CHAPTER 3

A SPRINGBOARD FOR FURTHER LEARNING

Teaching Seasoned Practitioners by Harnessing Their Experience

Hans Vermaak

The number of practicing management consultants keeps growing, most of them without previously having studied organizational change at university level. They enter the profession with backgrounds ranging from engineering and forestry, to psychology and economics, broadening their competence as they go. They mostly pick things up on the job, but also through in-house training programs (in large consultancy firms) or brief nonacademic skill-based trainings. Their original backgrounds do have relevance is some way, but leave much to be desired in terms of a common body of knowledge. Their gained experience definitely has relevance in many ways, but that knowledge is largely implicit and nonconceptualized. All this presents a need for educating practitioners with many years of experience.

In this chapter I focus on the continuing education of experienced practitioners, which presents a challenge for many reasons. Introducing basic ideas and methods, as is done in most bachelor and master's programs for young students, will hardly capture the imagination: the models are either

Preparing Better Consultants: The Role of Academia, pp. 39–49

already familiar or too clean-cut for the messy practice they deal with on a daily basis. Short, skill-based courses lack enough depth to push them to the next level. Generally, it seems that classical education formats lose their instructional power as the experience of students increases. Rather than broadening students' knowledge base through standardized teaching, it makes more sense to deepen their practice through tailor made exploration. This approach implies too much divergence for one curriculum to suffice, too much complexity for outside experts or best practices to provide the answers to and too much unpredictability to predesign and foresee how such programs pan out.

In 2003 I was involved in starting a new master's program geared toward experienced practitioners at a postgraduate institute (Sioo) associated with the University of Amsterdam. The old master's program had run successfully for 45 years; the new one was meant to push the boundaries of teaching this particular group. A team of five people redesigned the program from the ground up to meet the challenges outlined above. Since then, five groups of students have completed the program. Each group consisted of about 20 practitioners who combined studying with their day jobs; the program takes about 18 months to complete. The program has been quite successful from the perspectives of participants and their peers. In what follows, I sketch out some of the ideas underlying the redesign that contributed to its success. In particular, I want to focus on how we harnessed the experiences of the participants as a springboard for further learning and involved them in the co-production of their own learning as a means to build capacity for continuing development.

RESEARCHING AND STRETCHING ONE'S OWN PRACTICE

In the original program "big names" were commonly invited as guest lecturers to share stories of their own practice and teach their collection of cherished theories. The power of their delivery and their professional reputations helped to raise doubts amongst students about the quality of their own work and the efficacy of their own methods. This allowed students to become less attached to their own convictions and increase their willingness to explore new avenues offered by staff. The old program worked quite well in countering the risk of "pigeon holing" that commonly arises among experienced consultants (Perrow, 1970). Alumni would joke that the program was a good way to induce a "midlife crisis." However, a hidden assumption seemed to be that faculty, not the students, had the answers. Also that students' ideas and experience should be questioned and doubted, rather than harnessed and built upon.

Our new point of departure was that change agents with 15-30 experience bring in a lot of professionalism already, though they are often unable to put into words what they do exactly, let alone why it works. The concepts they "borrow" from literature are too haphazardly selected to add much meaning to their experience. A good example was one student who had great success dealing with organizations full of toxic emotions and histories of neglect. Her implicit know-how could potentially be of great value to others. However, the labels she used to explain her work came from the arena of project management: she was talking about the sequence of different phases, definition of roles, decision moments, etcetera. None of these shed much light on the magic of her work. They seemed too clean cut and crude to capture its sophistication and authenticity. As with the other students, her knowledge was tacit, making it hard to enquire into and build on (Polanyi, 1966). These shortcomings hinder students' development and their ability to contribute to the profession. So our first principle was for them to research their own practice and elucidate their implicit "change methodologies" in words that would make more sense out of them.

