

Burrows P. and D. Loi 2004, 'A Surrealist Encounter: using eccentric objects and odd experiences to foster reflective and collaborative learning', *The 30th Annual Organizational Behaviour Teaching Conference – A Tradition of Teaching*, June 22-26, University of Redlands, CA.

A Surrealist Encounter:
using eccentric objects and odd experiences to
foster reflective and collaborative learning

Daria Loi and Peter Burrows
RMIT University
GPO Box 2476V - Melbourne 3001 VIC Australia
Tel. +61 3 9925 5337 Fax. +61 3 9925 5342
daria.loi@rmit.edu.au and peter.burrows@rmit.edu.au

Selected theme: Teaching as Performance Art

This combination of workshop and catalyst session/paper presentation explores how eccentric objects and odd experiences can encourage reflection, fun, and connectedness. This work builds on the Pea Project, an experiential series of reflective exercises where we asked participants at a series of international conferences, including OBTC 2002, to take a pea and hold it in their hand while their hand was photographed.

Our session deals with themes borrowed from a variety of disciplines including art, design and philosophy and is written from an inter-disciplinary perspective as the authors have management and design backgrounds. We focus on how unpredictable, outside-the ordinary, aesthetically interesting objects and anomalous experiences can become triggers to create reflection and collaboration within the classroom.

The act of creating and reflecting on shared experiences liberates the learner on multiple levels, creating a sense of belonging, being, and being together – in this context teaching is a performance art.

Abstract

If one dreams alone, it is only a dream. If many dream together, it is the beginning of a new reality.
(Hundertwasser in Rand 1992)

In this paper we discuss the notion and use of eccentric objects and odd experiences to foster reflection and collaboration. Operating from symbolic constructivist (Barry 1996) and phenomenological (Bachelard 1958; Dastur 2000; Brearley 2001) perspectives, we explore how these experiences unfold and influence the way people perceive the world and think about themselves.

We draw on a number of examples from our teaching practice, including the *Pea Project* (Burrows, Loi & Coburn 2002), which was part of the conference experience at OBTC 2002.

Introduction

In this paper we explore a Surrealist Encounter where eccentric objects and odd experiences are used to foster reflection and collaboration. Eccentric objects include any artifact that is unexpected or unanticipated in the context in which it is found. For example, a goat seen in a farmyard would be unsurprising while a goat seen in the classroom would be absurd.

Odd experiences are memorable and cause us to stop in our tracks. For instance, an Italian woman and an Australian man asking participants at a management conference to take a pea and hold it in their hand while their hand is photographed is inexplicable. While peas in a produce section at a supermarket are unremarkable.

What is going on here?

Operating from symbolic constructivist (Barry 1996) and phenomenological (Bachelard 1958; Dastur 2000; Brearley 2001) perspectives, this paper explores the ways in which eccentric objects and odd experiences can open up the way people perceive the world and think about themselves.

In this paper a surrealist painting (refer to figure 1) and a series of everyday objects become triggers for reflective and collaborative learning as people play, wonder and create together.

The use of eccentric objects and odd experiences subtly and persistently ask that we venture beyond what we already know and understand, opening up and creating space for deep learning.

We offer our experiences in facilitating a Surrealist Encounter as a promising model for our colleagues to explore in the classroom.

Conceptual Framework

We have discovered that people who engage with eccentric objects and odd experiences draw out rich and evocative responses from each other. Because everyone starts from an equally odd and anomalous place, outside the “rubber stamps of conventional clichés” (Schachtel 1959, p. 288), responses tend to reflect the unique qualities, interests and experiences of the respondents.

The workshop explored in this paper is inspired by the imaginative leap of surrealist artists such as Herbert Read (2002) who in 1937 made a radio address to the British Public announcing that:

It has become necessary for the objects to explain themselves to the people. For convenience I speak on behalf of other objects. What is a surrealist object? It is an idea, *what a good idea* people say, when something occurs to them, when something appeals to their imagination.

How do such ideas come? It is often hard to say. Suddenly, or gradually they are part of our consciousness. Awake or asleep we become aware of them.

Where then do they come from? Some people say, confidently, out of the unconscious. Others will tell you, from the world of dreams. Others again speak only of poetry.

We need not go into that. It is more important to realize by what acts objects come into being because the nature of the act partly determines the character of the object.

What a good idea – we join with Read in recognizing the importance of the imagination.

