Pattern language: an approach for creating spirited learning experiences in groups

By Sylvia Vriesendorp

"[Certain patterns] create life, by allowing people to release their energy, by allowing people, themselves, to become alive. Or, in other places, they prevent it, they destroy the sense of life, they destroy the very possibility of life, by creating conditions under which people cannot possibly be free."

Christopher Alexander (1979: 105)

Introduction

For thirty years, from his base in the Architecture School at the University of California at Berkeley, Alexander (1979) has been constructing a "language" of patterns for creating life-affirming buildings, neighborhoods, communities, and towns. After intense study of the world's most beautiful architectural designs — designs that awaken us and make us come alive — Alexander composed 253 elements of architecture, ranging from how regions of interlocking urban and rural areas are constructed all the way down to the construction of a door. He calls the set of these elements a *pattern language*. "Each pattern," he writes, "describes a problem which occurs over and over again in our environment, and then describes the core of the solution to that problem, in such a way that you can use this solution a million times over, without ever doing it the same way twice" (Alexander et al., 1977: x). By stringing together the patterns, much like stringing together words, the possibilities for creating living spaces that "awaken us and make us come alive" are endless.

Inspired by Alexander and those who follow him, a number of us[1] are looking for a "pattern language" to promote spirited learning experiences for individuals in groups. I am looking for ways to help trainers *identify* and *name* patterns for the learning (and unlearning) they are trying to bring about in a group, in the same way that Alexander designs buildings to help people come alive in them. I am looking for a kind of "architecture of group experience" that creates a sense of aliveness as people struggle or celebrate in a group around a learning task. As trainers, don't we build "dwellings" for a group of people to learn by the way in which we structure the event? I hope that I can contribute to the articulation of a pattern language as a design tool for creating spirited learning in groups, so that we never again have to suffer pointless group experiences that drag us down in despair and make us look for the exits. I believe that many of our world's woes would be addressed more effectively if we could only learn better in groups.

The Recurrence of Patterns

[1] I owe much to my friend Joe Sterling (www.sterlinginsights.com) and my husband Axel Magnuson who introduced me to the pioneering work of Matt and Gail Taylor (www.mgtaylor.com) as they experimented with the application of Alexander's work in groups. I also owe much to Robert Kramer, Department of Public Administration at the American University in Washington D.C. who connected patterns to the tension between agency and community. And finally, I could have made few pronouncements about the applicability of the patterns in other cultures if it wasn't for the friends and colleagues of Robert Kramer and myself who are using pattern language in their work in Africa and Eastern Europe.

Before identifying the elements of this provisional pattern language for how to help groups learn, let us examine this notion of pattern. Patterns refer to constellations of features, characteristics, activities or events that appear *again and again*. Patterns abound in our universe, our world, our homes, our workplaces, our schools and our lives. Patterns relate to living and non-living entities. A car's motor is a pattern of various component activities that take place inside, allowing it to act as a whole motor. The variety of motors can be enormous, but the pattern is basically the same. Similarly, my mornings during the week follow a certain pattern, while my Sunday morning is very different. "Pattern language" is shorthand allowing me to simplify what otherwise would be a long list of specifics that would need to be arranged and re-arranged each time in some sort of order. Thus, "my Sunday morning routine" refers to a set of activities that I tend to repeat most Sunday mornings. It doesn't prescribe exactly what I do and whether I have an egg or cereal for breakfast, and at what time precisely I get up. But it does refer to a string of activities comprised of waking up, eating, reading the newspaper and participating in a religious ceremony. Naming the pattern relieves me from having to make a string of specific decisions about what to do next. It also preserves an overall quality to the experience of Sunday morning, whether I decide to read the New York Times or my local newspaper.