In many ways, this approach is new territory. Practitioners learn all the time, but this does not mean they create knowledge for others. For that, their learning is often too piecemeal and implicit. They pick things up on the job. The night before they go to a client they might put together a presentation based on materials they have nearby. Driving away from the client, they might ponder what worked and what did not. If the events keep puzzling them, they might talk it through with a trusted colleague or they might initiate an interim evaluation with the client. In terms of cognitive styles (Ruijters, 2006), they learn predominantly through "reflection" (e.g., in the car by themselves) and "interaction" (e.g., talking with a colleague). Both can give them new insights, which in turn may suggest alternative actions and in trying those out experience grows. However, such collected insights rarely lead to a cohesive story over time. It more often ads to a fuzzy cloud of loosely coupled notions accessible for these practitioners alone. To conceptualize their experience, another cognitive style is needed: "construction." Here people model their experience into professional knowhow. This allows for them and others to assess its value and underpinnings more systematically: to spot slippery reasoning, fuzzy terrains and downsides, to imagine improvements and new applications. Such research-based conceptualization thus became the central challenge we set for our students.

Practitioners are not altogether unfamiliar with research. They might have audited organizations or diagnosed sticky problems in the course of their work. They also have first hand access to rich and unique research material. They are accustomed to making sense of the ambiguous situations they face as practitioners. Also, any consultant who retains his curiosity and vitality over time has found a way to keep questioning what he or she is confronted with. Yet, these practices do not have the research rigor required to mine the "jewels" of their practice. This rigor is rarely part of the consultants' toolkit, which means they often fail to recognize what they do as much use to others or they use concepts and ideas too crude to do their practice justice. One of the aims of our program is to help them achieve some of that rigor.

This starts with spotting ways to acquire rich qualitative data from their past work or from new experiments. Such data consist of participative observations, assisted with document study, feedback from colleagues, collecting narratives, and so on. The challenge here is too slow down the consultants' quick paced way of doing things and to have them observe what happens rather forming quick (value based) conclusions. Next we teach them to analyze the data from multiple viewpoints, often in collaboration with colleagues and clients. We also encourage them to delve into the relevant literature for analytical frames to deepen their analyses and scrutinize their findings. Schulman (1993) refers here to the need for "conceptual slack": an overabundance of viewpoints acquired by delving into new literature, comparing authors, unearthing key ideas, and positioning oneself in a field. Teaching students to critically review literature is a challenge as it requires them to go far beyond the usual browsing though popular handbooks. Similarly, for many students, learning to persistently question what might seem to be clear-cut conclusions often goes against their professional habits. Gradually their findings take shape and we ask them to model them for discussion. We help them choose a level of complexity that makes sense: enough to do justice to their practice, but not so much that it would deter clients and colleagues. We introduce a typology of models and discuss their different functions and limitations: do you create a metaphor to show what the phenomenon looks like, or rather a mind map to distinguish its aspects and characteristics, a protocol on how to handle it, or a causal loop diagram to explain the dynamics behind it? Each type of model serves a different purpose and is constructed differently (Engeström, 1994). Such modeling is rarely discerned as a skill in and of itself. Usually, the student reflex is to come up with a recipe in the form of "a seven step plan," like those that dominate the profession: they help sell services, satisfy management demands and may reassure target groups (Gabriel & Hirschhorn, 1999). Unfortunately, such modeling allows most of the tacit knowledge that comes through the practice of consultancy to get lost.

