THE PRAXIS LEARNING CYCLE

Technical paper by

Anthony Hodgson

Contents

THE PRAXIS LEARNING CYCLE

Praxis – the practical application of a branch of learning
From the Greek *to do*

I Introduction

One of the main characteristics of Horizon Three is that probably the majority of its features are currently unknown and of these, most are probably yet to be created. Thus education towards the third horizon cannot be of the same kind as that of Horizon One. The dominant pattern in Horizon One is that the culture is to be transmitted to the next generation and this is essentially a prescriptive task. Yes, there is scope for creativity within that culture but within very limited parameters and the capacity for even that creativity is hardly taught in the education system. It seems clear then that the design of new generation adult education needs to be based on different principles more attuned to the new emergent reality of Horizon Three. This paper sets out a psychological framework of levels of learning as a basis to for the design of learning modules that develop the higher capacities necessary.

Levels of Learning

Learning is not all of the same kind as defined in this psychological framework for learning. In the h3uni approach we consider five levels; all levels are essential for human learning beginning with Level 1 and building up to Level 5.

	HORIZON 3 EDUCATION	Level 5	**wisdom** – the capacity to consider the big picture of a situation and the personal and ethical dimensions in both the immediate and the long term multi-generational perspective
		Level 4	**creativity** – the capacity to engage with challenges and problems for which there is not a formulaic answer and which require the arising of new ideas, insights or emotional physical behaviour that are trans rational and break new ground
HORIZON 1 EDUCATION		Level 3	**reflection** – the capacity to be aware of self to the degree of being able to give self-informative feedback, withhold jumping to hasty conclusions and questioning assumptions and possibilities
		Level 2	**reactivity** – the sensitisation of mind, emotion and body to certain stimuli which cultivates specialised faculties such as recognition, like/dislike and skilled responsiveness for example in physical sport
		Level 1	**conditioning** – the inculcation of patterns of behaviour including information recall and manipulation that is not under conscious direction – essentially a learned habit that is a foundation for behaviour

Learning in the traditional form of instruction is generally taking place in and embedded in Levels 1 and 2. This is across a range of things from tying shoe laces to doing calculus or kicking footballs. These two levels of learning are essential for human beings who have limited free attention and cannot get through life attending to everything necessary. However, they also become a means of external control of people and therefore are reinforced by conditioning forms of education, advertising and propaganda. In the context of higher education, the more standardised and mechanised education becomes the more is inculcating patterns of behaviour and altitude which serve the social regime rather than the individual development. Much higher education is based on training people to be good industrial and white collar workers; or constrained to specialised professions.

Individual development proper begins with the arousal of Level 3 where a person has not only learned 'stuff' but is also able to reflect at level 3 on what they have learned at Levels 1 and 2. The transition to this level of awareness is marked by the capacity to question the outside world first but then more essentially to question the self. Mechanical assurance becomes replaced by self-assurance that is open to the possibility of being wrong or not knowing, even when equipped with considerable expertise at Levels 1 and 2. This can either be a ceiling of achievement (the static mind) or an opening to higher level (the kinetic mind). This is the level that higher education needs to stimulate and develop if it is to serve the transition from the H1 paradigm to the H3 paradigm. It includes a broadening of the mind, a questioning of conventional assumptions and a sense of exploration of new areas of knowledge. This is fundamental and the external qualifications, such as degrees and diplomas are usually a distraction because the inevitably collapse into levels 1 and 2 dependent on memory and specialised sensitivity. Mechanical scoring systems for understanding are not possible.

In a world increasingly challenged by the unknown, even the reflective self comes up against its limitations since it functions largely in relation to the known. Higher education therefore requires the cultivation of the capacity to be creative which requires Level 4 learning. We believe that the spark of creativity is potential in all people and can be supported by practical techniques even though its primary energy is self-generated. In H1 education it is easily suppressed or even buried without seeming trace. We believe that this capacity in an inherent part of our make-up but is easily suppressed by the habits of conditioning and specialisation of expertise. The preconditions for creativity, such as the generation of questioning, the suspension of judgement, the tolerance of ambiguity and the capacity to play even with serious work, require their own educational process. Creativity gives a capacity to be able to enter the unknown confident we can generate ideas, insights and actions which carry us beyond what has already been learned.

