

Bill's Story – The joy of learning

My son hates reading but loves dinosaurs. But he picked it up. I gave him books on dinosaurs and apps and models. He took a joy in learning, nothing was forced.

It got me thinking, why it is when you are young, joy in learning is easily accessible, but when you are older, other things get in the way. How can we appreciate the joy in learning?

I am a trainer and courseware designer. My learners range from novices to experienced trainers across several industries. I am concerned about the feedback from the first batch of graduates that the journey has been an exhausting one – no breaks, tough assignments, practicum and capstone project all consuming. By the time I see the learners in the later units, they seem dead; lights are on but no one is home compared to the bright-eyed and eager people who started out.

I believe that learning should be life-giving and joyous. But now I operate in a Workforce Skills Qualification (WSQ) environment, pre-occupied with coverage, evidence, outcomes, standards, mandatory qualifications, training numbers, training and assessment specs. There are corporate logo-themed slides, thick learners' guides and tie-wearing assessors and trainers.

What might it mean to facilitate joy as the key driver of learning in a learning environment? How can I bring in more humanist perspectives? How can I create happier learners in the learning zone? How do I better understand my learners and what brings them joy in learning? What class cultures and relationships foster joy? How can I challenge some of the system constraints and competency paradigm to create some space for joy in learning?

Gagne suggests nine events for learning. I will share nine events of my own learning in this project.

Event 1. Sue's¹ Tools for Learning Design (TLD) workshop. She threw all assumptions about training on its head and introduced curriculum metaphors and meta-learning. Possibilities about training and learning expanded for me. How can I leverage on joy of learning? How can I encourage meta-learning?

I feel recognised for who I am. I was drawn deep. She trusted us to find our own paths and meaning. I wonder what would it feel like if all learning is like this? If I try that, would my learners have the capacity to fill the space? Does that question even matter? Do I need to worry for them?

Event 2. I started my inquiry into joy in learning in very small steps. I administered Brookfield's questionnaire to my learners after the first three sessions. Questions included: what moments have surprised you, engaged you, distanced you, helped you, and confused you? I also asked what gives you joy.

This was a hundred times more useful and robust than the usual "happy sheet"². I got a peek into my learners' psyches and motivations. Very quickly, I realised that what gave them joy is that they are in a community of learners, sharing, laughing. I told myself I need to make space for this to happen, to take a back seat in this.

Event 3. As I went along, I started doing some post-session reflections about my own teaching which I emailed to my learners – what I was trying to do, what I felt didn't meet my intentions and where I would like to improve or inquire more into. I felt encouraged to try this after Sue

Questionnaire:

1. *At what moment in the session this week did you feel most engaged in what was happening?*
2. *At what moment in the session this week did you feel most distanced from what was happening?*
3. *What action that anyone (facilitator or classmate) took in class this week did you find most affirming and helpful*
4. *What action that anyone (facilitator or classmate) took in class this week did you find most puzzling or confusing?*
5. *What about this class surprised you the most? (This could be something about your own reactions to what went on, or something that someone did, or anything else that occurs to you.)*
6. *Was there any point this week that you felt joyous about learning? Please explain.*

Questionnaire adapted from Brookfield, S. (1995)

¹ This refers to report author, Dr Sue Stack.

² Evaluation form

shared her own reflections with us in the workshop, helping us to see into her processes, assumptions, dilemmas and resulting development of learning strategies.

My original intent in doing this was to help the learners focus on the processes behind my facilitation rather than the content. You know, trainers being trainers, they are fixated with content. I wanted to move them away from that and encourage meta-learning.

But quickly, the responses that came did not talk about the *process* of facilitation that I was inquiring into, they talked about other things, like authenticity and bravery. They asked, “How can I make myself vulnerable like this?” They wondered how they could find the courage to do this reflective sharing with their own learners. Should they do this? What can of worms would be unearthed?

To me it didn't seem like a big deal, but to them, it was. I thought if I don't try it now, when will I ever? I also felt confident that the learning intent in making my processes open would be recognised by the learners. And I really enjoyed writing those reflections. They were long, but I like writing, not for assignments but for writing's sake. Somehow the learners caught that. First peek into what joy means as a driver of learning – *I need to be joyful first, or else how can I expect my learners to be?*

Another interesting impact of sharing my reflections was the deepening of relationships between us, a greater sense of trust and willingness to share more authentically in class our stories. Some took the opportunity to inquire deeper into the different meta-layers, who we are as trainers, what is going on behind facilitation and learning. I took the opportunity to grill them on what they were seeing, their perspectives on this, and it helped me see deeper into the learning, the relationships and the learners.

Event 4. The nadir. So after these three weeks, there was a huge impasse – lots of work (studies, family), feeling very tired and very stressed, waking up at 4am, nothing in my head. I knew something was wrong. So I think all the joy disappeared. It was all chaos and tiredness, and that showed because I think there was a dip. And during the 10-week module, there was one too and it showed. I became crankier.

At work we need to be strong, to show output, improvement and no weaknesses... it is all very tiring.

