The Problem With Experiential Learning

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Many years before I fully understood extrovert and neurotypical privileges, I took part in a variety of experiential learning sessions. The ostensible goal of one of the sessions was to solve a problem as a team in a high-stakes simulation. The underlying goal was to do so in a way that made people trust you and want to work with you. The most "trustworthy" people at the end were the "winners."

The whole thing left a bad taste in my mouth, but it wasn't until I sat down and actually drew up a list of the ways people are encouraged to gain trust and appear "fun to work with" that I was hit with how incredibly exclusionary the entire experience was.

A lot of gamification-style learning experiences are designed to encourage extroverted and neurotypical behaviors. Think fast. Move faster. Smile. Sing. Run around. Dress up in funny hats. Think out loud. Problem-solve quickly in the moment. Be gregarious. Be a risk-taker. Collaborate. Collaborate. Collaborate.

If you are not regularly "othered" in the workplace, perhaps these kinds of activities are easy to participate in, maybe even fun. But for marginalized people, creating situations like this can often lead to further marginalization and an alarming lack of safety. In the case of this particular simulation, to remain quiet, observe, and assume a supporting role – which are surely characteristics we also need in the workplace – were surefire ways to get labeled as

“untrustworthy.”

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How othering destroys safety

One feature of this kind of learning experience is often the “gotcha” moment. You spend two hours trying to solve a problem only to discover that either your team never had enough context to solve it, or the problem was intentionally unsolvable. Cue the almighty consultant-facilitator to say “Gotcha!” before going on to explain some convoluted moral-of-the-story that equates your learning experience with day-to-day work in your organization.

The lack of psychological safety in this kind of exercise is profoundly problematic. Attempting to get people to modify their behavior without making them safe first is a model destined for failure, and it only exacerbates the pain felt by marginalized groups as their differences are made to feel like causes for reprimand instead of diversity to be honored.

According to the Othering and Belonging multimedia journal run by UC Berkeley: “Othering” is a term that not only encompasses the many expressions of prejudice on the basis of group identities, but it provides a clarifying frame that reveals a set of common processes and conditions that propagate group-based inequality and marginality.” Othering is “a set of dynamics, processes, and structures that engender marginality and persistent inequality across any of the full range of human differences based on group identities.”

The unintentional othering of participants in learning design is an issue that needs far more attention. Ultimately, many experiential learning sessions are built on the premise that a team working together in harmony and homogeneity is the best way to solve problems and manage difficult problems in the

workplace. It treats collaboration as the ultimate goal and conflates openness and gregariousness with trustworthiness without considering the dozens of other ways that people work and provide value to their teams and organizations.

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The collaboration assumption

So much of life is virtual now, which means that just being present is often overlooked as a valid contribution. In other words, in order to be perceived as "showing up," you have to speak something into the Slack chat, the email thread, the Zoom call, the social media feed, etc. The concept of contribution becomes highly externalized, which is then equated with value – because this is what extrovert-privilege workplaces claim is so important: collaboration.

And yet, there is a long line of scientists, artists, innovators and professional daydreamers working in solitude, just waiting quietly in the wings of history to prove that you don't have to say a word to create something that can change the world.

Collaboration and teamwork have a place, for sure. But to present those as the only way to solve problems does a huge disservice to people who work well on their own, who do not need to speak often or loudly to have valuable things to offer and who may prefer accuracy over speed to get the job done right.

The truth is that not all collaboration is good collaboration. Ambiguity, groupthink, lack of clarity around roles and too much talking, are all ways that collaboration can fail. Understanding who is doing the work and who is riding on coattails can also be difficult and can cause interpersonal conflict that ultimately damages projects, teams and relationships.

Ways to create more inclusive learning experiences

To ensure that your learning experiences are truly inclusive, it’s crucial to design learning and training with high standards of psychological safety and to consider the impact on the most marginalized people in the room. Here are some questions to consider:

- Have all participants been made to feel safe? Psychologically safe? Mentally, physically and emotionally safe?
- Have you vetted the people about to be put in high-pressure simulations to make sure that none of them suffer from social anxiety, PTSD, sensory processing sensitivities or any other mental health issues that could cause triggering and meltdowns?
- Is the only way to “win” this activity through extroverted and neurotypical behavior?
- Is the only way to win through collaboration?
- Are people discouraged from potentially using their strengths, which may not align with this high-pressure situation, and therefore, made to feel less than or othered?
- Does the activity itself take into account people with auditory processing disorders and sensory processing disorders?
- Above all, what is the learning objective that requires high pressure/experiential/gamification-learning experiences as opposed to some other vehicle for learning and changing behavior?

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In my 20-year career as a learning and development professional, I have often heard colleagues say that there has be discomfort for true learning to occur. There are two problems with this approach to learning. One, the world itself is a source of discomfort for many people who do not fit into privileged categories, so why do we need to make them even more uncomfortable while learning? “No pain, no gain” is an archaic practice that not even the most diehard athletes subscribe to anymore. Two, there are many safe ways to get people to stretch, flex and grow without making them unsafe. Good learning experiences that are supported by good user experience expertise can ensure objectives are met without losing half (or more) of your participants on the way.

Keeping people safe is kind. Keeping expectations clear is kind. Minimizing ambiguity is kind. Teaching people in ways that honor their strengths and wiring is not only kind, it also helps you achieve those learning objectives and honors the hard work your L&D team put into the learning experience in the first place. For truly effective learning experiences, safety and inclusion are imperative.

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