



CRITICAL REFLECTION ON PRACTICE DEVELOPMENT

A reflection on using play to facilitate learning

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Submitted for publication: 11th January 2016

Accepted for publication: 4th April 2016

Published: 18th May 2016

doi: 10.19043/ipdj.61.007

Abstract

Background: At the South Eastern Sydney Local Health District Nursing and Midwifery Practice and Workforce Unit, we use the framework of CARE (a compound acronym of Capacity, cAbility, collaboRation and culturE) to inform all aspects of work. The principles of practice development (Manley et al., 2008) also inform our work, a major focus of which is the use of coaching, action learning sets and active learning techniques. The use of questions and questioning is key to these. These techniques are part of our person-centred approach to professional development and learning. This article describes my reflections, using Gibbs' model (1988), on the development of a questioning tool aimed at enhancing learning through play. The tool is an origami 'chatterbox', which was originally developed as part of a 'poster' presentation at the 2014 International Practice Development Conference in Toronto.

Aims and objectives: This article aims to share a critical reflection on developing and using the chatterbox and to describe how this experience led to deeper reflections on the role of play in adult learning.

Conclusions and implications for practice: The chatterbox has provided a simple and effective tool for introducing, practising and reinforcing the use of enabling questions. Its development allowed the categorisation of enabling questions. Personal reflections undertaken as part of the development of the tool inspired me to explore the literature about the role of play in adult learning. It has implications for supporting the learning of people who are interested in using enabling questions, by increasing their skill and confidence.

Keywords: Learning, enabling, questioning, adult learning, facilitation tool, play

Background and context

I work in the Nursing and Midwifery Practice and Workforce Unit of South Eastern Sydney Local Health District (SESLHD). The unit's function is to support the development of capacity, capability, collaboration and culture. SESLHD is a large administrative district of New South Wales Health and is made up of eight hospitals, which include tertiary and quaternary referral centres, aged care, palliation and rehabilitation. With more than 5,000 nurses and midwives employed across the district, the unit has a role in leading the development of a capable and competent workforce, with a particular emphasis on the development of leaders and effective workplace cultures.

The unit staff is made up of a team of nine nurses and midwives, with diverse backgrounds in clinical care, education and teaching and operational management. We work in person-centred ways and have skills in facilitation of processes, coaching, mentoring, curriculum design and evaluation and values-based leadership.

In 2014 our team welcomed the challenge of presenting an interactive poster at the International Practice Development Conference in Toronto. We wanted to share the work we had been facilitating with teams and individuals to use enabling questions as a way of contributing to collaborative workplace cultures. Three team members developed a poster titled 'Unleashing potential: it's all in the questions'. The origami chatterbox was designed to support the poster by illustrating the use of enabling questions. The chatterbox is a square of paper folded into a boxlike structure that fits over the thumb and index finger of each hand (Figures 1-3).

