

# L&D ‘on the edge’

**Gwen Stirling** offers a very experiential view of CPD

**I** feel a bead of sweat running down my dusty face as I stop and take a long drink from my water bottle. Glancing at my watch, it is only 11am and the sun is high in the sky, its light reflecting off the sand in the dry riverbed.

*“How about we walk for another half-hour, stop for lunch and a snooze under those trees over there?”*

*Rudi, our Namibian trekking guide, suggests. Some of the young people in our group are standing with their heads down, looking intently at the saucer-like elephant footprints in the sand. Others look towards me; their eyes communicating silently mixed messages of anxiety, bravado, excitement and fatigue, while their heads nod in agreement. I nod too. It’s already been a long day and I’m exhausted from the adrenaline of being so close to a large herd of desert elephants. The thrill of counting and observing these amazing animals is pumping round my body – and we still have an afternoon’s work to do before a short trek to our night’s camp.*

*The previous night, lying under the stars in a mossie net, I hadn’t slept much, my ears straining for the slightest noise. Up at 4.30am, I had lit a fire and cooked porridge for 15 people in the dark, packed my rucksack, filled water bottles and helped the group lift heavy packs onto their backs, before heaving my own onto my sore shoulders. Everything ached and I really needed a shower. We headed off just before 6am, thankful for the cooler air but knowing it was only*

*going to get hotter as we trekked the 12km to our lunch stop – and then a further 8km to our camp. This has been our rhythm for the last five days, with another five ahead before a shower and a rest day.*

*After lunch, it was time to continue the 1:1 development reviews with our project group. A complex mixture of coaching, mentoring, counselling and development, these are delightful but sometimes challenging conversations. Some of the participants are on a gap year, with a bright career path mapped out in front of them; some come from socially- and economically-deprived parts of the UK, often with a history of petty crime and drug or alcohol abuse. Others in the group come from SE Asia, mainland Europe and Australia, and a number come from our host country – Namibia. We are often confronted with challenging behavioural issues, exaggerated by the harsh living conditions and extremely physical nature of this research trek. Alongside the 1:1 conversations, the group spend many evenings around the campfire exploring different issues, giving and receiving what can sometimes be very direct feedback. Seeing the transformation in some of these young people after three months in the desert is a humbling and rewarding experience. I know their lives are not going to be the same again. It is a real cultural and social melting pot and I love it.*

Three months volunteering as a staff member on a youth development expedition with Raleigh International<sup>1</sup> had not only physically taken me to the other side of the world, it had taken me way out of my comfort zone and asked me to apply my professional skills in a very challenging environment. The challenge was not only physical (living in harsh desert conditions) but mental too – keeping myself going when I was homesick; feeling overwhelmed, out of my depth and not knowing what to do; emotionally exhausted; longing for some home comforts, and fed up of eating dried mopane worms and mealie meal!

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**When were you last ‘on the edge’ as an L&D professional?**



During my time on expedition I learned more about working with groups, group dynamics, coaching, facilitation and the art of dialogue and conversation than on any formal CPD training programme or course I'd attended before or since. I now bring these experiences into my work. In fact, I couldn't do the work I do now without these experiences; they frame many of the group interventions and workshops I design and run. Working with senior leadership teams and boardroom executives doesn't seem nearly as daunting as a group of 18- to 25-year-olds 'kicking off' in the middle of the desert.

I also learned a great deal about my own levels of resilience – something that is increasingly relevant in today's business world. Many of my clients are keen to explore how they can bounce back from whatever adversity they face, particularly in these challenging and unpredictable times.

When any of us enter a learning space, we are stepping into the unknown. For many of our clients, this is a scary and unfamiliar place. I believe, as L&D professionals, it is essential we remain familiar with these experiences and tensions, and remember what it **feels** like to learn. After all,

where's the authenticity in advocating development programmes that challenge and stretch participants, when you're not challenging and stretching yourself?

### **When were you last 'on the edge' as an L&D professional?**

As a practitioner in an increasingly competitive and changing marketplace, keeping your skills and approaches leading edge should be top of your to-do list. You owe it to yourself and your clients to stay ahead of the game and invest time and energy in your own development. It's easy to get comfortable and complacent when you are working flat out and it's simple to return to your good old favourite models, theories and session plans, but why should anyone in your organisation, or your consulting clients, use you rather than anyone else?

I often find it hard to describe to people what I do. I don't view myself as a trainer or a management consultant; more a facilitator of conversations, a developer of people, someone who asks curious questions and doesn't know what the answers will be. Sometimes I am more comfortable not knowing →

### **References**

- 1 [www.raleigh.org.uk](http://www.raleigh.org.uk)
- 2 *Agile Leader* research paper [www.berkshire.co.uk/white-papers](http://www.berkshire.co.uk/white-papers)
- 3 LYC sailing courses [www.lyc.co.uk](http://www.lyc.co.uk)
- 4 Arrival Education [www.arriveducation.com](http://www.arriveducation.com)

## *It is essential we remain familiar with these experiences and tensions, and remember what it feels like to learn*

than at other times. In the Ed Schein view of consulting, I don't come in as an expert (at least, not a content expert selling my technical expertise in a particular topic); my expertise comes from knowing about group processes, how adults prefer to learn, noticing how people interact with each other and, most importantly, having a deep understanding of myself.

