

Peter Slattery

Therapist, Educator, Trainer.

Mobile 0418 456 577

Email: petersla@zip.com.au

web: www.peterslattery.com

Correspondence:

PO Box 153, Dulwich Hill, Sydney NSW 2203 Australia.

ABN 17 861 766 294

Processes and programmes: fun AND useful Getting the balance right

‘ACTIVATE, COLLABORATE, CELEBRATE’

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**The following notes are intended to support the above workshop, which included activities, still pictures and video as part of the conversations of the workshop. It is impossible to provide all of these additions here, although I have included some pictures and list some of the activities we did in the actual workshop. And even though these notes are not intended as a stand-alone resource, they do highlight the main points raised in the workshop. If you would like to discuss any aspects of what you read here, please contact me directly. Cheers
pete**

ABSTRACT

‘This is fun and I like you’ is a delightful thing for those of us who work with young people, to hear. But there needs to be a lot more happening for a programme or a process to be of genuine value to a young person.

Hip hop can be fun, and sometimes it’s good for you, though not automatically. Fibre in your diet is good for you, but let’s face it, it’s rarely fun. And especially for young people, unlikely to get them excited. Youthwork, most of the time, and especially youthwork with young people who are having a hard time, needs to combine, as often as possible, both ingredients: ‘fun’ AND ‘good for you.’

What’s fun?

Looking at the world of young people gives us some ideas about what’s fun and exciting. And if we pay attention it is also clear that one size definitely does NOT fit all. The way we make something fun and attractive AND relevant varies enormously.

What’s useful?

Research, common sense and experience give us pretty solid guidelines about just what helps us grow well, in body, mind and spirit. We know for instance that the telling of a life story can be healthy, yet it also seems to depend on the way the story is told. We know that a sense of belonging and connection is important. Can we create this in a programme? Or even within a

conversation? We know that feeling like we are in charge, and actually being in charge, of our lives, is good for us. So how do we create this in a programme? Can we create this in a conversation? We know that identity is important, and sometimes the identity of 'outsider', or 'trouble-maker' or even 'sad person' can be as attractive as any other identity, but probably not as uplifting. How do we pay full attention to the reality of a person's life, yet help them do their very best (even flourish) within it, no matter what the circumstances?

So this workshop...

...is about how to get someone's attention whether it is in a one-off project, an ongoing program, within a mentoring relationship or in a conversation that you might have in a youth centre or in the street. And do so in a meaningful way. The workshop, of course interactive, will do three things:

- Identify the ingredients that young people need in their lives to grow happy, healthy and strong
 - Demonstrate the elements that help ongoing projects/programmes/processes be interesting AND useful
 - Showcase approaches and programmes that have successfully combined the elements of 'fun/interesting' and 'good for you'.
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THE WORKSHOP

Having fun is good and an end in itself. Yet for a young person who is sad, confused, in pain, angry, in great distress, or doing harm to themselves and/or others, there needs to be more. And workers with youth are often well placed to offer that something more. And that offer needs to be thought about carefully because it is possible, out of respect and compassion, to inadvertently help a young person remain trapped in a life story which does not uplift them, nor help them survive and flourish. Workers need to offer something fresh, unusual, with a sense of optimism and movement, whether this in a conversation or a more focussed programme over time.

A USEFUL CONVERSATION

At its most basic, a conversation about things that matter, a 'useful chat' or counselling session with a young person, whether formal or informal, planned or spontaneous, aims to be useful to that young person. The contact, no matter how brief, seeks some positive shift in that young person's life. There are certain elements which can increase the likelihood of this useful shift occurring. I always find it difficult to make a snappy list of 'one-words' so I will chat through these a little.

What makes a conversation useful?

