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TLIC PAPER

The Design of Emotionally Resonant Learning Experiences: Prospect-Refuge, Framing, and Friction

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ABSTRACT

As learning professionals, we often neglect the emotional aspects of the learning process, especially for adults and even more particularly in the context of corporate learning and performance. Anxiety, uncertainty, and vulnerability can become stumbling blocks as learners work through the transition from who they are to who they are in the process of becoming. The principles of prospect-refuge, framing, and friction – applied in fields such as architecture, urban design, and visual art – can provide powerful insight into the design of meaningful, supportive, and emotionally resonant learning experiences.

KEYWORDS

prospect-refuge, framing, friction, design principles, learning design, vulnerability

1 THE HEART OF LEARNING

The emotional aspect of learning is often missing from our approach to designing experiences, especially for adults. And when I say better, I especially mean warmer, fuller, and more resonant, because the emotions associated with learning – what we sense and experience as we learn – are not always considered as deeply and richly as they should be, because we don't make a deliberate effort to design for them.

I'm speaking as both designer and consumer of adult learning programs. Particularly in a corporate context, learning is typically understood as the acquisition and demonstration of facts, concepts, processes, procedures, and principles for the purpose of improving performance on the job. Performance is most commonly measured in clear quantitative terms: test scores, targets, results. These measurements allow us to evaluate whether a learner has met expectations. They also provide the yardstick by which we can compare the achievements of one learner to another.

Obviously, being able to perform core responsibilities and tasks is a desired outcome of a learning experience. But what are some of the barriers that can get in the way? What happens when learners lack motivation, or confidence, or even the willingness to learn? If we don't explicitly target these emotional states as goals – if

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we ignore them – we are leaving them to chance, for learners to work through on their own.

What lies at the heart of learning? It's a process of change, of moving from who we are to who we are in the process of becoming. We all know how it can feel to struggle through that transformation: feeling uncertain, anxious, vulnerable in the face of the unknown. What should we be doing as learning professionals to anticipate needs and support learners during this process?

2 PRINCIPLES OF DESIGN

How often do you pay attention to how your physical surroundings make you feel? Take a moment to consider what you see, hear, even smell. Do you feel safe, cozy, secure at this moment? Are you intrigued, or maybe challenged or frustrated? What's calling loudest for your attention? And which of your senses are most affected? Many of us (me included) rely heavily on input through sight but consider also what you may be hearing. Sound contributes a lot to our experience of the world around us. And don't forget to layer in smell, touch, and taste too. Even if we are not conscious of it, these sensations are affecting how we feel as we live, work, and play in different settings throughout the day and night.

Sometimes, these impressions are a response to the natural environment (or at least as 'natural' as an environment may be, given the pervasive impact of people over time in virtually every space on the planet). You may look dreamily through a gap in the tree branches overhead or lose yourself to the sound of water rushing over stones in the moments before you reach a creek.

At other times, there is someone – an architect, designer, urban planner, artist – who has made a deliberate attempt to elicit particular feelings in you. The most competent and compelling of these professionals have learned, through some mix of formal education, self-study, and reflection, how to create physical spaces and objects that influence our feelings, thoughts, and behaviours in specific and targeted ways. Experts in design – including architecture, landscape design, and urban art – have established general principles that help explain how these physical spaces and objects affect us, especially on an emotional level.

From these principles I have selected three that are particularly relevant for creating emotionally resonant (though conceptual) learning spaces: *prospect-refuge*, *framing*, and *friction*. You can see these principles at work in many different contexts once you know what to look for. They are versatile and powerful, and they can be applied beyond strictly physical environments to express how and why a wide range of experiences may influence us in the ways they do. Let's take a high-level look at what they are and how we might use them to gain greater insight into the emotional aspects of learning.

3 PROSPECT-REFUGE

Prospect-refuge is one of the fundamental principles for explaining how spaces, both natural and built, affect us on an emotional level. It reflects the dynamic tension between our desires for vista and sanctuary. There are times when we want a broad view out into the world, to explore, discover, and take risks. At other times, we crave safety and comfort, protection from both known and unknown challenges and threats.

