

THE INTERACTIVE METHOD

*THE PATH OF HEALING
THROUGH EMPATHY AND COMPASSION*

COMBINED EDITION

VOLUME ONE: THE PROCESS

VOLUME TWO: APPLICATIONS

VOLUME THREE: OUT OF THE PRACTICE

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Experiential Teaching

What is experiential teaching?

Experiential teaching a) uses experiential methods, b) teaches from an experience held in the body in the moment, c) is about the student's own just experienced world, d) teaches from the learnings revealed by the experience itself which often includes more than the original, planned objective, e) recognizes that each experience will have a unique manifestation in the student which makes each student's learning unique, f) requires all of the participants be in touch with their bodysense at all times, listening, learning and speaking from this place and g) in the case of Interactive Focusing teaches an experiential process.

Interactive Focusing is an experiential process model with a distinct form intended to have the integrity within the form to act as a skeleton on which experience can en-flesh. I have chosen to teach the model through direct experience. Rather than explain and lecture, I have developed exercises that students practice firsthand, and consequently they have experiences that will lead to their own personal learning.

I separate out the need first to learn the structure even though the structure of the process model is taught through experiential exercises. I believe there will be enough consensus from the experience to let a similar structure develop within each student. Once the structure is in place, the experiences from the process will be, no doubt, both universally human and uniquely individual.

The teacher designs the exercises to teach from a direct experience, orients the students to their bodysense, asks them to process their experience using their bodysense and asks them to speak and listen from the bodysense when sharing their experience. The exercise should evoke the learning the experience was intended to reveal...and more. Much of the teaching is done by the students' sharing their experiences and from the new learnings which have been revealed by their inner processes.

Because the learning is experiential, it helps if the teacher keeps the modules targeted with clear objectives, and uses concise descriptions, clear demonstrations and germane exercises. The bodysense is the mainstay of the experiential process and experiential teaching/learning because it is at the heart of the experience itself, and it is this organic mechanism that allows the experience to be discovered, recovered, recorded, to come into focus and to reveal the new learning.

Caveat: This said, some healthy confusion may still result due to the nature of learning (see my article, *Experiential Learning*). This isn't rote

memorization. It is learning from direct experience.

A basic truth about and first principle of experiential teaching/learning-

Something that is implicit in experiential teaching/learning is that the teacher's job is to create the possibility of an experience. The student's job is to have the experience. What is learned from the experience is independent of the teacher, and it is dependent upon the experience. In other words what I would like to make explicit is that when we are involved in experiential work we must be, as the Buddha says, lamps unto ourselves. As teachers we can't possibly teach anything except the way to have the experience. What is learned from the experience is totally dependent on the experiencer.

As teachers in the experiential tradition, then, we must come to grips with this reality. We must let go of desired outcomes. We must let go of needing agreement on what is learned. We must let go of the hierarchy that separates teacher and student as well as any implied obedience and veneration. What we can hold on to is our responsibility to create and/or teach a process model, something that is firm enough in its infrastructure that we and others can hang an experience on. We can hold on to teaching methods that provide exercises that lead to experiences.

Just as mutation in species leads to evolution, the uniqueness of experience insures that evolution of the model will occur. Though, as with any evolutionary process, there is the danger of bastardization, on the whole, I think the outcomes of *uniqueness of experience* is a good thing.

An example of experiential teaching using an experiential exercise-

I have developed an exercise to teach the Focuser how to help the listener listen empathically and compassionately. I call this the Focuser-as-teacher exercise. It is this exercise that I will use to illustrate experiential teaching.

When wanting to learn to become an empathic listener, I realized that there is one person, above all, who is most qualified to teach me to listen empathically and compassionately...the person to whom I am listening...for only the Focuser or the one telling her story knows when she feels empathically and compassionately heard.

The Focuser-as-teacher exercise:

The Focuser-as-teacher exercise:

1. The Focuser puts out her material speaking from the bodysense of the experience,
2. The listener selects the reflection by listening from her own bodysense and reflects the experience-bearing parts back to the Focuser,

3. The Focuser resonates the reflection against her bodysense in this new moment,
4. The Focuser gives whatever feedback is needed to help the listener listen empathically and compassionately and
5. The listener adjusts the reflection to come into closer empathic alignment with and understanding of the Focuser.

It is a sequence of statement, reflection, resonance, feedback and adjustment. *The Focuser teaches by resonating the reflection against her bodysense in this new moment and by guiding the listener via feedback to a more accurate understanding of not just the content revealed but of the person behind the statement, the Focuser.* This happens all the while the Focuser is using the reflections, resonating and feedback to become clearer in her own process about her own story or issue.

The design of the experiential exercise-

Within the design of an experiential exercise from which I teach:

1. I *describe* the module I am teaching,
2. I *demonstrate* the exercise as clearly as possible,
3. I assign the experiential exercise so the students can have a *direct experience*,
4. I ask the students to perform the exercise and to *share* with the group what came for them from their individual experience and
5. I teach additional points not produced by the sharing.