Wanting to push the boundaries with this program also made us challenge students to develop a methodology that not only enabled their personal interests, but actually added to our profession *and* could make a difference to the outside world. Finding such a convergence can take some time. For example, one student was fascinated by the powerlessness of many staff departments in organizations to deliver real added value. She had many years experience empowering human resource (HR) departments and trying to effect real organizational change from (interim) HR positions. Interestingly, as the youngest in a large family, she had acquired a knack for effecting changes in dominant practices and knew how to be politically savvy while doing so. Thus her societal, professional and personal interests and themes intersected. This points to something more general: advanced methodologies do not appear to be just about what people do, but come to life also because of who they are, what they believe, what interests them, and what fits their values (Vermaak, 2000). The profession becomes personal in a way. This also works the other way around: when scrutinizing some of their own case studies students would sometimes share how the events in those cases affected them personally. They would sometimes erroneously conclude these feelings had to be dealt with on an individual level. But some issues, like the powerlessness of staff departments, may get personal while being anything but individual: anyone else put in that situation might well "feel" the same thing because the circumstances call for it. These emotional reactions thus constitute a professional issue to deal with at work, rather than purely a personal hiccup to deal with privately.

In the end, students turn their findings into a "methodological handbook" to be evaluated by faculty and into presentations or articles for the outside world. Students' findings are generally not what they expected at the beginning: it is not harvesting what they already know. This is also because we valued imperfect handbooks dealing with tough issues over perfect handbooks dealing with tame issues. We feel the track record of our profession leaves quite a bit to be desired when dealing with more complex issues (such as sustainable development). New methodologies, thus, make the most difference when they shed light on more effective ways to deal with those challenges. As an uphill battle against accepted mainstream practices is generally part of any real innovation, students' methodologies can also help provide the language needed to legitimize taking roads less travelled to clients and colleagues alike (Vermaak, 2009). All this puts doing research squarely in service of professionalizing practice rather than the other way around. Given these ambitions, the handbooks remained works in progress till and beyond the end or the program. This allowed the students' methodologies to keep shifting over time as they grew to understand deeper layers, spot limitations, and see new possibilities. Handbook topics ranged far and wide: from 'dealing with ambiguity in organizations', "ICT driven transformations" and "dynamics of foreign aid," to "organizing learning under pressure."

COPRODUCING RICH DIDACTIC ENVIRONMENTS AND BUILDING METACAPABILITIES FOR LEARNING

Classic "teaching" is rife with problems. Organizing learning away from work in separate programs quickly results in problems transferring that learning back to work. At the same time, standardized curriculums narrow competences and hinder a pluralist view of organizations, while one-way instruction formats enhance consumerist learning habits (e.g., Levinthal & March, 1993). The content of most teaching programs is rarely controversial: it is more about what needs to be learned than what needs to be unlearned. The "hidden curriculum" most often seems to legitimize existing ideologies, rather than challenge them (e.g., Illeris, 2002). Such teaching easily becomes shallow. Given our ambition to harness tacit knowledge in students' practices, the need to intertwine work and learning quickly became self evident. Given the range of student practices, they needed to access a wide range of theoretical ideas as well. Given our focus on tough issues, controversial (i.e., not "more of the same") concepts came to warrant special attention. Given the target group of experienced practitioners, we saw a need to go well beyond the self-evident. All in all we felt sophisticated and deep learning was called for; but how to organize that?

Our starting point was to strive for a diversity of learning processes. If you regard learning processes as cycles in which people go through contrasting types of activities that complement each other, such diversity can be a way to close learning loops faster. This can relate to alternating between practice and theory, action and reflection (e.g., Kolb, 1984). Others might stress the conversion of explicit into implicit knowledge and vice versa, both individually and collectively (Nonaka, 1994), or between individual, group and organizational learning processes (Crossan, Lane, & White, 1999). Whatever the aspects chosen, the principle remains the same: learning deepens when a diversity of learning processes is available and used. What this means is that next to formal settings, much informal learning takes place as well; next to theory-based exploration, practice is researched; next to copying the art from colleagues, new interventions are practiced, and so on.

As staff we created a basic didactic structure with regard to collective moments of learning that already had some of this diversity built in:

1. A day-long introduction for all to get to know each other and a week-long travel meant to experience the key components and principles of the program as a 'microcosm'.
2. Knowledge labyrinths in which groups study an area of the literature (e.g., systems thinking or psychodynamics) going back to orig-

inal sources and meeting authors. Students write an analysis of that area and hold a public discussion on it with a leading author. They also reflect on what role knowledge has in their professional life and how to enhance that.