We especially appreciate the ability to move from one state to the other in response to our needs, transitioning from prospect to refuge and back again, depending on how we feel and what we desire in the moment. It's primeval: leave the cave to hunt, gather, and explore, and return for shelter from the elements and predators.

Let's start with prospect. Scramble up a steep hill and what do you see? What prompted you to climb up there in the first place? What's accessible to you now, that wasn't before?

In the original classification proposed by British geographer Jay Appleton in *The Experience of Landscape* [1], published in 1975, prospects range from panoramas to vistas to peepholes. If we take a metaphoric rather than literal view, we can also think about prospect in terms of novel perspectives, insights, and opportunities.

What are some of the feelings associated with prospect? Imagine you're standing at the top of that steep hill. It can be thrilling to be up high in a wide-open space, with nothing between you and the sky. Maybe you feel exhilarated, alert, motivated, inspired. You have sight into all sorts of things you couldn't see from the ground.

And then, depending on the circumstances, you may begin to feel afraid, or exposed, or vulnerable. In these moments, what you crave is refuge, enclosure, and retreat – places where you can feel secure. For example, Geoff Manaugh has written about vast, virtually inaccessible underground spaces, beautifully documented and rarely explored. In Chapter 2 of *The BLDGBLOG Book* [2], "The Underground," he shares stories and photographs of tunnels, sewers, mines, bunkers, and even extravagant below-ground extensions of homes in London.

And if we consider conceptual rather than physical experiences of refuge? This might include the opportunity for quiet introspection, for example, or a conversation with a trusted colleague or advisor.

What are our general feelings associated with refuge? As in the case of prospect, we will experience particular emotions when we find ourselves in refuge that meets our needs. Calmness, safety, comfort. And then over time, as circumstances continue to evolve, these feelings of security can verge into boredom and frustration. Where will that push us? Right back to prospect.

This complementary balance of prospect and refuge suggests we will feel best when we are able to move freely among spaces in which we can see and not be seen; we want the flexibility to choose when and how to keep an eye on our prey, while staying out of reach of predators.

You can see the principle of prospect-refuge at work in many different contexts once you know what to look for. It is versatile and powerful, and it can be applied beyond physical environments to express how and why a range of experiences may influence us in the ways they do.

4 FRAMING

Next, let's take a brief look at framing. In *Universal Principles of Design* [3], William Lidwell, Kritina Holden, and Jill Butler define framing as "a technique that influences decision making and judgment by manipulating the way information is presented."

We are familiar with this phenomenon in typical marketing and advertising, but here's a different example of framing. In the first episode of the 1972 BBC series *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger shows us *The Road to Calvary*, painted by Pieter Bruegel the Elder about 450 years ago. The image is highly detailed, filled with small figures watching as Christ carries the cross to the place where he will be crucified. As Berger explains, when you look at the painting as a whole, it is about grief, torture, and the callousness of the crowd. The overall theme, despite the subject, is decidedly secular.

But it is difficult to make out all the details when we look at the painting as a whole, so we scan over it, focusing our attention on one bit at a time. And in doing so, "the comprehensive effect of the painting can be changed. For example, it is possible to isolate and show the details in a way that makes the painting look like a fairly straightforward devotional picture" [4]. Many parts of the painting communicate religious messages, in contradiction to the impact of the piece overall. Somehow, the religious bits add up to a secular whole.

The fact that we control – we manipulate – information, especially when trying to simplify a concept or narrow attention on particular aspects of a thing, is critical to acknowledge in the design of learning experiences, and effectively the design of any experience. Try not to get caught up in historical or social resonances when you consider the word "manipulate." It literally refers to the fact of handling or influencing something, and it's unavoidable. When choosing to highlight one perspective, we necessarily obscure others.

