

The “T” Process: triangulating personal learning

Dave Griffiths

Centre for the Enhancement of Learning & Teaching
(CELT)

London Metropolitan University

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Introduction

A novel method for engaging in learning-focused dialogues is proposed - a method that not only allows learners to construct their own conceptions of learning, but also - where and if appropriate – allows them then to use those constructions to practice articulating and using learning acquired as the result of working and personal life experiences.

The specific technique, it is suggested, may be usefully employed in a wide variety of contexts where individuals are required – formally or informally – to articulate experiential learning in oral or written form and when employed in an assessment context, for example as a precursor to RPL (“Recognition of Prior Learning) applications, the technique becomes assessment ‘**as** learning’ (Earl, 2003)

Context

In 2005, the author was privileged to be a part of a team that developed an innovative Masters’ Degree in Leadership and Management, in a post-1992 Higher Education Institution (HEI). The innovations were many but chief among them was the nature of the entry qualification. In short, those who would be admitted to the programme were required not to have formal academic qualifications but, instead, to possess experience of being a leader and/or a manager at a level that would enable them to benefit from attending and completing the programme in question. It was, of course, possible to gain entry to the Programme with formal academic qualifications but the prime requirement was for applicants to be experienced in some way, as leaders/managers.

Entry to the the Programme required participants, at the point of selection, to be able to reflect upon and articulate, in an informal interview setting, learning they had acquired from their working lives and/or other experience that might demonstrate their leadership potential. The method/technique described here was developed by the author to assist in that process.

At the heart of the technique is a dialogue; in this case, a conversation between tutors and learners i.e. potential participants. But this is a conversation where the 'voice of the academy' at the point of dialogue and recognition does not carry automatic privilege. At face value, this solution may appear to be no more than a traditional interview for a place on a course. However, if it were simply that, then we would be merely reproducing the process in which an applicant is interrogated about the extent to which whatever they have to offer meets a specification of some kind, either overt or covert for a particular programme. The method proposed here is, to be sure, a structured interview but it is one where the structure used by the interviewer is minimal.

Through dialogue with the interviewer, the applicants' experiences are compared, contrasted and interpolated, and the aim is for them to come to their own conclusions about what those learning experiences collectively represent, for them, about their leadership potential. Through dialogue the applicant becomes a learner in the process and is enabled to construct and reconstruct meaning and create alternative meanings from their experience(s). Further, the method is a reflective activity that focuses on each of three time frames – past, present, future – and this is precisely the format in which Eraut (2000) describes what he calls a 'deliberative action' which allows learners an opportunity to recover personal/tacit knowledge generated by particular experiences.

The "T" (Triangle) process

The method of structuring the dialogue referred to here, has never, as far as may be known, been used in a research study before. It has been devised and elaborated by the author, based on an article originally written for practitioners of Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) in order for them to elicit representations of a client's 'criteria'. (a copy of the original 1-page article – which is no longer available in any other form - is reproduced in Appendix I).

However, the method does have recognisable and valued antecedents. The first comparison that may be made is with George Kelly's (1991) Personal Construct Theory (PCT). This theory of Kelly's has phenomenology as its base and it is sufficient here to say that the core of the theory is the repertory grid. This grid is a concept or cognitive map of an individual's constructs about and around elements of their assumptive world and it is created by asking participants to successively compare and contrast a range of self-generated and personally-meaningful exemplar experiences, in a highly structured way.