The act of creating and reflecting on eccentric objects and odd experiences *liberates the learner on multiple levels, creating a sense of belonging, being, and being together.*

These kinds of practices build on the work of a broad range of management and traditional educators (Giroux & McLaren 1989; Grumet 1991; Hooks 1994; Eisner 1995; Gunter 1995; Jipson & Paley 1997; Bilimoria 2000). We draw on Giroux & McLaren's critical approach to inquiry where people are encouraged to question the status quo, open up discourses around taken for granted ways of thinking and knowing, pushing and testing boundaries.

But how does one become aware of that which one takes for granted?

Our classroom practices have been influenced by the work of Gaston Bachelard (1958), in particular his views of phenomenology and the capacity of phenomenological work to elicit poetic ways of knowing, to prompt wonderment and to help people see things *as if for the first time*. Bachelard (1958, p. xxx) considers the imagination "a major power of human nature", taking its place "on the margin, exactly where the function of unreality comes to charm or disturb – always to awaken – the sleeping being lost in its automatisms".

Imagination is essential to creative aspects of management – this belief informs our practice.

Along with David Barry (1996), we propose that people have the capacity to construct their own meanings from the context in which they live and learn. When shared, such meanings provide a richer understanding of phenomena and the possibility of co-creation (Brearley 2001).

We are inspired by the work of Piaget (1978), Dewey (1916; 1973), and Kelly (1955), where students rather than teachers are at the centre of the learning process. From a constructivist perspective learners interact with ideas and materials to unfold personal meanings, constructing knowledge of the world around them and gaining a sense of autonomy and personal initiative from an environment that fosters such dynamics (Bruner & National Academy of Sciences (U.S.) 1960; Vygotsky 1965; Bruner 1966; Ausubel 1968; Papert 1980; Bruner 1986; Papert 1993; 1996).

In this paper we explore and share our approach to teaching and learning and gently highlight the benefits of constructivist practices based on the notion of eccentricity and oddity to stimulate collaboration, reflection and phenomenological awareness.

In line with Bilimoria's (2000) call for "generating and legitimizing the creation of new and vital teaching and educational structures and practices conducive to improve student learning", we offer the use of eccentric objects and odd experiences as an example of such practices.

Joining with Parker Palmer (1998) we recognize that "the real issue (for teachers) is not how do we 'fill up space,' but how do we create space for learning. True education guides students on an inner journey toward more truthful ways of seeing and being in the world".

In the following section we review the Pea Project, an experiential series of exercises that took place at a number of international conferences, informing the work discussed in this paper.

Antecedent experiences: the Pea Project

The Pea Project helped us discover the potential of everyday objects to become eccentric when experienced outside their usual context, creating spaces for learning and reflectiveness. This project revealed itself to be a multi-layered encounter, where several levels of interpretation, action, reaction, and reflection could meld.

Our vision with the Pea Project was to experientially share our methods for stimulating phenomenological awareness, initiating and deepening reflective practices with our peers (Schön 1983; Kolb & Moeller 1984; Schön 1987; Collier 1999). In what follows we establish links between this project and the Surrealist Encounter discussed in this paper.

On the first day of the conference we introduced ourselves to conference attendees, asking them to take part in a reflective learning exercise by taking a fresh pea from a pod and holding the pea in their hand while we took a digital photograph. Each hand holding a green pea briefly became the focus of attention, reflecting Bachelard's (1958, p. xii) view that "the communicability of an unusual image is a fact of great ontological significance".

We gave each participant a postcard with a previously photographed hand holding a pea and two questions: *What did you see?* and *What is going on here?*

Space was provided on the card for participants to respond. Completed cards and photographs became part of a presentation and discussion at a subsequent workshop where images of the many hands and peas were presented in darkness with music in the background.

In this procession of hands participants reported seeing their own hand *as if for the first time*.

Following the presentation people were asked to reflect on the process and again to reply to the two questions (*What did you see?* and *What is going on here?*). Rich and evocative responses were prompted from participants – responses as diverse as the hands depicted.

In our practice simple everyday objects like the pea become odd and eccentric when experienced outside their usual contexts, triggering learning and reflection.

Both the Pea Project and the Surrealist Encounter illustrate significant aspects of our approach to fostering reflective and collaborative practices as they tap into the *innate curiosity, playfulness, and creativity of people* (Thackara 2000), benefiting both organizations and learning environments.

The concepts discussed so far provide an antecedent rationale for the Surrealist Encounter.