Think about looking out a window. In buildings which were designed deliberately (as opposed to cookie-cutter buildings following a standardized plan not necessarily taking the local context into account), someone put intentional thought into where that window would be and why. The view it affords will encourage you to pay attention to certain things and not others. There may be aspects of the environment outside the control of the designer, especially those that may change over time – such as the construction or renovation of surrounding buildings, changing weather, even tree branches grown larger or trimmed – but under most circumstances, we can see how a certain view (i.e., access to particular pieces of information) is being promoted over others.

When designing learning experiences, we are always making choices about what to show, and therefore what to hide, whether we do so consciously or not. We should be making these decisions deliberately, but we often aren't. Although it can be challenging to acknowledge one's own blinders, that doesn't excuse us from the effort of trying.

As learning professionals, we hunt for relevant content and then piece it together – with their applications – in meaningful ways. But we may not recognize that where and how well we are able to focus the learners' attention will result in a representation that necessarily affects how they feel and think about the content and themselves, influencing their work and often their perceptions of themselves as well.

5 FRICTION

Finally, let's consider the third principle of design, friction. A common concept in many fields of design, I read something lovely about friction in *Urban Code* [5], written by Anne Mikoleit and Moritz Pürckhauer:

> In these moments of complete lack of orientation, the friction between old and new creates an extraordinary potential for creativity, culminating in a plurality of processes and activities, which thus initiate the change to a new beginning.

From its inception, the street art movement was an instrument for challenging conventions, prodding passersby, questioning social and political mores, and claiming the only spaces available to artists working outside the boundaries of traditional art.

Of course, some pieces are going to be more accessible than others. Works by Banksy are edgy and challenging, but fairly straightforward in theme. His pieces now sell for hundreds of thousands of British pounds (without any interest or effort on the part of the artist himself).

A little further off the path are artists like keysstroke. He hangs "smilylids" (smily faces painted on the lids of containers that he finds) promoting Dot TK, a New Zealand-based service offering free domain registration (which means domain names, and therefore websites, are not restricted to those who can afford them), just as he creates and places his artwork made from discarded materials in public (free) spaces.

Street art is the poster child of friction. From master muralist Diego Rivera to New York artists Stik and DAIN, street art mocks, pokes, provokes, and calls out disparity and contradiction. The goal is to confront our (often unquestioned) beliefs with an alternative vision – projected on a wall, sidewalk, or door accessible to anyone who may walk by – because conflict can be a powerful impetus for change.

Here's a more particular way of understanding experiences of friction relevant to learning designers: considering the learners' perspectives of who one *is*, who one *wants* to be, and who one believes one *should* be. Learning is a stretch from who you are in this moment into who you will become, whether that future self reflects an aspirational ideal or an obligation. The process will be more or less painful depending on the extent to which these various frames conflict.

In "Self-Discrepancy: A Theory Relating Self and Affect" [6], E. Tory Higgins writes about the emotions we may experience as a result of the gulfs that distance the "actual," "ideal," and "ought" selves from each other. He also looked at the effect of source; in other words, the goals we set can either come from ourselves or from significant others (partner, parent, close friend, etc.). So, each of us will tend to be motivated to achieve the expectations of one or more of these competing self-guides: actual/own, actual/other, ideal/own, ideal/other, ought/own, and ought/other.

Friction among these various selves in a learning context can be thrilling and motivating at times, and it can also push learners into discomfort, even sadness or anxiety. We can do a better job at supporting learners as they experience these conflicts, helping them to identify, accept, and respond to their feelings, thoughts, and actions, as they reflect on who they currently are, hope to be, and feel they should be.

All three of these principles – prospect-refuge, framing, and friction – can be useful frames for understanding what happens when we learn, when our beliefs, values, knowledge, and skills evolve from one state to another. I think we tend to underestimate the faith, fortitude, and preparation needed to do that well; the more discernment and awareness we can bring to the design of learning experiences, the better.

Let's focus on the first principle, prospect-refuge, and explore what it might look like in the context of learning design.

