N A S A G A
North American Simulation and Gaming Association

SIMAGES

Volume 1, Issue 1 - Fall / Winter 1998

The NASAGA Organization would like to thank Gail Heidenhain and Randy Hollandsworth for their time and effort in creating this issue of SIMAGES.

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Welcome to NASAGA

Welcome to 1999 - a year full of great opportunities for all of us. Early in the year many of us do planning for the coming year - taking the time to see where we want to be and what steps we'll take to get there. As NASAGA members, as you think about your professional goals and action steps for the New Year, let me make some humble suggestions.

- Participate in the NASAGA Listserve. This is a great way to share your perspective or to get information from your fellow NASAGAN's. (If you get this and have email, but aren't on the listserve, send a note to Jay.Schindler@orst.edu - he'll get you added.)
- Consider submitting some of your work for inclusion in the next SIMAGES. Contact Randy Hollandsworth or Gail Heidenhain for more information.
- Plan on being in San Francisco next November for NASAGA '99 - it promises to be a fabulous opportunity to grow both professionally and personally.
- Present at NASAGA '99! Soon you will be seeing the Call for Proposals. Answer the call! As someone who has been privileged to present for several years, I can tell you it is a great opportunity to share with the top professionals in our field (and lots of fun too!)

I wish you all the best in 1999. I believe your NASAGA membership will be a bigger part of your success than ever in the past. If you can think of other ways we can assist you, please email me (kevin@discian.com) or call 888.432.GAME.

Kevin Eikenberry
1999 NASAGA Board Chair

Participant-Directed Processing: Filling a Processing Gap

by Steven Simpson, Buzz Botcher and Dan Miller

In the spectrum of processing techniques, there is a gap between traditional question and answer sessions and no processing at all. In most educational programs, an objective of the program is to shift responsibility for leadership and for learning from the facilitator to the participants. This attempt at promoting self-sufficiency, however, is sometimes limited to the action component of the program. Even when the participants seem to be working independently of the facilitator during the action component, the facilitator often retakes control when it is time to debrief.

This seems inconsistent. If self-direction is valued, then there is a need for processing techniques that are participant-directed rather than facilitator-directed (Simpson, Miller, and Botcher, in press). Three such techniques are described below. While the techniques themselves are not new, they are good examples of methods that intentionally turn some of the responsibility for successful processing over to the participants.

Journalizing

Journalizing is the most individualized of the basic processing methods. After the action component of an activity is over, the facilitator asks participants to go off by themselves and write about the activity. The topic of the journal entries can be either specified by the facilitator or left open-ended. After 10-15 minutes of writing, the facilitator has the option of bringing the group back together to process further.

Processing cards

Processing cards are specially designed cards spread before a group. Some kinds of processing cards have words, others facial expressions, and still others pictures. The newest deck of processing cards are Chiji Processing Cards, which are a series of forty-eight images (e.g., lighthouse, sunrise, wagon wheel, eagle) on poker size playing cards. The cards are spread out, the facilitator asks a question, and each person picks a card that represents his or her answer to the question. For example, a small group of university professors were asked to pick the card that best represented the state of environmental studies at their respective institutions. One professor picked the broken pottery card, explaining there would be no environmental studies at his university until the current outdated commitment to disciplines was shattered and a new interdisciplinary approach was allowed to develop.

Concept maps

Concepts maps are most common in classroom settings, but are gaining popularity elsewhere as well. Concept maps are pictorial representations of whatever the participants learned from the activity. The representation may be a drawing, a flow chart, or literally a map or what occurred. After the action component of the activity, the facilitator breaks the full group into smaller groups of 4-6 people. Each small group is then asked to describe pictorially what occurred or what was learned. After the drawings are complete, a representative from each small group then explains that group's concept map to everyone else. If the processing takes place in a classroom, the concept maps can be drawn on transparencies and presented on an overhead projector. In an outdoor setting, large sheets of newsprint can be used.