Figure 1: The Chatterbox

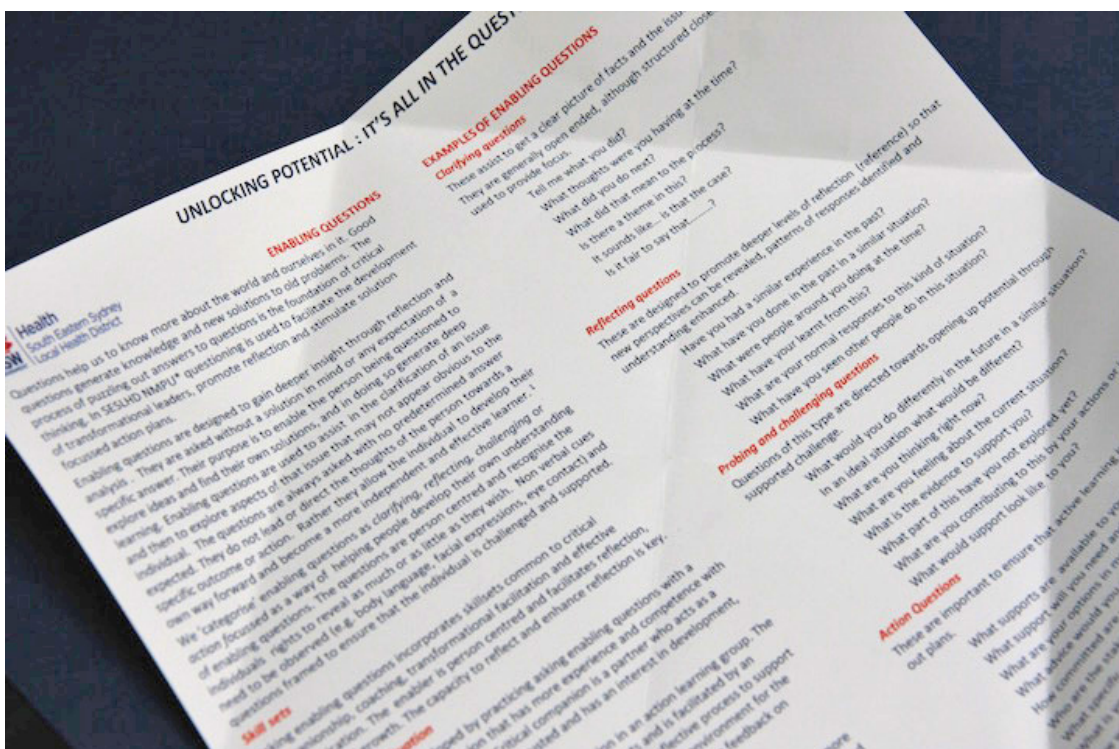


Moving the fingers reveals different folds of the box. The type of questions and a brief description is written under the first folds. Examples of the type of questions can be found under the second folds.

Figures 2 and 3: The Chatterbox unfolded to reveal the questions



Unfolded, the chatterbox shows a more detailed description of the questions and further examples on the reverse of the square. When practising the use of enabling questions, the chatterbox is used as a prompt by the learner.



This experience stimulated my reflections on the role of play and fun in adult learning.

Description

Our team is engaged in work across the health district that aims to enhance positive workplace cultures. This includes bodies of work relating to leadership development, and patient- and person-centred care programmes. It also involves working with groups of health professionals with the goal of fostering their development as teams. We avoid giving solutions, preferring to facilitate teams as they explore issues and develop their own solutions through asking them enabling questions.

The three team members involved in the poster project collaborated with the larger team to brainstorm ideas. We wanted the poster to attract people to the display, be Australian in theme and, most importantly, be interactive and fun. These prerequisites were based partly on the brief, but also on the experience of learning from other poster presentations we had seen and developed. As experienced facilitators, we are aware that adults learn when engaged, that incidental learning can be quite powerful and that facilitating learning requires varied approaches to meet the needs of individuals.

As we brainstormed ideas for our presentation, we actively reflected on our previous experiences of facilitating individuals and groups to learn the skills of enabling questioning. We knew that enabling questions are those that encourage exploration of a problem with a view to developing new understandings and appreciations, and the subsequent identification of actions to address and or resolve that issue. An enabling approach creates opportunities for people to feel empowered, reflect critically, challenge assumptions and discover opportunities. Based on the techniques of appreciative inquiry, we see it as a key tool in supporting the development and enhancement of effective, person-centred workplace cultures.

Before this, the team had developed an informal approach to describing types of enabling questions, based in part on our experiences as coaches and as facilitators. The preparation of the chatterbox led to the development of a system that categorises enabling questions into four basic groups: clarifying, reflective, challenging and action based. Clarifying questions help to sort out facts and details and move the narrative forward. Reflective questions encourage deeper thinking and analysis, and can broaden perspectives and enhance and deepen understanding. Challenging questions aim to identify assumptions, question habits and stimulate new ideas, while action questions focus on the way forward and identify specific activities to address the issue and measure outcomes.

Our framework has been informed by Socratic questioning, appreciative enquiry (May et al., 2011) and solution-focused coaching (Greene and Grant, 2003). Socratic questioning is referred to by Paul and Elder (2007, p 36) as a 'form of disciplined questioning that can be used to pursue thought in many directions and for many purposes'. It systematically explores a person's ideas through structured questioning, helping them to recognise ways to solve problems using knowledge they already hold. Appreciative enquiry promotes the use of a positive focus to determine what already is working in a system rather than emphasising what is failing (May et al., 2011). Solution-focused coaching encourages the setting of goals and action plans (Green and Grant, 2003). Integration of these approaches encourages individuals to identify their own context-specific solutions and to develop realistic action plans.

In our work with leaders and managers, we have noted the difficulty many people can have in grasping the difference between listening to find a solution to a problem, and listening to understand. In order to enable another to resolve or address their problems, an individual needs to understand the elements of the problem, be aware of their own assumptions and habitual responses to problems and to be committed to their actions to address the problem. In many instances, individuals comment on how difficult this is, particularly where workloads are heavy and managers' habitual responses relate to rapid and reactive problem solving.

