As a way to continue a previous conversation about experiential education at SFU (see What’s All the Fuss About: Experiential Education), in September, 2013 nineteen colleagues joined in a daylong workshop with one of the masters of experiential education practice, Professor George Lakey. The size was limited at the request of Professor Lakey, and participants ranged from undergraduate and graduate students to faculty of all ranks, and drew from Sociology/Anthropology, History, English, Humanities, Gender Sexuality and Women’s Studies, and Urban Studies.

Lakey is internationally known for his work as Research Fellow at the Lang Center for Civic and Social Responsibility at Swarthmore College, for his co-founding of Training for Change, his eight books, and for his more than 1,500 workshops across five continents. It was Lakey’s most recent book, Facilitating Group Learning: Strategies for Success with Diverse Adult Learners (2010, Jossey-Bass), that inspired Mark Leier (History), John Bogardus (Sociology and Anthropology), and Adrienne Burk (FASS Teaching Fellow) to propose that the Dean’s FASS Visiting Speakers Fund to bring him to SFU. Dean Craig enthusiastically supported the proposal.

The September workshop was devoted to experiential, or as Lakey terms it, "direct education." This model is focused on the relationship between teacher and group (or instructor/facilitator and students/learners) and seeks to replace the “scattered attention – of a teacher preoccupied with curriculum and participants preoccupied with distractions – with gathered attention.” Lakey follows very much in the Deweyian traditions of experiential education – that is, in designing experiences so that they are tied directly and intentionally to other stages, so that participants can mine the experiences for meaning and simultaneously practice skills needed for strong democratic practices beyond the classroom.

The workshop was constructed for participants to go through a series of activities in order to cultivate a profound experiential understanding of how one builds a learning environment. Following Lakey’s principles of good design (allowing for different kinds of learners, moving between differentiation and integration exercises, making accountability explicit, monitoring both manifest and less visible rhythms), the workshop offered both conceptual and pragmatic tools to participants. One said, “George Lakey had a very unobtrusive way of taking us through the experience of building a learning group, grappling with an issue important to the group, and then reflecting on that experience and learning from it. Thinking about a class as a group rather than a random collection of individuals will change the way I approach the beginning of each semester….I especially appreciated George’s suggestions for bringing out difficult or potentially contentious issues and making it possible to discuss them in an inclusive and respectful way. The fact that the workshop participants ranged from graduate students to long-serving professors shows how relevant participatory and experiential approaches are to people at different stages in their teaching careers."

The excitement, and transferability of the workshop, was evident from others’ remarks as well: “This was the most useful and illuminating teaching workshop I have ever been to.” “I cannot wait to begin trying out some of these ideas in class, ideas
involving ‘debate spectrum,’ ‘noticings,’ innovative ways to introduce students and to build a ‘container’ for effective group building and learning.” “The workshop was fantastic. George's explanation of the experience/reflection/generalization/application sequence was totally new to me and very refreshing and exciting. I got useful practical ideas for in-class exercises, including the spectrum recognizing rank in the room, a spectrum for viewpoints in a debate, breaking into caucuses, differentiation/joining, and reflecting [exercises].”

Two participants started applying things from the workshop immediately: “This morning we did an experiential exercise that I had tried before related to [a documentary film]. For the first time, though, I tried ‘noticings’ in a circle after the exercise….. The result was fantastic - students noticed all kinds of things, some of which I had anticipated, some of which I had never considered, all of which were useful.” Another participant brought his discoveries to a community group connected to his doctoral research areas; while trying to figure out process and organizational structures in the newly forming coalition, he found applying the principles and his insights from the workshop “completely turned a central organizational impasse around.”

Those interested in Lakey’s general approach can gain much from reading the book that inspired this visit. Though to some the richness of the book is in his very detailed stories and accounts drawn from facilitated workshops (rather than from courses per se), many of George’s ideas – and the profoundly thoughtful and respectful way he works – are illuminated in ways that make sense in academic classrooms as well. Some are provocative: Lakey insists that, given learning arises only outside a learner’s comfort zone, it is essential for teachers to facilitate the creation of safe learning conditions and then allow, and intentionally elicit, attention to conflict and difference amongst the learners. In other words, to “introduce tensions carefully, but within a process so that the [course participants] have the capacity to resolve them.”