1. Description of the exercise:

I ask for a volunteer to listen to me (the instructor) as I demonstrate the Focuser-as-teacher exercise. I will be the Focuser. I tell the volunteer that I will go inside and get in touch with an issue my body is carrying. I will tell her a short story from my bodysense that captures my experience. I will ask her to do nothing but give me reflections for which she uses her own bodysense to select. I will take the reflection inside and match it or resonate it against what is sitting in me in the moment. I will give her feedback about how the reflection was for me: Was it accurate? Did she say back all that I needed to hear? Did she reflect more than I needed? Did she catch my energy level (calm, agitated)? Did she catch the emotional coloration (sad, happy), the tempo (fast, slow), and so on? Did I feel heard? Did it shift? Did more come?

After describing to her how I want her to listen to me and checking that she is okay with my giving her feedback about how the reflections were for me, I begin to tell her my story.

2. Demonstration – a brief transcript: *(Jerry is the instructor. He will be the Focuser-as-teacher. Lynn is a volunteer who will listen to Jerry, using only reflections – reflecting back to him the experience-bearing parts of his story so he can resonate the reflection, give her feedback and let his own process move forward.)*

Jerry: I'd like to tell you a little about what I just got in touch with when I went down inside. It is very surprising. I'm a little shaken, moved off center about it. I mean, I didn't know it was there. This morning I was playing with my son at the beach. He's just three years old. I was holding him in my arms. Big waves were crashing up against us, and one hit me behind the knee, and I buckled. We went down into the surf, and he got splashed in the face. He started crying. I immediately said to him, "Don't cry. You're such a big boy, such a brave soldier."

Lynn: Let me see if I got all of that. This morning when you were playing...

J: No. I really don't need you to say all that back. What I really wanted you to hear is that when my son started crying I said to him, "Don't cry. You're such a big boy, such a brave soldier." *(Jerry gives immediate feedback sensing he doesn't need to hear the scene-setting, only the crux of it.)*

L: You just need to hear what you said to your son, "Don't cry. You're such a big boy, such a brave soldier." *(Lynn immediately adjusts her reflection to fit the feedback which is important so the storyteller will feel empowered, that his feedback was responded to.)*

J: Yes. Yesss! What sadness comes here for me. I actually want to cry. It touches into something that happened a lot in my own family, and something I promised myself I would never, never, never do to anyone else – tell someone not to have their own experience and make them have an experience the way I thought was okay or socially acceptable.

L: Sadness and tears come here for you. It is about all that old stuff in your own family where you weren't allowed to have your own experience...

J: *(Jerry interrupts Lynn)* Well sadness comes, but no tears. I only want to cry. You know, I can't really cry. All the children in my family, especially the boys, were told they shouldn't cry. You were a sissy if you cried. "Bennett men don't cry!" I can't remember the last time I cried. But right now I really want to cry. I realized when you said, "Tears come for you," that no tears came. I only really wanted to cry for what I had just done to my son...mmm...and what had been done to me. *(Jerry realized that Lynn hadn't been accurate in her reflection when he resonated it against what was there. In resonating he gives her feedback about what he actually said... and lets her know what more came from the resonating...that he hadn't been*

allowed to cry as a child, that he was doing the same thing to his own son, and this made him want to cry, but he couldn't.)

L: It is really that you want to cry but no tears come...both for what you did to your son and what was done to you.

J: Yes. You got the words right, but I can't sense that you really get how sad it is for me. You said it so quickly. I think I need to hear it a little slower and softer. *(Jerry gets that Lynn said back all the right words, but he is sensing something is missing in the delivery. This is more subtle and delicate feedback.)*

L: You're sensing something off in the way I just said that. Let me slow it down a bit. It's been a very long time since you were allowed...and you allowed yourself to cry. You want to cry and no tears come. You weren't allowed to cry...and just this morning you did the same thing to your own child, something you promised yourself you would never, never do. You didn't allow him his own experience...you didn't allow him to cry. *(The feedback really seems to help Lynn touch into more empathic and caring listening. Lynn gets that she not only was too fast in her delivery, but maybe she didn't take enough time to really get it empathically. Her second attempt seems to genuinely try to capture the pain Jerry was suffering, empathically and compassionately.)*

J: Mmm...I'm touching into something very tender...bruised. I need some time to just be with myself here. Could you sit here with me...quietly? *(Jerry senses he needs quiet time and gives Lynn feedback so she can be with him in the way he needs in this moment.)*

The demonstration continued a bit longer but was cut short due to time constraints. Jerry realized that he would need to come back to this and process it more deeply...and he promised himself that he would.

