

Issues of power and identity
in corporate experiential learning practices

A paper presented at the
Experiential Learning in Communication Commission
National Communication Association annual convention, Chicago, 1997.

Walter John Carl
Department of Communication Studies
105 BCSB
University of Iowa
Iowa City, IA 52242-1498
walter-carl@uiowa.edu

ABSTRACT

This paper provides a discussion of issues regarding power and identity in the training practices of corporate experiential learning (CEL) providers. Existing research in the field of experiential education neglects discussions of power and hierarchy issues and often leaves unchallenged its fundamental assumptions regarding identity and human agency. My data for this pilot study is based on observations and interviews from an actual training day in which lower-level managers and line employees from a manufacturing company were sent off-site for a full day of communication and team work skills development. Following a review of literature, statement of research questions and methodology, I critique dominant philosophical perspectives of the experiential education field and illustrate how these guiding assumptions neglect the issues of power and hierarchy in the training environment. I conclude the paper by proposing questions for further consideration based on Kenneth Gergen's concept of relational self and Paulo Freire's work in education.

Introduction

Nearly anyone who has facilitated and/or participated in an experiential education program has heard of the values of openness, collaboration, team work, and personal growth. An often implicit assumption of this discourse is that there is relative equality among the participants of an experiential education program. What is often excluded from such a framework is a conceptualization of power and hierarchy. This exclusion becomes especially problematic when working in the field of corporate experiential learning (CEL) where many corporations who pay CEL providers for their training are hierarchically structured. For example, one traditional value of experiential education is that it takes people out of their everyday environments and places them into a space where they can work on issues of communication and team work (Stoltz, 1995). CEL providers argue that by distancing people from the hassles of the work place and removing the influence of hierarchy, managers and other employees will be better able to resolve problems. This practice of sending employees off-site for training, often making it mandatory, raises two concerns. First, what evidence is there to suggest that the influence of hierarchy is actually removed, or even reduced, when going off-site to a CEL provider? Second, if the hierarchy is removed in this process, whose interests does it serve?

This neglect of power and hierarchy issues is understandable, though not excusable, when seen in light of the philosophical assumptions surrounding human agency and identity in the discourse about experiential education. Smith and Roland (1995) argue that much of the philosophical approaches supporting CEL stems from the 1970s encounter group movement based on the work of Carl Rogers and humanistic psychology. Frequent critiques of humanistic traditions are that they do not account for social and structural constraints nor contain adequate conceptualizations of power (Smith, 1988). To be able to understand issues of power and hierarchy in CEL, then, it becomes necessary to understand the philosophical underpinnings about identity and human agency that have dominated the field of experiential education.

In this pilot study, I investigated the themes of power, identity, and agency in an actual CEL training program. To do this, I observed an off-site training day for a group of lower-level managers from a manufacturing company located in the Southeast. Prior to and throughout my full-day observations, I interviewed employees/participants, facilitators, and representatives from both the CEL training organization and the manufacturing company to understand how issues of identity, power, and hierarchy surface in a CEL context.

In this paper, I will review salient research in the field of corporate experiential learning and organizational communication, present my research questions and methodology, discuss the results of my interpretive analysis, and present questions for further consideration based on tentative conclusions from the data.

Review of Literature

The philosophy of experiential education and its historical evolution is predicated upon concepts developed by John Dewey, Albert Bandura, and Carl Rogers. Dewey argued that for creative responses in changing environments, people would need to be taken out of the context of their habitual routines and patterns and be challenged in a mode of thinking oriented towards problem-solving and utilizing direct, hands-on experience (Weigand, 1995; Dewey, 1934). Bandura's work from a social-cognitive perspective focuses on learning through observation and imitation and by integrating one's behaviors, personal qualities, and environmental contexts (Frick, 1990).

Rogers approach augments the value of "congruence, empathic understanding, unconditional positive regard, as well as active listening and valuing self-worth" (Weigand, 1995, 2). In his book On Becoming a Person, Rogers responds to the question "what is my goal in life?" with some general patterns he has observed in his clients: moving away from facades, away from "oughts," away from meeting cultural expectations, away from pleasing others, toward self-direction and autonomy, toward a being in process who is always changing and never static, toward a complex being (with nothing hidden nor feared in oneself), toward openness to experiences, toward acceptance of others, toward trust

of oneself; in short, the authentic self is achieved by following Kierkegaard's maxim: "to be that self which one truly is" (Rogers, 1969).

Humanistic accounts of agency rest on certain assumptions about identity and subjectivity that have been critiqued for their lack of attention to issues of power and social constraints (Smith, 1988). These critiques of identity, often collected under the banner of postmodernism, historicize the contingent, socially-constructed nature of a true and knowable authentic self (Smith, 1988; Gergen, 1991). Kenneth Gergen (1991) argues that the notion of an authentic self is called into question due to rapid expansions and developments in technology, specifically, communication technologies. People are exposed to new and different cultures and world views and become "saturated" with these. This process of having our selves become "populated" with competing perspectives on life brings with it a realization of the contingency of our own perspective, once taken as natural and given, and subsequently leads to a loss in assuming we have true and knowable selves (Gergen, 1991). Each truth is made relative based on the situation in which we find ourselves and upon possible alternatives. As various perspectives permeate our notions of identity and self, "one ceases to believe in a self independent of the relations in which he or she is embedded" (Gergen, 1991, 17).