This is directly related to Dewey’s ideas of authentic experiential education. Given the diversity in SFU classrooms, also especially pertinent are Lakey’s ideas about truly inclusive welcomes at the outset of classes, his recognition of culturally preferred habits around speaking, listening, intervention, and dissent, and his thoughtful pointers about sensitivity in cross-cultural issues (Chapter 19). In addition, he offers an extended section on how to address variable status ranks in a learning environment. Another thought-provoking section from the book illustrates his strategies to get learners to deal with their ambivalence in overt ways. The goal here is to enable participants to either articulate intentions about remaining with the group or to exit it in a "clean" manner. Given how exhausting it is for teachers and committed learners to be in courses with passive or uninterested students, this offers a refreshing alternative!

Perhaps at this point you are thinking experiential education is not possible in your course, or for your material, or for your kind of personality. If so, be assured that the examples in the book give substantive evidence that these approaches work extremely well across a wide range of contexts, populations, and kinds of educators. One of the particularly helpful characterizations for teachers who are charged with teaching content-rich courses is to recast their roles into that of "museum guides" – that is, as those who know the "exhibits" [i.e. the course modules] which must be visited and in
what sequences, but who can structure experiences for varied groups of learners in more inclusive ways. Lakey covers at length the pros and cons of points of negotiation in design of learning environments, and also points to strategies for adjusting everything from room arrangements to teaching interventions based upon one’s own particular nuances and preferences.

Other tips have to do with the teacher’s behavior. For example, in a short section on “understating: framing to increase participation,” Lakey discusses how the very wording of elicitive questions can inadvertently exclude all but the most confident learners. Group queries that ask individuals to identify an incident when they completely understood [a phenomenon] or realized they made a big difference, can shut down students who are more tentative about what they understand or are beginning to experience. Instead, Lakey suggests asking questions such as “How many of you can relate to some part of what she just said”? or “I wonder what that might represent”? “What else might relate to this? If there were something else?” Such phrasings will invite more learners, with a wider range of responses, to enter a conversation. There is also an intriguing section (pp. 173) on providing silent support for learners as they navigate classrooms, discussions, assignments, and exams; I’ve never seen such a discussion before in pedagogical texts.

Finally, it must be said that the thoughtful and measured approach present both in George Lakey’s September workshop and his book offer a new, potentially productive way into SFU’s current conversation about “educational goals.” Lakey suggests an instructor’s role is threefold: “to mobilize [students’] confidence, to share critical tools and to challenge them to think for themselves” (p. 41). Lakey’s work is explicitly about setting goals and intentions, authentically pursuing them, and holding himself (and each learner) accountable throughout and at the end of a specified pedagogical experience such as a course. However, Lakey’s practice is at its core about recognizing that robust and effective pedagogy embraces individual’s learning as necessarily differentiated; curricular materials can be prepared, but each learner will take to those in importantly diverse ways. Thus, rather than the idea that learning outcomes can be pre-determined and measurable, Lakey’s practice suggests we can only be accountable to a process that involves both the instructor/facilitator and students. Such a process involves educators being explicit about the intentions and unfolding of a course or program (the map of the “museum” and the sequences and means to explore it), as well as points of negotiation that might be part of it (if any). Equally, such a process would ensure that students at the beginning of a semester explore their ambivalences and then make either an explicit commitment to pursue their own learning - or cleanly opt out. At the end of the course, all would re-visit these various explicit commitments to hold themselves accountable. This approach, clearly, differs significantly from "learning goals" discussions identified elsewhere. The good news - for those intrigued by ideas of experiential education informed by nearly a century of educational practices within Dewyian, adult education, and critical pedagogical practices - is that there exists, in George Lakey’s work, another path for pursuing this as an educational direction at SFU.

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If you would like further information on the group perusing these ideas at SFU, please contact either Mark Leier (leier@sfu.ca) or John Bogardus (bogardus@sfu.ca).

Here’s some info on George Lakey: [http://www.trainingforchange.org/george_lakey](http://www.trainingforchange.org/george_lakey)
[http://www.trainingforchange.org/georgebook](http://www.trainingforchange.org/georgebook)