Event 5. I read an article about Confucian culture and how Confucian values have permeated learning, and discouraged the joy of learning.

“Chinese people believe that everyone can succeed in their studies if they make the effort. Thousands of case studies have confirmed this view. Research has revealed that the majority of adults in China participated in learning through external motivation (Zhang and Hu, 2002) – very few adult learners studied through intrinsic motivation. The result is that when their studies have been completed, students consider not studying further because learning caused them great suffering. In a lifelong learning society, however, learning is not an event but a lifelong process. If learning is painful, people will not feel happy and continue learning throughout their lives. In order to establish a lifelong learning culture, the learning effort and learning enjoyment need to be combined.”

From Zhang Weiyuan (2008)
Conceptions of Lifelong Learning in Confucian Culture

We always hold the teacher up to impart knowledge to us. There is a lot of respect. It is all good but at some point, something goes missing. We start to see learning as a task. Suddenly, reading this article, it all made sense – the dilemmas, the tensions between needing to be the subject matter expert and wanting not to be all the time. Enculturation! So I asked, *“Can I free myself from these shackles?”*

I always thought I needed to be seen as a perfect role model, delivering the most innovative or interesting types of facilitation for maximum learning. Now I don't need to be perfect – I can be authentic. I can choose when to admit that I am not perfect, that things could have been better. What gives me the confidence to do this? It feels right.

When I ask what it means to bring joy into myself, it lightens me up, it enables me to be authentic. Bringing joy into myself allows for authenticity. When I am authentic, I give permission for my learners to be as well.

Now when I Skype my learners to talk about their mock facilitation, I want to ask: How can you not see this as an assessment, but rather how can you bring life to the design? How do you bring your authentic self to the design?

Event 6. During the 10-week module, there was one session where I Skyped a learner late at night, who had attended a previous module that I ran. He told me off the record “You know, you asked for feedback about yourself. I will tell you this. The previous module I met you, you appeared very distant, the teacher on a pedestal. But this time round, I found you a lot more down-to-earth. As a result, your credibility increases.” I thanked him for sharing, and was more energised and convinced it was ok to be me when I’m training. I am no longer on a pedestal, I can be myself.

And by being myself, I am noticing more. Last session, I was preparing in the room, writing on the board and getting the task sorted when a student came 20 minutes early and asked for help. I was in task mode and said can we talk while I am doing this. He said “I’ll go get a coffee.” I stopped and realised that I needed to switch out of task mode and connect with him. So I sat down face-to-face and we talked through his issues. When he did his feedback, this was the thing that brought him most joy – it all happened before the class began. It has made me realise that I get caught up in my thinking and tasks, and I need to be attuned to the relationship side. Take a more mothering role. Explore this role, listening in to when I need to do it.

Event 7. The computer crashed. I lost everything – all my emails, data. I thought it was a sign that I could leave the past behind and start afresh. Free of baggage, free of conventions. I felt quite strangely liberated to be honest. Also, it was a test of the evolving clarity I was slowly developing. What were my reactions? After I sent my computer to the IT department to try to salvage it, I was asked to go for lunch while they worked on it. I left the building and looked up. And took this photo: I felt my mind clear up.



I like to look up when I drive or when I walk. It could have been a hectic day, and I just need to look up and sometimes those few seconds are all I need to help me cope. I see the sky in all its incarnations, I see the clouds and see meaning, shape. I see the branches of a tree at sunset and it's like Nature's Jackson Pollock. I see light streaks, rushing into a flourish. I see the truth, and I am deeply humbled. There is clarity, there is joy and there is noticing.

My research method, I suppose. I did it a lot during this project

Event 8. That 10-week module continued, there were three weeks where the learners took over and did practice facilitations. Their classmates pretended to be a particular audience where they reacted from a role, but they were not very good at that – too polite. Usually I would sit at the back, observe, take notes and do the debriefing, very much the expert teacher, judging their performance. This time around, I decided I would participate as well. I told myself to join in, have fun, play, take on a role and act from that role, so that the “facilitator” had to react

and improvise. I got playful, enjoyed myself and the atmosphere became even lighter than before.

Initially they asked “How come, why?” I was ribbed, made fun of, but somehow I retained control of the sessions. At certain points, learning was entirely self-driven. Others began to play as well – it became play-like. The power flattened out. I became one of them, it was authentic. It wasn’t me sabotaging, clowning for no purpose, it had a learning purpose. I made sure I was *with them*. There were disagreements, both in opinion and character, but everyone was in forgiving mode. My expressions were scrutinised, and if I even frowned or showed negative body language (they didn’t know it was mostly borne out of tiredness), they would tell me. It was a reminder to myself – *I need to be joyful, for it gives them permission to be as well.*

Event 9. Conversation with Sue. Unpacking what has happened. Where am I now? Have I changed and what is it I have changed to?

I no longer wear ties.

I am in a place where there seems to be an alignment with everything. I have become comfortable with all aspects of my life, in being me. I have certain strengths, but I can be a human being, with weaknesses, when I need to be.