- Being unexpected, unusual. Something which catches the person's attention, because 'same-old same-old' is unlikely to work
- The 'attention catching' is meaningful, not just amusing or clever
- Which means it is interesting for *this* person
- And it needs to be relevant and deal with what is on the person's mind, not only what others might be concerned about
- The nature of the conversation needs to 'fit' for the person. It needs to be chatty if this is their style, or possibly brief and reflective if they are less verbal; playful or serious; more abstract and conceptual or more concrete in style and focus; more public (chat) or more private (reflection)...
- Old unhelpful behaviours, ways of thinking and feeling need to be 'contained'. They find little place and little expression...
- Because the conversation explores new meanings to old stories
- Or overlooked stories...
- Or forgotten aspects of old stories
- So that new possibilities appear...
- And as they appear there is choice as to what might be explored further
- In equal measure there is support and challenge, comfort and adventure...
- With the aim that a person might experience themselves in some new way, which means a new thought, feeling or action
- And with a good eye and total honesty, there is a quite deliberate attention to and a focus on a person's existing strengths, qualities, triumphs
- And with the same good eye of perception there is a noticing of and drawing attention to the exceptions to behaviours and ways of being which are less wonderful for the person and those around them. There is attention to the contradictions and contrasts as these suggest there are choices about how to be in the world
- And a conversation intentionally or by natural progression will tend to explore what research and experience tell us are likely to help a person grow well in life:
 - Connection and belonging
 - Solid relationships
 - Being in charge of life
 - A clear and positive sense of self and identity
- And finally, it is the task of all involved parties, but particularly the worker, to monitor with integrity the process of the conversation to ensure that it genuinely embodies and mirrors each of these ideas.

The process of a conversation

Let me talk through some of these ideas and try to bring them to life a little.

There is probably no more important idea than '**Getting a person's attention**'. And a general principle to apply here would be: '**Do the unexpected**'. And while this is easier said than done there are some strategies which can help; such as using a 'frame'.

A 'frame' is just what it sounds like; a way of looking at and talking about something. Here are three:

Frames

- **Body, mind, heart, spirit**
- **Living Loving Learning**
- **Past present future**

Body, mind, heart, spirit

Asking a person about these four aspects of their life creates interest but it also does three other really important things.

- It guarantees choice (which is part of being in charge of self) because a person can 'fill' a frame any way they choose.
- Secondly, asking about who a person is and about their life in this unexpected way is more likely to touch on new aspects of a person's life
- The frame opens possible doors onto all aspects of a person's wellbeing.

Living Loving Learning

Asking someone if they are living, loving and learning in their life, as they would like to, leads immediately into relationships, into sense of life purpose, into hopes and fears....

Past present future

Asking someone to look into their past and/or present and/or future, and identify for instance:

- Important people then, now and in the future...or...
- Significant moments, in the past, happening right now, or anticipated...
- Or dreams that came true/never came true/hope to become true...

Each of these is **meaningful**. They are not tricks nor clever ways to amuse. They are open and genuine attempts to get a person's interest so that a conversation about things which matter can take place. And while the conversation may head into difficult territory and touching on disturbing parts of a person's life is unlikely to be considered 'fun', it is certainly important. And part of the idea of 'holding a person's interest' means making such conversations possible.

Interest and relevance. If you have caught a person's attention then you have their interest. Maintaining interest means making sure the conversation is relevant to the person. Which means dealing with their concerns, worries, hopes and dreams. There may be things that we feel we need to get to, or have to get to, like being angry, or dangerous drug taking, or hurting people; yet we can approach these indirectly by making sure we are talking about the things the young person themselves finds important. The first workshop activity which appears below is an example of a simple and respectful way of doing this.

Workshop activity: You and your life
A two minute conversation in pairs

This first activity highlights the ideas of interest and relevance by simply asking people to speak about who they are as people, and about their lives.

- **Please tell me about you...**
- **Please tell me about your life**

These straightforward and overlapping questions will often elicit quite different thoughts and feelings.