6 FOCUS ON DESIGNING FOR PROSPECT-REFUGE

Let's suppose I've been engaged to create a facilitator-led workshop for learners to develop their coaching skills. I would start by defining the learning objectives. From a cognitive perspective, objectives might include "Name the steps of the coaching model" and "Apply the steps of the model to a typical workplace situation." I might also identify affective objectives, such as "Appreciate the value of coaching

for professional development" and "Encourage peers to invest time and effort in coaching others."

What do these objectives mean from the perspective of the learners? Just as an architect will consider the needs and preferences of the people who will be moving into a home she's designing, I should try to discover as much as I can about the interests, expectations, and aspirations of the audience, so I can create the most appropriate and relevant space for learning.

An architect must also work within the boundaries of regional zoning laws and regulations, just as we must respect requirements set by an employer, school board, or professional association, as well as project limitations, which can include budget, time, and technology constraints. But just as important are the specific needs of the people who will be participating in the learning experience we are creating.

Depending on the situation, I may have some insight into learners based on previous experience, or I may have had the chance to conduct a survey or series of interviews. The more complete the information I have and can apply to the design, the more likely the program will address learner needs.

If I'm developing the coaching workshop as a consultant engaged by a particular company, at a minimum I would be able to find out some general characteristics about learners through conversations with the client, who most likely works in a department such as Human Resources or Learning & Development.

But suppose I'm creating this coaching workshop for a general audience. In this case, I'm likely to attract learners from a broad range of disciplines and backgrounds. Setting expectations upfront would become especially important. I would also want to plan how I might be able to group learners based on key characteristics they have in common.

For example, in a corporate context, I would certainly want to consider years of experience as a manager as well as previous training in coaching skills. It would be more difficult to build and deliver a good workshop if the participants vary widely in these two respects. On the other hand, I might not be as concerned with the industry in which they work or their particular job role or title.

For our purposes, let's make the following assumptions:

- As the designer, I am certified by a global organization dedicated to coaching skills, so I will use their coaching model and methodology.
- Learners must have at least five years of experience as a manager (i.e., have had at least one employee reporting to them during that time).
- The workshop will focus on the fundamentals, so I won't assume prior formal training in coaching skills.

I'm going to add one other element for consideration. All participants will need to complete a 360° assessment before attending the workshop. That means not only have they evaluated themselves on their coaching skills, but they have also been rated by their managers, peers, direct reports, and even external colleagues and customers. I won't have access to individual results but will get an aggregate report that displays general trends for the group a few weeks before the training.

The next step would be to create a design document – a plan or blueprint of the learning experience – which lays out the overall flow: content, activities, and timing needed for learners to be able to achieve the learning objectives.

So far, I've been following a traditional approach to designing a workshop. But here's where I'll do something a little different. Let's consider how I might apply the concept of prospect-refuge to create a better experience, a better space for learning.

Learning typically focuses on prospect. At the beginning of a workshop, for example, we set the stage by walking participants up to the top of the steep hill and pointing out the different things we expect them to be able to do once they are back on the job. Sometimes these goals are relatively simple, clear, and close to view; other times, they are further out on the horizon, a little hazy. The extent to which these goals require each participant to stretch will vary, depending on their individual levels of knowledge, experience, and confidence. But ultimately, as learning designers we devote our energy to setting the destination and then building efficient pathways to lead participants there.

I wonder sometimes if it's the focus on setting cognitive objectives that has led us to prioritize prospect in our learning designs, at the expense of offering refuge in counterbalance. Acquiring new concepts and skills at the cognitive level is understood as fulfilling a rational and practical requirement; it's a question of filling the car with gas. We don't worry about how the car may feel about it.

But when you take emotions into account, a learner's desire for refuge becomes more evident. How might motivation, confidence, and willingness be affected during the process of learning and change? Every one of us has felt insecure or vulnerable at some point while participating in a class, either at school or at work. Depending on previous experiences of success and failure in learning, students will respond differently when they encounter a challenge. Some will be stimulated to push even harder, while others will benefit from an opportunity to stop, reflect, and regroup before jumping back in. And responses can vary for individual learners over the course of each experience.