Gergen outlines this move from a modern to a postmodern self. For analytic purposes, Gergen breaks the transition into three phases, realizing that these are not necessarily distinct, nor linear, phases. The first phase is "strategic manipulation" in which an individual is distressed upon the realization that she or he performs and enacts various roles to achieve ones own social ends. The second phase is called "pastiche personality" in which a person is liberated from conceptualizing oneself as possessing an authentic or essential self and learns to enjoy multiple forms of self-expression within and among various contexts. Gergen writes, "as social relationships become opportunities for enactment, the boundary between the real and the presented self -- between substance and style -- is erased. What seems to be true and substantial from one standpoint seems merely stylistic from another" (155). The

third and culminating stage is the “relational self,” which is characterized by the loss of an individual, autonomous self, and is replaced with notions of interdependence and a new understanding of how relationships construct the self.

Notions of agency often involve the degree to which individuals are free to make choices.

Implicit in models of experiential education are views of human agency. For example,

Sullivan and Kolb (1995) explicate six processes that help transform experience into learning:

Perception – a self-interpretive processing of experience and a critical dimension to the relativistic nature of what is experienced;

Deep Experiencing – embracing the fundamental essence derived from an organic, holistic, spirit;

Following the Learning Cycle – experiencing learning in concrete, reflective, abstract, and active ways;

Reflection – gaining perspective over time from the first three steps;

Inside-Out – engaging the dynamic interplay of the inner world of self in a social system;

Conversation – verbalizing and communicating leading to further insight and understanding which reinforces the learning, i.e., making sense through public discourse and community dialogue. (6)

A large part of “inside-out” and “reflection” upon experiences involves the freedom to make genuine choices (Sullivan and Kolb, 1995; Rogers, 1961). Grundy (1982) argues that within a social context “there must be a structure which allows equal power relationships between group members, including the teacher or facilitator, if the freedom to choose is to be a valid one.” Sullivan and Kolb (1995) draw from Paulo Freire (1970) to argue that participants in experiential education must be empowered to choose their own personal view and engage in a co-equal relational act of conversation in which all participants have the opportunity to name their own experiences. Sullivan and Kolb acknowledge the power dynamics at work in the process of defining and interpreting a particular experience, but argue that these should not take away from the responsibility of each individual to reflect upon one’s own experiences. Stoltz (1995) also considers the power dynamics at work in the creation of change, especially in groups that involve people from different levels of hierarchy. He

argues that being outside, away from the cultural artifacts of the hierarchical office environment, removes the “traditional trappings of power” (Stoltz, 1995, 13).

Other studies about power and organizations include Eisenberg and Witten’s (1987) discussion of openness of communication within organizations, which is often a value highly touted within the context of CEL. In their article, Eisenberg and Witten argue that complete openness is not necessarily the most beneficial thing and that it often has a managerial bias. It was initially argued, especially in the early human relations movement, that being open with one another up and down the hierarchy would actually level the hierarchy and make for more egalitarian power relations. In actuality, however, open information was being translated into power by those in more privileged positions in the hierarchy, thus reifying the dominant power structures. Instead of unguarded openness, Eisenberg and Witten argue for strategic ambiguity which can be beneficial by allowing for greater flexibility to respond to environmental changes and allows for more divergent interpretations to coexist and for more diverse groups to work together. They also note, though, the ways corporations can use strategic ambiguity as a rhetorical form to benefit the existing hierarchy.

Research Questions

Due to the lacunae in existing research regarding power and hierarchy issues in CEL, my research questions are:

- What are the primary assumptions that characterize the field of corporate experiential learning?
- What is the discourse that “supports” or is consistent with guiding assumptions in corporate experiential learning?
- What is the discourse surrounding issues of power and hierarchy during a training day?

Methodology

To learn of the discourse and assumptions that guide the practices of CEL providers, I felt it was necessary to observe an actual training day and to talk with employees, facilitators, and representatives of both the CEL training organization and the client corporation. My methods of data collection and analysis follow.

Data Collection

My methods of data collection involve primarily semi-structured interviews and observations of an actual training day. One interview was conducted with the training coordinator of the training company to get a sense of themes that may surface during the observation. The semi-structured interview focuses on tensions experienced in the training sessions between and among the goals of the training company and the client company, and between the facilitator and participants; additionally, questions were asked about the philosophy of corporate experiential learning (CEL), and how personal and emotional issues are dealt with during the one-day training session.