References

Simpson, S., Miller, D., and Botcher, B. (in press). The Processing Methodology Spectrum and Therapeutic Recreation. Expanding Horizons in Therapeutic Recreation.
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Cool Stuff

Enhance Your Overhead Projector

The Trainer's Warehouse distributes several handy devices that can jazz up your overhead projector use. They sell special dice that can be used to display numbers on the screen. They also have game spinners that can be placed on the overhead projector to select numbers at random. The larger spinner adds the greatest suspense, as its arrow slows down more gradually. An electronic timer/stopwatch/clock combination features count up, count down, 1-minute warning signal, icon flash, and alarm signal. This device can be used on the OHP to time activities and breaks.

Source: The Trainers' Warehouse, 800-299-3770, fax: 508-651-2674,
and email: **sales@trainerswarehouse.com** .

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Designer's Edge
Too Smart

Write these two words, one below the other, on a flip-chart sheet:

> NEW
> DOOR

Ask the participants to work individually. Give these instructions:

Rearrange the letters in these two words — NEW and DOOR — to spell one word. When you have done this, please stand up.

Pause for a few minutes. It is unlikely that anyone will solve the puzzle. However, if one or more participants do stand up, quickly check their solutions.

Correct or congratulate as appropriate.

STOP! Before your read further, try this activity yourself. Get the participants' attention and tell them, Here's how I rearrange the letters in the two words to spell one word.

Write "ONE WORD" on the flip chart. Pause for a few seconds to let the solution sink in.

> ONE
> WORD

Debrief the participants to elicit this learning point: Sometimes we are too smart for our own good. Instead of approaching a problem in a direct, straightforward fashion, we assume that the solution has to be complex.

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Action Learning: Action that Matters; Learning that Sticks

by Verna Willis

Growing numbers of us seem to be getting serious about finding out what Action Learning is and how we may be able to use it in our work. Most of us are already very serious about wanting to help people make their learning more efficient, and certainly more effective. It may seem at first that Action Learning is just another name for something we are already doing, especially since it involves empowering the individual learner and encouraging collaborative work effort. These words and these motives are familiar to us. But as each of us tries to fit Action Learning into our mental frameworks –that is, to relate it to what we already know – we may miss the significant differences that give Action Learning its power and make it irreducible to its component parts. If our eye is on "components ," then we are likely to look about us and see what we think are "look alikes." And we will be misled.

Getting to Understand, Before We Get to "How To"

So let's get down to basics and see if stating some distinctions will help to illustrate the unique strengths of Action Learning. It is highly experiential – but it is not experiential learning of the sort that ropes and wilderness courses provide. Action Learning processes do not break down easily to simulations and part-practicing. Instead, set members are called upon to deal with real, raw, persistent, intractable problems exactly as they are encountered in the work-a-day setting. They are the sort of problems that no one has any answers to, the sort of problems where our experience and patterned learning may actually lead us astray and stand in the way of figuring out new ways to think and act. So the idea of tearing down what we think we know becomes as important as the idea of building up what we discover we need to know in order to act effectively. Action is to be taken directly on the problem-in-the-raw.

Nor does the operation of a project team or task force qualify as Action Learning, if these work groups are wholly concentrated on getting something done with little to no concern for what may or may not be learned in the process. There will be plenty of action, and people may incidentally learn. But typically there is no advance planning for learning as a process outcome and no provision made for thinking collectively about learning during and after its occurrence.

Action Learning is not entirely about creating better organizational communication, either. For although honest, open communication is crucial for Action Learning, the reflecting we do in the privacy of our own Action Learning log, in our own office or living room or with another person in chance encounters at the coffee machine is perhaps the real engine behind the work and learning. Intense inner dialogue has to happen, if anything is to change and "stick."

Summing this up, Action Learning is recognizable by the requirement that three conditions must be present and woven together: a high concern for the balancing of task and learning; conscious and habitual private and collective reflection about both task and learning, and a really knotty problem –not a side issue and not manufactured – to work on.

Constituting Action Learning Sets

The Action Learning set (some people call it a team, but this can obscure its uniqueness) ideally consists of four to six individuals who enter into an agreement to lay aside the trappings of status, position, and expertise so that each has an equal voice and an equal accountability. There are several variations in the way sets are formed, but there is some evidence that sets of people who do not know each other, when placed in organizations they do not know much about, to pursue a problem with which they are totally unfamiliar may yield not only the best outcomes but also the greatest amount of learning. While this may strike us as a crazy idea when we first hear it, it does reflect what we know about the creative process. It thrives on high variety and high uncertainty. Cross-functional teams may achieve some of this variety. Cross-organizational teams raise the variety even higher. Ideally, such teams could be constituted as Action Learning sets and capitalize explicitly on learning dimensions along with high quality task performance. Without the learning emphasis, they are "look alikes."