We introduce our leadership programme participants to the techniques of asking enabling questions to support their participation in action learning sets and their roles as leaders in healthcare. Action learning sets are employed to encourage leaders to practise exploring issues, enhance deeper and more generative learning, and to avoid giving solutions to a colleague's problem. We have taken a multifaceted approach to this in an attempt to address different learning styles. This has included lectures with visual illustrations and printed handouts, fishbowl demonstrations (which model a set to a group of observers) and discussion followed by facilitated practice in triads. We have reflected that many of our participants struggle with the notion of enabling, and this struggle has primarily related to wanting to give solutions rather than allowing the person presenting an issue the freedom to identify their own solutions. They often comment that they do not know the 'right question to ask'. A significant breakthrough in encouraging enabling questioning came when we decided to make the practice triads less 'serious'. Instead of setting out a problem, we asked the presenters to tell a story from their experience of when something amusing had happened to them. Enabling questions were to be asked about the experience. As a result, the energy in the room lifted significantly, with plenty of laughter heard. Feedback from facilitators and participants suggested that the clarifying and challenging styles of questions were used freely and that reflective questions were introduced in every triad. Action-based questions were not usually asked, as the focus of the triads was to practise clarifying, challenging and reflective questions. We built on this experience when developing concepts for our interactive poster by using a lighthearted approach.

The intent of the poster was to demonstrate the types of enabling questions we encourage. As we planned the poster abstract, we 'played' with language and how it might relate to the poster requirements. After several sessions in which we informally explored ideas, we came up with the idea of using 'puppetry and creative origami'. At that time we thought we would be using the puppets to 'ask' questions and demonstrate our work, and that the 'creative origami' would be visually appealing depictions of Australian birds and animals. Like all great creative processes, the more fun we had with the ideas, the more we developed the concept, adding inflatable kangaroos, hand puppets and Australiana bunting to our display. We realised we had limited capacity to fulfil our vision of Australian animals in origami due to our lack of paper-folding expertise. Spontaneously, and directly out of the discussion regarding this lack of origami skills, the idea for the 'chatterbox' was born. As we developed the idea, we saw the possibility of using the chatterbox to introduce questioning and simultaneously to contain information about our question types to the audience of practice developers.

Feelings

The dominant feeling during the preparation for the presentation was excitement, tempered by the knowledge that the work our unit is doing in this area was to be presented to the international practice development community. The planning included rehearsal of how the poster session would be run. It was intended that the hand puppets would encourage people to look at the offerings, but that the presenters would use the chatterbox to ask questions of those visiting the stall. The questions would be posed in the context of the conference. For instance 'How did you get here today?' or 'Where are you from?' would be used as clarifying questions, with more challenging and probing questions asked in relation to sessions attended. In this way, the application of the types of questions would be demonstrated. The first rehearsal created some anxiety for one of the presenters, who was not confident in their ability to 'ad lib' and perform with the puppets. Despite knowing my colleague well, I had not anticipated these concerns, and this was a timely reminder to be more person centred in my planning. We were able to discuss this and together we prepared some sample 'scripts' for the interactions. At the conference when the puppetry was used to engage delegates, my colleague was confident and enjoyed the role.

Evaluation

The chatterbox was tested at the conference. Initially attracted by our Australiana display, delegates readily engaged with our team. Their reactions were affirming of our original intent to entertain them

in a playful way. Many commented on how they remembered the 'toy' from their childhood, although quite a few needed a quick refresher on how to use it. 'I remember this as a kid' and 'this takes me back' were typical comments. Smiles and laughter were features of the interactions. Several people asked if the work had been published, and one suggested that there 'was a lot' of literature to support adult learning through play.

When my colleagues reported this to me, I was intrigued by the idea of a body of literature about the role of play and playfulness in adult learning that I had never considered. I was interested to see if my long-held belief that people learn more easily when having fun was supported in the literature.

I conducted a literature search in the ERIC online library, using various search terms including 'adult learning + play', 'adult learning + games', and 'adult learning + fun'. When these revealed fewer than 10 titles, I added 'creativity + learning', and was surprised to find a dearth of literature supporting the role of play or fun in adult learning. Most articles were opinion pieces rather than research, and the research reports were many years old. I found some literature relating to 'gaming' and adult learning, particularly computer gaming. This does not generally address how 'play' contributes to a sense of enjoyment, or if adults see this type of learning as fun. There is also an abundance of writing on the topic of simulation, but there is little to suggest that the role of 'fun' has been considered in the serious business of adult learning. There is a significant body of knowledge that supports the role of childhood play and learning; children learn through the experience of playing and the learning is incidental. Playing is, for children at least, generally fun. On revisiting the work of Piaget (Merriam and Caffarella, 2009) and Vygotsky (Kozulin, 2003), I noted that there was an expectation that children learn through play, and that play is generally fun in nature. Gaming and simulation for adults have learning as their purpose, but I found no explanation of why playing might support or enhance learning.

