

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN THE 21ST CENTURY: PERSONAL REFLECTIONS AND INSIGHTS FROM BURNING MAN

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ABSTRACT

ABSEL scholars have been illuminating the path to effective experiential learning for over 40 years. This journey of intellectual and theoretical exploration, paired with a sound foundation focusing on effective application, continues into the 21st century. However, social and technological changes, coupled with cultural changes and the characteristics of Millennial Generation students, makes this 21st century task more challenging than ever. One possible source of insight relevant to this challenge comes from the 28 year-old socially innovative and culturally revolutionary Burning Man Project. Burning Man has become a unique cultural institution and a world-wide movement. It has spawned a set of guidelines called the 10 Principles of Burning Man, as well as generating numerous unique behavioral and social practices. This paper will begin with a history of whole-person experiential learning, followed by an explanation and analysis of several of the somewhat institutionalized aspects of Burning Man. The paper concludes with an integration of whole-person experiential learning and Burning Man practices with an eye towards implications relevant to 21st century education and the ABSEL mission therein.

DISCLAIMER: The reader should note that the content of this paper is sourced in the individual opinions and experiences of the author. The descriptions and frameworks discussed herein are the sole product of the author's insights and/or shortcomings, and are not to be interpreted as a position of the Burning Man Project or as a reflection of the educational and training programs conducted under the auspices and control of the Burning Man Project.

INTRODUCTION

As ABSEL continues its mission into the 21st century, there are reasons to broaden the scope and scale of the conceptual models that guide our thinking as to the effectiveness of our educational and training efforts. One reason is that the conceptual models of the past, while effective in their time and place, may have lost their relevance. As an example, just look at the way computer technology has affected both the means of execution and

the content of simulations. The author has had numerous conversations over the years with ABSEL scholars and simulation-based educators as to the scope and scale of the changes wrought by technological changes in computers.

On the other hand, on the experiential learning side of the ABSEL equation we may have relied too long on traditional conceptual schemes such as, for example, Lewin's (1951) individual change model of unfreezing, changing and freezing/refreezing. The author, for example, has come to believe more in the explanatory powers of the Turner (1986) model of change focusing on the concept of liminality. We could do well to explore the additional insights afforded by the liminality mechanisms of separation, existing in a liminal zone and integration. Change design programs can then be seen as intentional liminality, while participant change, especially transformative change, exists as reflexive liminality. To the point of this paper, and to illustrate innovation potentialities and to look at future directions in educational practices, the example put forth here focuses on the implications of the 10 Principles and culturally based practices of the Burning Man community.

However, before that topic is undertaken, an important factor to consider is also the way our student population has changed. The members of our modern organizations and the students in the classrooms and training programs of today are a product of the 21st century in general and of the Millennial Generation in particular. Twenge and Campbell (2008) list the following as observed characteristics of Millennials as opposed to previous generations: 1) higher self-esteem, 2) narcissism, 3) anxiety, 4) depression, 5) lower need for social approval, 6) more external locus of control orientation, and, 7) more agentic traits such as assertiveness, especially for women.

The topic of narcissism has been addressed by ABSEL scholars (Markulis, Murff & Strang, 2011; Hoover, 2011). The dynamics of narcissism come into play when confronting the challenges of education and training processes in the 21st century. Narcissism's hunger for grandiosity can only be fed from external sources. Therefore, the narcissist must rely on social sources for information supportive of inflated self-importance. However, at the same time, narcissists suffer from a lack of empathy and a generalized lack of a capacity to see things as others see them. The combination of these two factors yields a set of dynamics wherein narcissists have a harder time hearing feedback from others while they

simultaneously need the feedback that confirms their grandiosity. The conclusion on this point is that while all people tend to engage in processes of selective screening and filtering, narcissists are hyper-functional in this regard. Therefore, narcissists are particularly challenged when it comes to both generating and utilizing information directed towards learning and individual change. As such, narcissists, as students, offer a uniquely viral form of resistance to simulation and experiential learning processes as they function to both minimize and distort valid information to serve their own purposes (Hoover, 2011).