Other types of sets are formed in familiar settings with unfamiliar problems (e.g., introduction of new technology), or in unfamiliar settings with familiar problems (e.g., working with new commercial partners who have similar businesses). An intact work group may usefully form a set to deal with familiar problems in a familiar setting, though this may not yield the richest of learning opportunities. The reason is obvious: if the problem could have been easily solved by those who know about it, it would have already been attended to.

Some Important Action Learning Set Processes

Action Learning considers whatever knowledge is readily available, but also understands the continuous need for inquiry and questioning of assumptions of self and others, In fact, the start point for set members is always the struggle to ask each other questions about the problem that no one has thought to ask before. "Telling" frequently blocks discourse; "asking" unfreezes it. What is sought is a collaborative learning experience where those involved learn from and with each other in ways that promote self-esteem and confidence. What is at stake is full utilization of what each person knows, what each person values, and how these combine to achieve new perspectives and new solutions. There is no curriculum, in the formal sense. Set members simply go out and find whatever information they need to proceed with their tasks. This makes Action Learning radically different from such strategies as problem-based learning, where learners "design a curriculum" and then undertake the lessons they designed.

Many other interventions based on working in small groups require that facilitators be present for every session. Action Learning practitioners do not all agree on the amount of facilitator presence that is needed, and in fact it may vary from group to group. But the earlier a set can be "weaned" from reliance on a facilitator, the faster the set becomes responsible for itself, for looking after its members, and for accomplishing both learning and action. One of the basic assumptions in Action Learning is that adults should have assistance to start the process, and then can be counted on to continue on their own –including internal conflict resolution -- for as long as necessary or pertinent. Facilitators are then "on call" only for emergencies.

Who Brings the Problem to the Table

There are two major ways to present the problem or problems that will be worked on. A joint problem that all set members can work on is in many ways advantageous. It is like turning the power of every personal "searchlight" to bear on the single problem. The second way is for each set member to bring a problem that will be worked on in turn with every other set member's problem. This is not as inefficient as it might seem, for as each problem gets worked, others find insights into their own particular issue or problem. There is a strong likelihood in any of these situations that the problem will "migrate " and become something else --usually an underlying problem that is far more critical than the first one identified. There is much to be gained from this. What can sink the effort, however, is that problems brought to the table may turn out to be too unimportant to the organization or the specific "problem owner" to be pursued with passionate self-interest. If the problems identified are not having a crucial impact, then the collective process becomes an exercise in logic and interpersonal relations. If there is no implemented action, the activity actually ceases to be Action Learning.

Generally, some or all of the set members will be involved in the implementation of action. And that is the essence looked for: problems of real significance, addressed with serious, collective commitment, while paying attention to how we think about problems and go about solving them. The reason the learning side of the equation is so important is that changes are occurring at a rate faster than our rate of learning. Learning that sticks is learning that is internalized, that generalizes and becomes a way of living and acting in all of our work , family, and community settings. That is what Action Learning intends to produce.

So That's Action Learning –But How Can I Use It?

The beauty of Action Learning is that it is how we learned naturally before we went to school and had information fed in and ground out for test-taking. It is how we learned naturally before we all became "experts" who are supposed to have all the answers. We need to learn the arts of in-depth inquiry and sustained listening. These aren't frivolous statements, nor are they meant to be anti-intellectual or anti-education. The point is that we tend to act as if we know what is going on in the minds of others (judging from what we see of their behavior) and we forget to find out whether that is so. Action Learning humbles us. People know far more than we think they know and even more than they think they know.

The biggest obstacle to marketing and implementing Action Learning interventions is that uncovering all the hidden knowledge and potential for learning takes time, and for most of us it takes a radical change in mental sets. If a client demands instant results and does not see that wisdom in action is not acquired overnight, then it may be too risky to try. A watered-down version of Action Learning may do more harm than good, and leave the same bad taste behind that many of the early quality improvement efforts did.