The second antecedent is something known as the 'Watchword Technique' (Daniels 1992, 2004). This method is itself of unknown origin, however, it was always intended for use as a self-development technique and is based on Jungian notions of word-association. Indeed, the outcome is intended to reveal (for self-development) the metaphors and archetypes that Jung suggests lie at the (collective) unconscious heart of our being. It is also claimed that the technique will also reveal our personal

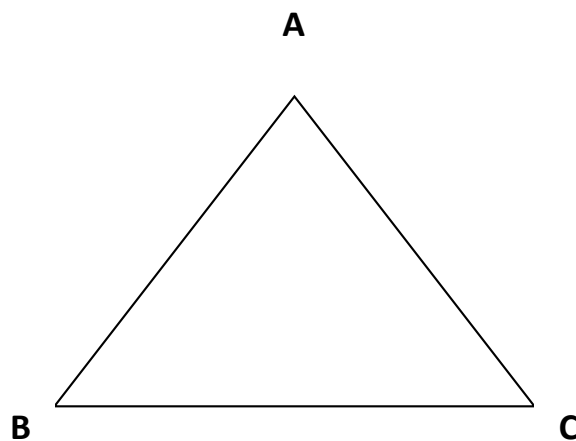
'psychological types' something which hitherto has been the province of the more famous (and costly) Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI).

There are other comparisons and antecedents that may be claimed for the "T" Process including of course the business technique of decision-making known as the 'forced comparison technique' and not forgetting the far-more-famous 'dialectic' technique of argumentation which, of course, derives from the dialogues of Socrates.

Method

Participants were asked, prior to the dialogue/interview to select at least three things that they considered were learning experiences for them. To ensure that they considered a range of experiences from which personal learning occurred – that is, nonformal learning experiences, - a list of situations that others have considered to be learning experiences was circulated in advance of the interview/dialogue. That list is included as Appendix 2. They were asked to generate and supply their own list to the interviewer at the interview.

At the interview, participants were told that they would be asked to select at least three of their chosen learning experiences for a discussion that would be recorded (for the purposes of this study) and they were then presented with the diagram here:-



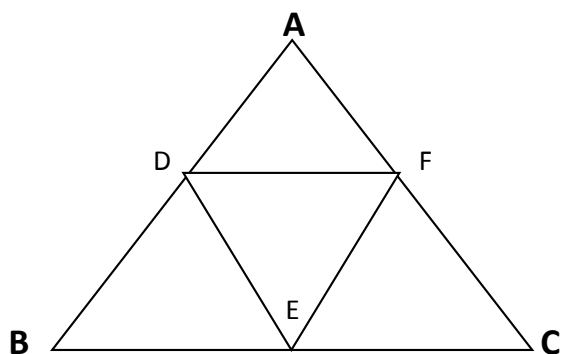
Each of three chosen learning experiences were written at each point, A, B and C of the diagram.

Participants were asked to freely respond to their chosen experience at point A and their responses were noted on the shared diagram – as well as being recorded. Participants were then asked to freely respond to their chosen experience at point B and their responses were noted on the shared diagram – these were also recorded for the purposes of the study.

After that particular discussion had taken place, participants were then asked to compare, contrast or otherwise examine their responses to the experiences they

had named as point A on the diagram **together with** the responses to the experiences they had named as point B on the diagram. They were then asked to freely respond and, if they so chose, ‘name’ the comparison point (point D) as they had ‘named’ the experiences supplied in the list – the point that, for them lies between point A and point B – and therefore a new and constructed learning experience, unnamed and something ‘tacit’.

The process was then repeated by asking the participant to compare, successively, their points B and C (together) and then C and A together. Through that process, new and ‘discovered’ learning events shown in the diagram below as D,E and F are revealed which are then available for ‘dialoguing’. Of course, further comparisons can be made beyond those initial ones – so you could compare D with E, and E with F etc. Indeed, the more comparisons that are made, the more clear the person’s learning preferences and approach becomes clear. Time available (and the energy of those engaged in the dialogue) is the only limiting factor. Different purposes will demand different levels of engagement



FINDINGS

Participants were asked to identify ‘static’ learning points (A, B and C) which were then, through dialogue, converted into ‘dynamic’ learning points (D, E, F etc). These represented new constructions of learning for them and examples of both static and dynamic learning constructions are recorded below.