Of course, all humans are subject to selective screening of data and of potential filtering of information. In particular, the human tendency is to filter out that which is disconfirming to current point of view and/or disconfirming to their self-image. This is the basic rationale for all forms of cognitive dissonance reduction (Festinger, 1957). The importance of getting educationally relevant information in place is a challenge that all instructors face. This paper suggests that the templates for human interaction as posed by Burning Man offer a set of possible solutions to this dilemma, especially if the educational and training processes are conducted utilizing whole person learning.

THE EVOLUTION OF THE WHOLE PERSON LEARNING MODEL

The concept of whole person learning was introduced in the first ABSEL proceedings (Hoover, 1974). This model was refined by examining cognitive-experiential interactive factors (Hoover & Whitehead, 1976). The model achieved its final form (Hoover, 2007) with the addition of a spiritual dimension of analysis:

Note: the whole person model encompasses dimensions 1), 2), 3), and 4).

- 1) Intellectual Actualization has to occur to the extent that a cognitive framework is established, allowing for the "what", "where", "when" and "how" of successful endeavor.
- 2) Emotional Actualization has to occur to the extent that emotional involvement is established to the point that the groundwork is laid for commitment and internalization.
- 3) Behavioral Actualization has to occur to the extent that necessary skills are understood, believed in and behaviorally learned to the point that successful, goal focused performance can be manifested at will.
- 4) The global and encompassing aspect of whole person actualization is Spiritual Actualization. Spiritual Actualization occurs when basic life perspectives/values and meta-philosophies are altered. Such an occurrence is often described as transcendent learning, transformative learning or individual change. Spiritual Actualization learning experiences have traditionally

been rare in the context of an organizational change management program or in educational settings. However, they are frequent and ubiquitous at Burning Man.

The most current (and perhaps final) version of the whole person learning definition can be found in Hoover, Giambatista, Sorenson & Bommer, (2010):

Whole person learning exists when a personally responsible participant, exposed to both direct and vicarious modes of participation, cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally processes knowledge, skills and/or attitudes in a high intensity learning situation characterized by a high level of active involvement.

This definition adds "direct and vicarious modes of participation" and "high intensity learning" to the original 1974 definition. These concepts were added to the model, incidentally, as a result of the author's transformative learning experiences at Burning Man. This definition also introduces the prescriptive personally responsible role of the adult learning individual – one of autonomy and self-direction. Autonomy and self-direction are capacities more fitting for adult learning processes (Brookefield, 1990; Knowles, 1973; and Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 1998) and andragogy in learning system design as opposed to pedagogy (Forrest & Peterson, 2006).

It is useful to examine whole person learning from the perspective of the educator and the learning system designer. As such, the definition below (Hoover, 1974) outlines a "how to" perspective. As an educational approach, whole person experiential learning may be viewed as follows:

Whole person...experiential learning may be viewed as a methodology of education whereby structure and individual or group experiences are contrived to develop learning and perceptual capacities, to develop and reinforce cognitions, to impact on emotions and attitudes, and, importantly, to function in developing capacities to behave consistently with the insights of these processes and experiences.

One of the author's insights, viewing transformative learning experiences on the playa at Burning Man, is that they often involved a combination of direct learning experiences combined with a collection of vicarious learning experiences (Hoover & Giambatista, 2009). Therefore, to round out the whole person learning model, the concept of vicarious observational learning was added to the whole person learning repertoire (Hoover, Giambatista & Belkin, 2012a).

We introduce the term vicarious observational learning (VOL) because not all vicarious experiences involve direct observation (e.g., experiencing vicarious pleasure in gossip about others) and not all observation is vicarious (e.g., a psychologist observing a patient). Observation was described by Bandura (1977) and Kolb (1984) as a more generalized learning phenomenon, while Merriam-Webster.com defines vicarious as “experienced or realized through imaginative or sympathetic participation in the experience of another”, closely resembling the particular learning experiences we created and assessed in these studies. Since our particular approach to vicarious learning includes observational learning and management education scholars are generally familiar with this term, we therefore coin the term “vicarious observational learning.”