Surrealist Encounter: a workshop example

...it is evident that a painted image – intangible by its very nature – hides nothing, while the tangibly visible object hides another visible thing – if we trust our experience. (...) What does not “lack” importance is the mystery evoked in fact by the visible and the invisible, and which can be evoked in principle by the thought that unites “things” in an order that evokes mystery. (Magritte in Foucault 1983, pp. 57-58)

The Surrealist Encounter began life as a facilitated workshop for Australian health managers where everyday objects and a surrealist painting (refer to figure 1) became triggers for reflective and collaborative learning as people played, wondered and created together.

The process adopted for the initial Surrealist Encounter follows:

- Furniture in the workshop space was rearranged to create an informal setting;
- Participants were divided into tables of five people;
- On each table a box concealed an everyday object (a stick, a scarf, a suitcase, a record, a shoe or a net);
- After a brief introduction participants were advised that whatever they found inside the box was to be used collaboratively to create a playful and imaginative response;
- Participants were advised that the collaborative outcome should have a positive flavor;
- Participants were given time to play, discuss and create together;
- The product of each group’s play was presented to the other groups;
- A series of PowerPoint slides with details of a surrealist painting were then shown;

- Slides slowly revealed that the objects previously found in the boxes and used to create stories and artifacts coincided with details from the painting; unlike their individual creations, the painting told a negative story;
- This revelation prompted an animated group discussion;
- Following the discussion people were invited to a nearby room arranged like a trattoria (traditional Italian family run restaurant) where they could serve themselves from a buffet;
- While music played in the background, reflective conversations continued in an informal and friendly atmosphere over lunch.

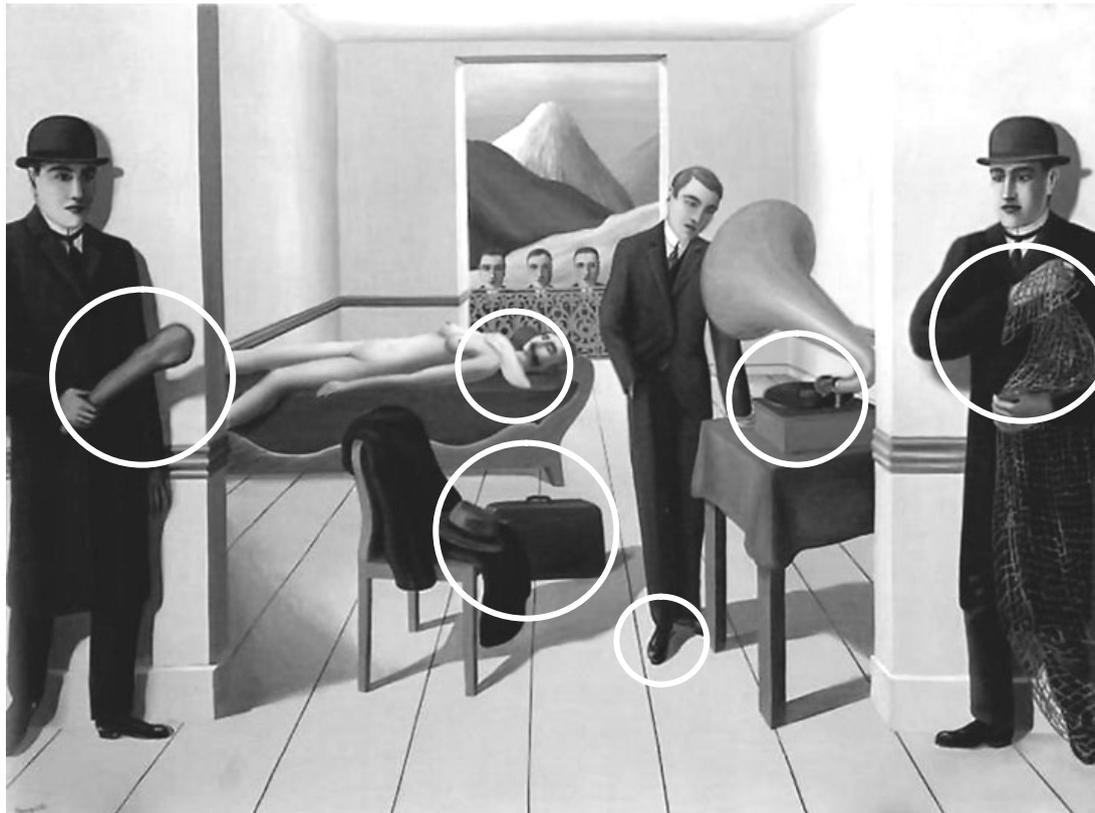


Figure 1 – Six everyday objects (the stick, the scarf, the suitcase, the record, the shoe and the net) used during the Surrealist Encounter inspired by René Magritte's (1926) *The Threatened Murderer*.

