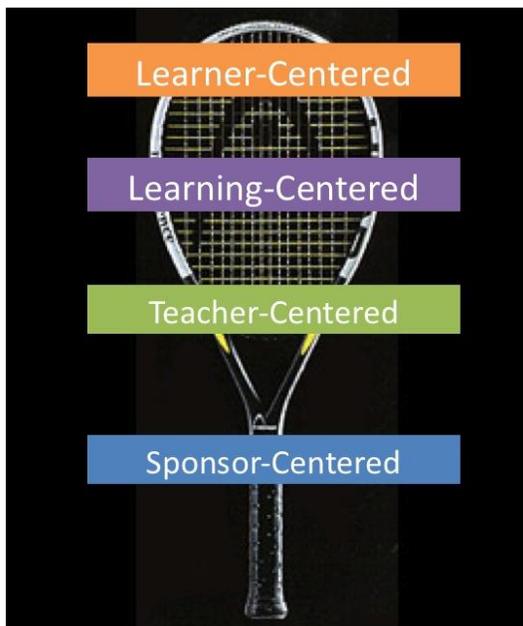


Finding the Sweet Spot: Creating Learning-Centered Workshops

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The question about what the centre of learning should be – either the teacher, the learner, or learning itself– seems like an easy one for people immersed in Dialogue Education or other similar approaches to adult learning. Indeed, the topic for this summer’s *Voices in Dialogue* e-newsletter initially struck me as a closed, (even rhetorical) question, with a “right” answer. (For shame, Jeanette!).



But as I swing in the front porch hammock and listen to my children playing on the street, I think back to when I played tennis as a kid and I discovered how the middle of a tennis racket is the best place to hit the ball. It’s called the “sweet spot”, that place smack dab in the centre of the cat gut where the tension is *juuuust* right. When you hit the ball there, your shot is powerful and the ball goes right where you want it to. But hit it anywhere else – on the rim, the yoke, the outer strings or the shaft – and there’s no telling where the ball will go.

Similarly, finding the learning-centred “sweet spot” in a learning event involves negotiating the dynamic tension between the competing demands of the learners, ourselves as teachers/facilitators and the sponsors of a learning event. But when you hit it, you really experience the power of learning!

Four Different Kinds of Learning Events

Let me continue by describing four types of learning events (e.g. workshops, classes, seminars, online-learning, conferences, etc.).

1) Learner-Centred Events

Learner-Centred events typically celebrate the knowledge, experience and decision-making of the participants.

In the hands of a skilled facilitator, these events are highly-responsive to their emerging learning-needs, providing space the participants to set the learning objectives, agenda and process on the fly (e.g. the Training for Transformation approach). In other cases, such as in Open Space Technology workshops, the learners actually choose the topics to discuss in self-facilitated small groups, thus allowing them to truly be Subjects (Decision Makers) in a highly Relevant and Immediate learning experience.

Done poorly, however, completely learner-centered events can risk becoming haphazard, unaccountable and time-wasting events. I've attended workshops in which the facilitators are hesitant to add in their knowledge and experience (e.g. "I'm just the facilitator, I don't know anything..."), or even to exercise decisive voice on creating an solid learning process (e.g. "what happens is what is meant to happen"). As a result we spent a lot of time sharing our collective ignorance or getting stuck in a poorly-structured learning task. In other cases, I've seen facilitators demonstrate a complete lack of accountability to meeting the agreed upon agenda by suddenly changing the program to meet the needs of a few outspoken participants. In both cases, the end result was frustration and disengagement.

2) Teacher-Centred Learning:

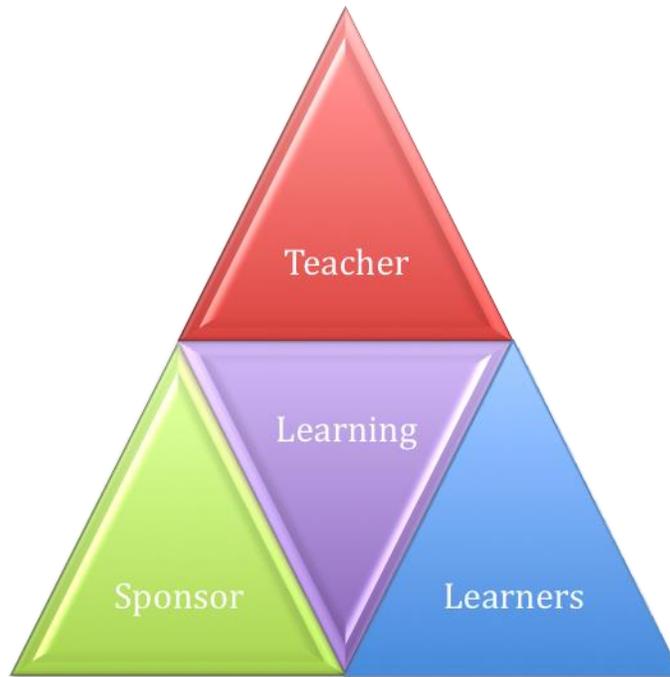
On the other extreme, we have learning that is **Teacher-Centered**. These types of learning events often exemplify a monologue approach to learning, where "one voice" – the teacher's – dominates and is valued.