"Be yourself with more skill" is some of the most valuable advice I've been given - and it's something on which I base my leadership development work. I don't subscribe to the 'chalk and talk' school of training and the more I work with individuals and groups, the more I realise the ability to facilitate a good dialogue between people who don't normally talk is a rare and highly valued skill to develop.

In my world of L&D, I am the instrument of my work. How I choose to use myself in my interactions with a group or with an individual is hugely influential in how well the session runs and the participants achieve their goals from it... So it's important to keep my instrument well-honed and

well-tuned. Hence my CPD focus is on equipping myself to be able to be myself with more skill and help others do the same.

I'm constantly asking myself *why should people buy me rather than another L&D professional?* The business world around me is changing rapidly and unexpectedly. The context in which I work is messy, unpredictable, volatile and full of ambiguity and contradictions. Leaders talk to me about being tested more than ever due to the conflicting strategic demands of cutting costs and achieving growth. My own agility and ability to understand, and respond to, the business world in which my clients work - and the agility of the leaders<sup>2</sup> with whom I work - is being stretched constantly. How can I be satisfied with dusting off the same old workshop and training materials, safe in my comfort zone, when the people I'm paid to support are clearly out of theirs?

I want to be taken seriously as a professional in my field and completing an MBA enabled me to have business conversations with my clients on their terms and in their language. Learning a new 'financial language' was a real challenge; I struggled to grapple with the concepts of balance sheets, discounted cash flow, depreciation and amortisation - and the principles of that increasingly common acronym ROI. Contrast that with...

*The soft chanting of the monks and radiating, muffled sound of a gong gently penetrates my consciousness. I breathe in deeply, savouring the woody and exotic fragrance of the incense burners as I open my eyes, blink a few times and let my attention widen to include the rest of the temple. I am mesmerised by the*



heads of the monks, trainee monks and lay worshippers all neatly sitting cross-legged in rows on the floor cushions. The temple roof stretches high above me, ornate with carvings and statues. The shaved heads, orange and brown robes, stillness, gentle presence and humility of the monks has captivated me and I feel grounded, with a sense of calm radiating through my body. The last hour has flown past far quicker than I could ever have imagined. When I was offered the opportunity to meditate silently for an hour in a Buddhist monastery recently, I wasn't sure what to expect. I certainly wasn't sure if I would be able to sit in silence for that length of time! Keeping my attention focused 'in the moment', focusing on my breathing and noticing what was happening in my body, had been really difficult. Yet a little over an hour later, I didn't want to leave.

In the last couple of years, I've chosen to focus my CPD on developing my self-awareness and group working skills to a deeper level; to be able to work more often in what I call "the here and now". I believe we can only change ourselves, our own behaviour and our own ways of leading, through our **immediate interactions** with – and responses to – other people.

It isn't an easy place from which to work. The first time I chose to draw the attention of a group to what was happening in the room in that moment, I could feel my heart pounding, my palms sweating and every part of my body tingling. Yet, what happened next was such a profound shift in the conversation we were having that it was one of the best interventions I could have made. I felt really alive as a consultant; I didn't really know what was going to happen next but, for that time, I was comfortable being uncomfortable.

CPD doesn't just happen in a professional context, and I don't believe the distinction between my professional learning and my non-work learning exists for me anymore – and maybe not for you either. I now bring more of my whole self to my work and my social learning is equally valid and influential in my professional capacity. I would encourage professionals to consider CPD in the broadest context.

Learning how to sail and skipper boats<sup>3</sup> recently really brought this home to me. It was terrifying for me to take charge of a boat, to make the correct navigational decisions, consider the weather, the wind and tides, the abilities of my crew and to safely steer us to our harbour for the night. I didn't know all the 'right' answers and needed to rely on my more experienced fellow sailors – who sometimes didn't know the 'right' answer either! I experienced vividly what it was like not to know something, to grapple with learning new skills and apply them in a real-life context. It made me

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wonder how often we ask others to do that when we consider embedding learning, role plays and bringing learning to life in organisations, and how often do we do that ourselves.

My CPD story isn't mainstream. I admit I'm a learning junkie, a magpie attracted by shiny new methodologies, with a sense of fun and wanting to play in my work – I call it 'plork' ('play and work' combined). I also believe CPD doesn't have to be complicated; it doesn't have to be done in a classroom or formal learning environment and it doesn't have to take place in some overseas country. Whether it's learning how to bake, learning a new language, coaching and mentoring learners in an inner city school<sup>4</sup>, scuba-diving for the first time – whatever makes you curious, feel alive, and connects you to what it **feels** like to learn – those are the experiences to follow and place at the heart of your CPD.

I would urge you to take yourself to your learning edge, take a deep breath, let those feelings and emotions wash over you and, invigorated, take the experience back into the heart of your practice – for you and your clients. **TJ**



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