The Surrealist Encounter has proved to be an effective platform for exploring the use of everyday objects to stimulate reflective thinking, creativity and to encourage collaboration.

Without exception the responses of participants were highly creative and rich in meaning. These responses included:

- playfulness;
- animated interactions and laughter;
- a sense of wonderment, curiosity and intrigue;
- strong engagement between participants;
- the framing up of experiences in very personal terms;
- animated discussions during and after the workshop;

- participants expected we had a single clear goal rather than a series of open-ended objectives and consequently wondered about our motives; and
- intense reactions after seeing the full surrealist painting.

Participants' responses were unpredictable. We believe this outcome is related to our constructivist methods where we let events unfold rather than pursuing preconceived ideas of how people might respond. This could provoke discomfort in some teachers; however we feel that unpredictability adds to the richness and complexity of the experience. In our view unpredictability is a positive outcome as it places teachers in playful, spontaneous and often surprising contexts where people's responses are central.

This requires a leap of faith based on a belief in people's *innate curiosity, playfulness, and creativity*.

As we discovered with the Pea Project "this requires faith that no-one will come to harm", including the teacher, and "that the benefits of this work will soon become apparent to everyone" (Loi & Burrows 2004).

Such experiences go well beyond words as the following example demonstrates.

One of the *boxes* given to participants was a small *empty* cardboard suitcase. This artifact was given to a group that responded by creating a series of powerful mimes portraying the various stages of a life journey where moments of that journey were represented by the suitcase. The performance intensity was such that other members of the larger group were seen to be weeping.

These experiences have had a powerful effect on us.

Conclusions

We propose that teachers intending to work in these ways need to make deft use of stimuli, offering learners scaffolds so they can work, play and creatively engage with each other. The role of teachers in such cases is that of enabling possibilities rather than directing or prescribing outcomes.

We believe that the Surrealist Encounter offers a shared experience to inspire playful experiments in the classroom and more creative teaching practices. This work should be seen as a platform for the development of an infinite array of reflective and collaborative experiences.

We *hope* the Surrealist Encounter will encourage our peers to experiment with constructivist teaching and learning practices, stimulating playfulness, wonderment and creativity in learners.



Can one imagine being a teacher without having hope for children?

Is such a person still a teacher or would the meaning of teaching lose its fundamental meaning if it were not sustained by hope?

(van Manen 1990, p. 109)

Planning Details

Proposed audience

This session has sufficient depth and conceptual/philosophical layering to engage new faculty and experienced educators alike. More experienced teachers will draw out the underlying constructivist and phenomenological nuances whereas less experienced members of faculty will be drawn into the reflective process. New members of faculty will benefit from the insights and responses of more experienced conference participants.

Maximum number of participants

This session accommodates up to 30 people.

Type of session and optimum time required

Combined workshop and catalyst session – 90 minutes

Session Timeline

(2.45-4.15pm - Zanja Room, Orton Center)

- Pre-workshop preparation of room → 2.30-2.45pm
- Introduce workshop → 2.45-3pm
- Play and create time in groups of 5 → 3-3.20pm
- Group presentation time → 3.20-3.40pm
- PowerPoint and Group discussion → 3.40-3.55pm
- Wrap-up and contextualization including outline of this paper → 3.55-4.15pm

Special requirements

- Access to the room 15 min before the session starts so we can set up.
- A data projector.
- The room setting needs to allow for the use of movable tables and chairs.

Teaching Note

Given the comments in our conclusion, we believe that a Teaching Note is not appropriate for this catalyst session and workshop.