Pattern Language and Design

Alexander (1977) uses pattern language as a *design* tool. By creating an inventory of 253 architectural patterns, Alexander (1977) provides his clients with a menu of choices to help bring to life a house, neighborhood, community, town or region. Rather than following a blueprint produced by expert builders, Alexander encourages ordinary people to tap into an age-old and an intuitive and universal wisdom that knows how to make living spaces come alive. "When a building works," according to Alexander, "the space itself awakens. We awaken" (cited in Kohn, 2002: 30). Likewise, when learning works, the mind awakens. Whether in a classroom, corporate boardroom or retreat setting, it is possible to distinguish times when learning does, indeed, occur – when individual spirits soar – and times that the opposite happens, when educators and learners alike leave a group feeling drained, discouraged, cynical or dispirited. There is something that sets these experiences apart. By knowing the patterns that contribute to a sense of aliveness, we can design spirited learning experiences.

A Perennial Human Dilemma

Anyone working with groups encounters a human phenomenon, a tension between the need for individuation and the need for attachment, the will to separate and the will to unite, independence and dependence, aloneness and intimacy – between the invigorating, creative solitude of freedom and the love and acceptance obtainable only within community. There appears to be a dialectic that needs to be managed in order to accomplish the learning task: To feel fully alive and creative, members of a learning group need to be able to solve and continually re-solve a dilemma between their position as independent actors, as agents, with their own personal history, needs and aspirations and their need to belong to a larger community, a whole, with *its* own needs, aspirations, and sometimes very long history. Clashes are inevitable as independence wrestles with dependence, as part connects to whole, as peoples' need to be in control of their own destiny struggles with their equally strong need to belong.

Mary Parker Follett recognized some eighty years ago in *Creative Experience* the fundamental part-whole dilemma that each person in a group faces: "the whole is itself as much a part of the entire process, is itself interweaving with the parts at the same time that the parts are interweaving with the whole" (1924:99). Thus, to become spirited learners, individuals must find the creative will to affirm their difference from others while at the same time remaining connected to, and a part of, the larger whole. To become a facilitator of such spirited learning in groups, we have to manage this tension, arriving at a formula which accepts *a maximum of individuation within a maximum of connectedness*.

Spirited Learning

The goal that I have set for myself is to create "spirited learning in groups." I have come to realize that such spirited learning requires that I pay attention to the subtle interactions between individuals and the groups in which individuals choose (or are required) to embed themselves. Involving "the spirit" in learning means that I have to attune myself as a trainer or facilitator, to the tension – and its continual resolution – that exists among a group of learners who have come together: a tension between agency on behalf of the self and being in community with others. This tension needs to exist and be managed in order to allow people to learn and unlearn, give and take, surrender and assert, unite and separate. In experiments with different structures (different from what people are used to) I have begun to identify patterns that predictably produce the outcomes I want (spirited learning, a sense of curiosity and discovery). These are patterns that infuse individual spirit into a collective experience and a collective spirit into individual experience. They transform learning moments that might otherwise be boring, dispirited, unproductive or soulless into learning moments that merge and harmonize part and whole, I and Thou, self and other, both blurring and highlighting the boundary between self and other. By naming the patterns we have begun to identify the conditions that create the right moods or settings for spirited learning – for animating "each living center."

A Language for Learning

If we teach novice facilitators, trainers and teachers the sort of interventions, or "tricks of the trade," that seasoned professionals apply with such ease and success, we are actually doing them a disservice. For example, they could never facilitate or train like me for the simple reason that they will never *be* me. Teaching to become a good trainer is not just simply a matter of competence, of mastering a set of techniques. I have seen newly trained trainers who use an ice-breaker when an icebreaker is not needed and distracts from learning, taking up precious time. Or when a problem analysis is exactly the wrong thing to do, or when plenary work is done where small group work would have been better. The "trick" aspect takes over from the deeper insight in what helps people learn in groups and groups to learn through the individuals that form them. The idea of a pattern language and a grammar provides a new frame for teaching novices this deeper insight, and to help them connect to their own experiences of learning in a group. What exactly they'll do for implementing a particular pattern, the specific trick or technique they'll use can be one that fits their style and temperament, rather than one that I, as their teacher, like to use.

