

Ongoing Discussion “Thought Piece”

Experiential Learning, the Laboratory Method and the Work of Barry Oshry

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“Power is not position; power is the ability to recognize and realize the potential of whatever position we are in.” (Oshry, 1977, p. 1)

As life-long learners, many of us attend conferences and workshops in an effort to enhance our leadership skills. We hope that our learning will enable us to lead in new ways that will improve our workplaces and work lives. More often, conferences and training programs fail to live up to our expectations. Not all workshops are created equal and neither are all learning methodologies. This paper explores the experiential learning method and the laboratory method in particular. The work of Barry Oshry (Oshry, 1996, 1999) is presented as unique exemplar and an opportunity for significant learning.

As both theory and a practice, experiential learning has its intellectual roots in the work of Kurt Lewin who emphasized the central role that experience plays in human learning (Kolb, 1984). Rationalist, cognitive and behaviorist learning methodologies emphasize acquiring and manipulating symbols and focus on simplistic cause and effect relationships and rewards to imprint the learner (Skinner, 1968). In contrast, experiential learning theory is holistic, combining experience, perception and cognition in a way that impacts both the individual and the group (Kolb, 1984).

Action Research and Laboratory Training have provided a foundation for adult learning theory. The T-Group Method, used extensively at National Training Laboratories (NTL), and much of adult learning theory and management training literature and practice have their roots in the work of Kurt Lewin. Lewin initiated an approach to learning about groups, interpersonal relations and cultural change as accomplished through action research (M. K. Smith, 2001).

From his work and the subsequent work of the membership of NTL, the field of organization development emerged.

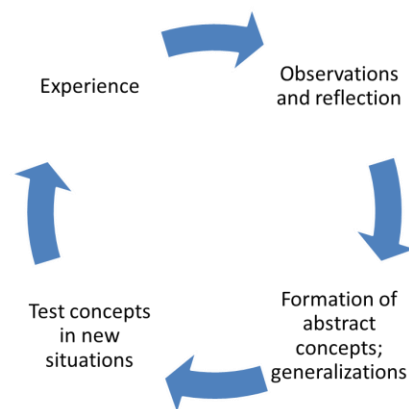
Kurt Zadek Lewin was born in 1890 in what is now Poland. He grew up in Germany and completed his PhD in Psychology after he returned from service in World War I. In 1933, Lewin fled Nazi Germany and immigrated to the United States and became a citizen. Once in the United States, Lewin's work moved away from an individually-focused psychology to an interest in group dynamics and human systems. His field theory explained individual social behavior as a function of the person and the environment and focused more on changing the environment rather than changing the person (Lewin, 1997). Included in his work were the Iowa Studies—a participative action research project which was aimed at enabling women to unlearn embedded habits around the use of meat in the family diet. The women explored their own resistances to change and were able to experiment with providing diet alternatives. This research led to Lewin's conceptualization of change as a process of unfreezing, changing, and refreezing. Individuals change when they experience an imperative to do so—unfreezing. Unfreezing is about creating an environment where values and beliefs can be challenged. Individuals are then free to move to a new standard of behavior—moving or changing. Once behavior has stabilized, the change is accomplished---re-freezing (Lewin, 1999a). Lewin asserted that an emphasis should be placed upon removing restraining forces rather than by increasing the forces driving change.

Lewin called this change in beliefs and values 're-education'—in contemporary terms we view the concept as transformation. Re-education or transformation involves unlearning patterns of thinking and acting that are well established in individuals and groups and operate at

the level of the norms and values that each of us expresses in our actions (Argyris, 1990). Lewin pioneered the T-Group Method, an experiential group workshop in which participants learn individual human relations and group skills through a social learning process of attending to the 'here and now' events of the group. The T-group models action research as participants undertake a process of shared learning in and as a group. However, experience alone does not automatically create correct concepts.

So the method begins with experience, which is accompanied by the deliberate collection of data and observations about that experience as it unfolds. Reflection also plays an important part in the process. Collected data are analyzed and conclusions are fed back to the learner. Lewin borrowed the concept of feedback from engineering and adapted it to a social learning and problem-solving process. Feedback generates valid information to assess deviations from desired goals and provides that information to the learner. This closed loop provides the learner with an opportunity to modify behavior, if needed. Learning is understood as a four-stage cycle with experience at the heart of the process.