3. Coaching refuges where students reflect on personal issues they face in their work, in professionalizing and in their research. Most of this takes place in small groups, some methodological guidance in ways of coaching is offered in collective settings, and key issues are selectively addressed 1-on-1 with a staff member.
4. Fascinations that people have in their life can have relevance for their professional identity, sometimes literally but surely figuratively. Students each organize a seminar "on location" on their fascination (like "city development" or "professional skating") for fellow students and explore its relevance.
5. Methodology labs are the largest component of the program. Here students are helped to research their practice, relate this to theory, push their boundaries in experimentation and conceptualize key findings. Guest faculty are invited to discuss ways to do this and help students along. As "role models" the work and development of these guests is also discussed and critiqued by students.
6. In "manifestations" students share their new found methodology with the outside world. The first manifestation is a full day program with respected academics who discuss the robustness of the students' findings with them; a second manifestation is a public gathering with a few hundred guests where the relevance of their findings is gauged by clients and colleagues. In both manifestations the students have a leading role organizing and facilitating the events. We consider this a transition stage towards continuing manifestation after the program.

No matter how diverse this didactic structure, a tension between collective and individual needs does remain. This tension stems from the different content the students focus on (in terms of change methodology), from the different types of research they have chosen to conduct, and from the different ways they like to learn (e.g., Coffield, Moseley, Hall, & Ecclestone, 2004). Also, it is hard for either staff or students to predetermine how these needs would evolve. Thus the didactic structure provided by the staff could only be a base to build on: most of the learning environments had to develop along the way, and most of the learning took place outside of these collective settings, shaped by the students themselves. As a rule of thumb, half of these additional activities took place in small groups of students around subjects or processes they choose to share (e.g., delving into common literature, analyzing each other's cases, helping to construct findings, etc.). The other half generally consisted of some sort of action research with people in their workplace addressing real issues and investigating there what works and why. Most of the time is thus spent and most of the progress is thus made outside the formal program and its basic requirements. It makes the program that results different each consecutive year and the design complex and emergent, both of which make it all the more interesting.

An implication of this setup is that we as staff cannot oversee or steer all learning processes. We thus have to share and distribute responsibilities (Buchanan, 2003). First and foremost each student takes responsibility for their own development: they invite colleagues to help interpret their cases, seek out experts they want to talk to, do experiments in their clients' organizations, and so on. Each student has access to part of the program's budget to spend on what helps them most in this respect. There is also a shared responsibility among students for the topics and activities they choose to venture into in small groups as well as for the final and public second manifestation. The plenary sessions are generally co-organized by the staff with some students (in a rotating schedule).

We regard sharing and distributing didactic responsibilities as a pragmatic choice that allows for didactic richness. But is was not our only motivation. The other reason was to deliberately build metacapacity amongst practitioners to organize their own learning. The best way to build such abilities it to enable students to codesign, cofacilitate, and coevaluate learning: to get their own hands dirty, to be assisted in doing so, to experiment and gain experience and to draw lessons from it in a safe environment. Given the real life challenges in our profession, continuing education is very worthwhile. Outsourcing this responsibility to outsiders like training institutes, business schools, or HR departments not only makes learning more shallow, but also results in it being a temporary activity organized away from work. It creates an unwanted dependency of practitioners on others for their development. Why not have this learning be self organized just like the rest of the professional's tasks and responsibilities? This could be organized around concrete issues to be tackled on the job floor by direct colleagues as in Schön's (1983) plea for "reflective practitioning." It could also be organized around knowledge exchange among professionals sharing common identities, expertise, passions and endeavors as in Wenger's (1998) plea for "communities of practice." It could be done in many organic ways as an intricate part of everyday work life. So we decided the program should not only be about content (change methodologies), but also about the capability to organize such learning on a continuous basis in one's career.

delving into common literature, analyzing each other's cases, helping to construct findings, etc.). The other half generally consisted of some sort of action research with people in their workplace addressing real issues and investigating there what works and why. Most of the time is thus spent and most of the progress is thus made outside the formal program and its basic requirements. It makes the program that results different each consecutive year and the design complex and emergent, both of which make it all the more interesting.