There is deeper side to human nature that is referred to by words such as conscience, compassion, and transformative understanding. This is the domain of wisdom and Level 5 learning which has traditionally been the domain of the elders that have been through life, learned from life, are aware of both human fallibility and human strengths and can see more clearly what is at stake in any situation from a broader holistic perspective.. They have developed breadth, depth and longer time horizons in their make-up. However, just to be old does not mean to be wise and wisdom does not necessarily respect age. There is a role in higher education to cultivate appropriate wisdom in any age group. Many young people today are wiser to the global situation than their parents and grandparents. Wisdom can be built on reflective practice in personal ethics as well as a broad exposure to the ideas, cultures and traditions of the world. It can also be

accelerated by certain practices such as mindfulness and self-development and the practice of wisdom council methodology.

Learning How to Learn

The transition from Levels 1 and 2 to Levels 3, 4 and 5 requires a shift in the manner of learning. Our culture, even most higher education, does not equip us to learn at the deeper levels. For this we need a process called learning how to learn, or put another way, we need to learn how develop our capacity for praxis, for applied knowledge. The process can be sketched out approximately by the analogy of learning a musical instrument in a manner to be able to play and interpret written compositions.

Suppose I form an intention that I wish to learn an instrument, for example, a clarinet. The clarinet is new to me and so I first become familiar with its shape size feel, the way the keys work and how to prepare the reed and mouthpiece and make first sounds. At the same time I begin to study the structure of musical staves and the symbolism of notes and rhythms. I do this for as long as it takes to begin to be able to make some passable sound tone and correlate my fingers and blowing with the notations on the sheet music. I begin to make music. But then I have to expand my range in the clarinet repertoire and seek opportunities to play with others. The example here would include the development of the capacity to creatively improvise. As I get into more and more challenging music I'm confronted by my limitations and find the threshold where taking things further feels daunting. If I'm fortunate at this stage I get the help of a good coach or teacher who sees my strengths and weaknesses and coaches me into deeper and deeper practice until I'm beginning to perform at a satisfactory level. I could stop there but I might wish to go on and pass on to others what I have learnt which confronts me with another threshold of relearning how to help beginners; to discover beginners mind. At the point where I can pass on something of my learning and skills to others I have completed a cycle and demonstrated learning. But of course this cycle is also a spiral and I can go on to more advanced levels of developing my performance capability.

There are some key points to note in this story which apply to any praxis learning. Firstly it is not a simple one step process where you take the lesson and you get it. There are stages along the way each with a different quality of challenge requiring a different skill development. Secondly the process may be abandoned along the way. One stage does not automatically take you to the next stage; there has to be a movement to a different quality of learning. Thirdly the experience of going through the learning cycle is one which evokes different moods of relative success and failure such that there is no resting place, only episodes of enjoyment and pauses of incubation. Fourthly to complete the cycle requires impulses from outside the personal learning pathway such as opportunities to practice and the help of a coach or mentor. The role of coach may also come from being part of a peer learning group of fellow practitioners. This is sometimes called a *community of practice*.

II The Theory of the Praxis Cycle

There are three interacting processes in a complete praxis learning cycle. From one perspective the process is linear in time. At some point the learning begins, goes through a series of stages and then completes. From our perspective each stage in the process is connected in different ways with other stages of the process such that there is a complex structure unfolding. This pattern is represented out of time. However the pattern of learning and the activity through time are connected by a third aspect which is the will and intelligence of the learner. These interconnections are also critical in the design of effective learning

pathways or learning modules. The three processes will initially be treated separately, then their interrelationship explained, and finally the way they hang together dynamically pointed out.

First Process – Internalising

The first process of the Praxis learning cycle is the main grounded experience of the learner. Each stage has its own quality and there is a qualitative discontinuity or shift between one stage and the next. This means that there is an inherent hazard in moving from one step to another. The learner may experience this as a kind of sticking point or an energy barrier. A well-designed learning process and support will help the learner across the threshold. However, there are also two major steps which are referred to below as transition hazards. These are more challenging to the learner and may cause them to either go off at a tangent or give up on realising the potential of that particular learning opportunity. These transition hazards are more easily overcome if there are also two support processes referred to below is the second and the third processes.