The point of the whole person learning framework is that impactful transformational learning, the kind of learning that produces long-term individual change, is not sourced in just one isolated aspect of the person. While most educational processes have historically focused on cognitive processes and intellectual change, the whole person approach recognizes that lasting change involves multiple learning dimensions. In addition, learning frameworks can be altered to enhance the potential for insightful levels of learning (Hoover, Mitchell & Wu, 2012b).

There has to be Intellectual Actualization to the point that a cognitive mapping framework is established (Hoover, 2008b) --- for example, the identity of “Burner”. There has to be Emotional Actualization to the point that “We make the world real through actions that open the heart” (quote from the Burning Man principle of participation, see below). There has to be Behavioral Actualization to the extent these “actions” and chosen behaviors can be manifested at will. And, finally, there has to be Spiritual Actualization to the extent that individual choices can be made to alter basic life perspectives/values and meta-philosophies. It is the author’s observation that the high intensity behavioral immersion that washes over a Burning Man participant on the playa has these same whole person effects. That is why the insights gained from Burning Man may well guide us into productive avenues for education in the 21st century.

MANIFESTATIONS OF BURNING MAN

The author has been a member of the Burning Man organizing team for 18 years. Over these many years, I have seen, directly experienced, vicariously observed and personally facilitated many things that have left me with feelings of wonderment, and sometimes residual feelings of awe. The personal transformative outcome that came from

these myriad experiences was like living inside a revolving kaleidoscope of images, an artist’s palette of ideas, and a tapestry of human interaction coupled with behavioral immersion. Attempts have been made to apply some of these personal learnings (Hoover, 2008a; Hoover, 2008c), and this section of this paper draws heavily on those experiences and writings.

The Burning Man Project is chosen here for illustrative examples of that organization’s creation of an innovative socio-cultural paradigm and an ongoing organizational reality that has functioned to not only expand the human consciousness of Burning Man participants (called Burners) during the event, but also to produce artful, creative and expressive lifestyles for Burners the other 51 weeks of the year. The Burning Man Project, steered by 10 unique Guiding Principles (see below) distilled from the Burning Man culture, produces aspects of community and shared experience that yield the requisite energy for transformation of self and transformation of educational and training processes.

Almost everyone that attempts a description of the annual Burning Man festival, which is now over 28 years old, comes up with a different set of descriptors. Burning Man founder Larry Harvey has described it as “Disneyland turned inside out” (Harvey, 2000). The annual week-long festival of self-expression, which has grown to an annual attendance of over 68,000 people, takes place in the Black Rock Desert of northern Nevada over every Labor Day weekend. The temporary city of Black Rock City appears in the barren desert flats as people from the world-over converge for a life transforming week. The event’s namesake center piece comes when a giant wooden man is set aflame and burned to the ground at the end of the week. However, many veteran Burners have come to see the burning of the Man figure as only one of 400+ plus pieces of interactive art, buoyed up by the interactive community spawned by over 800 theme camps where social capital and visionary relationships are spawned.

The culture of Burning Man has been institutionalized, as much as anything could ever be institutionalized at Burning Man, by the adoption of 10 culturally derived and behaviorally guiding Principles. These are:

- **Radical Inclusion**
Anyone may be a part of Burning Man. We welcome and respect the stranger. No prerequisites exist for participation in our community.
- **Gifting**
Burning Man is devoted to acts of gift giving. The value of a gift is unconditional. Gifting does not contemplate a return or an exchange for something of equal value.
- **Decommodification**
In order to preserve the spirit of gifting, our community seeks to create social environments that are unmediated by commercial sponsorships, transactions,

or advertising. We stand ready to protect our culture from such exploitation. We resist the substitution of consumption for participatory experience.