An implication of this setup is that we as staff cannot oversee or steer all learning processes. We thus have to share and distribute responsibilities (Buchanan, 2003). First and foremost each student takes responsibility for their own development: they invite colleagues to help interpret their cases, seek out experts they want to talk to, do experiments in their clients' organizations, and so on. Each student has access to part of the program's budget to spend on what helps them most in this respect. There is also a shared responsibility among students for the topics and activities they choose to venture into in small groups as well as for the final and public second manifestation. The plenary sessions are generally co-organized by the staff with some students (in a rotating schedule).

We regard sharing and distributing didactic responsibilities as a pragmatic choice that allows for didactic richness. But is was not our only motivation. The other reason was to deliberately build metacapacity amongst practitioners to organize their own learning. The best way to build such abilities it to enable students to codesign, cofacilitate, and coevaluate learning: to get their own hands dirty, to be assisted in doing so, to experiment and gain experience and to draw lessons from it in a safe environment. Given the real life challenges in our profession, continuing education is very worthwhile. Outsourcing this responsibility to outsiders like training institutes, business schools, or HR departments not only makes learning more shallow, but also results in it being a temporary activity organized away from work. It creates an unwanted dependency of practitioners on others for their development. Why not have this learning be self organized just like the rest of the professional's tasks and responsibilities? This could be organized around concrete issues to be tackled on the job floor by direct colleagues as in Schön's (1983) plea for "reflective practitioning." It could also be organized around knowledge exchange among professionals sharing common identities, expertise, passions and endeavors as in Wenger's (1998) plea for "communities of practice." It could be done in many organic ways as an intricate part of everyday work life. So we decided the program should not only be about content (change methodologies), but also about the capability to organize such learning on a continuous basis in one's career.

Coproducing the program with students does not lessen the intensity of staff involvement, quite the opposite. We just spend more time assisting the students taking charge rather than taking charge ourselves. We do not select resources beforehand, but bring in our network, knowledge and experience for them to make more conscious choices. There is no set list of literature, teachers or exercises, as we deliberately compose that along the way to fit students' needs. We confront them with the sturdiness of their designs and review their progress. We have no preset ideas on what to teach, but do claim the floor to bring in ideas or table discussions where we feel these can raise the level of learning. We selectively take up those tasks that are overlooked: enough to maintain the vitality of the program, but not too much in order to leave much to be desired and taken on by all those involved. Where learning works, progress is made in terms of content; where the learning falters we use it to further insights as to why that is the case (Fritz, 1999). You could say we try to create as much leverage as possible with our staff contributions: not to free ourselves up as learning becomes more efficient, but to reach greater depths as learning becomes more pervasive.

LOOKING BACK

After five completed programs, we are starting to take stock. On the whole, alumni are very positive about the new program. This is not to say that all components are (or ever will be) immediately successful: we regard ups and downs as integral parts of any real learning process, any experimentation and any distribution of leadership (e.g., Geschka, 1978). These can add rather than subtract from the meaning of the program when they are used to gain insight in these processes and strengthen meta-capabilities. Many students have become more visible contributors to the Dutch community of practice of change agents. Some have since received publication awards, others have considerably built up their practices, a few have moved on to do PhD research as practitioners. Alumni networks are strong: many students keep meeting up year to year, working together in projects, and publishing together.