Lewinian Experiential Learning Model (Kolb, D.A., 1984)



In Lewin's laboratory, observers were assigned to record their observations of group behavior on forms designed specifically for the exercise. This particular practice directed observation to the items interesting to the researchers, including leadership, competition and orientation to action. (Lewin, 1999b). This systematic recording of data made the comparison and analysis of human behavior in groups more deliberate and made generalization possible. In the application of Lewin's approach in T-Group methodology, this step was replaced with the observations and recollections of group members (Bradford, Gibb, & Benne, 1964). An emphasis was placed on concrete experience, shared in the here and now and designed to test and validate abstract concepts of behavior in human systems. The immediacy and personal nature of the experience provided a focal point for learning and gave subjective, and sometimes profound meaning to concepts that were shared, tested and discovered in a group setting. As a result, the validity of the concepts that were created during the learning process became more powerful.

The National Training Laboratory (NTL) in Bethel, Maine, held its first laboratory session in 1947, shortly after Lewin's death. In the decades since, NTL has conducted thousands of training laboratories in Bethel and around the world which have provided a space for participants to experiment with their own behavior and relationships in specially-designed environments that are truly experiential (Bradford et al., 1964). Over the ensuing decades, NTL and its members have experimented broadly with the design and use of small groups in various practice settings. Barry Oshry's Organization Workshop and Power Lab are created in this tradition and provide participants a way to experiment with the dynamics of power, powerlessness and being caught in the middle (K. K. Smith, 2002).

The concept of power has been poorly understood and variously explained in social and in management theory. Traditional and economic conceptions view power as a commodity, as something that can be held or possessed or that a human being is endowed with. As such, power is commonly presented as power over, or as a representation of A getting B to do something they would not otherwise do (French, 1956). The French philosopher Michel Foucault (1990) associated power with practices and techniques. The concept of power was presented as relational rather than a commodity that one could acquire. No matter how it is viewed, the exercise of power is a reality and a necessity in human systems. In the words of Barry Oshry, “Power is not a dirty word. System power is the ability to act in ways that fundamentally transform whole systems, elevating them to new possibilities of experience and accomplishment for their members and for the systems as wholes (Oshry, 1999, p. 7).”

The Power Laboratory (Oshry, 1972) is a week-long, experiential workshop. It provides participants with an opportunity to experiment with power from one of three perspectives. Participants are divided into “elites” or haves, “immigrants” or have-nots, and “managers” or middles—those who find themselves between the other two groups. Participant assignment is in part based upon an assessment that applicants complete during the registration process. The assessment identifies individual approaches to the challenge of limit situations which each of us confront in habitual ways. It is aimed at providing the most optimal experience for each participant in terms of learning and growth.

During the Lab experience, the Elites are given the physical advantages of luxurious lodgings, excellent food, and the authority to govern the society—which is aptly called New Hope. In addition, Elites exercise control, own all of the property and have the power to give or withhold all resources. Upon entry into New Hope, immigrants are deprived of all possessions

and are left with only the clothing they wear. Although provided with dormitory-style shelter, Immigrants must work to earn the money that will put blankets on their beds and food in their stomachs. The managers are provided more adequate food and lodgings, but are afforded little power and are at the beck and call of the Elites on whose behalf they manage the immigrant workforce. Oshry calls the experience a magnicosm of system life (Oshry, 1999) in that it magnifies the conditions that are familiar to most of us in our families, organizations and human systems. It is as if the volume is turned up on situations that might ordinarily be ignored. Instead, it's as if situations stand out starkly, occurring on a stage where we all have an opportunity to observe.

The Power Lab is a total immersion experience; participants live in New Hope 24 hours a day with no time outs and no breaks from the action. Like the T-Group, the experience of the Power Lab sets aside the day-to-day lives of those who have come to live in the Society of New Hope. The total immersion experience creates a phenomenon that has an affinity with flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), where time and attention are entirely focused on the current activity and the participant has become engrossed in the experience to the extent that he or she is emotionally invested. The participants are fully caught up in the experience rather immediately.

The Lab begins on a Friday, as staff set up the experience and make ready for the arrival of the participants. Elites arrive on Saturday and quickly learn their place in the society and the framework within which they will work. They are given some latitude to construct the a systems story and to make certain choices around how they exercise power and how they work together (Oshry, 1999). They spend the first day preparing for the arrival of the Managers and Immigrants and determining how to assign work and direct the society. The managers arrive on Sunday at noon, whereupon they transition into their new roles and are greeted by the elites.

Their assignments are explained and together, with the elites, they prepare for the Immigrants, who arrive later the same day. Upon the Immigrants' arrival and transition, the Society of New Hope is born.