1.1 Intending to learn

In praxis learning the engagement has to be voluntary not coercive. There has to be a need that the would-be learner has registered and that he or she is seeking to satisfy. It may be unclear but is an unmistakable 'itch' that requires 'scratching'. The intention needs to be clear enough that the would-be learner has some idea, however, vague of the needed field of learning. On the other hand, they may already have information and made judgements that speed their search.

1.2 Familiarising with the field

The next stage is getting clearer about what the learner is getting into and what the requirements might be. In h3uni this will be done through some familiarisation media about the topic, about how it aligns with the need area and what successful learning can bring. One way this can happen is through a short talk and illustration by an experienced practitioner or a similarly constructed video. This leads to commitment to taking up the Learning Module.

1.3 Assimilating key material and experience

In each Learning Module there will be body of knowledge to be taken on board by the learner. This will be a concept, a process, some illustration and some initial engagement exercises. It is at this point the media needs to shift from passive to active requiring the learner to generate their own content to try out the method on. This means that, in some appropriate way, they may have to reframe and redefine their initial challenge or need in a new way which begins to get them thinking differently. This stage is also where their intention and motivation to learn new thinking is tested.

TRANSITION HAZARD

1.4 Applying the material

This differs from the previous stage by moving on to serious application: can application of the newly learned method actually make a difference to the practical project of the learner. This stage can have a range of experiences from a 'eureka moment' of things falling into place almost instantly to a protracted wrestling with the interaction between the tool and the situation until a new angle or action is generated.

1.5 Confronting the difficulties

If the learning is to go deeper then the learner becomes aware that they have only touched the tip of the iceberg of the method they are learning. As they dig deeper they become aware of additional complexities, the limits of their learning and limitations of the method. Perhaps the selected method only tackles one aspect of their original need. On the other hand this where the practice in praxis is paramount. This is where the journey of "10,000 hours for mastery" begins.

1.6 Practising and practising

If the need of the learner was a 'one off' situation then they will probably go no further than stage 4 because the difficulties of stage 5 will not appear worth it. However, if their need was in a recurring field (like running sequences of decision meetings) then they will enter the phase of extending their range of application. This will increase their appreciation of the method and develop greater flexibility. It is likely, in a social enterprise situation that this will involve other people who share the need and thus arouse their interest in learning the method.

1.7 Transmitting learning

There is a praxis learning rule that to learn beyond a certain point it is necessary to teach. This may be a pragmatic sharing in the midst of work or it may take on a slightly more formal approach of coaching others, passing on hints and tips from experience. This is also where the social networking of learning is critical. This networking leads naturally into the next stage.

TRANSITION HAZARD

1.8 Demonstrating learning

This is where there begins to emerge communities of practice around particular methods or cluster of methods. This is where the learning begins to be noticeable to a wider society by the fruits it generates.

Second Process – Exercising

The example in the introduction of learning to play musical instrument emphasises the point that mastery of the instrument comes through practice and application. Simply knowing how the instrument works is insufficient to actually play it well. This second process, running in parallel to the first process, helps the learner to keep applying the knowledge in a manner that turns it into practical understanding and capacity.

2.1 Finding opportunity

If the learner has no significant opportunity to apply what they have gained in the first three stages of the first process, then they will stick at that point. So it is critical that this second process is commenced with a real opportunity to apply what they have learnt to something real. This contributes a crucial stimulus to the learner to overcome the transition hazard.

2.2 Engaging opportunity

The next stage is to engage fully in that opportunity developing the skills and insight that enable the power of the method to deliver results. This is where the learner is experiencing increasing benefit in their original area of need from the method.

2.3 Struggling in the opportunity

no mastery develops without a struggle by the learner with his or her internal obstacles and difficulties. Yet it is this struggle that helps develop the higher-level skills and capacity to make the method work more and more effectively. But moving from the struggle into the next level of flow state is not guaranteed.

TRANSITION HAZARD

2.4 Flowing in the opportunity

The next stage is often referred to as the flow state where the masterful application of the method is seemingly effortless. The learner feels that finally it is really working in them and for them. They can actually get results that were not possible before engaging in learning this particular method.

2.5 Relearning the essence

The experience in the previous stage sets up the conditions for the learner to realise the essential simplicity of the method behind all the complexity and the struggles of trying to get it to work for them. This is sometimes referred to as achieving "beginners mind". This changes the capacity of the learner to share their learning with others.