'Fit' refers to the different individual styles and ways which people have of being in the world. Ways which need to be responded to and welcomed into a conversation. A conversation can be more serious or playful, more wordy or more reflective, more spoken or unspoken, more discussed or written/drawn, even on a scrap of paper or with a finger in sand. It can be done physically by moving or less physically by sitting under a tree. It can include humour and playfulness or be more earnest and serious.

Containing the less wonderful aspects. I talk carefully about this idea because we each have a life story and it is uniquely our own and worthy of respect. And yet I know too that going through and around stories of pain, destruction, hurt, suffering can, without meaning to, give attention and strength to unhelpful aspects of a story. A person's physiological response, their emotional and intellectual focus can be on the suffering, the pain, the difficulty, and they can become overwhelmed, trapped by these aspects. Every person has qualities and talents, strengths and triumphs within life, and these are the aspects of a story which help people notice their survival, their own struggle which has victories as well as defeats, hope as well as despair. All can be explored yet with a focus on these aspects: **New stories, new perspectives, possibilities and choice** become a reality.

The new place. Learning and growth means experiencing something new, experiencing ourselves in new ways. And a conversation needs to create chances for people to stretch themselves. So there needs to be a balance of **support, challenge and bravery.**

The workshop activity which appears below seeks to demonstrate the inclusion of these dimensions. The conversational process seeks to combine respect and acceptance for the person as they are now, as well as an invitation and opportunity to extend themselves.

Workshop activity: Playful or adventurous?

The second workshop activity highlights the ideas of choice, challenge and support.

'Have a think about whether you are feeling, today, more PLAYFUL or more ADVENTUROUS...and in a few moments I will ask you to have a discussion with another person based on a series of questions that I will give you...'

Once people chose, the following questions were put up. People could of course, and do, and can be encouraged to...change their minds once they see the questions. It is an opportunity to be one or the other...that's all it is. And this is a workshop!

PLAYFUL

What is the most fun you have ever had:

- On your own?
- With one other?
- With a group?
- Your last BIG fun was when?
- What fun MUST you still have?

ADVENTUROUS

What in life do you:

- Hope for?
- Dread?
- Avoid?
- Attract?
- Seek?

Strengths, qualities, triumphs

We all have imperfections. We all need, in larger or smaller ways, to work on those. Focussing on and bringing out the best in ourselves means applying these qualities in dealing with our human imperfections. The third workshop activity highlights this.

Workshop activity: the best in you

This activity highlights the idea of focussing on people's strengths, qualities and talents.

So with the above thought in mind, and to highlight the importance of this idea, people were asked to think about and chat about the following:

'Think of a moment when the best in you emerged:

- A worthwhile and not often called upon part of you
- And then chat about what encouraged this to emerge
- And then chat about: You 'step up' when...

Conversations (and programmes) also do well to attend to what research tells us about humans and **wellbeing**. There is a fair body of research and some considerable wealth of personal stories to suggest to us what is useful in helping us as humans, flourish.

- **A sense of belonging and connection**
- **Good solid relationships**
- **A solid positive sense of self and identity**
- **Being in charge of lives.**

Belonging and connection can mean simple and profound things like having something worthwhile to get up to each day, feeling like we belong and are connected to something, whether purpose, place, people, history or culture. Having **relationships**, major and minor in our lives, and/or having people who we care about and who care for us, makes a difference to how overall, well we are, how much we flourish in the good times, and how well we survive the tough ones. Having a **solid sense of identity** and believing we can **influence** what happens in our lives gives us a sense of **purpose, control and direction**.

Talking about these things not only avoids casting a young person in the role of 'trouble-maker' or 'troubled person' but actually takes them into a series of things which, in different ways, are important to all people of all ages. And almost always, in one way or another, variations on these elements will emerge naturally in conversation. Strengthening these elements in our lives, in the lives of young people, is uplifting and sustaining.

