



Resistance Overcome by Courage

some thoughts by Jane Vella

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At the United Nations in New York in 1991, a number of leading physicians from around the world had been invited to a conference on designing AIDS training. The Indian physician, Dr. A., in charge of coordinating the conference, had hired me to design with a core team. The night before the conference was to start, a small group of doctors came to her complaining that the program they received did not follow usual conference protocols: learned speeches given from a podium by learned physicians and researchers. Dr. A. relented, and told me she planned to restructure the conference. She invited me to stay overnight and attend the first day.

I was saddened by her decision, although I understood the pressure she felt. At about ten that evening, the phone rang in my hotel room. It was Dr. A. "Please consider leading the conference according to our original plan," she said. "I realize that the dialogue approach is imperative here."

The next morning we began the conference with Dr. A. introducing the process and me as the leader. I set the first learning task to the group, who were somewhat reluctant to get started. One of the members of the core team (Dr. T.) who had been most outspoken in his opposition to a dialogue education format sat almost sullenly at his group's table. He was a well-dressed European physician, in an expensive suit and tie, highly shined shoes and a grim visage. I watched him as the group set to work on the first learning task, inviting inductive reflection on the scope of the problem in their unique context. After a few moments, his expensive jacket came off and was draped over the back of his chair. Then, I saw him open his shirt collar and loosen his tie. The dialogue was heating up! Soon Dr. T. was in the midst of it, and the fur was flying. Learning was going on apace, and there was not an expert at a lectern in sight. They were, of course, all experts, sharing not only their ideas but also their passion.



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Across the room, I saw Dr. A. watching the learning groups; when I caught her eye she smiled and mouthed a silent 'Thank You'. She had trusted the design and it was bearing fruit in learning for all. I wish we had had at that time the tools for evaluation (cf. Chapter Nine) that we have now: how useful it would be to know what learning took place in that room and what transfer and impact followed the conference.

Frame the learning task. When you are faithful to your design, you place it in a frame that enhances the learning potential of everyone in the room. The frame is the overall design, with content specified and objectives clearly set forth. The time frame is non-negotiable so the teacher is accountable to do all of the learning tasks in the overall design within that time frame. Learning is not arbitrary, dependent on the attentiveness or intelligence of the learner. The event is not a brilliant performance by a sagacious and learned teacher. It is a faithful design for learning.

Each learning task follows on the previous one in an explicit and clear sequence, so the frame itself is evident. As learners work each task, they naturally make reference to preceding learning tasks and new knowledge and skills already gained. The skilful Dialogue Educator celebrates each reference, thus reinforcing the continuous learning. The frame extends and opens to embrace contiguous interests of learners; but there is always a frame.

A Broken Frame. When I was in high school, I led my classmates in a seditious effort to break the frame in the classroom of a particular old nun who was given to philosophizing. One or the other of us was set to ask a broad, irrelevant question quite apart from the topic at hand. Once we had hooked the teacher by this question, we could sit back and be entertained by her musings and memories. I confess this at this late date to show how easy it is to break the frame, and get a leader to abandon his design.



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