The setting and the conditions for the Power Laboratory have been developed over more than 40 years and more than that number of Laboratories (Oshry, 1999). Over time, the three-class society that is New Hope has evolved and matured and the workshop design has solidified. The Power Lab is held every spring at the Craigville Conference Center on Cape Cod in Massachusetts. In 2003, I had the opportunity to be a participant and eagerly joined the Society of New Hope as a Manager. My experience profoundly deepened my understanding of my 'self' and the dynamics that I create with my own behavior. The lab strengthened my skills as a system member and leader and it changed me forever. I will never forget the day that I left Logan Airport after experiencing the Power Lab. Ironically, it was the weekend before the United States invaded Iraq. President George W. Bush had given Saddam Hussein and his sons a matter of hours to surrender or have their country invaded. My learning from the Power Lab made me see the situation differently than I would have seen it only the week before. This year, I will have the opportunity to participate in the Lab as a 'rookie anthropologist'— one of several staff members who observe and record system life in the Society of New Hope and learn from the experience. I have no doubt that my own learning will be profound.

In laboratory training, one of the major methods of learning comes from the support that staff. Laboratory staff support and coach participants as they diagnose and experiment with their own behavior and relationships in specially-designed environments (Bradford et al., 1964). In this tradition, the staff at the Power Lab work alongside participants. Everyone is assigned a Coach who is available to provide immediate feedback in what can be an intense and very real

practice field. In this way, they act as guides for the approaches that participants choose to take as they experiment with the critical issues that are associated with power and leadership in system life. At appropriate times, the Coach can help participants identify possible choices and shape strategy for action in the system—actions that create lasting learning. Their support provides a basis for goal-directed action and individual evaluation of the consequences of that action—much needed feedback.

The Power Lab also uses many of the tools and skills of inquiry associated with the laboratory method (Bradford et al., 1964). These include data collection, data analysis, diagnosis, and evaluation. During the societal experience, anthropologists follow the action in order to collect data. Throughout, two or three anthropologists silently follow participants and record the action—in journals. They do not engage participants. As a group, and under the leadership of a facilitator, they work to create the system story of each lab—all of which are unique. Over the course of the laboratory, they synthesize a story that is formalized and shared with the participants after the societal portion of the experience ends. Because the laboratory is so involving and complex, considerable reflection is needed in order to adequately process the experience. Considerable time is provided at the end of the week for debriefing. In order to adequately conduct the debriefing, the anthropologists share the system story. Kurt Lewin believed that in part, group ineffectiveness could be traced back to lack of adequate feedback and an imbalance between observation and action. As human beings, we tend to either emphasize decision and action at the expense of information gathering or to be bogged down by data collection and analysis at the expense of action. Lewin aimed to integrate the two in order to create effective, goal-directed learning. The data gathered by the anthropologists, their system story and the personal coaching provided to participants provide a good balance of action,

feedback and data that make deep and personal as well as group reflection possible. The societal portion of the laboratory is here-and-now focused and provides vivid personal content for learning. During the program, coaches and anthropologists assist the participants by collecting and analyzing the societal data and after the societal piece of the program ends, the staff releases that data for reflection and generalization to the there-and-then. During New Hope, participants develop their inquiry skills and become more competent in assessing and understanding the forces that will continue to operate in their lives outside the laboratory.

As the societal portion of the program transitions out, the staff debriefs the experience and creates opportunities for reflection. Concepts are shared that provide a systemic view of the group dynamics as well as applications for life after the laboratory. This program design allows the learnings and behavioral gains from the experience to be related to larger system dynamics and power relations that operate outside the lab—back in the there-and-then lives of participants in organization and society as a whole. The relationships between the staff of the Power Lab and its participant learners are much more complex than those found in ordinary workshops or management training programs. Because the input for the learning grows out of the interaction between and among group members, rather than from knowledge selected and presented by the trainer, staff does not have the authority or position power usually associated with teacher-student relationships. Power Lab staff members assist participants as they learn from the experiences they develop. A variety of staff roles facilitate learning. Alternatively, staff may participate, encourage, observe, interpret, and coach. After the society ends, the focus shifts as the staff share theoretical concepts and knowledge that make processing and analyzing the systemic nature of the Society of New Hope possible. The team that constructs the Power Lab ensures that all who attend participate in a world-class learning experience. In addition, they

work to enable each other's personal growth and development and to ensure that each new lab incorporates lessons learned from prior experiences.

