

Yet another radical paradigm shift: Some congruent ideas about SF Training

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Abstract

SolutionSurfers describe the experience gained in 15 years of training Brief Coaches. The focus is on congruency between content and method and delivery and enabling the participants to learn by actively exploring and developing their own content of learning: “Learning by doing”. A description of SolutionSurfers workshop on respectful ways of “not answering participants’ questions” held at the SFCT trainers conference in 2011 illustrates these principles.

Introduction

Once again – it’s incredibly simple and at the same time not easy. When we started our Brief Coach trainings about 15 years ago we were guided by two central ideas:

1. **Congruency between content and method of delivery:**
In other words we wanted to “walk the talk” and let participants experience SF in the interaction with us rather than just have them hear about it
2. **Learning by doing:** We were (and still are) convinced that learning is most effective when it becomes possible for participants to actively explore and develop their own content of learning

As simple as this may sound, it leads to vast consequences in all our training activities. Everything we ever learned about training (and we were quite well trained as professional

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trainers) was turned upside down and we launched into the adventure of discovering a radically different approach to creating space for learning.

Below you will find the description of a workshop we held at the SFCT Trainers Conference in Frankfurt in 2011. It illustrates in an exemplary way how the above ideas change not only the design of a workshop but also the role of the trainers and participants. For example, taking seriously the SF presupposition that clients have the competencies and resources to come up with their own fitting solutions leads to a new way of dealing with participants' questions in the trainer's role. Consequently participants' questions become precursors of participants' own answers. And consequently the trainer replaces his traditional expert role with a not-knowing position where he guides a process for participants to come up with their own answers.

Now you may wonder: how does this work in practice?

Read our step by step description of the workshop. By the way, the workshop dealt with the very same topic: "How to facilitate participants' questions". You will also find some hints about our thinking behind what we did.

II. Basic workshop ingredients

I. The participant enters as expert

The room is nicely prepared, there is music, there is a chocolate on the chairs arranged in a closed circle around some flowers, some posters with relevant SF quotes on the wall, some toys and books on the table to be discovered and a flipchart with the workshop title: "Welcome: How to facilitate participants' questions".

Daniel, Felix, Kati, Peter and Stephanie, the five workshop leaders, greet whoever enters the room. A slightly different interaction starts right there. We are not sure if participants notice that we greet them as the experts for generating their own relevant learning. Hopefully they notice that we are more interested in them personally and their ideas than in our

(non-existent) powerpoint presentation or (non-existent) lecture. While we greet them in our understanding we are aware of some of the following things:

- Participants will be creating their own learning content, so as trainers we can confidently let go of all the intelligent and ingenious things to prepare or deliver and instead invest our time and attention right from the beginning in those who will make the difference to their own learning– the people who enter the room.
- We are convinced that sustainable learning happens in the interaction. So we set a common ground of useful interactions right from the start and as soon as we share the same space. Maybe we can ask about recent success stories, maybe we find other ways to acknowledge participants’ talents and resources and create a meaningful relationship.
- Posters, books and toys in the room support an individualised process of arrival. Participants can become inspired by whatever triggers their curiosity for discovery and learning. And it helps us as trainers to find out what is important to them and to meet participants where their interest is.

2. Workshop architecture

Participants and Trainers are sitting in one closed circle.

We start the workshop with Daniel saying “thank you for coming” and pointing out that the participants as trainers must have some experience with the topic already. He is standing while everyone else is sitting in the closed circle. The other four workshop leaders are randomly sitting amongst other participants. We like the idea of blending in with the participants and outing ourselves as co-learners. Only Daniel has a special role by giving instructions in creating a mutual space for learning. He suggests moving every second chair to create a new seating structure.

Two concentric circles are created, the inner circle facing towards the outer circle and vice versa.

Now everybody finds himself face to face with another person in pairs, which were formed randomly. With this format of two circles we can maximise the number of possible diverse interactions between participants in the course of the workshop by alternately asking people to move clockwise in one circle and in the other circle counter-clockwise. The architecture of this setting makes it clear that the important things will be happening in conversations among the participants and not via 'show and tell' by the workshop leader. It strengthens the trust in the equal value generated by each participant, regardless of experience or seniority.

