Elements of Solution-focused Training Methodology*

by Katalin Maurer-Hankovszky and Peter Szabó

How can you design a training or a curriculum when you agree with Heinz von Foerster's statement that knowledge can really not be transferred at all (von Foerster 1998). What do we as educators have to let go of and what can we still shape and create if "knowledge is generated by an individual, and therefore creating an environment which makes these processes of generation and creation possible is essential" (von Foerster, 1998: 70)? Katalin Hankovsky and Peter Szabó are pursuing this question in their article and meet with interesting theoretical and practical answers.

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Having experienced that knowledge as content cannot be transferred, we have increasingly become fascinated with creating an environment suitable for learning. Fritz B. Simon put it very poignantly: "The form of teaching is the actual content of teaching" (Simon, 1997: 153). The methods of teaching and training described hereafter were developed and refined in our trainings for solution-focused coaches. In training coaches or educators, we particularly experience heightened expectations regarding the consistency and congruence of the "teachers" – in the guise of "walk your talk" or "Demonstrate the basic assumptions and the content of your training in the form of your training and in your teaching style". This often poses a challenge for our own understanding of the role of the teacher. Especially when we use solution focused coaching model advocating that the clients are the experts and coaches should practice the attitude of "not-knowing", we ask ourselves how we can be teachers and practice "not knowing" at the same time?

Solution-focused Interventions in Trainings

Merely doing without inputs is not good enough. We are facing a more demanding task: to find out what we can do instead in order to offer participants helpful room to discover their own actions and their own knowledge which suits them. In the following, we will describe some of the most frequent interventions we use in seminars with a solution-focused mindset: appreciative hypothesizing, the solutions timequake, the question wall, the structure puzzle, and the magical learner's diary.

Appreciative Hypothesizing

or: "Always adress the person in his or her resources first." Insoo Kim Berg

Appreciative Hypothesizing is suitable for the first sessions of trainings or educations and was developed by Wolfgang Eberling and Jürgen Hargens (Eberling and Hargens, 1996: 159) as an alternative to a traditional introduction phase. The focus is on the resources of the participants.

In the beginning of the course, we do not distribute the usual list of participants so that the the participants do not know the names, functions, companies of the people they will meet in the introduction round. From this position of "not-knowing they then take turns in voicing their appreciative hypotheses about the strengths, skills, and resources the other participants could possibly have in the introduction phase.

Thus, the first interaction in the system "coaching-course" is created from a resource oriented viewpoint. One of the participants volunteers to be the first that the others hypothesize about. After listening to the hypotheses of the others, he or she gives a short feedback on which of the mentioned skills he or she would also ascribe to him- or herself and which hypothesis he or she is most happy about.

Before the next turn, the trainer repeats the task and stresses that strengths and favorable attributes is what this exercise is looking for. If participants mention hypotheses which at first glance deviate from the given task, the trainer asks the person contributing the hypothesis in which way the fictitious characteristic could be a strength of the other participant or in which situations this characteristic could prove an advantage.

This way, the focus is on useful resources and on observations and hypotheses oriented at strengths right from the beginning. At the same time, the course culture is purposely grounded in an appreciative attention among the participants. They remember their perceptions of positive interpretations. Deviations from the set rule (for instance statements without a discernible connection to personal strengths) are integrated by questions rather than corrected. The participants become conscious of the fact that every associative hypothesis is acceptable and that it leaves open other interpretations and especially that any association can result in an empowering construction. An interesting side effect of such an introduction phase is that the usual exchange of personal information does not happen. The group is enabled to function without the members knowing anything about the personal data of one another.

The Solutions Timequake

"No problem can be solved from the same level of consciousness that created it." (Albert Einstein)

The solution timequake is an effective method of transferring the power of the miracle question into a training setting and at the same time enabling a whole group to experience it. The participants can experience their state of solution before they have even started the course. The participants receive a personal written invitation to this solution timequake at the start of the course. The agenda for the day reads: "Meeting in the future", and the letter contains an invitation to an "alumni meeting two years after graduation from the course". To explain this invitation you can refer to the movie "Back to the Future" with its time-travels or the book "Timequake" by Kurt Vonnegut with the bump in the space-time continuum. It helps to fix the moment of the timequake precisely, to combine it with a change of place, or to consciously let it take place after a break in which the participants had time for individual reflection.

