- adaptation and reconsiderations.

These steps feed into one another and can be visually represented in Figure 1.1 opposite.

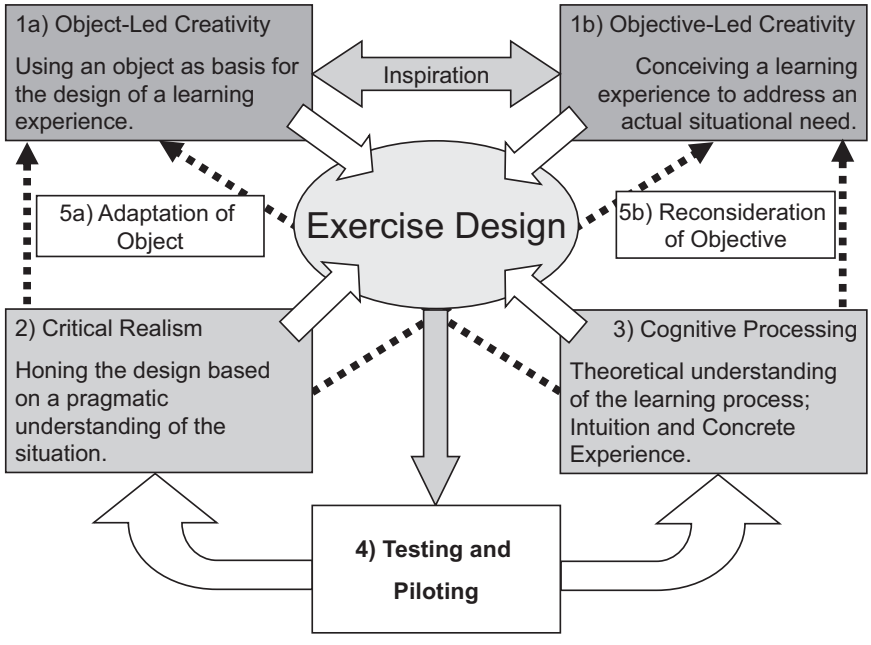

Figure 1.1 Overarching experimental exercise design process

Sources of Inspiration

Inspiration for us comes from two main places: 1) having a clear idea of a desired outcome and asking 'How could that be achieved?' and then being on the lookout for kit that would be useful in achieving that outcome; and 2) seeing something, anything, and asking 'How could that be used?'

Practitioner's Exercise

Take a blank sheet of paper and a pen. Your objective is to enable a group to explore issues around *customer service*. List ten different training possibilities or activities that you could run with each of the following resources:

A teapot

Toilet paper

Paperclips

Don't reject any of your ideas out of hand. Everything around you has some sort of learning potential. Apply the words attributed to Charlemagne,* 'Let my armies be the rocks and the trees and the birds in the sky.'

Note: * In the film *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, Henry Jones attributes these words to the Roman emperor, though we can find no evidence that Charlemagne actually said it.