The observation involved a full day (8 am – 6 pm) of collecting data through the use of observation and field notes. I have been sensitive to specific themes that surfaced during the first interview and also open to further themes emerging throughout the day. Throughout the day, I have conducted unstructured, informal interviews with participants and facilitators to clarify what is going on during the training, and have probed for more information relevant to emerging themes.

The training company's promotional material have also been analyzed for congruent or conflicting themes that develop during the training day and interviews.

Analysis

My method of analysis is informed by Becker's (1971) "sequential analysis" which is a continual checking of data against interpretation until satisfactory meaning is grasped (Gilbert, 1993). The analysis of the data begins while it is being collected; the researcher reflects on possible meanings

of the data during its gathering to distill any salient themes. Based on this provisional analysis, attention is directed to these themes during further data collection. Continuous hunches, or hypotheses, are made and verified with the data in a process that refines initial interpretations. At times, initial hypotheses may be thrown out or added in light of current information. The mechanical logistics of my analysis are straightforward including the following steps: transcribe field notes, search for categories and patterns or themes, arrange the data thematically, construct an outline for the final write-up (Gilbert, 1993). In addition, as part of my data analytic process, I have constructed episodes in which to group events based on my observations (Anderson, 1987, 345). I chose to construct my episodes to keep consistent with the break up of activities that were defined throughout my observation (for example, all of the opening lecture is one episode, while the next episode is the next activity the group engaged in).

There are numerous limitations to my analytical approach owing to the constructed nature of my categories for themes and episodes. By this I mean that I have chosen to select certain themes and episodes and by this selection, there is a necessary deflection of other themes, and a reflection of my own biases (Burke, 1945). More specifically, by opting to do an interview with the training coordinator first to formulate some specific themes of which to be aware during my observation, I have limited my awareness of other potentially salient themes from the observation. Additionally, by constructing the episodes according to the break up of events as outlined by the trainers, I have accepted their construction of the day's events which may lead me to be more biased to a "trainer's" perspective, and not, for example, from the participants' perspective. A further limitation is that I have not adopted a more rigorous thematic analysis. By not adopting a more systematic approach, I further open myself up to preconceived biases that would lead to certain "pet" themes emerging (for example, I am interested in issues of power and hierarchy and the discourse surrounding these topics - what I want to see, I will probably notice; another example of this is that I have read research on CEL for my review of literature and I may have been biased to notice themes that this previous research has already identified).

Emergent themes/constructed categories

Responding to my research questions, the following themes emerged during my analysis of the data collected for this project:

- CEL assumptions and discourse:
 - *“Providing the environment” approach* - this theme surfaced during the interview with the training coordinator, during the training day, within the training company’s written mission statement, and in corporate experiential learning literature. This approach involves the facilitator providing an appropriate environment for the clients to learn in, but leaves the responsibility for their own experience and interpretations of their experiences up to the participants.
 - *Personal growth/Carl Rogers* - this theme surfaced prominently in the literature review and in observations of the training day. It includes issues of identity (appearance vs. authentic self), facilitating the personal growth process, challenges, and “stretching,” or expanding one’s current physical, mental, and interpersonal limits.
 - *Use of symbols and metaphors* - this theme also surfaced in the review of literature and observations and refers to a common practice of CEL professionals to utilize symbols and metaphors in their creation of challenge activities for the participants.
 - *Transference and “follow-on”* - this theme emerged in the interview with the training coordinator, throughout training day, and in the review of literature. It refers to transferring and applying skills learned during the training day back into the work place; “follow-on” is CEL-speak for “following up” with a group after they have had the outdoor training and could include focus group sessions, classroom lectures, and on-site (i.e., at the plant) meetings with the participants.
 - *CEL-speak* - this theme has considerable overlap with other themes (especially “Personal growth/Carl Rogers”) as this refers to discourse that is particular to CEL and/or organizational training in general.
 - *Safety* - this theme emerged during the training day and refers to issues of safety, medical reports, and health concerns.
- *Emotional and personal issues* - this theme has some overlap with the “personal growth/Carl Rogers” theme. It emerged in the interview with the training coordinator, during the training day, and in the review of literature. It refers to how emotional and personal issues are/are not brought up during the training day and how they are talked about when they are brought up by participants or training staff.
- *Power and hierarchy issues* - The hierarchy aspect of this theme surfaced in the interview with the training coordinator, the training day, and in the review of literature; the power aspect was most salient due to its exclusion in terms of explicit discourse, although power themes were seen to weave throughout the day (this distinction between power and hierarchy is not to imply that they are unrelated). This theme also considers managerial bias on behalf of the training company. Additionally, a notable portion of this theme is one participant’s

experiences throughout the day; Peg may illustrate an example of what happens when things do not work out so well.

To orient the reader to the events of the day, I will take a few pages to provide a brief chronology of the events of the training day from arrival of the employees/participants from the client organization, through the opening lecture and initiatives, to the final debrief session. I detail a good portion of my field notes from the opening lecture as it helps to frame the events of the day.