A comment

Often to even get a conversation started we may well have to go by the road less travelled. Especially if the person is grumpy or sad or wary, or has been around the system for a while then doing something less likely, something less expected, stands a better chance of getting their attention. Yet this is no trick. Whatever we do also needs to be meaningful and relevant. It must relate to who they person is and why we are having the conversation. This doesn't

mean us expecting wild enthusiasm, but what others consider important, may occupy very little time and space in the young person's mind. And even though we may need at some moment and in some way to look at the smoking dope, staying out late, getting drunk, fighting, or getting into trouble at school, getting people off his or her back may be of more interest and that is where we might need to start.

And a conversation does not need to be a laugh a minute, but does need to be interesting enough, and relevant enough so the young person feels inclined to continue. What a great challenge for us.

A USEFUL PROGRAMME

I will try briefly here to convey through the inadequacy of words what I consider to be the ingredients of a good programme. And a good conversation and a good programme share many of these ingredients. Programmes usually have the added advantages (and dangers) of being over time and of involving groups (an audience) rather than individuals.

Firstly, there is the creation of an environment, a climate, an ethos, a relationship which almost inevitably invites the best from people, seeks and highlights their best aspects. Within this there is a climate which promotes both acceptance and striving. There develops an ethos where there is support and challenge in equal measure, with opportunities for people to show their talents and for these talents, no matter how modest, to be enjoyed and appreciated. There are opportunities for people, with encouragement and safety, to take risks; physical, emotional, cultural, social, and personal. There is appreciation of the attempts, the willingness to try, which is applauded as much as actual success. And while the presence of others always increases the risk of embarrassment, of conflict and at times a certain pressure to resort to old ways, it also offers the chance of an audience to a person's experiences, bravery and adventurous attempts at newness.

And if a programme takes place over time as most do, there are multiple opportunities. There is a fostering of acceptance of self and of others, by self and others. And there is the constant and simultaneous encouragement to develop the courage to try new things, feel and think new things. Because personal growth is always in the new territory, sometimes in the scary place. And even if over a short time, these new learnings and experiences have a good chance of sticking, of staying with the person, of becoming who they are, because they are constant, multiple and repeated. And this process by its very nature contains the very behaviours, thoughts and feelings which may be damaging to a person. The process allows less attractive and possibly unloving aspects of people to lie quiet, to diminish in power and impact. And throughout, there is guidance, spoken and unspoken, direct and indirect, from guides and those who inspire both by who they are and what they do. Guides who ideally encompass a range of ages, cultures and individual personalities, from peers, elders and mentors. And part of the guidance is to help those involved in the experience, place it into some place within their understanding of their life, so that when they leave this experience, they will leave as slightly different human beings, carrying the changes with them back into environments, sometimes unsympathetic, where what has been experienced can be remembered, maintained and built on.

These words can sound somewhat romantic and fanciful and so I will try, through pictures, (and possibly even a few more words!) to breathe some reality of life into them.

'PAWS UP' – a good programme

Let me describe two programmes which I think embody the elements I just wrote about. The first is PAWS UP, run in Armidale by Bernie Shakeshaft (with I imagine, great support from others)



backtrack@skymesh.com.au

Talk to Bernie for more information. Let me give the briefest impression of what Paws Up is about. The boys join the programme, they get to know their dog and train their dog, then at some point they go to events and take the dogs through competitive jumping. And along the way many things happen.



Sounds fun and interesting, and when I saw it I thought so too. Yet there is more. What stands out for me about this programme is this. Firstly it is totally in synch with the research about wellbeing.

A SENSE OF BELONGING within the group

GOOD RELATIONSHIPS with the dogs, bernie, each other, and the wider 'world'

IDENTITY. The boys have a clear and productive role, and they have uniforms which, in a useful way, identify and unite them

IN CHARGE. The boys are in charge of training and caring for the dogs, they participate in public events.