References

- Ausubel, D. P. 1968, *Educational psychology, a cognitive view*, Holt Rinehart and Winston, New York.
- Bachelard, G. 1958, *The poetics of space*, Beacon Press, Boston.
- Barry, D. 1996, 'Artful Inquiry: A Symbolic Constructivist Approach to Social Science Research', *Qualitative Inquiry*, vol. 2, no. 4, pp. 411-438.
- Bilimoria, D. 2000, 'A new scholarship of teaching and learning: An agenda for management education scholarship', *Journal of Management Education*, vol. 24, no. 6, pp. 704-707.
- Brearley, L. 2001, 'Exploring Creative Forms within Phenomenological Research', in *Phenomenology*, ed. Barnacle, R., RMIT University Press, Melbourne.
- Bruner, J. S. 1966, *Toward a theory of instruction*, Belknap Press of Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.
- Bruner, J. S. 1986, *Actual minds, possible worlds*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass.
- Bruner, J. S. and National Academy of Sciences (U.S.) 1960, *The process of education*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass.
- Burrows, P., Loi, D. and Coburn, M. 2002, 'The Pea Project - A proposal for a whole of conference interactive experience including a 60-90 minute workshop', *The 29th Annual Organizational Behaviour Teaching Conference - The Courage to Teach*, 19-22 June 2002, Chapman University, CA.
- Collier, S. T. 1999, 'Characteristics of reflective thought during the student teaching experience', *Journal of Teacher Education*, vol. 50, no. 3, pp. 173-181.
- Dastur, F. 2000, 'Phenomenology of the event: Waiting and Surprise', *Hypatia*, vol. 15, no. 4, pp. 178-189.
- Dewey, J. 1916, *Democracy and education : an introduction to the philosophy of education*, Macmillan, New York.
- Dewey, J. 1973, *Experience and Education*, Collier, New York.
- Eisner, E. W. 1995, 'What Artistically Crafted Research Can Help Us Understand About Schools', *Educational Theory*, vol. 45, no. 1.
- Foucault, M. 1983, *This is not a pipe*, University of California Press, Berkeley.
- Giroux, H. A. and McLaren, P. 1989, *Critical pedagogy, the state, and cultural struggle*, State University of New York Press, Albany.
- Grumet, M. 1991, 'Curriculum and the art of daily life', in *Reflections from the heart of educational inquiry: understanding curriculum and teaching through the arts*, eds. Schubert, W. and Willis, G., Albany Press, Albany, pp. 74-89.
- Gunter, P. A. Y. 1995, 'D.C. Bergson's Philosophy of Education', *Educational Theory*, vol. 45, no. 1.
- Hooks, B. 1994, *Teaching to transgress : education as the practice of freedom*, Routledge, New York.
- Jipson, J. A. and Paley, N. 1997, *Daredevil Research - Re-creating Analytic Practice*, Peter Lang Publishing Inc., New York.
- Kelly, G. 1955, *The psychology of personal constructs*, Norton, New York.
- Kolb, D. A. and Moeller, R. 1984, *Experiential learning : experience as the source of learning and development*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, N.J.
- Loi, D. and Burrows, P. 2004, 'The Pea Project: a Constructivist Encounter', *paper submitted to the Journal of Management Education*.

- Magritte, R. 1926, *The Threatened Murderer*, The Museum of Modern Art, NY, New York.
- Palmer, P. J. 1998, *The courage to teach : exploring the inner landscape of a teacher's life*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, Calif.
- Papert, S. 1980, *Mindstorms : children, computers, and powerful ideas*, Harvester Press, Brighton, Sussex.
- Papert, S. 1993, *The children's machine : rethinking school in the age of the computer*, BasicBooks, New York, NY.
- Papert, S. 1996, *The connected family : bridging the digital generation gap*, Longstreet, Atlanta, Georgia.
- Piaget, J. 1978, *The development of thought : equilibration of cognitive structures*, B. Blackwell, Oxford.
- Rand, H. 1992, *Hundertwasser*, Benedikt Taschen, Köln.
- Read, H. 2002, 'The Surrealist Object', *Surrealism*, Norfolk, LTM Publishing.
- Schachtel, E. G. 1959, *Metamorphosis; on the development of affect, perception, attention, and memory*, Basic Books, New York,.
- Schön, D. 1987, 'Educating the Reflective Practitioner', *Meeting of the American Educational Research Association*, Washington, DC.
- Schön, D. A. 1983, *The reflective practitioner : how professionals think in action*, Basic Books, New York.
- Thackara, J., Articles of Association Between Design, Technology and The People Formerly Known As Users, <www.doorsofperception.com>, 2000, (Accessed 11/06/01).
- van Manen, M. 1990, *Researching Lived Experience*, SUNY Press, Albany.
- Vygotsky, L. S. 1965, *Thought and language*, M.I.T. Press, Cambridge, Mass.