I don't believe this is an immutable characteristic of an individual. The more successes a person experiences (probably within a specific context), the more likely she will persevere as the challenge grows. But every person can reach the point where the degree and quality of stretch required to achieve goals becomes great enough that she would welcome even a brief moment of respite for reflection before forging ahead.

It's clear what constitutes prospect in the context of our workshop on coaching skills; it is the expectations we set for performance, represented by the learning objectives. It's the complementary aspect – refuge – which I believe is often neglected by learning professionals. Let's continue with the example of the coaching skills workshop, to see what it might look like to design deliberately for refuge.

Assume I've received the 360° assessment aggregate report for the group of participants registered for the workshop. I can see that while coaching has been rated relatively poorly across the board by managers, reports, and others, the learners tended to rate themselves at least average in coaching. In other words, our learners, all of whom have at least five years of experience managing employees, are not perceived to be as good at coaching as they believe they are.

I know these managers have received their assessment results and have seen how they were rated on their coaching ability by others. Those who were rated poorly know they were rated poorly. In fact, in my own professional experience there have been many times when I knew that specific individuals participating in a training session were not good coaches, based on reports from their team members. And yet I have heard these same managers state, with considerable emphasis, "I don't need this training. I've been managing and coaching people for years. What a waste of my time."

This is an example of a well-studied phenomenon known as the Dunning-Kroger effect. It's a survival mechanism. Even when faced with objective and well-intended evidence to the contrary, we can easily delude ourselves into believing we are better

at doing something than we actually are. In fact, it tends to be the less competent employees who are more likely to rate themselves as the strongest performers on the job, particularly in North America.

There are two things that must happen before a person is able to enact meaningful change. She has to be *aware* of the need for change, and then commit to the need to change. But imagine how it would feel as a seasoned manager with as many as 10 or more years of experience in the role to acknowledge, even to herself, that she is not a good coach. Uncomfortable? Embarrassing? Threatening?

A key element of survival is the ability to take refuge, to protect ourselves in the moment. This is not about avoidance; it's about taking time out when facing a challenging situation and having the opportunity to reflect on what it might mean to address it. How can we offer refuge to a learner who would benefit from a secure space to acknowledge the need to change, even if it's just to herself? How can we design a workshop that provides this opportunity for learners when they need it?

Let's consider what refuge might look like in the context of the workshop on coaching skills. There are many possibilities. For example, we could offer learners a few minutes at the beginning of the workshop for personal reflection – not on their own ability or confidence in coaching, but on a time when they witnessed someone, someone they admire, making an important change in his or her life. It could be a public figure or someone they know personally. They could write down what they believe the person may have been feeling throughout the process, from acknowledging the need to change, to gaining new knowledge, skills, and behaviours, to letting go of old thoughts and habits. We could reinforce there are no right or wrong answers; what matters most is reflecting on what another person might experience during a time of change. We could invite volunteers to share what they wrote if they wanted, but not require it.

What makes this activity an example of refuge? We are providing an opportunity for learners to consider what may be involved in change, but from the perspective of another person. Often that's easier than reflecting on one's own abilities and emotions. Who hasn't been astonished by their ability to see clearly what another person can't see in himself, while still being blind to their own foibles?

Once you have identified an opportunity for refuge, the other consideration is how to make it available to learners when *they* feel they need it. It can be difficult to balance group and individual needs during a workshop. There is usually pressure to shepherd everyone toward common group goals at the same pace and in the same way, for the twin sakes of efficiency and consistency. How many times have you participated in a workshop in which the facilitator continued to surge ahead without acknowledging, or perhaps even realizing, you or other participants were sinking?

If we continue with the example of personal reflection as an opportunity for refuge, we could encourage learners to take time throughout the workshop to look back on their initial notes, at their discretion, whenever they wanted to revisit or update their insights into experiences of change. Again, we could invite them to share, or not.

What else could we do to offer refuge to learners during the workshop? Some strategies are more easily adapted to learners' own timing than others. The facilitator could share a personal story of struggling through a difficult experience of change, then invite volunteers to share their stories over the course of the workshop. This can help create an environment in which it is safe to share past challenges, including failures.