The second biggest obstacle is that, with our rich training/consulting/designing experience, we may plan to intellectually lay siege to the literature on Action Learning, conquer it, and trot out on the field imagining that we can play this game without practice. But as simple as Action Learning is, it isn't easy.

Find a well-qualified mentor and apprentice yourself. Undertake Action Learning as a set member, before you try to lead a set. There is more to action-engaged learning than meets the eye.

Dr. Verna Willis teaches at Georgia State University and is an associate of the Revans Centre for Action Learning and Research in the UK. Recent involvement in Action Learning includes work with privatizing health care systems in the UK and with an oil company in the U.S.

Program Openers
by Gail Heidenhain

When we begin a seminar or meeting, we wait until everyone has arrived. What we sometime do not take into account is whether each person can truly be present, open for what is possible in the context of the situation. It's like the story of the Native Americans working at a building site in the big city. After everyone had arrived, the whistle had blown and all the others had begun work, they were still sitting on the floor in a circle, their eyes closed. Reprimanded by the foreman, who said that everyone had arrived and begun working, they answered, "Yes, our bodies are here, but we must first wait for our souls to follow before we can effectively work."

When you walk into a seminar, workshop or meeting, you are not alone. There is so much you carry along with you unseen by those around you. Your mental baggage includes your

mental models - your stories and opinions about the world and your place in it
expectations - about the course, its place in your life, whether or not it is useful, what you want to get out of it, your own abilities and what learning is and isn't
projections - about others, allowing you to interpret with your own programmed bias when someone says or does something.
fears - about your knowledge and ability to learn, how you will look to the others, whether you will be accepted, what exactly will happen, the list goes on and on…
life's events - the complex emotions, experiences and concerns that may preoccupy you in the moment - the fact that your daughter isn't well, that you forgot to mail a mortgage payment, that you didn't handle the conflict with a fellow worker well, that you have just fallen in love, that you are overworked and would much rather just take a break, anything but be

here today.

An opening activity can be simple, but it is always powerful. It has several purposes. As a check-in, it can allow the concerns foremost in the minds of all participants to come into the open. It can give the participants the opportunity to empty their minds of all that is cluttering it, to calm the incessant rambling of the mind and to be present in the present. The opening phase can also be used to set the tone for the entire seminar/meeting. It can help people find their place in the group, have their voices heard. It helps the group cohesion process to begin. There are many ways to conduct the opening phase. It's important to take a few minutes to "center" yourself, to collect yourself, to notice your breathing, to become present. This can be accompanied by music alone, by a directed guided imagery or by simply focusing on an object, an idea or your breathing.

There are then various ways to continue, in a round, using a talking stick, each person speaking from his/her heart while the others simply listen empathetically, or more metaphorically using various props to facilitate the experience. A simple activity, mental or physical can then focus the group and each individual on the topic of the seminar.

Some possibilities for opening activities are:

- the use of symbols (objects or pictures) to represent feelings and thoughts.
- drawing to music.
- describing feelings in the form of weather, landscapes, types of water, etc.
- finding three words to represent what is important to you.
- finding a body position to symbolize what's happening in your life.
- a guided imagery and then sharing the experience and its relevance.
- listening to music and then checking-in with thoughts and feelings that arose.
- a short activity that gives time for reflection and sharing.
- a pithy phrase - reflection and sharing.
- a physical activity that acts as a metaphor .

Check-ins and other opening activities offer many potential benefits to the participants, to the group as a whole, and to the process and the content of the meeting or seminar. They allow participants to become fully present, rather than be distracted by other concerns. They invite the whole person to engage, not just the role. Time spent with checking-in, focusing the awareness of the individual is time well spent, time that helps facilitate the learning process for each individual present.

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How Seriously Do You Take Your Sense of Humor?
by Leslie Brunker, M.A. / ABS

How do you integrate humor into one's ordinary, mundane daily work practices or into highly technical or linear training programs? As a training consultant specializing in interpersonal skills and humor in the workplace I have given this subject a great deal of thought, study, and, of course, muse. Humor is one of those ethereal subjects that is difficult to define and even more difficult to assign a "how to" text to it. People like it when there are specific steps involved. They want the "Seven Habits of Highly Humorous Individuals" or some version thereof.