PARTICIPANT A	
‘Static’ points; the learning experiences named/described prior to the dialogue:-	
Point A	Having a very caring and supportive family on my mothers side – but having a father I worshipped but was a bully
Point B	Limitations of natural intelligence, having to strive hard to be at best average, being benchmarked against an older sister who went to Cambridge. Failure to achieve the requisite requirements to enter University and having to go down a technical route
Point C	Living on my own in South Africa 1998 – 1985
‘Dynamic’ points; the learning experiences named/described through dialogue when comparing/contrasting or otherwise examining the experiences above	
A with B	Learned from mistakes and learned to do that successfully (reflection-action)

B with C	Learned to be 'proactively self-reliant'
C with A	Importance of developing multiple perspectives in building/maintaining relationships
D with E	Learned to 'get out of my own way'
E with F	Learned how to create trust and rapport and importance of that
F with D	Discovered ability to be empathic "wanting to see things from 'the other side'"
The Participant did not feel able to proceed further because of time restrictions	
PARTICIPANT B	
'Static' points; the learning experiences named/described prior to the dialogue:-	
Point A	Losing Mum & Dad and left to live on own for first time and loneliness of that
Point B	Took over multi-disciplinary team who I had been told were 'rubbish'
Point C	Working on a 'regulatory body' submission in a new job after not working for many months
'Dynamic' points; the learning experiences named/described through dialogue when comparing/contrasting or otherwise examining the experiences above	
A with B	Developed personally – deliberately - through purposeful strategy
B with C	Developing sense of and level of self-worth
C with A	Grew-up – learned that it is always necessary to learn
D with E	Confident in dealing with change
E with F	Learned that life is a bumpy road but also learned where 'bumps' are 'in the road'
F with D	Work from basics, 'first principles' - becoming a reflective practitioner
The Participant did not feel able to proceed further but this was only because of time restrictions	

One claim for the method was that it also represents an assessment **for** learning. In order to assess that aspect, participants were asked to say what impact, if any, the dialogue generated by the method had had on them. Both participants responded very favourably:-

Participant A says:-

I have gained a huge amount out of this as without having previously realized my developmental achievements, it became so apparent why I am the person I am. The personal strengths I have gained and have within me have in the main got me to where I am today – not because I have necessarily been taught them or that I'm academically brilliant or well read but much of it through self development and learning from mistakes. It may well be argued that with the right coaching in life I could have achieved greater goals at an earlier age but that's the past. My job is to pass on those skills to my sons at home and to the younger graduates at work. I recognize of course what I can't give them is life skills and these have to be attained by getting out there and experiencing life in full and taking opportunities to extend oneself whenever they are presented"

Participant B says:-

“It was an interesting experience. I realised as we went on that I was putting together and putting into words for the first time, ideas and things about myself that I had previously only half-thought. They’re certainly things that I will try to capture in my head for the future. Is this a process I can do with myself?”

Interestingly, both participants, quite spontaneously used the metaphor of a jigsaw puzzle coming together; more specifically, they could see themselves as a single jigsaw puzzle piece, joining together a range of other pieces.

CONCLUSION

The method, while only piloted here, does show promise both as a fit-for-purpose method of assessing non-formal learning and as an assessment practice aimed at being a learning experience in itself.

References

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Biographical Note

Dave Griffiths has been a member of CELT and its previous incarnation for over 11 years, having spent many more years than that working in a variety of Human Resource Development contexts. As an academic staff developer, his interests lie in enabling professional teaching practitioners to look beyond the frameworks of their own disciplines in order to appreciate teaching as ‘professional artistry’. As a psychologist, he takes a lifespan development approach to learning. He says the two are highly compatible.

APPENDIX I

CRITERIA - Roots of Belief Change

I have found routine NLP elicitation techniques such as the criteria tree and metaprogramme divination to be useful, but limiting. The processes involved, even assuming high quality rapport, can be lengthy, artificial and tedious. While I was wondering about this and doing an internal audit of past resources, I recalled some techniques from George Kelly's Personal Construct Theory.