All of which is **WORTHWHILE** and **MEANINGFUL.**

The boys experience themselves and each other as productive and caring, talented and useful. Equally they are seen and responded to in this same way, by the wider world in which they move as part of this programme. All of this is the experience of bringing out the best, bringing out strengths and talents.

The messages, teachings and learning of the programme, are both spoken and unspoken. As a dog learns to jump as shown in the following photo,



a number of things are happening:

- The dog must learn to look up to be able to jump high
- If the dog attempts a jump and doesn't make it, it is caught by one of the boys
- If the dog succeeds, as it goes over the jump, it is caught by others to ensure its safety.

These ways of thinking and ways of working with the dogs are talked about openly as ways of bringing out the best in the dogs, but also are discussed as principles that might apply more widely in the lives of the boys: ideas of setting your sights high, of attempting something challenging, of giving and accepting support, of belonging to and being part of something fun and worthwhile.

In many ways, directly and indirectly, spoken and unspoken, the experience of the project is generalised to the wider aspects of the boys' lives.

'BEYOND EMPATHY' – another good programme



The second example I want to refer to is from Beyond Empathy, <http://www.beyondempathy.org.au/> an Australia wide organization that runs multiple programmes and projects running including regulars camps where young people, carers, workers, elders come together for a week and do fun AND meaningful things. While the comments here may well apply to all aspects of what Beyond Empathy does, I make them here specifically in relation to the camps which I have been part of for some years now.

There is, for young people, **a chance to shine...**



And to, with support and understanding from those around them, to risk,



a chance to be brave...

To learn and experience **new territory**... and to do so physically, mentally, emotionally, artistically, socially and culturally.



There is **a chance to accept and be accepted**



And there are **multiple opportunities** for each of these things, in the **appreciative company of others**





And there are also opportunities for **guidance**...



And there is contact across ages and cultures, which particularly for indigenous and threatened cultures, is hugely important for young people.

And finally the experience **finds a context within each person's life** by discussion and non-verbal comment. Rather than sitting like a strange event different from everyday life and with a sense of the unreal about it, it becomes an experience which has a place in the person's life and strengthens them through new experiences and makes possible ongoing application and growth. And this happens, because there is time, albeit short, for multiple opportunities to shine and experiment, for experiences of acceptance with and by others and for the processing of these experiences over time and with discussion.

And the importance of this is considerable:

'...when you think thoughts or learn something, you actually turn on genes inside the nerve cells in your brain to change the number of connections between those cells.' Norman Doidge MD 2008. 'The Brain that changes itself.'

A comment

Interestingly, while the camps do have guidelines or rules, they seem to operate more with the creation of an environment of involvement and cooperation and with requests and opportunities, rather than hard and fast rules.

And so at the risk of making a list...

Useful ingredients of a 'fabulous' programme

- **A chance to shine**
- **Within an environment which supports and invites**
- **Where the very feel of the event 'contains', and via both acceptance and encouragement to be brave and to launch into new things, the less fruitful aspects of people simply diminish**
- **A chance to be accepted, of and by self, of and by others**
- **Many chances to be brave, adventurous...to stretch self**
- **To an applauding audience...**
- **With an ongoing useful combination of support and challenge**
- **And where the experience is contextualised in the person's life, it makes sense and 'fits'**
- **And where there is contact with guides, mentors, 'inspirators' of different ages.**

A final comment

I hope these notes are useful. Yet I am aware that they are just that: notes; words on a page. The workshop attempted to create an experience for people so we could breathe life into the hugely important ideas that lie behind these words. And so it is with the work we do with young people. It is possible to have a dog program, a hip-hop programme, a camp or a conversation which does not embed these elements. And it may be fun, and as acknowledged at the beginning of these notes, fun is important, yet in itself it is not sufficient for helping shift some of the heavy weight within people and within their lives. More is needed. And it is a joy and a privilege if we are able to be part of that extra in the lives of the young people we work with.