- **Radical Self-reliance**
Burning Man encourages the individual to discover, exercise and rely on his or her inner resources.
- **Radical Self-expression**
Radical self-expression arises from the unique gifts of the individual. No one other than the individual or a collaborating group can determine its content. It is offered as a gift to others. In this spirit, the giver should respect the rights and liberties of the recipient.
- **Communal Effort**
Our community values creative cooperation and collaboration. We strive to produce, promote and protect social networks, public spaces, works of art, and methods of communication that support such interaction.
- **Civic Responsibility**
We value civil society. Community members who organize events should assume responsibility for public welfare and endeavor to communicate civic responsibilities to participants. They must also assume responsibility for conducting events in accordance with local, state and federal laws.
- **Leaving No Trace**
Our community respects the environment. We are committed to leaving no physical trace of our activities wherever we gather. We clean up after ourselves and endeavor, whenever possible, to leave such places in a better state than when we found them.
- **Participation**
Our community is committed to a radically participatory ethic. We believe that transformative change, whether in the individual or in society, can occur only through the medium of deeply personal participation. We achieve being through doing. Everyone is invited to work. Everyone is invited to play. We make the world real through actions that open the heart.
- **Immediacy**
Immediate experience is, in many ways, the most important touchstone of value in our culture. We seek to overcome barriers that stand between us and a recognition of our inner selves, the reality of those around us, participation in society, and contact with a natural world exceeding human powers. No idea can substitute for this experience. 

Related Links

Larry Harvey did not compose his model for an experiment in temporary society as an essay, and then attempt to publish that essay. Rather, Larry Harvey, serving as a visionary sounding board and a source of clarification, gave his clarification of the 10 Principles that reflect the Burning Man ethos to the Burning Man community. They,

in turn, by the thousands, turned and continue to turn those ideas into a living entity, actualized by a vibrant and intensely interactive community of like minds and like spirits, and thus forged the foundation of a new cultural entity. That cultural entity, now known simply as Burning Man, has not only transformed the annual trek to the Black Rock Desert into a “must see” event but also into a worldwide movement:

“We (Burning Man) are no longer staging an event; we’re coordinating a global community” (Harvey, 2000)

In the 2006 summer edition of the Burning Man Newsletter entitled *All the News that’s Fit to Burn*, Larry Harvey (2006) addresses the continuing evolution of Burning Man’s cultural outreach:

“Every year thousands of people return from the desert and ask themselves how they might take what they have learned from Burning Man and apply it to the realm of daily life. Increasingly, they are surrounded by communities of other burners—people like themselves, who are accustomed to cooperating and collaborating with one another, not merely competing. These are folks who know that there are certain values that depend on one’s immediate experience—essential spiritual values—that should never be commodified.”

If the 10 Principles are examined in total and in combination, as they function to produce the unique Burning Man experience, an inescapable conclusion emerges. Burning Man is not a “drop in”, casual experience. It is an intense, immersive experience that has the power to transform those who participate. This power can be applied to educational challenges and to training situations, as will be described below.

This point brings into focus the reason to assess Burning Man as a lens through which to examine the creation of impactful learning system designs and engagement in educational training program participants. Living the Burning Man culture as a Burner and actualizing the Burning Man ethos, whether in a dust storm on the desert or in a cubicle in an office in San Francisco, boils down to experiencing what Weick (2007) calls “moments that matter”. The trick for designing educational programs is turning those moments that matter into experiences that yield meaningful learning and personal development. The integration of whole person learning may be a key to accomplishing these goals.

INTEGRATING WHOLE PERSON LEARNING AND THE TEN PRINCIPLES

The reader should know that the delineations made below are for editorial convenience and do not do justice to the interactive nature of the 10 Principles as an experienced set of phenomena. As previously stated, a Burning Man experience is an immersive experience, and it is a false dichotomy, for example, to think that radical inclusion and radical self-expression are not combinatorial and are not interactive. If nothing else, the peace of mind that comes from being immersed in a community characterized by radical inclusion can lower barriers that free expressive behaviors and participation.

Radical Inclusion: Imagination takes a front seat once a participant comes to accept that there are no prerequisites to full participation except for membership and a willingness to serve. As a result, Intellectual Actualization is enhanced as a remarkable ability to generate innovative ideas emerges. This expands as well to a remarkable openness to the new ideas of others. Group settings are characterized by individuals respecting one another, opening avenues of personal satisfaction, a sense of personal safety, and Emotional Actualization. At the group agenda progresses the benefits of suspending judgment on an idea or a new perspective come into focus. A challenge faced in educational and training settings, participants not listening actively, becomes a Behavioral Actualization template of active listening. This happens almost automatically since radical inclusion puts a stamp of inherent legitimacy on statements made by radically included others, statements that have Spiritual Actualization potential to the extent that they are sourced in the authentic self.