Third Process – Coaching

Overcoming the transition Hazard from struggling to flowing is greatly helped by a third process that is brought in by a living interaction with someone who can highlight the strengths and inhibit the weaknesses of the learner. This is evident in in sport but actually applies to all forms and levels of learning in any kind of depth.

3.1 Coaching intervention

The first step in this third process is aware the learner, even though they may be quite proficient, recognises that they are also deficient and not realising their full potential. From this position they are able to invite someone to give them coaching to discover positive and negative features in their practice that, when worked on, can significantly shift their performance.

3.2 Directing critical practice

The role of the coach is not to drill the learner in the practice but rather to reflect back how the practice is going and to stimulate the learner to make the often small changes that make a big difference to how they can use the method. The coach also helps to cultivate in the learner the right kind of self-belief and self-confidence.

3.3 Supporting development

At this third stage the coach is no longer necessary as in the previous stages but still is a kind of benefactor for the sustained capability of the learner. This is also where the learner is now learning as much through helping others learn as through their own practice and thus has become, with the coach, a significant member of the community of practice that has formed around the method.

TRANSITION HAZARD

III The Integral Process

The Interweaving of the Three Processes

Some indications have been given earlier of the way the three processes interact and correlate with each other but it is easier to see these once the whole picture has been described. The learning cycle is based on a profound understanding that traditionally has been distilled into a unique diagram called the enneagram. The application of this model has been restricted to fringe esoteric groups and as a framework for personality types. The application here is quite different and based on the operational and design power of the diagram as research by myself and colleagues in the fields of creativity, design and organisation.

The diagram (shown on the next page) has the following structure. Firstly a circle represents the process cycle of interest. Since the enneagram represents transformation processes then strictly speaking the circle is a spiral and requires the third dimension. In this theory, for transformation to take place three independent but mutually relevant sources or inputs are needed. These are represented by the triangle. In the case of Praxis learning the three sources are the learner, the application opportunity and the facilitation of coaching.