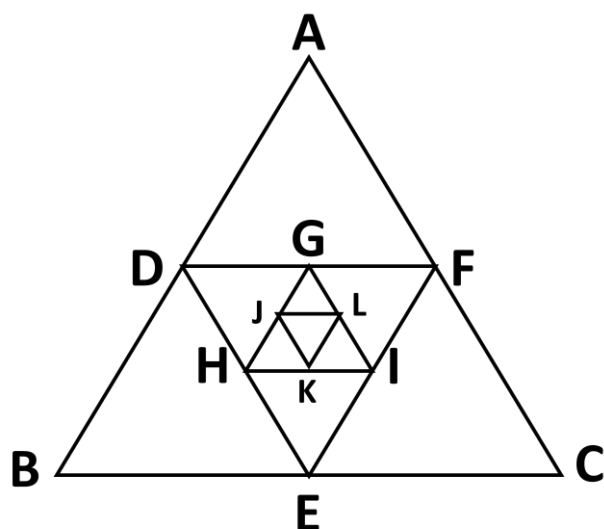
Unpleasant memories of number crunching on a steam driven computer rapidly gave way to a picture of the light, easy process of Kelly's elegantly simple technique.

"Identify three people - A, B and C - who are important to you. How are A and B similar and different from C? How are B and C similar but different from A? How are A and C similar and different from B?"

From this picture, I experimented in training workshops and developed a simple and direct process which I called Criteria Awareness Triangles (CAT). In offering you this brief outline I am assuming your competence and elegance in rapport skills, sensory acuity, behavioural flexibility, and quite a lot of creativity as well!

THE "T" PROCESS

1. Ask your client to access three valued criteria (A, B and C), explaining that the arbitrary choice of three is not a final choice, but will be used as a basis for eliciting highly prized "core" criteria which are not necessarily high in conscious awareness.



2. Write _____ each of the three criteria at each of the three apices of a triangle and then ask for the criterion or concept which links each pair of criteria

For example, "What is the D which links A and B? What is the E which links B and C? What is the F which links C and A?" This process is repeated several times. as this diagram shows.

3. It is interesting to experiment with the differences between responses when the client sees the triangle being developed or accesses the criteria "blind", and when the order in which the criteria are given is reversed. For example: When A was given as "trust" and B as "comfort", the question "What concept links comfort with trust?" elicited the response "Touch", but the question "What concept links trust with comfort?" elicited the response "Time" in the same session from the same client.
4. As the elicitation process progresses beyond the inner triangle, say to JKL and beyond, the client typically experiences certain words or linked concepts appearing again and again. Some clients have arrived quite rapidly at an interim position where they have the same word in each of the three apexes. ***These repeated words are likely to represent core criteria.***
5. Having elicited them, the client can, for example, go on to work on criteria equivalences or to explore other relationships between concepts and criteria. Each triangle CFE, AFD and DEB can be analysed by the CAT process, so that there is plenty of data for further self discovery. There are no fewer than 14 triangles in the figure, and the potential for a deep level CAT is much more complex.

APPENDIX 2

List of example 'learning experiences' supplied as examples to participants – prior to the dialogue

- 1.** Living on my own in a foreign country
- 2.** Coping with my parents' acrimonious divorce
- 3.** Having stripped down and rebuilt an old motorbike which had been discarded as scrap
- 4.** Being made to write and re-write a major report many times
- 5.** Being stranded on a mountain after suffering an injury
- 6.** Trying to 'keep cool' whilst supervising difficult staff
- 7.** Being given a sticky meeting to chair while the CEO was out of the country
- 8.** Loneliness when forced to take early retirement
- 9.** Arriving at a very posh school with a cockney accent
- 10.** Being asked to run short training courses at work
- 11.** Being the only one on the spot after a non-fatal hit-and-run accident

(adapted from Harri-Augstein and Thomas, 1991, p. 7-8)