The Patterns

In finding and naming patterns and the underlying grammar, I have grouped the 33 patterns identified so far in a series of clusters that I believe to be like contingency rules (if you want spirited learning then this is what you need to include in your design). The patterns within each cluster speak to one element of what a specific rule is all about. For each pattern there are three questions:

1. What is this pattern that operates to help people "awake" to their simultaneous apartness and connectedness, partialness and wholeness?
2. What is the tension that this pattern addresses and what do we know about that tension and spirited learning in a group?
3. How can we implement this pattern?

A complete description of each of the six patterns discussed below is presented as Appendix 1.

(1) *Patterns to Motivate People to Move Out of Their Comfort Zone and Consider Learning.* If you want to create a state of mind, a sense of anticipation, a feeling of safety and a curiosity about the experience that is about to begin, you have to consider:

- Stimulated Senses
- Aligned Expectations
- Respect for Learning Anxiety
- Power Differentials

(2) Patterns to Unleash Energy and Remove Restrictions on Learning. If you want to create an environment characterized by freedom and playfulness to explore and experiment, where participants feel encouraged and supported, where learning is the norm, and where trust can be developed, you have to consider:

- Lifted Spirits, Energy at Work
- Open Space
- Safe Conversations
- Comfort Zones
- Intimacy Gradient
- Laughter and Lightness
- Control over Learning

(3) Patterns to Take Advantage of Learning Opportunities. If you want to trigger rich conversations and learning everywhere, take advantage of underutilized resources for teaching and learning, and make everyone both teacher and learner, then you must consider:

- Self in Group
- Digestive Aids
- Energy Dips
- Rehearsal

- Images as Mnemonics
- Peer Leadership
- Multiple Pathways
- Outdoor Learning

(4) Patterns to See the Other. If you want people to re-arrange their sense of self and the other, appreciate the gifts of the world around them, and expand their repertoire for creative problem solving with others, then you must consider:

- Playful Otherness
- Them + Us = New Us
- Difference in Sameness
- Listening to Self and Other
- People as Stories
- Disclosure in Doses

(5) Patterns to Link the Learning to "The Big Picture," and Real Life Out There. If you want to root the group experience in real life and at the same time distinguish it from real life (for example by presenting a set of concepts that are meaningful and that allow people to talk with one another across boundaries in ways that are not possible "out there,"), the you must consider:

- Return to Plan
- Theory Anchors
- Application Tests
- Real Life
- Meaningful Transitions

(6) Patterns to Take the Outside World Back Inside. If you want to make sure that what is happening in the outside world connects with what is happening in the inner world (because we believe that these provide opportunities for learning and growth), then you must consider:

- Introspection and Reflection
- Time-Out from Work
- Self-Esteem Levers

Conclusion

The patterns listed above and described in more detail in the Appendix are, no doubt, part of a larger set still to be discovered. They are a first attempt to sketch a language of learning, a set of rules or principles that can serve seasoned trainers, teachers or facilitators or anyone else who wants to generate more life, more love of learning, more energy, more soulfulness and more creativity in their classrooms and corporate meeting rooms.

Alexander's architectural patterns have been referred to as "recipes" (in Kohn, 2002: 30). The patterns presented above are also recipes but more in the sense of recipe as guide (a pinch of that, a bit of this), than as exact prescription for action (first do this, and then do that). Not all of the pattern clusters will be relevant in each occasion. My dream is that, eventually, the

grammar of learning, once consensually validated by educators, will consist, like Karl Weick's grammar of organizing, of trusted "recipes for getting things done when one person alone can't do them and recipes for interpreting what has been done" (Weick, 1979: 4). I hope to see new and novice teachers, trainers and facilitators review the list before each course or event and select the patterns that are relevant because they produce outcomes that are desired. In using the patterns in our practice we have discovered that we can predict the spirited learning we were looking for. If nothing else, I hope that a review of relevant patterns can bring people who work together into a meaningful conversation about what it is they are trying to accomplish. That in itself would be worth all our efforts.

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