Gifting: I do not want to bog this analysis down by reiterating the interactive and overlapping nature of the 10 Principles as mentioned earlier, but my experience in Burning Man has shown me that one of the nicest gifts that can be given in a meeting or in a training session driven by the cultural principles of Burning Man is the Behavioral Actualization gift of active listening. The gift of active listening puts the radical inclusion stamp on interpersonal interactions and produces an Emotional Actualization relational aesthetic that strongly reflects the basic tenets of the Burning Man culture. Other gifts that are given without expectation of return are the gifts of appreciation and positive reinforcement. Most Burning Man Staff meetings are concluded with a systematic and unapologetic round of “I appreciate Person X for” Positive reinforcement is accomplished in Burning Man gatherings often by the spontaneous snapping of fingers as opposed to staged applause or perfunctory praise. There was also a relatively turbulent period of time a few years ago (linked with a nautical theme for the Burning Man event) when the finger snapping was replaced by choruses of pirate sounding ‘Aaaarrrrh!!!’ sounds.

Decommodification. The Burning Man focus on immediacy and participatory experience rather upon consumption functions to transform the usual mechanisms of organizational engagement. In the Default World (the World outside of Burning Man) we often define ourselves by the work we do, by the car we drive, or by the neighborhood we live in. In Black Rock City your job is to just expressively be yourself and to have a hell of a lot of fun. Your transportation can be your feet (which everyone has), a bicycle (of which there are thousands), or a personally expressive art car (which only you design, build and decorate). Stripped of the readily available and easily applied identity labels of the Default World, Burners are left to find the identity they express in Burning Man within themselves and in their interactions with their newly adopted community of fellow Burners. The transformative power of the Burning Man experience thus comes from an avalanche of individual insight combined with an unprecedented level of community engagement. This is a pathway to significant levels of Spiritual Actualization.

Radical Self Reliance: As Burners develop the capacity for radical self-reliance, they also manifest an exceptional capacity for personal responsibility. In organizational meetings or group settings this manifests as each person not only relying on their own resources, but also expecting others to do the same. As a consequence, it is a Burning Man meeting guideline to leave the concept of blame at the door, thus freeing up Emotional Actualization potentialities. This allows the group to be forward focused on ultimate outcomes and how to contribute to those outcomes as opposed to looking backwards on what has happened or might have happened in the past. Burning Man staff members and volunteers have an expression that encapsulates radical self-reliance. It is that Burning Man is not a bureaucracy--- it is a “do-ocracy”. This “can do and will do” attitude is the essence of Behavioral Actualization at the highest levels.

Radical Self Expression: Burners express themselves freely and expect (and enable) others to do so as well. This is Behavioral Actualization sourced in authentic self, and the result is the gift of honesty in communications. It should also be noted that radical self-expression manifests in Burning Man gatherings as an insistence, that whatever is being done, is also fun to do. Thus, Burning Man work sessions may be looked on as hard work by participants because the pace is often furious, but they are also looked at a chance to have a great deal of fun at the same time. Fun, an inherent part of any Burning Man process, thus operates as an Emotional Actualization baseline. If it ain’t fun, then it ain’t satisfying, and if it ain’t satisfying, it ain’t gonna get done.

Communal Effort: In a Burning Man gathering of any sort, the focus inevitably turns to a consideration of “What impact will this have on the Burning Man community?” (the people), and “Does this serve the needs of the Burning Man Project?” (the organization). Therefore, solving the old bugaboo of finding the big picture and then

being willing to focus on it is more or less built into Burning Man meetings. This is a combination of Spiritual Actualization in the form of expression through one's community, combined with Behavioral Actualization to get things done. In fact, utilizing mental alertness and Intellectual Actualization, when a person veers off from this communal effort/big picture orientation and thus strays into self-aggrandizement or a personal/individual agenda, they are unfailingly called on it by another Burner. For example, in the Burning Man sub-group of the Black Rock Rangers, such behavior is labeled as "un-Rangerly" and is not condoned.