I remained intrigued by the apparent lack of research to support the idea that learning in adults might be enhanced by playing games, especially when I reflected on how many games we play as adults. Board games can be entertaining but also teach us new information about the world – *Trivial Pursuit* for instance. We can also learn at a deeper level than factual recall, and many people have learned new dexterity and speed through popular smartphone or tablet apps. The explosion in game applications for handheld devices and tablets does support the notion that adults do enjoy games that challenge our intellect and many, such as *Luminosity*, are specifically designed to enhance cognitive flexibility – despite little evidence for their efficacy. They appear to be used as pastimes rather than actively to learn.

My reflections have led me to consider the possibility that learning through such pastimes has the effect of allowing people to connect in a non-threatening way. I have observed people playing games, and also using the chatterbox, and I have seen that people engage socially through the game. This social contact means that the focus is on the game and on the person they are playing with, and the process of learning is less conscious and more incidental in nature. The learning that does occur is supported by the social aspect of the activity. This has been the case with the chatterbox, and first-time users have reported that it allowed them to use the tool as a guide in a less stilted way than referring to a list of questions. Most importantly, it freed them from the sense that they had to ask the 'right' questions, and allowed them to learn through having fun.

Since its launch in Toronto, the chatterbox has been used locally and at district level as a prompt to stimulate nurses and midwives to adopt a more enabling approach to their conversations with others. It is also being used in some of our leadership development work across disciplines. The chatterbox is used to introduce the types of questions used in an action learning set. In the initial teaching and practice session the 'questioner' will randomly select a type of question, and formulate one specific to the situation. Discussion around the appropriateness of the type of question for the stage ensues, guided by the facilitator if required. In this way, greater clarity about the selection and timing of questions evolves. The playful nature of this decreases the pressure on the questioner to ask the 'right' question. We have observed that confidence builds quickly so that when actual learning sets follow, the

structure of moving from clarification through to action determination is more fluid. Most importantly, the tendency of novice action learning participants to offer their own solutions to the issue brought to a set is greatly reduced. We believe this is because the chatterbox encourages and enables participants to focus on learning questioning techniques in a comfortable and supportive environment. While the tool awaits a more formal evaluation, initial feedback has been positive. What has been observed is that the chatterbox does enhance engagement in learning about enabling questions. It is played with in a way that makes the user more open to asking a question and the element of 'fun' appears to decrease discomfort about asking the 'wrong' question. Particularly encouraging is anecdotal evidence from facilitators, who have noted that participants in action learning sets who have been introduced to questioning through the chatterbox are able to ask more open-ended and facilitative questions.

Analysis

The process of preparation for the poster had two material outcomes. The first was the emergence of a more structured definition of the types of enabling questions we use. This has given clarity to our own understanding of enabling questions and helped us to define a hierarchy of question types from clarifying to action planning. The second is that a playful approach led to the development of the chatterbox as a resource that can assist our facilitation of others as they develop skill in questioning. The use of this simple tool to engage and provide a scaffold for learning and using enabling questions has been well received. The tool is available for use across the district, and is to be made available in electronic printable form to staff via the district's intranet.

On a personal level, the feedback from the conference attendees led me to explore the literature relating to the role of play in adult learning, and I am surprised at how little research has been conducted in this area.

One key new understanding that has emerged from my reflection is that there may be a 'taken-for-grantedness' that play is the domain of children. This may have implications for the ways in which we engage adults in serious bodies of work. It is evident adults do engage in games – be they physical or intellectual – and it would seem to me that, as facilitators of learning, there are many potential opportunities to validate our use of fun in formal and informal learning situations.

Conclusion

The development of an innovative approach to skill development has involved me in a reflection on the role of play in adult learning. It has initiated a deeper consideration of the role of play in adulthood, and revealed an apparent lack of research into the role fun plays in adult learning.

The reflection has also led to a deeper appreciation of the role of simple resources in helping to shape thinking and in particular to foster new approaches to enabling others to find their own solutions.

Action plan

The use of the tool will continue, with a basic 'users guide' being developed. This is seen as helpful to encourage the application of the tool, but also to explain and provide examples of where, when and how it can be employed. This will be added to a local suite of resources being developed to support facilitation and cultural development within our district.

Poster presentations for work undertaken by the team have already been influenced by our experience. More creative approaches to engaging the audience have emerged as we begin the process with the team engaging in a dynamic and enjoyable exploration of creative ideas. This has resulted in attractive posters, which contain and deliver the message more creatively than those we produced previously.

Finally, there is a need to evaluate the tool, with an emphasis on its usefulness in assisting people to apply their learning about enabling questions to their practice.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge my team members in the Nursing and Midwifery Practice and Workforce Unit who have supported and encouraged me in the work that is outlined in this reflection: Karen Tuqiri, Keith Jones, Robin Girle, Tamera Watling, Coral Levett, Sharon White, Ruth Smoother, June Sheriff and Kim Olesen. My special thanks go to Karen and Keith who presented the chatterbox to its first international audience in Toronto.

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