The design of the program has never been constant, even the core team running the program shifts. This is purposefully done to keep ourselves on our toes, to keep pushing boundaries and to act congruently with the principles of the program. Not all redesigns are necessarily improvements, but the program is getting increasingly robust over the years. In terms of theory we increasingly see ourselves raising awareness of topics like "power and politics," "systemic thinking" and "social constructionism." It is hard to know whether these theoretical inputs are a response to the shifting context of our profession, the development of the core team or the new composition of student groups. We also have a few puzzles left. One is that we presume with this type of program that practitioners already possess the basic skills and knowledge of our profession. (We try to pre-select students on the basis of this.) However, it regularly turns out later on that some basics are missing. This is partly because the common body of knowledge is not that clearly defined, and partly because most practitioners enter the profession from very different (one sided) backgrounds. It can create blind spots and Achilles' heels that become clear late in the program. Another puzzle is to what extent such an emergent and complex didactic design can be "copied" as a best practice and how sustainable the needed "playfulness" of its faculty is in the long run. Time will tell, no doubt. Some things do become ever more constant though and we start regarding them as central to the program, like the focus on researching how practitioners deal with tough problems in their own practice and the focus on co-producing complex learning environments. Both were therefore put forward here as elements I do not see as transient, but at the heart of teaching experienced practitioners.

REFERENCES

Buchanan, D. A. (2003). Demands, instabilities, manipulations, careers: the lived experience of driving change. *Human Relations, 56*(6), 663-684.

Coffield, F., Mosely, D., Hall, E., & Ecclestone, K. (2004) *Learning styles and pedagogy in post-16 learning. A systematic and critical review.* Trowbridge, England: Learning and Skills Centre.

Crossan, M. M., Lane, H. W., & White, R. E. (1999). An organizational learning framework: form intuition to institution. *Academy of Management, 24*(3), 522-537.

Engeström, Y. (1994). *Training for change: new approach to instruction and learning in working life*. Geneva, Switzerland: International Labour Office.

Fritz, R. (1999) *The path of the least resistance for managers. Designing organizations to succeed.* San Francisco, CA: Berret-Koehler.

Gabriel, Y., & Hirschhorn, L. (1999). Leaders and followers. In Y. Gabriel (Ed.), *Organizations in depth: the psychoanalysis of organizations* (pp. 139-165). London: SAGE.

Geschka, H. (1978). Introduction and use of idea-generating methods, *Research Management, 3*, 25-28.

Illeris, K. (2002) *The three dimensions of learning. Contemporary learning theory in the tension field between the cognitive, the emotional and the social.* Frederiksberg, Roskilde University Press.

Kolb, D. A. (1984) *Experiential Learning. Experience as the source of learning and development.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Levinthal, D. A., & March, J. G. (1993) The myopia of learning. *Strategic management journal, 14*, 95-112.

Nonaka, I. (1994). A dynamic theory of organizational knowledge creation. *Organization science, 5*(1), 14-37.

Perrow, C. (1970). *Organizational analysis: a sociological review.* Belmont, MA: Wadsworth Publications.

Polanyi, M. (1966). *The tacit dimension.* New York, NY: Doubleday.

Ruijters, M. (2006). *Liefde voor leren. Over diversiteit van leren en ontwikkelen in en van organisaties* [Love of learning. About diversity of learning and development in and of organizations]. Deventer, The Netherlands: Kluwer.

Schön, D. A. (1983). *The reflective practitioner. How professionals think in action.* New York, NY: Basic Books.

Schulman, P. R. (1993) The negotiated order of organizational reliability. *Administration & society, 25*(3), 353-372.

Vermaak, H. (2000). Wat is een goede carrière? Zin en onzin van levens-fasen in het adviesvak [What is a good career? Making sense of life stages for management consultants]. *Management & Organisatie, 5/6*, 217-236.

Vermaak, H. (2009). *Plezier beleven aan taaie vraagstukken. Werkingsmechanismen van vernieuwing en weerbarstigheid* [Enjoying tough issues. Dynamics of innovation and stagnation]. Deventer, The Netherlands: Kluwer.

Wenger, E. C. (1998). *Communities of practice: learning, meaning and identity.* New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.