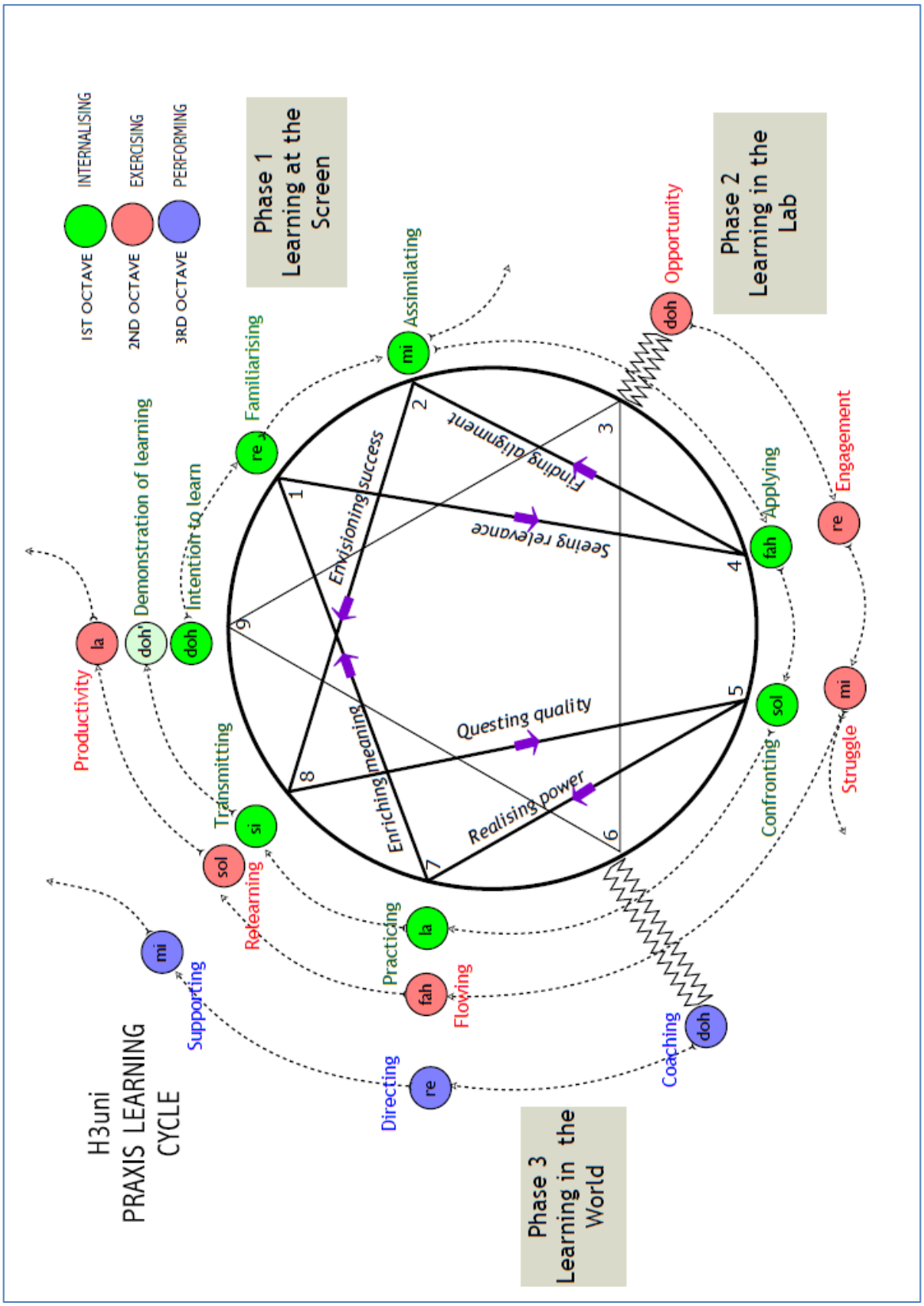
The basic transformation process in the case of Praxis learning is the transformation of an intent to learn into a masterful demonstration of that learning. In this model the process does not proceed in a smooth way but goes through various stages each of which has a different quality both in the external task and the internal requirements and states of the learner. One way this has been represented is by analogy to a musical scale or octave in which the eight notes represent the eight stages. Simply setting off with an intent does not in any way guarantee fulfilment of that intent. The world is complex, hazardous and non-linear in its properties. Great achievements in the arts, the sciences and practical affairs do not proceed in a straight line and the same is true for great learning. By great learning, here, I do not mean as judged by the a litre of a given culture but more as a fulfilment of a potential within any human individual.

In an octave of transformation there are two greater hazards already referred to in the previous section as transitional hazards. The nature of these hazards is that at this point the original tent is highly vulnerable to deviation. This can be seen in daily affairs as well as retrospectively in the study of history that things have a tendency to turn into their own opposite. The liberating revolution becomes the next oppression. The structure of the enneagram depicts a way of overcoming the deviations and hazards by the commencement of two other initiatives at critical points. The second one has been referred to as Exercising (starting at point 3) and the third one has been referred to as Coaching (starting at point 6). The timely blending of these three streams greatly increases the chances of a completed transformation. In the case of praxis learning they increase the chances of achieving mastery.

The blending of the three processes of Praxis learning have yet another dimensional represented by the internal connections that follow the recurring 1-4-2-8-5-7-1 sequence. There needs to be another degree of freedom to guide the integrity process through time. It is in the nature of these six connections that they transgress simple linear time and facilitate a stronger connection between the past the present and future. They are essentially the interconnections of an anticipatory system that holds the transformative study through changing phases and changing circumstances.

The above three paragraphs are likely to make much more sense if read in conjunction with the diagram of the enneagram on the following page.

Diagram of the Structured Process



The Inner Learning to Learn

The following table explains a little further the basic meaning of the interconnecting lines.