The alumni meeting takes place in a relaxed mood just as it would in the real situation. Everybody is very consistent in following through with the idea of the leap into the future. The trainer is very happy that everybody was able to make it, success stories, achievements, and things that worked really well are shared in small groups or in the whole group.

The participants share how the course has proven effective in real life, how they developed their own self-understanding, or which of the fears they had in the beginning of the education did not come true. They create surprising and meaningful constructions about the future they desire, and the constructions support the learning process as a motivating vision.

The first part of the course catapults the participants into their own awareness of their wanted future. Instead of a linear approach to the goal of the course, this method creates room for solutions with a nearly playful ease and leaves room for all kinds of miracles.

Question Wall

Or: "Questions are the harbingers of our own answers" (after Johan Wolfgang von Goethe: "Our desires are the harbingers of the skills and abilities that lie within us.")

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tions. Luckily the awareness for the fact that the participants are the experts for the appropriate answer to their own questions has also risen with it.

In this context, a question wall in the training room can be helpful in many ways. The title could be as follows: "These are the questions I will find answers for" or "Questions are the harbingers of our own answers." The wall becomes an important instrument which enables participants to steer their own learning process. The responsibility for goal, paths, and solution stays with them. Finding answers on their own also strengthens participants' self-confidence in the learning process and trust in their ability to learn.

In the beginning phase of a training module, the participants start by focussing their learning attention on a certain topic. They form small groups and formulate individually relevant questions which when answered would have made their participation in the course worthwhile.

If further questions arise in later phases, they can also be recorded carefully on the question wall as valuable harbingers of even more answers.

If you use cards to write down the questions, you can use them in various forms throughout the course:

■ The degree in which an answer has been found can be scaled individually:
– Where am I on an answer scale at the moment?
– What has already become clear?
– How will I know that I have come one step higher on the answer scale?
■ The ability to construct solutions can also be triggered by questions like:
– If what there was an answer hidden in what I experienced during the last two hours of the training, how could I use it to answer my question?
■ At the end of a training, answers to participants' questions have developed and they can exchange them in small groups – experience shows that by this time 80 percent of the questions have been answered.

■ The participants can take unanswered question cards home as a reminder for the next training or leave them with the trainer so that they can be surprised by their own answers at the beginning of the next training module.

Of course, not all questions are pinned to the question wall – only so-called "acorn-questions". The trainer can introduce the differentiation between water glass questions and acorn questions at the first suitable moment. Water glass and acorn are symbols for different paradigms in the understanding of teaching. Sometimes a simple information, which is available and prepackaged and can be poured out like water from a jug into a glass, is sufficient. And sometimes it is more like an acorn lying under an oak tree, in which everything needed for becoming a huge and impressive oak tree is already preformed and available: Nothing needs to be added, only the space and framework have to be made available so that it can develop on its own.

Sorting and Structure-Puzzle

Or: "Real understanding is not possible; there are only useful and less useful misunderstandings." (Steve de Shazer)

What we as educators deem to be the content of the course and what the individual participants make of it are at least two different things. Both didactic forms, sorting and structure-puzzle help us stop wanting to prevent this difference and, on the contrary, enable us to utilize it in order to generate individually relevant learning.

On the first day, all participants receive their personal set of little cards with the key terms for the whole course. The sorting task consists of placing the cards on three different stacks depending on whether the participant knows the term (1), can associate something with the term (2), or whether he or she does not know anything about the term (3). In this

first use of the cards, the task helps the participants gain an overview of possible contents of the course.

The meaning of the key terms is not explained explicitly. However, the cards are taken out regularly and resorted individually. This way, every participant can observe his or her progress in getting to know the basic terms in a process of self-empowered learning. They measure themselves against their own understanding and their own interpretations of the basic terms. The meaning the trainer associates with the terms on the cards is simply one possibility of interpretation among others.
It is only relevant whether the interpretation of the participant is useful and helpful for his or her own momentary process of learning; the trainer does not necessarily know a "correcter" interpretation.

During the course, the participants are also use the cards as a structure-puzzle. Each participant lays out the cards with the key terms in a structure that makes sense to him or her and that represents his or her own model of solution-focused coaching placing together what he or she thinks belongs together. He or she only uses those terms for his or her own model that he or she thinks are relevant, and her or she can also supplement his or her own relevant key terms on empty cards. This helps the participant construct his or her own helpful reality concerning the content of the course. At the end of the exercise, the participants look at the various models that have been created, and it becomes clear that several very different structures are possible. This makes room for intensive exchange on possible interpretations of the "real" content of the course.
What is "right" or "wrong" about the manifold misunderstandings becomes increasingly obsolete. What becomes relevant is whether the misunderstandings are helpful and how they can be made useful for the participants individual context.