In its worst form, we see teacher-centered learning in professional conferences, academic lectures, and religious services in which one expert "delivers" information to his/her "target audience" via the heavy artillery of lectures, sermons and data-dense PowerPoint slides. The learner's role here is largely passive; their role here is reduced to nodding in agreement – or nodding off to sleep – and they may (or not) get a chance to ask a question of clarification to the speaker at the end.

In its best case, Teacher-Centred learning events can be a great keynote with tones of inspirational stories, some clever jokes, a few super slides, some witty repartee with a few audience members, and a compelling call to action that has us all on our feet at the end. (See www.ted.com for some effective presentations).

But even here, the focus remains primarily on the personality, charisma, knowledge and/or style of the presenter -- "Wow! She sure knew a lot" or "What an engaging speaker he was" – rather than on what the learners did or learned.

Of course, I'd rather listen to a presenter who was personable and knowledgeable; and there are still orators out there like President Obama or former UN HIV/AIDS ombudsman, Stephen Lewis, who can share their wisdom and stir our hearts. But in the end, without providing opportunities for the learners



to go deeper to create their own meaning, it is difficult to discern how much the audience members retain or what difference it makes for their lives.

3) Sponsor-Centred Learning Events:

I'd like to add a third component here: the sponsor. When working as a consultant, I've also found the sponsor can have an inordinate effect on the learning process. Often the person or organization who hires you to design and facilitate a learning event has their own agenda and requirements, and you find yourself needing to balance these versus what you want to accomplish and what the learners are requesting. The fact that they are also paying you also introduces a power dynamic here that makes it extra tricky!

I once facilitated a workshop in which the sponsoring agency provided a staff member to attend each session of the workshop. *"Great!"* I thought, *"They can be there to answer any technical questions and they'll also get a more realistic sense of the challenges that the participants face in meeting their proposal and reporting requirements"*.

But in practice, I realized that they were really there to ensure adherence to the donor's understanding of the topic as articulated in the government-approved slide deck. Any challenge to the received orthodoxy or deviation from the officially-sanctioned slides was met with a hasty correction during the workshop and a scathing rebuke to me during the end-of-the-day debrief. It felt a bit like having a Politburo representative there to ensure ideological purity and adherence to the Party's line.

4) Learning-Centered Learning Events

Somewhere in the elusive middle, however, is a place where the needs of the learners and the teacher are balanced, where both are equals and co-learners, but they have distinct and clear roles. *The Sweet Spot*. When you hit it, it looks something like this:

- Before the workshop, the facilitator invites the learners to name what they want to learn and what they bring via a Learning Needs and Resources Assessment (LNRA).
- She then looks at the WHO (participants, facilitators, sponsors), is “wise about their Why’s” and creates a structured yet flexible learning design with clearly defined Achievement-Based Objectives (ABOs).
- This workshop design balances the needs of everyone in the room and finds ways to meet the emerging learning needs without compromising the ABOs that everyone has agreed to.
- There is a mix of inductive tasks that draw upon the prior experience, knowledge and wisdom of the learners and deductive tasks in which new theories, knowledge and facts are mixed in. The learners are given plenty of time to apply what they’ve learned and to consider the significance of their learning for the future.
- Everyone’s voices are heard and affirmed; the facilitator’s role is clearly defined to keep the time, guide the process and be responsive to the emerging learning needs.
- The facilitator uses the design flexibly, bending it when she needs to, stretching a task here, cutting another back there, bending it like a trellis to support a growing vine.
- Throughout the workshop, the learners are invited to step back and reflect meta-critically on their own learning and to actively engage in the evaluation process for their own sake.

The end effect is that the design and facilitation approach together create a space in the middle of a circle of the learners and facilitator. A space in which learning can occur freely. A place of surprise, creativity and wonder balanced by accountability, clear roles and enough structure. I’ve seen this happen a few times in my own workshops – although of course, fewer times than I’d like-- and *when it happens, it’s magical*.

A Musical Analogy

Just in case tennis isn't working for you, how about a musical analogy:

Teacher-Centred Learning Events = A solo by a great trumpeter or opera singer. If they are good, we are in awe of their virtuosity and listen with rapt attention. But no one in the audience dares to make a peep.

Learner-Centred Learning Events = A free jazz ensemble in which the players know their parts, and improvise freely. Although chaotic, there can be great creativity on display and it's full of surprises. Or, depending on your tastes, it can just sound like a lot of noise....

Sponsor-Centred Learning Events: The Soviet State Orchestra plays a symphonic work by an approved, ideologically-approved composer in perfect unity. Technically flawless and controlled, but no space for spontaneity or humanity.

Learning-Centred Learning Events = A jazz orchestra in which the facilitator conducts an agreed-upon score, keeps the time, and cues the soloists (sometimes extending the solos if they are really hot!). He strives to create space for the soloists to shine while honouring the role of all the players.

Epilogue: Fighting the Teacher Within

One of the traps that I think that I sometimes fall into is to think that my learning events are automatically "learning-centred" because I use a Dialogue Education approach.

But I must confess that my design-centric approach can sometimes become as "teacher-centred" as the worst lecture or death-by-PowerPoint presentation. I have to continually fight the temptation to over-structure the learning process, or to stick too rigidly to my learning design in the face of an emerging learning need or time-management issue. I need to cultivate the practice of leaving lots of "white space" in the design and to adapt to the flow of the learning process on the floor.

After all, it's not about my design, it's about learning.