3. Framework of SFness

Nevertheless, the workshop leader plays an important role by *being* SF in everything he suggests and reacts to. He is in charge of maintaining a disciplined framework of SFness throughout the entire workshop. A typical example is Daniel's first invitation to communicate in pairs:

The person in the inner circle share with your partner from the outer circle two examples you are a bit proud of on how you facilitated participants' questions in your training. You have 4 minutes for this.

Of course asking for success stories is a very SF thing to do. It expresses confidence in the participants as true experts and presupposes that participants do have experience and expertise in what they want to learn.

By *being* SF as a workshop leader, we mean staying out of the participants' content and providing a structure for them to discover their own answers regarding the topic. This is very similar to what we would do with an individual client or team in our coaching work. We use the knowledge of the participants, their resources and what they bring into interaction.

We consciously start asking for an experience and not for a principle. So it is not about generating or providing knowledge, but about learning from success stories and about

constructing individual solutions from inspiration and analogy, building on what already works.

Daniel does not only ask for one example, he wants two. We assume that this was not just a coincidence. It is part of an SF “what else?” pattern.

III. The centrepiece: participants generate relevant content

As the inner circle shares two success stories with the outer circle, relevant content on the topic is being generated in two ways:

- the act of telling supports constructing useful reality for the people in the inner circle
- the act of listening offers a chance to learn from others.

The outer circle moves one chair clockwise.

This next piece of workshop architecture increases the number of possible content solutions due to new communication partners. There is also the element of building on what was exchanged before by adding something different with a chance to gain an enlarged understanding.

The outer circle asks the inner circle a question they have as trainers regarding the topic “dealing with participants’ questions”. The inner circle then deals with this question.

Honestly – we are rather proud of this part of workshop architecture, because it generates relevant content on different levels at the same time:

- For the person in the inner circle, content can be generated by actively experimenting with the trainer’s role – not only talking about it! The person is already “warmed up” for the exercise. He or she can choose to apply one of his or her own previous insights shared in the earlier round. Due to having a new conversation partner, he or she can also choose to experiment freely

with any new ways to deal with the question asked by the person sitting opposite.

- For the “asker” in the outer circle, learning content is generated either by the verbal answer he gets from the counterpart in the trainer’s role or by the way the “trainer” deals with the question. The asker can choose to ask whatever is the most relevant question for his/her learning at that moment in time or even build on what he/she has heard in the previous round.
- Both conversation partners learn from their own reflected real life experience in either role.
- And then there is yet another level of learning which is also experienced: the workshop facilitator congruently walks his SF talk in the interaction with his workshop participants. Daniel is congruently not interfering with the content generated by participants. The wording of the instruction “dealing with” is formulated in an open neutral manner. And Daniel does not give any recommendation of “try not to answer questions” based on his own personal preference.

The inner circle moves one chair counter-clockwise after 4 minutes.

This is a nice change of pace in the workshop architecture. Participants may realise that the instruction was different the last time and that the trainers have skilfully thought about the setting and process. Showing variety in process-competence and eloquence in *being SF* is an interesting counterpart to leaving the content discovery fully to participants.

The inner circle asks a question and the outer circle deals with it.

It is the same setting as before, but in a different role and with a new partner. So participants can co-create new learning content by immediately trying out something that they have just seen or thought in a fresh and neutral setting. Experiencing both roles creates an additional change of perspective. Again Daniel’s only contribution is making sure that participants experience by doing and by interacting.

The outer circle moves one chair clockwise and shares some thoughts, learnings or surprises about their last three conversations.

This time the scene for interaction, exchange and social co-construction with a new partner offers a fresh element of meta-reflection.

Plenary wrap up moving back to one circle – sharing findings and discoveries.

Daniel asks participants to come back into one circle. And we are curious to hear some insights – whoever wants to share whatever seems important. And believe it or not – there were ideas and insights we as workshop facilitators had never thought of. The final remark came from our friend Aoki-san. He was politely asking for our own opinion on the topic. Fortunately we had prepared a handout with our 13 ways to facilitate participants' answers.

IV. Increasing the choice of learning

If you have read this far you might easily guess our own preference when it comes to the topic of facilitating participants' questions. We usually have many good reasons and numerous ways to repeat the question and let participants come up with their own fitting answers. We call it being congruent as an SF trainer.

For the same reason we are putting a lot of attention and care into the design of training and workshop structures which create a space for participants to come up with their own fitting learning.

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