3. Experiential exercise:

After explaining the exercise and demonstrating it, I ask if there are any questions about the model. I then ask the students to break into dyads and experience the exercise firsthand, using the demonstration as a model. They can take about twenty minutes which they will divide in half so each has an equal chance to be both Focuser-as-teacher and listener. When they are finished, I ask that they return to the large group and share what came for them...how it was for the Focuser to ask for what she needed...and how it was for the listener to be freed from having to do everything perfectly...alone and in the blind.

4. Sharing:

First I set out some ground rules for sharing. I indicate that there are “X” number of participants, and that I would like each to get roughly equal time for sharing. I ask each person to confine themselves to one turn. This helps them to be more concise in describing their experience and, perhaps, more targeted in searching for their new learnings. I ask that they check inside to see what feels right and safe to share, and I request that they speak and listen from the bodysense in an empathic and caring way. I indicate that the sharing will help us learn and build the model as often each student catches at least a part of what the exercise is all about.

This gives them a sense of their responsibility to the group a) to share...but only as much as they feel safe sharing, b) to consider that each person is entitled to an equal amount of time, c) to listen to each sharing with openness and curiosity, d) to help teach the object of the exercise as we build a model from the group sharing, e) to recognize the value and the diversity of the sharings and of the people and f) to speak and listen from the bodysense.

When the exercise is completed and we have reconvened in the large group, I ask them to take a moment to go down inside to their bodysense and to get in touch with what came for them from the exercise, what their new learnings were. I give them a couple of minutes of quiet to get in touch with this. I then asked them to share what came in a paragraph or so of description – four or five sentences (with smaller groups you can increase the amount of sharing while still limiting the amount of time).

I find that these sharings often capture most of what I wanted to teach from the exercise...and often more comes to them as well as to me than I had already known. The sharings have diversity, depth, genuineness, are in the moment from the bodysense and, when they don't cover all I wished to teach, I can add to it.

The students appreciate the opportunity to offer their own learnings, which makes learning collaborative rather than hierarchical. They feel empowered, and I get a chance to see where they are in their learning process. I often receive the gift of learning something more from them as well as something more from my own growing forward as an outcome of that particular experience. In fact, my attitude when I enter a teaching experience is that I not only expect that I will have a significant new learning, but that I am entitled to learn something new from them. I think that this is a fair exchange, I will teach them what I know if they will teach me what they learn.

About group dynamics-

Group sharing, building a model together is one of the most binding activities a group can participate in. I find that coming back in the large group not just to share something but to build something together is not only cohesive, it is the essence of community building...like barn-raising or quilting. There is little that we do in groups today that has the effect on community that building or making something together did in the pioneer days.

The group sharing we do with our exercises has all the healthy and healing aspects of Interactive Focusing itself because we take the trouble to maintain the right environment, speak and listen from the bodysense of the experience and listen with empathy and compassion.

The importance of the bodysense-

With Gendlin's work, as discussed in his seminal book *Focusing* (Bantam, 1978), came information about the bodily felt sense which I call the bodysense. This led the way to the experiential process because finally we had the tool for the discovery and recovery and conscious naming of our own experience and not just the speculation about this experience. We were speaking from a newly recognized place describing the experiences that constitute our knowings and influence our development.

Clearly, not until the discovery or recovery of the bodysense was it possible to have a truly experiential process and to learn from that process in this particular way that which is so deeply human about ourselves. We can be thankful that the bodysense has been named, described and utilized as a basic tool for coming to consciousness and discovering our own right way...our way to healing. And we might notice how more has been revealed than we might have imagined...using the Focusing process itself to discover, uncover and recover our knowings.

It is with Focusing and the bodysense that I believe we shifted from being able to describe the phenomenon (phenomenology) to being able to speak from the experience itself (experiential process). So, in the beginning there was the bodysense.

To conclude-

I operate under the premise that there is a significant difference between the *experiential process* and all other processes which aren't considered primarily experiential. *This premise is that because it is an experiential process all teaching and learning flows from the experience itself and that we must use experiential methods to teach and learn these processes. Above all, we must employ the bodysense in all aspects of the teaching and learning as this is our fundamental experiential tool.*

This statement is meant to convey how seamless the experiential process is and how seated it is in our *direct experience* and the modality we use to become aware of it. I don't consider a discipline experiential that isn't arrived at through the bodysense as I find that other ways of bringing experience to consciousness aren't full enough to really capture the experience and process it or move it forward toward healing which is the promise of experiential processing.

The challenge implicit in the experiential process is to find ways to teach it using our direct experience and to find ways to learn it from our direct experience using our direct referent, our bodysense. To be a teacher of an experiential process like Interactive Focusing, we have to commit to this. We have to be sure that our methods are consistent with the notion of the *experiential process*, and to realize that anything that comes other than from the experience itself and through the bodysense is not congruent with an experiential method and suggests that we are doing something other than an experiential process.