For teachers and trainers who are delivering fairly dry material, it is helpful to bring out the humor in the fact that you are all in this together. A playful way to connect is on the very fact that you're gathered to explore such a dry subject. When you create an environment where there is permission to laugh, then humor will begin to emerge naturally. You do not need to be a comedian. You can also identify humor in any subject, even very serious or sad subjects. This is done by having a sensitivity to how other will receive your perspective. The more you can put yourself in others' shoes, the more easily you can bring lightness to a situation. I have worked in very "serious" situations with groups who work with dying people and there families, in emergency rooms, on crisis lines, and even in the legal system, so you know humor can be addressed for almost any group or subject.

Humor is a challenging subject to teach because each person has their own unique experience and comes with their own unique set of expectations. Since humor is so personal and ever changing, I find the learning process to be fairly right-brained. How can I tell you "how to" have more humor? I can tell you what I do to experience more humor, but that still is not the answer. It has less to do with what one does as it has to do with a way of being. (Ah, now for the ethereal.) Our thinking influences our being, so I usually like to start with how one thinks. I also focus on habits; especially habits of thinking and interacting. Most people think of interaction as having to be with another person or persons, but not so. We begin our interactions with the way we relate to ourselves and through ourselves. That gets reflected out to how we relate to other people, and to our environment and the world.

When I teach any interactive skills I always begin with the relationship with the self, then look at how that reflects into our interpersonal relationships. How we integrate humor has to do with how seriously or how lightly we are able to take ourselves. The more seriously I take myself, the more that seriousness will be reflected in my interpersonal communications. When I practice taking myself lightly and giving myself a break for being human, I then am more willing to give others that same break. There is great value to learning to laugh at oneself and then to see oneself reflected in others and in life so that we may continue to muse and be amused.

Humor is a tremendous tool for communication as well as a survival skill. The wonderful thing about it is that it's something we all have access to (however, some have it buried more deeply than others). Like any habit, it takes some conscious practice and creativity to expand our experience and skill with humor. We also require a certain amount of sensitivity to others to learn what's working and what needs to be modified.

As a presenter, teacher, educator, and facilitator I know that humor is my most important and effective tool. I invest in it just like I invest in all other tools for my profession. Sometimes it comes through the spoken word, and sometimes through activities such as learning games or simulations. Once I am proficient at using this tool, it comes naturally when teaching any subject. The trick is not to learn to tell a bunch of jokes during training, but to learn to see humor in the moment. Also to regard the human experience as one full of joy rather than of angst, full or hope rather than of despair, and rich with learning and opportunities to grow rather than mistakes and failures. It really comes first from a way of thinking, which translates to a way of being. Make humor and joy a habit, and before you know it you'll see it in all of your work, even the most tedious and dry. You'll see it in your relationships, even the most difficult and grating. You'll see how valuable that tool really is and how it affects everything you do.

Leslie Brunker, M.A., is a learning facilitator and training consultant based in Portland, Oregon. For sixteen years she has developed and implemented active training programs throughout the United States in the subjects of Team Development, Communication Skills, Conflict Resolution, Leadership Development, Humor in the Workplace, as well as Train-the-Trainer. She works through her company, Unlimited Potentials Training and Consulting Services, located in Portland, Oregon (503-233-3859, **litenup@ipinc.net**). Leslie Brunker, M. A./ABSUnlimited Potentials Training & Consulting Services, 6336 SE Milwaukie Ave., Suite 26, Portland, OR

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Reflections

An effective workshop or seminar has a sense of closure when it is time to end. The same applies to the end of a day or module of a workshop. A reflection phase at the end of a learning module allows the learners to think about what they have learnt and experienced. It gives them the opportunity to reflect on what they wish to take with them and how it can be useful to them. Time so used at the end of a learning session gives each person a sense of closure, rounding off the experience for him/her individually. It can also be an opportunity to directly express their feelings, thoughts, and reactions to you and to each other.

In our next issue, we will look at this phase more closely. Perhaps you are now at the end of your first reading of our new SIMAGES. Maybe you skimmed through it, maybe you read it from cover to cover. Take a few minutes to reflect on your personal experience. Which articles touched you in some way? What was important to you while reading? What can you contribute to the next issue?

Thanks to all of those who contributed to this edition of SIMAGES.

Gail and Randy