

MY PERSONAL LEARNING JOURNEY

ANNE DAVIDSON

My first facilitation teachers were eleventh graders. At twenty-one, I entered their English classroom as an idealistic student teacher. In fact, all of the significant role models in my life have been teachers. My maternal grandfather became a renowned and beloved school superintendent in a small South Carolina town. His wife taught second grade for over 30 years. And my paternal grandmother was a high school Latin teacher who instilled both love of language and high standards. So it is not unusual that I began my life with the dream to inspire young people with good books, a love of writing and a few life-lessons. That first year, the lessons were all mine.

The world had shifted profoundly but almost unnoticed in the sleepy Southern towns where I came to maturity. When I entered a secondary classroom in 1972, the revolution was well underway. Blacks were confronting whites. There were daily “racial incidents” – and sometimes fights and knifings – in the hallways of the high school where I did my student teaching. Kids came from mill villages after working all night to help support their families. They mixed with and challenged the values of the “country club set.” Antipathy was rank between the blacks and the working class whites, the legacy of importing black scabs to break mill-worker strikes for better wages in the 1930’s, not to mention the legacy left by slavery and economic hardship.

Classroom discipline in this environment was virtually impossible, not to mention delivering my carefully prepared lesson plans. To the students, the state recommended curriculum was irrelevant. When I was assigned to teach Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible*, I got my first real lesson about teaching. I had to start thinking about what the kids needed, not what the textbooks outlined as “grade-appropriate” subjects. I had to start where the learners were rather than where the experts said they should be. I had to find out where the learners wanted to go before telling them where I was taking them. I started to experiment – to truly learn. Instead of Shakespeare and Arthur Miller, we started with *Consumer’s Report* because the majority of my students were saving money to buy a car so they could quit school. We examined truth in advertising and how to do basic information searches. We moved on to creating classroom dialogues about cultural and racial differences. We started sharing the personal stories of the people in the room and looking at the importance of education in breaking unproductive family and social patterns. Later, we did read many of the classics – and the students came to see the parallel and relevant messages for the 1970s. But my work was never the same. I never again felt I could get other people to change just by following MY instructional design. After struggling with traditional educational structures for a time, I left to become first a librarian and then an instructional designer and trainer. I joined a college faculty and also began to explore theories of adult learning and brain research. These fields were emergent, and I was an avid learner. Yet each new insight seemed to challenge the very structures and assumptions of the organizations where I “lived”: large universities and small, traditional academic communities. I began, in a very intuitive, unarticulated way, to sense that my work had to be about changing the fundamental structures of these organizations before I would be allowed to help others learn in the ways I was coming to

believe productive. I wanted learning to be more learner-directed – not just when the learners were adults, but also when they were high school and college students – perhaps even as toddlers. I wanted more opportunities to individualize instruction to account for the variety of learning styles and unique innate talents. I craved flexibility – and at every turn was told, it seemed, to “follow the rules.”

In utter frustration, I finally left the world of education to get a “real job.” I decided to get an MBA to change and strengthen my library science and instructional design credentials. But in pursuing this degree, my inner compass won the day – I gravitated unerringly toward courses in organization development (OD) and toward a mentor with an organizational development background and broad consulting experience. I found that many of the questions and issues about guiding group and organizational change were fundamentally the same ones I had asked about guiding individual learners. OD was compelling because it offered an opportunity to re-design those very rule-driven structures that had blocked my learning in the first place. So after earning my MBA, I eventually became an internal director of organization development and training for a mid-sized city government.

And then the old pattern repeated. Armed with all of my new knowledge and insight, I set about transforming a traditional organization. I believed in MY vision. The workplace would become less rule-driven. People would come to work excited, contribute their utmost creatively and be rewarded and recognized for their efforts. Citizens and internal customers would be served exceptionally and their individual needs satisfied. We would implement cutting edge programs that would result in a lean, efficient organization recognized nationally as a leader in the field.

For a time we made great progress toward my vision. It was seductive, in a way. We implemented management by objectives and comprehensive supervisory training, performance appraisal systems and comprehensive needs assessments. We created a total quality management process that involved front line employees in problem solving and process redesign. We reaped impressive gains – three quarters of a million dollars saved from one project alone. There was a longer delay between idealism and disillusion than in my eleventh grade classroom. Adults have learned to be more polite (or perhaps guarded) about saying what they think. But after the first couple of years, dark suspicions began to nag. People were still resistant, unhappy, and distrustful of “management.” The public clung tightly to their mental model that government was wasteful and ineffective.

In one striking example, in the same week the newspaper heralded a local industry’s total quality management process and their relatively modest cost savings, they characterized the City’s similar but more successful process as “identifying over \$300,000 in waste.” And once the “low hanging fruit” was gathered, progress seemed to slow. Managers more frequently tried to micro-manage employee teams that were not getting results or not making fully informed recommendations. While receiving public accolades, I started waking up at night feeling like I was back in that eleventh grade classroom trying to

interest sleep-deprived, angry teenagers in the intricacies of Shakespearean English. We were stuck. Only this time, the reasons were even more complex and harder to discern.

