



ART OF DISCOVERY

THE POWER OF ELICITING

ELICIT

One of the things I love most about teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL), especially to those who know very little English, is the fun of trying to find new, creative and engaging ways to communicate effectively. I remember my own TESOL tutor's core mantra: 'Elicit, not explain.' It is, of course, tricky to explain if we lack a common language, and that's where eliciting can prove so useful.

I want to share some ideas here, from the TESOL world, that can be applied more broadly in fields including coaching, group facilitation, mentoring and training. A close friend in the Philippines uses the metaphor of a well. She contrasts drawing out water with pouring in water. 'Coaching and facilitation are about drawing out; training and mentoring are about pouring in.'

We may perhaps associate eliciting more closely and easily, therefore, with coaching and facilitation than training and mentoring. However, the latter fields often use approaches, methods and skills that share common ground with the former too. In my experience, eliciting is a skill that can be used along this whole spectrum of fields to engage people and enhance learning.

SILENT

I was asked to work with a small group of people, using no words and only Cuisenaire rods, to teach telling the time in English. I invited the group to use spoken language but, following a technique developed by Caleb Gattegno, I was to remain totally silent.

It felt a little like charades, signing and miming images and ideas with the group working hard to interpret what I was doing. I would tap and place the rods on the table and invite them to guess the meaning, using gestures to invite their responses and indicate, say, when they were using English correctly, or how to modify it if needed.

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It was a fascinating experience. The group proved able to piece together spoken language on the chosen theme, drawing on what little English they already knew, and to achieve the learning goals without me saying a single word. This was an extreme form of eliciting that involved drawing out, modifying, building on etc.

Initially, some participants were more enthusiastic about trying the technique than others. On having tried it, however, all agreed afterwards that they were able to remember far more of what they had learned this way than if I had simply explained it.

ENGAGE

I took part in a *Lego Serious Play* leadership workshop with a skilled facilitator, Richard Gold. After offering very brief and basic instructions for each activity, Richard would ask, 'Is that sufficiently unclear?' It was a clever and creative way of ensuring that participants worked, struggled and grappled with what they were doing, with him offering only minimal prompts.

I was reminded of skilled coach and leader of 3D Coaching, Claire Pedrick, who similarly only offers only the shortest of questions: 'So? And? Then? Now? Next?', thereby ensuring that the client-learner does the work.

These case examples made me wonder: as people professionals, do we sometimes try too hard? In our efforts to develop people, do we do too much, give too much, and risk leaving participants as passive recipients? I can think back now to times in my own practice when I have said too much, eager to share my knowledge, to inspire, inform and enthuse, and this in front of an audience whose eyes are glazing over.

So, I now ask myself, what's the minimum I can say and to move this person, this group, forward...and what are the best eliciting techniques I can use to engage them well?

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DISCOVER

The principle here is not simply to entertain, play games and have fun – although those can be useful by-products of such approaches if participants enjoy them. The primary intention is to engender a state of curiosity and, from it, to engage people in a valuable journey of learning and growth.

At its heart is discovery. To discover implies a spirit of adventure, an open voyage into the previously unknown. Participants may discover new energy, awareness, motivation, knowledge and skills. They may also discover what they already know and can do, and yet perhaps hadn't realised until now.

I worked with one organisation where the leadership felt tired and stuck so I proposed and designed a 'Discover' programme. Leaders would visit, interview and shadow leaders in radically-different organisations and cultures, with radically-different ideas and approaches, then come back together periodically, with interested academics and other key stakeholders, to share learning in groups.

My role was to evoke critical reflexivity and critical reflective practice by raising awareness, questioning assumptions and provoking challenging-constructive tension, to elicit fresh discoveries and ideas.

DIVERSE

Having worked with people from more countries and cultures than I can now remember, I'm struck by different methods that work well for eliciting insights and ideas from different people and groups.

In some cultures, posing questions in a group can feel threatening or inappropriate, especially if there are hierarchical dynamics in the room and people feel embarrassed or humiliated if they can't answer a question correctly. Such dynamics can emerge from age, gender, social status etc. as well as from formal-structural hierarchy, so I always find it important to do careful research first.

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Different individuals respond to eliciting differently too. Some learn by working outwards from what feels familiar, comfortable and therefore predictable. Appreciative questions such as, 'What works well in this?' or 'What do you want it to be more like, more of the time?' can feel valuable and safe.

Others prefer to take a leap into a totally different idea-reality and work backwards from there. Disruptive questions such as, 'Design 3 solutions: 1 illegal; 1 immoral; 1 unworkable!' can work well, especially if the aim is to create innovation.

What eliciting techniques have you found most useful?

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Nick has a Postgraduate Diploma in Coaching Psychology, a Masters' Degree in Human Resource Development, a Degree in Theology, a Diploma in Pastoral Studies and a Certificate in Supervision and Consultation.

Nick is a Fellow of the UK's Institute of Training and Occupational Learning. If you would like to learn more about Nick and his work, or would be interested to work with a coach to enhance your own discovery and eliciting skills, see:

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