Arrival

I arrive at the training site on a warm, sunny day just after 8 am. Familiar with the peaceful surroundings of the outdoor training course from my first interview on-site some weeks prior, I walk up the brick path leading to a large, modern-looking, wooden house. Greeting me inside a carpeted training classroom is the training coordinator, Lucy¹. I poke around for a few minutes writing descriptive field notes until the participants arrive in a bus at 8:17 am. Lucy runs out to greet the clients as they disembark and make their way to fruit, coffee, pastries, and “Kenny G” on the stereo inside; the classroom ambience is inviting, pleasant, and professional. The nearly forty participants, dressed mostly in jeans or light pants, and tee shirts and light sweaters, appear to fall within the age range of mid-twenties to mid-sixties, most within the 30-40 year age bracket. There seems to be an even distribution of males and females and race and ethnic groups (mostly African-American and white). The four other members of the training staff come out to eat and socialize with the participants and around 8:45 am everyone finds their seats for the invitation and opening presentation by the co-founder and lead facilitator of the training company, Ricky.

¹ All names used are pseudonyms.

Opening lecture

After everyone is seated (four staff trainers sit in the back of the room behind the group; I sit at the back of the room on the left side wall near the staff, but not with them), Ricky explains what the training day will and will not be like and attempts to alleviate anxieties about the physical challenges of the day. Ricky then talks about working with adults in a training situation and indicates that a more respectful approach than traditional, classroom style training sessions would be “action learning,” which is learning by doing where the participants make their own conclusions about what is to be learned.

The participants are then asked “why are we here?” from a “business perspective.” Ricky asks how many of them were sent here and most of the hands go up; with the exception of a vice president, a supervisor, and an upper-level manager, all of the employees were told they had been scheduled to come to this training on this date via Lotus Notes and by Sam, the human resources manager, individually talking to each person face-to-face. Ricky then presents Sam to the group to explain why the group is here.

Sam, as the human resources person responsible for bringing the clients out here, begins to provide a brief background to the participants about “why they are here” on a Saturday, especially because “no Saturdays” was a new policy of the company. Sam then narrates a story about an upper-level person (identifies him by name) in their company setting up a “planning for change” approach. This strategic planning includes the plant operating at “100% with less than 8% scrap.” Having employee training is a significant part of this planning for change (the human resources department was recently established 6 months ago). The vice president of human resources, Sam’s boss, met one of the staff who was a facilitator for the day at a creative leadership conference in which the facilitator was training. From this initial contact with the training company, the upper-level management team came to the outdoor training facility and had such a positive experience that they wanted to have others within the organization have similar training experiences. A group of supervisors came out as the second group and this group of mostly quality assurance employees and engineers are the third group

from the company to experience this training. Based on an interview with Sam later in the day, at least two more groups will be coming to the training in May and either August or September; all managers will receive this training and maybe operators and mechanics, depending on budgetary constraints. Sam indicates that today is a time to come together as a team. He indicates that he has seen changes in the managers who have already come to this training and some of the group nods in agreement. Sam argues that the group should all come together because we “all get paid by one person.” He finishes his talk by saying we’re “doing OK now” but we can get better.

Ricky orients the group to the events of the training day and emphasizes the importance of challenging oneself, or “stretching.” He moves to a flip chart on the left side of the room and talks in more detail about the “interpersonal stretch.” He distinguishes between “appearance” and “authentic” selves, making the connection that when faced with a challenge, the appearance self wants to stay in the comfort zone, wants to not look bad; appearance is “lookin’ cool when I die.” In contrast, the authentic self would look at a challenge like “the wall,” an activity planned for later that day that has become infamous, and say “I’m scared shitless!” Part of the interpersonal stretch is living the authentic self. Ricky indicates that people have greater respect for the authentic self and then goes on to list a series of contrasts between the two selves:

<u>Appearance</u>	<u>Authentic</u>
Rationalize	Observe what’s goin’ on
Analyze	Accept what’s goin’ on
Critical	Participate
Focus on the past/future	Focus on the present
Give blame	Find solutions
High control	To give control
“Playing roles”	Seeking adventure, growth, and risk
Playing not to lose (safety)	Playing to win
	More genuine

Ricky then introduces the training staff (facilitators) who will be working with the participants who are split into two groups.

Initiatives and debrief sessions

The two groups then engaged in “initiatives,” which are activities designed to illustrate themes of collaboration, trust, team work, and communication, until lunch time. After the one-hour lunch break, the two groups swapped facilitators and engaged in more initiatives. I chose one group to follow throughout the entire day and interviewed participants and facilitators between, and sometimes during, each initiative.

After each initiative there was a “debrief” session in which the facilitator asked the participants to reflect on their experiences and to apply these experiences to situations at work. At the end of the day, both groups came together for a final debrief session led by Ricky. After all the participants left, I was allowed to attend the staff’s debrief session where they discussed the events of the day, asked for my perspective on the day’s activities, and generated ways to improve upon the day’s program.