Inner Connection	The Exercise of Guiding Attention
1-4 Seeing Relevance	In familiarising themselves with the topic the learner is also mentally and emotionally reinforcing the anticipated relevance of the topic; or discovering early on that this is not the appropriate match to their learning need.
4-2 Finding Alignment	The mode of assimilating the topic is coloured by an increasing sense of alignment between the aspiration of the learner and the relevance and usefulness of the topic
2-8 Envisioning Success	Highly motivating for the hard work of assimilating the topic is the capacity of the learner to envision what success will be like when the topic has been mastered
8-5 Questioning quality	A key aspect of the struggle at stage five is the capacity of the learner, possibly helped by the coach, to question the quality of the learning and application in a constructive way
5-7 Realising power	The step from confronting to practising is above all the realisation of the intrinsic power of the topic method and how it is changing the way the learner can get things done
7-1 Enriching meaning	Looking back on how the topic seemed at the familiarising stage the learner sees how it's meaning and significance have been enriched by all that he or she has been through

IV The Implications and Guidelines for Designing Learning Modules

The whole point of the above theory of Praxis learning is to provide a guiding foundation for the design and testing of learning modules. The question is what practical indications does this model give to those taking on the task of designing learning modules. For aspects are considered; namely, shaping the knowledge component, configuring the specific learning process, harnessing the available technology and guiding the student in the process.

Shaping the Knowledge Component

Any operational method like a thinking skill, a mapping skill, a decision skill requires a certain minimum set of knowledge which informs the method. For example, the successful practice of a creative thinking skill may require a certain basic knowledge of the way the mind inhibits creative thinking and how those inhibitions may be circumvented. Some topic areas will have a significant amount of knowledge to set the learner up whereas others will require relatively little. However, in Praxis learning the role of the knowledge component is not primarily to increase the learners' knowledge as such but rather to introduce a distillation of the essential knowledge that will enable a method to be taken up and put to work by the learner. This distillation and shaping itself will require skills of concept mapping and diagnostic of learning steps. The knowledge will need to be shaped in a way that enables the flow of the eight stages of Praxis learning. This is not the usual way of teaching and so represents a new kind of skill on the part of the curriculum designers stop

Configuring the Specific Learning Process

No two topics will have exactly the same learning process, although there will be topic groups with some similarity. This means that the curriculum design needs to be guided by the Praxis learning theory to work out the best way of engaging the learner in experiencing a significant insight inside a brief period of time, as little as one hour. Although related to the shaping of the knowledge, this aspect is much more to do with the operational psychology of how a given practice method is learned. For example, some topics may go better with a "jump in at the deep end" approach; others may go better if carefully built up piece by piece until a whole picture becomes clear. Again, which specific learning process works best may also depend on the psychological type and learning style of the student.

Harnessing the Available Technology

This is perhaps the most challenging area in designing effective learning modules that are true to the spirit of horizon three learning. It is not so much the technology itself, which is advanced to the point where a great many things are possible relatively easily that were unavailable even three or four years ago. The challenge lies in the way of harnessing that technology in a way that will support levels 345 learning. Almost all the information and learning technology is located in levels one and two. The advent of some mind mapping software and decision support software has passed into the lower aspects of levels three, but in terms of Praxis learning some quite new designs are needed. My own researchers with the technique developed with John Bennett and colleagues called structural communication, pushed the process design more solidly into levels three learning. However at the time that work was done, the technology was exceedingly primitive compared to today. Techniques of visual facilitation have been developed that push the learning into level 4. There are methods, for example varieties of wisdom Council, that could be taken into level V but there is very little to build on as yet.

Guiding the Student in the Process

This fourth aspect relates particularly to the second and third processes and to the role of the inner connection lines 1 – 4 – 2 – 8 – 5 – 7 – 1. The basic level of process is that which can be built into the protocols of interaction through the software. The second level of process is perhaps giving the learner self-reflective tools that make the learning what in systems signs would be called second order. The aim here would be to stimulate self-awareness of the student to move from single loop learning in two double loop learning where assumptions ourselves challenged. The possibility of networked interaction with a live mentor could mean that double loop learning could be strengthened and there is a prospect of engaging triple loop learning where the deeper worldviews of the student are challenged and developed.

Design and Development

the above for considerations all point to the need for a significant design development and testing process to create and demonstrate the means that the higher levels of learning can be facilitated by new ways of incorporating an harnessing the technology. My experience cannot emphasise too much the tremendous cognitive design task for curriculum developers in going this route. New knowledge and skills will have to be developed to make this all work.

In parallel to the use of Internet and software technology there is a role for local face-to-face learning groups as well as learning networks that are part local and part virtual. All of this is another whole area to be explored. However the basic Praxis learning model is, I believe, universal for all possible ways of stimulating and developing horizon three type education.