Several streams of my intellectual journey began to give me glimmers of insight. I kept pushing these thoughts away, because they consistently indicated that the problems with change – both personal and organizational – were much deeper than I or most of those around me wanted to dig. All of our carefully crafted “programs” were not going to bring my vision or the vision of the organization and the community into reality. Admitting this truth would threaten my success. I would not be able to meet or exceed my neatly written performance objectives. And I would have to be the lone messenger acknowledging that the emperor really did NOT have any clothes.

Numerous writers and thinkers contributed to my insights – and nightmares. I have forgotten many of their names, however, one moment that is crystalline in my memory was attending the 1990 film Mindwalk starring Liv Ullman and Sam Waterston. Based upon Fritjof Capra’s book The Turning Point, this portrayal of a conversation among a poet, a politician and a scientist challenged my notions about how the world “really works” and introduced me to a more systemic understanding of universal complexity. It was so disturbing that I tried hard to put this “quirky” view of the world out of my mind – only to find myself compelled by it.

Soon after, I started to read about chaos theory, first in esoteric works and later in the more approachable writings of Margaret Wheatley and her associates. Around the same time, I met Roger Schwarz and Dick McMahon from UNC’s Institute of Government. The city government where I worked was their client, and each worked with us in a limited way on various management team and human resources issues. They introduced me to an approachable “translation” of the work of Chris Argyris. I then began to read Argyris’ (several times over before I felt I could even begin to understand his meaning), along with the interpretations of Peter Senge and other writers beginning to popularize systems thinking. The work resonated in both subtle and striking ways. The laws of systems seemed to explain many of the reasons that our total quality solutions worked for a time and then ceased to have impact. The more I understood mental models and the notion of theory-in-use, the more I realized that until those of us in organizations changed how we thought, we were doomed to continue designing approaches to problems that could only work in the short run, if at all.

In 1992, I was privileged to attend the second Group Facilitation and Consultation course offered by Roger Schwarz and Dick McMahon. The thirteen days of training gave me a deeper and more practical understanding of the notions rattling around in my head about how human and organizational change actually occurs. Roger’s work expanded and made applicable some of the theory I had been reading. The fundamental values taught by the program, the techniques for intervening to create effective conversations, and, more important, the practice in trying to produce behaviors consistent with my values changed me deeply. More and more I could see why so many of our OD interventions had failed in the past. And more and more I became committed to doing the hard work necessary to change my own thinking at a much deeper level.

Of course, I made the same old mistakes, too. My approach to achieving mastery at a new level was the same as it had always been -- to learn concepts and to teach others. And my "teacher as expert" frame was so deeply embedded in my family history, my early training and my very identity that I slipped back into more subtle, skilled versions of my early mistakes. I began to "teach" others the errors of their ways. I could point out in great detail all the ways someone was ineffective in a conversation or meeting and what he or she needed to do to "fix" it. And I was blind to the way I was imposing my worldview on others and the many ways in which my own behavior was inconsistent. I am sure I contributed more to resistance than to learning. Thanks to incredibly bright and talented peers who tolerated my learning journey, I was helped to turn the resistance I got from others into insights about my own behavior. The Facilitation and Organization Development Group (FODG), composed of graduates of the Group Facilitation and Consultation course, became a rich learning laboratory. Members met quarterly to discuss readings, share experiences, challenge and support one another. Slowly, over a period of 2-3 years, my work became more about looking deeply within myself and how I co-created ineffective communications and relationships and less about intervening "on" other people. And, paradoxically, the more I worked on myself, the more "present" I found I could be with individuals, groups, and organizational clients. The more present I could be, the more I could focus on the subtle theory-in-use issues and organizational dynamics that blocked growth, learning and change. I could increasingly see emergent patterns in my own life and in the lives of organizations.

My learning accelerated in 1996 when Dick McMahon invited me to co-facilitate a long-term developmental project with him in Laurinburg, North Carolina. The previous year, I had joined Dick, Roger Schwarz and Peg Carlson as a colleague on the UNC faculty. I had the wonderful gift of working with a group of colleagues who shared their own learning and challenged me frequently. Dick has proved the most perceptive, demanding and compassionate mentor in my life. We began a journey together in Laurinburg that has continued now for over 6 years. That experience deeply informs my personal definition of this field.

The point of recounting this long personal journey is to explain my belief that one's own deep inner work is integral to guiding the personal growth of others and the change of organizations. Without making mistakes, sometimes over and over, and sometimes the same ones more and more subtly, it is difficult to understand one's own mind and, with empathy, to appreciate how we humans create the dilemmas we constantly construct in our relationships and social systems. I am still on this journey. One day soon a client or colleague will call to my attention a glaring inconsistency or shining new insight. Yet increasingly, I see that by going directly toward my personal dilemmas I gain strength and the ability to partner with others in stimulating personal and organizational transformation.

This is not a journey for the faint at heart. But I believe it is more than worth the effort. For me, growth has been slow, but it has sustained. This is the hardest and most rewarding work of my life. I think it has the potential to make a real difference in the

world. For me, it is a pathway to using my unique talents to create a legacy from my time on this planet. I hope you will join me as a fellow seeker and share your own insights and burning questions.