Analysis of themes

The following is an analysis of themes as they emerged throughout the training day. The themes identified above have considerable overlap. For the purposes of this paper, I will restrict my analysis to the following themes: “provide the environment,” “issues of power and hierarchy,” and “Personal growth/Carl Rogers.” Due to the overlap of the first two themes, I will discuss them together.

“Provide the environment approach” and “issues of power and hierarchy”

The mission statement for this training company provides an excellent introduction to the “provide the environment approach.” It reads:

Our Mission:

To design and provide environments and process that enhance and stimulate the growth of individuals and groups/in order to recognize our greatest potentials both individually and interdependently/demonstrating a way of living that honors all life that respects each individual, and recognizes the value of the greater whole/to step into the future with vision, empowerment, and the resources with which to succeed as an enlightened and sustainable culture.

In his opening lecture, Ricky talks about how the facilitator will provide an environment for participants, but how their experience and stretching is dependent upon the participants' personal responsibility. This point is reiterated in the final group debrief when Ricky tells the group that what they get out of this day is up to them and that it is their responsibility to transfer back what happens here today². In my first interview with the training coordinator, she responds to my question about the mission of the company with this statement:

yeah, what we are charged with, what we charge ourselves with, is creating a safe environment in which changes are allowed to happen. We don't make the changes happen but create the environment where they can happen; and that's what we charge ourselves with everyday.

It is interesting to note how her comment changes from "yeah, what we are charged with" to "what we charge ourselves with." This quote highlights important aspects of this theme: responsibility and accountability, in whom do these reside and under what circumstances? That is, there is great effort to speak in proactive, agentic terms such as "what we charge ourselves with" rather than a more passive "what we are charged with." Based on inferences drawn from my observations and understanding of CEL, the training company charges itself with/is charged with, among other things, the following: setting up an appropriate design and structure for the activities and initiatives of the day, making sure the course is safe, describing connections from the participants'

² Given page constraints, I did not include references to field notes. For a full copy of my field notes, please contact me.

behaviors to group and communication dynamics principles, and to provide guidelines, or tools for how to have a positive and worthwhile experience. From Ricky's statements during the day, it seems that the responsibilities of the participants are: to choose to participate, have a "good" experience, and to transfer and apply this experience back into their personal and work lives.

Providing the environment as an approach places responsibility for the participant's experience onto the participant as an individual, autonomous agent and seems to remove a sense of responsibility from the training company's role in that experience, especially when the participants do not have a positive experience. For example, attributions for Peg's, an employee participant, bad experience made in the closing staff meeting which I attended are internal to her, such as: she is known for this "type of behavior," she's "blaming the group," she is "in a troubled world," and that she would make an interesting "psychological case study." What appears to be missing, with the exception of one facilitator's isolated comment in the final debrief (the company does not "have the structure for doing it" referring to transferring certain skills back to the work place), is an account of the structural conditions at the work place and other social constraining forces that influence responses to the training day. Additionally, there is an inconsistency in Ricky's presentation of appearance/authentic identity and taking responsibility for one's experience. Ricky argues in the opening lecture that an authentic self gives control while an apparent self maintains control. It would seem, however, that one needs to take control for one's own actions and experiences rather than giving up this control; to give control over to someone else is to not accept responsibility for one's own actions. Is it fair to infer that the participants should maintain control for their own actions, but give up control when it is in the best interests of the training company or client company?

Another illustration of the "provide the environment" approach is one facilitator's comment, "I'm not the expert, you went through it." This comment was made as a way to encourage feedback from the employee participants. At first glance, this perspective accounts for a sense of participant agency by showing that each person can give voice to her or his own experience, but it also takes responsibility off of the facilitator; if he is not the expert, then why is he facilitating this activity? Granted, it can

be inferred that the facilitator is saying that he is not the expert of the participant's experience, but where does his responsibility enter in? Much of the accountability for the participants' experiences seem to be placed exclusively upon the individual participant, without a discussion of the facilitation staff's role.

Further evidence of the "provide the environment" approach surfaces in the preliminary interview with the training coordinator prior to the training day; the training coordinator responded to my probe (probe and response follows):

Walter: Are there times when there, or, what are the times when there are some consistencies with what you feel is appropriate for the clients and are there times when there are some inconsistencies [between the facilitator and client participants]?

Training coordinator: Because I listen with my heart and head there are less times that it's inconsistent. But when there are times that it's inconsistent, the best way is for, to allow them to experience the inconsistency themselves. So, you set up a procedure where that would happen, and it's sort of a like pulling the wool off, not pulling the wool over someone's eyes, but pulling the wool off someone's eyes, allowing them to see.

This is similar to a comment made by Ricky, who was the lead facilitator during the day, responding to another facilitator's query about how to keep the participant's responsible for their own actions. Ricky stated that a strategy is to "catch them [the participants] in their failure." That is, design the initiative so that the participant can succeed or fail, and then the facilitator can use this as an example to make certain points. Both Ricky's and the training coordinator's comments remind me of philosophical and religious views of "free moral agency"; the world is provided/created as an environment in which humans can either do right or wrong, be a saint or a sinner. In this view, there is no account for social, structural, and discursive constraints on human agency. Extending the analogy, the training company acts as a higher Being by setting up the environment and putting it in motion, standing back and waiting for someone to make a mistake and then stepping in and making an example of it.