I am teaching a module using principles of transformative learning where in the typical Singaporean fashion, you are told to give the class a powerful video, something to break assumptions, to initiate change. Follow this procedure and transformation will happen! But for me transformation has snuck up, I am still at the larval stage.

I have come to *realise it is me being aware of myself.*

I will be myself, I will be as meta-cognitive as I can be. *Authenticity and awareness.*

I think I have always been pretty self-aware and authentic, but I have moved to a new level. You struggle for a while, hit a purple patch where everything clicks and then the cycle begins. Perhaps I am now more conscious of this as an important part of me being a joyful teacher.

Some of my learners see what I am doing, and they are very inspired, but then there are others who are provoked and puzzled by me doing this, they ask “Why

are you who you are?” The responses at the end of the module reflections by most of my learners were far deeper and longer than the usual “happy sheet” responses. They were deeply reflective, deeply appreciative of our collective learning journey.

I am beginning to notice how every person I come across comes with motivations, fears, preferences that are very deep-seated, and which I would never be able to uncover very quickly. As a result, I need to find out, I need to give it some time ... I don't rush into things ... we must do this or that. When I am working with groups, I am watching the process, watching my own opinions, when to hold my tongue and allow the space for conversation to flow and deepen, and when to give my opinion or to steer it. As a result we are not covering the content in order, and often we are going a lot deeper than is required as it is now connected to real obstacles and issues that people are experiencing. We are inquiring together.

Some people look at me and wonder when I will intervene, but I let them know it is okay. I am thinking “It is who you are and you will find your way. I trust that you will find your way. I don't need to be the god, I don't need to hold your hand all the time.”

Although I don't believe anyone is coming from a clean slate, some people believe that they are a clean slate. They want more structure, specific knowledge. I find myself giving them what they want through emails, before class or in breaks. So when they need a hand for a while, I am there. But not in the same way as before – standing up in front of the class and delivering the answers.

In my training module, I had three quality assurance assessors come in at different times to audit the course. The first one, a previous teacher, looked at what I was doing with a smile on her face. She said something important is happening here. It is not following the schedule but it is really good, special. The other two looked at their review forms and I didn't conform to them. They didn't see what else was happening, the opening up of people, the connecting to their own lives and work, the deep inquiry and transformation.

For me, my happy sense of achievement for my learners is that they become open to possibilities and they are able to explore these for themselves, not waiting for someone to tell them how to do it, “Here is this strategy.” When they recognise they have the power to be explorers that makes me very happy.

I think I am an explorer as long as I stay open, as long as I am comfortable, being myself, things will open up and appear. For example, I may not know about data coding now, but if I do want to know it, things will open up. My mind is receptive to anything... my antennae are all up. Whatever you need will appear. It is the realisation that you CAN if you are open up enough to want it.

I am also beginning to see my daughter and son more differently – a lot more peace and laughter at home – it is quite radical. But sometimes, I relapse to being my old self – frowns, tensions. For example, my daughter asked me to help her study for her exams. We had no practice exams at home. I was initially panicking, then I relaxed, feeling calm and aligned. I recognised her for who she is – bright and hyperactive. What materials would help? I don’t need to be the parent who knows everything. Let’s find out together. Now that is absolutely stress-free. Attending to that moment, what can we use right here, right now, antennae up....

The clarity from joy of noticing

It is about noticing.

Noticing myself, my responses, my fears, my joy.

Seeing them and letting them go.

*Moving into an empty space, like the sky, where there is nothing,
but also where there is everything.*

Only then can I notice other things –

my family, my learners, my colleagues, my friends.

With noticing comes clarity.

With clarity comes joy.

*Joy not always in exuberant form,
but equally joy in being serene, being aligned.*

Joy that shouts but is silent.

Joy that knows that it doesn't.

It starts with me.

References

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Acknowledgements & Background



This story was constructed by Dr Sue Stack (pictured, top) from a participant's presentation and interview in the Tools for Learning Design project. This is part of the Tools for Learning Design project led by Dr Helen Bound (bottom) and Dr Stack. We would like to thank the participant for allowing his story in all its vulnerabilities to be shared.



This story and the four others that are found in the Tools for Re-imagining Learning website convey the participants' questions, issues, processes and journeys. These stories have been slightly fictionalised with changed names to provide anonymity. They aim to express the authentic voice of the participants through using a conversational writing style.

The Tools for Re-imagining Learning website is a resource for trainers, curriculum and learning designers, and training leaders in the Singapore Continuing Education and Training sector interested in deepening understanding of their practice to create innovative and enlivening possibilities for their adult learners.

The Tools for Re-imagining Learning website and the Tools for Learning Design project overview can be found at www.ial.edu.sg.

For more information on the Tools for Learning Design project or the Tools for Re-imagining Learning website (content), please email Dr Stack at susan.stack@utas.edu.au or Dr Bound at helen_bound@ial.edu.sg.

We welcome questions or feedback on this publication, the Tools for Learning Design research report or the Tools for Re-imagining Learning website (layout or technical issues). Please email research@ial.edu.sg.

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