Luckily the awareness for the fact that the participants are the experts for the appropriate answer to their own questions has also risen with it.

In later phases of the course, the participants can check their constructions and interpretations of different connections and contexts for their usefulness by using their own model. They learn to keep what works and reconstruct what doesn't.

Magical Learner's Diary

Or: "The way we individuals construct and describe our reality influences the future contacts of everybody involved in the system." (Walter and Peller, 1996: 48)

The participants receive a small empty pocket-book with the title "Diary of How I am Taking Good Care of Myself: Goals, Miracles, Resources and Exceptions" (cf. Eberling and Hargens, 1996:41)

When handing out the pocket-book, the trainer tells a mysterious story:

These pocket books have been specially developed in a very expensive process and therefore possess a mysterious quality: Should the owner attempt to enter problems, deficits, or complaints, the writing will peel off the pages and will not stick. This playful instruction underlines the suggested solution-focused and

resource-oriented perspective for keeping the diary.

The course regularly offers "diary" times reserved for the reflection of individual learning processes.

How the prospective solution-focused coach observes and describes him- or herself in his or her actions as a solution-focused coach naturally changes his or her actions in the coaching interaction and also the effects of his or her actions. From a systemic and solution-focused perspective, it therefore makes sense to reflect in a positive and caring fashion.

Attention! The Attitude

The forms of the interventions described above are naturally only some of the possible features of a solution-focused course or education. The systemic, constructivist attitude we take when we accompany a group using these interventions is what is essential. Hereby, the following basic reflections are important for us:

Learning as Reflected Action

Learning best manifests itself in action. This means that the classic seminar setting is ill-suited for creating learning. We

believe that real work in real situations offers more congruent opportunities for development. Under this assumption, most of the time in a course should be used for action. The participants can experience (in our case) coaching action (in the roles of coach, client, and observer).

If the participants work with their own practical examples during the seminar, they can use the large number of reflection times to review the relevance of what they are doing in their daily work lives.

Learning as a Re-discovery of what we Already Know

Seen from a constructivist perspective, we already need to have an inner representation of something before we can perceive or integrate it. Thus, learning is a process of rediscovery which necessarily starts inside. As a consequence, we have to assume that the individual personal style (to coach, for instance) is already fully existant. If the learning setting is helpful, the pre-existing inner representation is merely rediscovered. Such an assumption draws the attention to the learners themselves and to the already functioning harbingers of their abilities.

It becomes highly likely that the participants can integrate what they learn in the process into their personality and into their personal situation. This assumption also helps the learners to keep examining the outside input and check it for its usefulness and suitability for their own context.

Learning Cannot be Avoided

Every individual is on his or her own personal path of development independent of any kind of organized, target-oriented situation. Since our belief in the effectiveness of adult education is questioned by the observations that "participants don't learn what was taught – something was learned that was not taught – something was learned even though nothing was taught" (Schäfter, 1999:5) we rather start by listening curiously to what the participants think they have learned. We put our trust both in the potential of the individual and his or her ability to make his or her chosen path (or the part of the path we accompany) meaningful.

To End with an Anecdote

Recently, we had to leave out a planned module of 1,5 hours in the first part of the whole coaching course for an urgent reason. We had planned to give the participants a possibility to actively look at goal development questions in more detail. It was difficult for us to leave out this part for various reasons: For one we are very proud of our own creative method (it is called "The Expert's Cocktail-Party"), and then this method had often proven very helpful with former classes at exactly this stage of the course.

More beggars yielding to necessity than conscious choosers at this point, we started the participants on the next coaching conversations. Our only vague hope was that this change in program was probably good for something.

But miracle of miracles – it actually was good for something. All participants came back from their conversations with gleaming happy faces and visibly content. They reported that the conversations were very simple and filled with a playful ease. They had been surprisingly useful for the clients in the exercise as well as the coaches – during the last 5 years, we had never experienced this extent of success stories in the first part of the education – and all of this even though the participants were missing the important module. In the break following the coaching conversations a participant asked us whether he could photocopy one of the posters saying:

" *to go beyond the delusion that everything is feasible – towards an attitude in which we don't unnecessarily stand in the way of miracles*" *(Stahl, 2001)* ◼

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