A further aspect of the "providing the environment" approach is choice, specifically exercising "choice in the moment." Ricky explained at the beginning of the day in his opening lecture not to choose now whether or not to participate in the activities, but wait until right before the activity starts.

Again, this seems at first to be a very supportive, non-coercive approach to training, which reflects the guiding principles of Rogerian thought. It can also be seen, however, as a seductive strategy. An oppositional reading plays out like this: suspend your critical judgment of the apparent self, be authentic and accept what we are telling you for now and take a risk to be involved in our training day; we know you have some preconceived ideas about this approach to training but if you give it a chance and let us pull the wool off your eyes and show you where you are a little off, you will come to understand that this is a valuable and appropriate approach. So, don't decide now, but wait until later when we've taken the whole day to prepare you and then, disregarding the pressure of the moment to make a snap decision, allow yourself a free, genuine, and more informed choice.

Yet another issue related to these themes of the "provide the environment" approach is that of hierarchy. Stoltz (1995) argues that CEL provides an advantage by being off-site so that traditional power structures are either done away with or are not that apparent. I asked the following question in the preliminary interview with the training coordinator: "How much of the hierarchy do you feel is taken away when employees come out here?" The training coordinator replied, "I experience 100% of it taken away. More often than not it is in the 70% and up." One group had their supervisor with them throughout the day and the issue of hierarchy came up during the "spider web" initiative, used to discuss issues of quality, teamwork, and personal accountability, in which they teased their supervisor when they were passing him through the web saying he could be dropped. Without an understanding of how they interact at the work place, a useful comparison cannot be made. What can be reasonably inferred from this is that the participants are still aware of hierarchy issues during the training day. From my research it is not clear how much of a difference this awareness makes in terms of the effectiveness of levelling the hierarchy. For my purposes, however, this does not present a problem because I want to investigate the assumption(s) behind this question, that is, whose interests does it serve to level, or at least talk about levelling, the hierarchy at an off-site training?

On the surface it appears that levelling the hierarchy is in the best interest of all employees, including management, in that the off-site training is a “sanctuary,” or more simply, a place to get away from the office and work on some serious issues of teamwork and communication. An oppositional reading opens up a different perspective. If all the employees are working together as a team, but this team still exists within a hierarchical framework, those in power will be able to appropriate information, knowledge, and productivity, to their own interests (Grundy, 1982), similar to the phenomenon Eisenberg and Witten (1987) described regarding open communication. If the employees are trained in an environment where hierarchy is levelled, assuming for the moment it is or at least hierarchy is not as significant an issue, how will this help lower-level employees in a work place environment living the material reality of a hierarchy? This also seems contradictory to the goal of experiential education being practical and realistic.

There is further evidence to suggest that the training day contains elements in which there is a managerial bias (Deetz, 1992). This primarily includes discourse regarding how this group of production line workers and engineers and quality assurance people are “not gonna catch it [the point of the training] like a group of higher managers,” which was a statement made by Ricky after a debrief of an initiative. A similar example is the conclusion that the staff should do more activities with this type of group, because they were not as verbally proficient as a group of higher managers.

The last issue I would like to discuss regarding issues of power and hierarchy is one participant’s experiences, Peg. Peg is especially interesting, in terms of this paper, for at least two reasons: 1) as someone who is physically challenged, due to her injuries and subsequent surgeries, she represents the difficulty some CEL providers have serving their clients who are in similar situations and also reveals a general bias towards more persons who are able-bodied (Stoltz, 1995); 2) she is an example of what happens when things do not go as they should from the training company’s and client company’s perspective. From her act of resistance in not signing the waiver form for participation to her emotional soliloquy at the “tower” debrief, the culminating initiative for the day, she exposed sites of power and brought them into the public transcript (Scott, 1990).

Throughout the day Peg expressed how she felt about not being able to participate and how she was forced to go to the training day with her company being aware of her medical and personal concerns. The training company did attempt to make some concessions for her with Ricky offering her to lie down in the house and tried to include her in some activities (although it is my personal opinion they could have involved her earlier, and more consistently, throughout the day). Where I think there is a fair critique to be made of the training company is in open discussion of the participants' situation in terms of this being a mandatory training; the "command performance" nature of this training was made clear during lunch: one participant said, "if your not coming now you're coming later" and the "tower" debrief session where participants admitted they had to come to the training because of pressure do so at work. The only time this issue was raised was in the opening lecture by Ricky when he asked how many of the participants were sent here; after this, he turned the presentation to Sam, the client company's human resources manager, not commenting on it any further. There was an excellent opportunity in the tower debrief to discuss the various power influences and constraints rather than trying to point out how Peg should have had a better experience. I will return to this issue of power and how it might be better addressed in CEL after a discussion of conceptions of identity in the following theme.