As the society ends, the Coaches lead the participants in a Time out of Time, or TOOT. The TOOT brings all system participants together in one space to provide all system members an opportunity to find out what life was like in other parts of the system. Usually, we know what life was like for us in our part of the system—this TOOT begins the process of de-briefing and reflection that ends closes out the societal portion of the Power Lab.

The Time out of Time is also an element of Oshry's Organization Workshop (Oshry, 1996), a one-day experiential exercise which creates a three-tiered organization with participants divided into Tops, Middles, and Bottoms and their Customers. After the societal portion of the lab ends, an Organization Workshop is conducted. The OW provides yet another mechanism that connects the power lab learning to there-and-then and life outside the lab. As participants take on roles in a 'new organization', periodically, concepts are shared that provide insights into organization spaces and how they shape our behavior in human systems as Tops, Middles, Bottoms and Customers. In this exercise, Tops have overall responsibility for the organization and its success, Bottoms do the work and perform the services that the organization provides in the larger environment. Each Middle supervises a Bottom Group, and the Customers have the projects and the money that the organization will need if it is to survive in its environment. The life of the organization lasts a few hours, and within that time, there are periodic TOOTs, where the members of the system come together to reflect on what life is like for each group from its vantage point. The TOOT furthers the shift in participant thinking and the realization that no matter what our position in organization, instinctive behaviors can keep us trapped in relationships that are unproductive and ineffective. Systems sight offers the opportunity of a

new and more productive approach. Experiences in the OW remind participants of the all-too-familiar experiences in organization life. Throughout the OW, the facilitators share frameworks that highlight the differing worlds of Tops, Middles, Bottoms and Customers and provide strategies for creating more productive and healthy human systems (Oshry, 1996).

On the last day of the Power Lab, participants experience the system story as shared by the anthropologist team. They have an opportunity to ask questions and further process out the experience. The range of issues that the Power Lab surfaces for participants is broad. I attempted to record and catalogue the lessons that I learned about myself and my own power orientation in order to improve my ability to deal with power and powerlessness. At the end of the week, I chose not to travel back to Boston on Friday evening. I had planned to stay in the city before flying out on Saturday. The experience had left me spent. Rather than drive, I cancelled my reservation and stayed on the Cape. I needed the rest of the evening to reflect on an experience that had changed the way I viewed myself and how I function in human systems. Looking back, I consider this to have been a process of personal change. The immersion had created a situation that provided an opportunity to unfreeze. I was ready to change and move to new behavior and take a new approach to organization life.

The Power Lab often produces strong in-group out-group dynamics, misunderstandings and mistrust. The differential power positions that exist in the lab create and encourage participants to 'make up a story' that explains the meaning of the behavior of the other group. Many learn just how difficult it is to create effective communication—even when our intentions are good. Elites learn that when they use their power—as they must—they will be mistrusted, even if they try to share it. The managers learn what it is to be caught between and how difficult it can be to not align down—with Immigrants or up—with Elites. All who participate in the

Power Lab leave it with a greater appreciation for structural inequality and injustice and the impact it has on all of us. Those who have been on Top may find themselves in a situation where they experience powerlessness and those who have been on the receiving end may find how difficult it is to use power effectively. Moreover, participants learn about the complex interplay between individuals and structure and that there are enormous individual differences within groups. I encourage all of you to take the opportunity to participate while this powerful learning program is available. Why not sign up now?

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BIOGRAPHY

For more than 25 years, I've worked at the Boeing Company where my efforts have always been aimed at supporting individuals and teams to improve their working together relationships. I began my career at Boeing in Southern California at Rocketdyne, where I first had the opportunity to facilitate the Organization Workshop (OW) as a part of an organization transformation effort. In the decades since, I've had many opportunities to conduct the OW and the Merging Cultures Workshop at Boeing, as a part of the In2:InThinking Network and to share Barry's whole systems framework and leadership empowerment stands. This material almost always results in systems sight by surfacing predictable, reflexive behaviors that all participants immediately recognize--in their work lives and beyond. On a daily basis, I use the framework in my own life to change the dance and open new possibilities.

In 2012, I completed my doctorate in Human and Organizational Systems at Fielding Graduate University and in the same year, I learned to ride a motorcycle and had my 61st birthday. My husband Paul and I live on Whidbey Island, Washington just north of Everett within easy commuting distance of the Everett factory. I enjoy gardening, walking my dog, Elvis, reading, writing and trying out new recipes. Paul and I have three adult children, Lacey, Jessica and John.

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