Sometimes it could be as simple as letting learners know they can take time out for themselves when they feel they need it. No need to raise their hands for permission. Or maybe, let's consider adding an activity for learners to complete

during the workshop for which they need to prepare ahead of time. This can be risky, as "pre-work" may be skipped by some, but in this case, participants should see a visible and practical tie into the workshop, which provides some incentive for getting it done.

Imagine that in advance of the workshop, we ask two things of the learners:

1. Review the results of your 360° assessment, including ratings as well as any comments provided by the raters.
2. Ask someone whose opinion you value – someone who knows you well and you trust to be honest and direct – to be available at __ o'clock (during the coaching workshop) for a 10-minute call to talk with you about your abilities as a coach.

Who are the people from whom we feel safe to receive feedback, even if it may be critical? Usually, it is trusted colleagues, friends, and family members. If a learner is unable to find a person to play this role, the facilitator could step in and serve as trusted advisor, though probably more as sounding board than source of feedback.

So, after the workshop introduction, during which the facilitator welcomes the learners and provides an overview of the objectives and agenda, they then take a few moments to record their answers to the following questions:

- What is my greatest strength as a coach? Why? What is a specific example of a time when I did this well?
- What is my greatest opportunity for development as a coach? Why? What is a specific example of a time when there was a need for me to improve in this area?

The facilitator then asks learners to call the people they previously arranged to contact so they can discuss and record their answers to these parallel questions:

- What do you think is my greatest strength as a coach? Why? Can you share a specific example of a time when I did this well?
- What do you think is my greatest opportunity for development as a coach? Why? Can you share a specific example of a time when there was a need for me to improve in this area?

The intent is for learners to be able to compare their own sense of who they are as coaches with how they are perceived by others. The existing relationship of trust creates an opportunity of refuge, a space for learners to receive feedback that may or may not be difficult to hear, depending on the individual situations.

One drawback is that this particular activity isn't designed to be completed in the moment when an individual learner may benefit from it most (as it occurs at a set time in the workshop agenda). But at least learners can subsequently refer back to the responses they recorded for both sets of questions at any time during the workshop, as needed, taking time to step back and consider what they can do with what they have heard.

7 SUMMARY

We just walked through an example of how a learning professional might apply the concept of prospect-refuge to the design of a coaching workshop. We could do the same with respect to framing and friction. For example, is a 'good coach' primarily someone with an understanding of the coaching process, someone

who values coaching, or someone who demonstrates powerful – non-verbal, in particular – coaching behaviours (framing)? What activities might support learners as they begin to recognize, accept, and work to address significant gaps in their current performance as coaches (friction)?

Furthermore, we can consider how these three principles can work in concert. We set objectives (prospect) and then determine the area of focus (framing). Friction between current and future selves then sparks development and change but can lead learners to feel sad or anxious at times. In these moments, they need opportunities for refuge, safe spaces to take stock of what they're feeling and thinking, to experiment with perceptions of who they are, want to be, and should be. Then they can step out of refuge and back into prospect with a more refined sense of where they are heading.

You may be familiar with the story of how August Kekulé, late 19th century German chemist, discovered the ring structure of benzene through a daydream of a snake biting its own tail. The circle formed by the snake was interpreted by Kekulé as insight into the structural configuration of the chemical compound. In its way, the principles I've borrowed from fields like architecture, urban design, and visual art to gain a deeper understanding and respect for the emotional experience of learning – from prospect-refuge through framing and friction back to prospect-refuge – follows the skeleton of the snake (or *ouroboros*), and is working in the same direction as Kekulé, applying concepts from physical to conceptual space.

Learning is not a clean rational process. It is goal-driven, but it is also chaotic, messy, and confusing. Meaningful change requires that learners make themselves vulnerable, as they transition from a known state to an unknown one. They need confidence, determination, and motivation to approach that transition. To create the most supportive spaces for learning, we need to design them with prospect-refuge, framing, and friction in mind, to help guide learners through the process of clearly seeing and elaborating on their actual, ideal, and ought selves.

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