"Personal growth/Carl Rogers"

A large part of personal growth and Rogerian approaches involve choice and facilitating environments for change, which is why there will be some overlap with the above theme on "providing the environment." To recap from the review of literature, a Rogerian approach is guided by Kierkegaard's maxim: "to be that self which one truly is." This theme is most clearly revealed by Ricky's statement regarding the discussion of Peg in the staff debrief session: "Just shower them with love and kindness and offer them ultimate choice and give her total space to make her choices." One facilitator's comment at the "wild woozy," an initiative that focuses on trust and communication, about the way to help people grow is to take away their fear supplemented with the individual's

willingness to trust and take risks is also consistent with Rogerian thought (see literature review; Rogers, 1969). Furthermore, notions of identity as discussed in Ricky's opening lecture regarding appearance versus authentic self are indicative of Carl Rogers. Gergen's critique has already been provided in the literature review; now, I would like briefly take up the feasibility of what CEL might look like with a more postmodern conception of identity, specifically Gergen's relational self.

Conceptualizations of identity and human agency

Smith and Roland (1995) reveal similarities between 1970s encounter group movements and CEL; it is clear that the CEL approach depends a great deal on Rogerian thought to ground their claims and the types of activities and initiatives involved in the training. My argument is that CEL professionals would do their work better, according to the training company's mission statement and the goals of experiential education as discussed in the literature review, to train with a relational self version of identity rather than the appearance/authentic self dichotomy.

First, a recap of the dichotomous selves according to Ricky's opening presentation. Consistent with Rogers' thought, Ricky argues that an authentic self involves: observing and accepting what is going on; participating; focusing on the present; finding solutions; giving control; seeking adventure, growth, and risk; being more genuine; and playing to win. The appearance self involves: rationalization; analyzing; being critical; focusing on the past and the future; assigning blame; maintaining high control; playing roles; and playing it safe. To succeed in the training company's current goals of providing an environment in which change can take place regarding effective communication and team building, the facilitators depend on these aspects for the following reasons:

- *observing, accepting, and giving control versus analyzing, being critical, and taking control* - so that the participants can suspend judgment long enough to participate in unorthodox (according to their typical routine at work) approaches to learning, acting silly, going to a training day on Saturdays, and to have the participants passively accept and not question the cultural transmission of a new set of (possibly managerial-biased) values regarding communication and teamwork;

- *focus on the present versus focus on the past/future* - so that the participants can make the choice “in the moment,” which can be a seductive strategy as discussed above, and to not be aware of historical forces that may shape current constraints to agency nor how current activities may have adverse effects on the participants’ future;
- *seeking adventure, growth, and risk and playing to win versus playing it safe* - so that the participants can stretch and expand their comfort zone and be open to a new perspective (the training company’s), but also this is tempered with the safety considerations due to liability inherent in this type of training, yet another contradiction. The “playing to win” strategy seemed to be thrown in by Ricky as a persuasive attempt at identifying with the down-to-earth, blue-collar crowd of the employees;
- *being genuine and finding solutions versus rationalization, playing roles, and assigning blame* - so that the participants have to accept their responsibility for their own actions (being genuine, not rationalizing, not playing roles), but focusing on solving the participant’s problems and absolving the responsibility of the training company for their activities (not assigning blame).

With the notion of the “relational self,” the dichotomous trappings and contradictions of authentic-appearance selves can be avoided, as well as offering a better opportunity to more adequately discuss issues of power, hierarchy, and social constraints. Before I proceed, I want to first address the issue of why utilizing the “relational self” perspective would make a difference to CEL professionals; after all, Ricky argued in his opening lecture that he prefers groups who do not “just sit around and think all day” and the tradition of experiential learning is a realistic, doing, hands-on approach that should not involve too much sitting in a classroom learning about postmodern views on the social construction of identities.

First, it would be inaccurate to argue that there is not a lot of thinking and/or discourse about what goes on during a training day. The challenges of the activities demand that the participants analyze and think more critically and reflectively about their behavior. For example, in the “circle juggle,” an initiative that focuses on flexibility and adapting to change, Ricky asks that the participants analyze their behavior (“What happened by adding the balls in?”) and another facilitator asked the participants to critically reflect on issues of quality in the production line during the “spider web” initiative. Second, there is a great deal of discourse throughout the process/debrief sessions that reflects conceptions of identity that does not need to, nor presently does, take place in a

classroom environment (although in the case of this particular training day, Ricky speaks specifically about issues of self and identity). Furthermore, Gergen argues that the relational self provides a more accurate conception of the experience in people's lives than does modernist notions of the authentic self, which is completely consistent with the "experience" aspect of experiential education. That is, the goal of experiential education is to provide as close as possible learning conditions to the "real" world, and the "real" world involves issues of power, control, constraint, and hierarchy that is not being dealt with by CEL providers. Granted, I am generalizing from this one training day to the whole field of CEL, but this claim that CEL providers do not adequately address issues of power and hierarchy is consistent with Stoltz's (1995) critique of the field.

