

Teaching generative relationships through experiential learning

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Context: Two sets of courses at the BI Norwegian Business School, both dealing with positive relationships (appr. 20% of the courses) within a larger agenda of Managing for Excellence: 1) Master of Science class (12X3 hours) and 2) an Executive Master of Management class (5X4 days). In both of these courses we emphasize a form of experiential learning where students go through cycles of:

1. Concrete experience: seeing a movie clip, sharing their own stories or actively trying something out themselves within their own settings;
2. Reflective observation: discussing what seemed important in triggering positive relating: What is going on? What worked/did not work, and why?
3. Abstract reasoning: linking experiences and observations to a set of theoretical resources. The five strategies for respectful engagement in Jane Dutton's (2003) book on *How to Energize Your Workplace* are particularly helpful. We also use a repertoire of practices on generative resistance and liberating laughter from a book on *Idea Work* (Carlsen, Clegg and Gjersvik 2012);
4. Active experimentation: designing experiments for trying out action strategies; involves choosing settings & strategies and defining expectations of outcomes.

There are at least two cycles. Cycle one typically starts with a film clip from the movie *Invictus*, in the scene where Mandela (Morgan Freeman) meets the captain of the South African rugby team, Francois Pienaar (Matt Damon), for the first time. It is a wonderfully rich example. Simply ask: "What's going on?" or "What are the people doing?" (We copied the use of this example from Esa Saarinen at Aalto University). Clips from a documentary on El Bulli (*Cooking in progress*) also work well but need more context.

Cycle two takes place outside of class as students try out action strategies for building positive relationships in their daily work or other activities. Students are typically given a menu of ca 10 possible action strategies as inspirations. They write a log and come back prepared to share. Some students do two loops, some even three. We provide feedback on logs (yes, it's a challenge!) and a final edited version forms part of a hand-in that is graded.

Lessons learned:

1. **Action first:** For both learning cycles, starting in concrete experience provides a necessary empirical grounding and motivation.
2. **Potentially very big impact:** Many students report aha-experiences with turn-around of difficult relationships and acquiring decisive new repertoire for leading and relating and creating. Almost all report big impact from small actions.
3. **Training together:** Many experiments derive their power from *being collective*, e.g. training sessions for providing generative resistance on critical challenges.
4. **It flows well beyond work:** Many try out strategies within their family settings and find new pathways for growing and staging themselves.
5. **We know much more than we can tell:** Successful experiments often entail complex sequences of interactions, e.g. presence – listening – sharing – inviting – *then* challenging. These are dynamics of connecting and relating that are only partially reported in the literature that we use.