Civic Responsibility: Even within the edict of having a minimal number of rules, Burners value a civil society and conduct themselves accordingly. In meetings and communication exchanges this manifests as individuals not only taking responsibility for their own behaviors, but also not speaking for others or trying to project their ideas on others. Again, should someone lapse into these types of behavior, they are firmly reminded that "We don't do things like that here." A common phenomenon, for example, in a Burning Man setting, is to speak for the absent others, respecting the wishes and perspectives of others even if they are not present at the moment. Speaking for absent others can be seen to function as a combination of Emotional Actualization and Spiritual Actualization.

Leave No Trace. A Burning Man gathering does not conclude when the meeting is adjourned or when it is time to move to another venue. A Burning Man gathering concludes when the meeting has adjourned and no trace of the meeting being held remains. This habit of Leave No Trace is rooted in Burning Man's ongoing relationship with our event permitting agency, the Bureau of Land Management. However, Leave No Trace has become such a part of the Burning Man culture that it has melded with civic responsibility and communal effort. This can be seen as a combination of Spiritual Actualization as environmental awareness combined with the Behavioral Actualization of personal responsibility. For example, if a Burning Man gathering is held in Golden Gate Park in San Francisco, when the gathering breaks up the assembled Burners not only clean up the mess they made while there, but also the mess they found upon arriving at the site.

Participation: Active participation is part and parcel of the Burning Man experience. "No Spectators" signs can often be seen in and around Black Rock City. In a Burning Man gathering this often manifests as Behavioral Actualization with everyone in the room being present in the moment. This is reinforced by Burning Man meeting rules for no laptops, no cell phones, no pagers, etc. However, what makes participation work in the Burning Man culture is that it is not just participation, it is radical participation. This means that you are invited to work, you are invited to play (that fun stuff again), and you are invited to make your world real through participatory actions that open your heart (Emotional Actualization).

Immediacy: Immediacy is the Burning Man cultural

principle that is probably the most misunderstood. It is also probably the one, if I was forced to pick, that I would select as the most important. In the culture of Burning Man, immediacy is not an abstract idea tied to a temporal reference point. It is an Emotional Actualization driven felt experience of living in the moment and accepting the consequences of being part of something that is not only unique in and of itself, but also rooted in a unique and special part of self (Spiritual Actualization). It means being willing to be uncomfortable in the moment to accomplish something in the long run (Behavioral Actualization). It means being able to take time out in the moment to appreciate, perhaps even to revel, in where you are and what you are part of (Intellectual Actualization). In the context of executing educational programs and personal development, it means that the timeless dilemma of getting commitment from people morphs from an often insurmountable obstacle to existing on the verge of being a non-issue.

TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

Combining the analytical power of the whole person learning model with the personally impactful nature of Burning Man could result in a potentially powerful set of tools, a set of educational and training tools that could facilitate transformative learning. Transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991; Mezirow, 2000; Cranton, 1994) is similar in many ways to the whole person learning concept of Spiritual Actualization. It is usually described in terms of a person changing his or her perspective to the extent that self-understanding is increased in a meaningful fashion, belief systems are altered or revised, all to the extent that behavioral changes or changes in lifestyle follow.

However, Mezirow's perspective (1991, 2000) is much more applicable to the case at hand. Mezirow believes that transformative learning comes from individuals experiencing "disorienting dilemmas". In his writings, these disorienting dilemmas are usually described in terms of some sort of a major life transition or even a life crisis. However, earlier in this paper it was established that 21st century organizational members, and members of the Millennial Generation, may be less susceptible to ordinary, one-dimensional educational programs or learning system designs than previous generations. High levels of self-esteem, combined with significant tendencies towards narcissism, in the 21st century are coupled with modern social media and internet information overload. Overcoming this combination of forces is a daunting task for 21st century educators. Here is a key question --- Can non-dramatic, one-dimensional educational programs pack enough of a punch to get through to 21st century students? If not, we need a better set of tools.

CONCLUSION

Such a set of tools can be found in the powerful frameworks and techniques found in whole person experiential learning. Disorienting dilemmas, or their psychological equivalents, can be found in the immersive experiences, cultural philosophies and ultimate modernity of Burning Man. Bounding, borrowing and binding these two systems together can significantly increase the potentialities of the learning system designs and educational programs this combination can produce.

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