Very briefly then, the main argument of the relational self is to show how our lives and selves are radically interdependent with others and within social contexts of power and control. The notion of showing how we are dependent upon others and the need to trust others considering this radical interdependence would be fully consistent with current discourse of teamwork and trust. Furthermore, the relational self can account for the contingent, historical forces that influence notions of self and identity and may allow for a more useful vocabulary (i.e., avoiding the dichotomous appearance versus authentic self language) to discuss power relations (Gergen, 1991; Scott, 1990). In sum, I argue that the relational self conception of identity will provide a better vocabulary to discuss social, cultural, and discursive contextual constraints in the work place and the participants' personal lives.

Conclusions and questions for further consideration

The field of CEL is predicated upon notions of individual, autonomous, authentic, and choiceful agents that are consistent with discourse about personal growth and managerial biases, while often limiting the discourse regarding issues of power and hierarchy. These themes are threaded throughout the narrative account of the training day and support and extend existing research on CEL. A concluding argument that I make in my analysis section is that CEL would do well to challenge itself as a field by becoming self-reflexive about their conceptions of identity and self, and possibly embrace a view more

consistent with Gergen's relational self. Some researchers in the field of CEL are more self-reflexive and Sullivan & Kolb (1995), for example, draw on Freire (1970) to argue that each person must have the opportunity to name his or her own experience and engage in dialogic communication. However, the feasibility of this is limited in hierarchically structured organizations (Grundy, 1982). Grundy (1982) argues that within a social context "there must be a structure which allows equal power relationships between group members, including the teacher or facilitator, if the freedom to choose is to be a valid one." If these more egalitarian power structures do not exist at the work place, what is the value of CEL? How might the work of Freire in Brazil be applied into U.S. corporate work environments and CEL? What is left out from these final conclusions is a detailed account of how these power and hierarchy issues can be raised in CEL and the consequences of doing so for the participants, the trainers, and the client company. My hope, however, is that this paper "provides an environment" in which this dialogue can take place.

REFERENCES

- Anderson, J. A. (1987). *Communication research: Issues and methods*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company.
- Becker, H. (1971). *Sociological work*. London: Allen Lane.
- Burke, Kenneth (1945). *A Grammar of Motives*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Deetz, S. (1992). *Democracy in an age of corporate colonization: Developments in communication and the politics of everyday life*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Dewey, J. (1934). *Experience and education*. New York: Collier Books.
- Eisenberg, E. and Witten, M.G. (1987). Reconsidering openness in organizational communication. *Academy of Management Review*, 12, 418-426.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. London: Penguin.
- Frick, W. (1990). *Personality theories: Journeys into self*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Gergen, K. J. (1991). *The saturated self: Dilemmas of identity in contemporary life*. New York: Basic Books.
- Gilbert, N. (ed.) (1993). *Researching social life*. London: Sage Publications.
- Grundy, S. (1982). Three modes of action research, *California Perspectives*, 2-3, 23-34.
- Kolb, D. A., Rubin, I. M., & Osland, J. (1991). *Organizational behavior: An experiential approach* (5th edition). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- McGee, T. (1995). The one-day challenge course model. In C.C. Roland, R.J. Wagner, and R.J. Weigand (Eds.), *Do It...and Understand!: The Bottom Line on Corporate Experiential Learning*. Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company, 24-27.
- Rogers, C. R. (1969). *On becoming a person*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Scott, J. C. (1990). *Domination and the arts of resistance: Hidden transcripts*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Smith, P. (1988). *Discerning the subject*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Smith, T. (1995). Crossing the line: Psychological perspectives. In C.C. Roland, R.J. Wagner, and R.J. Weigand (Eds.), Do It...and Understand!: The Bottom Line on Corporate Experiential Learning. Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company, 177-180.

Smith, T. and Roland, C. (1995). 1970 and 1990: Parallel revolutions. In C.C. Roland, R.J. Wagner, and R.J. Weigand (Eds.), Do It...and Understand!: The Bottom Line on Corporate Experiential Learning. Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company, 166-172.

Stoltz, P. (1995). Developing leaders experientially. In C.C. Roland, R.J. Wagner, and R.J. Weigand (Eds.), Do It...and Understand!: The Bottom Line on Corporate Experiential Learning. Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company, 12-22.

Sullivan, M. and Kolb, D. (1995). Turning experience into learning. In C.C. Roland, R.J. Wagner, and R.J. Weigand (Eds.), Do It...and Understand!: The Bottom Line on Corporate Experiential Learning. Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company, 5-11.

Weigand, R. (1995). Experiential learning: A brief history. In C.C. Roland, R.J. Wagner, and R.J. Weigand (Eds.), Do It...and Understand!: The Bottom Line on Corporate Experiential Learning. Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company, 2-4.