

Chapter 21. Developing Autonomy, Initiative and Risk Taking through a Laboratory

Design

Introduction

I originally undertook the development of the "Autonomy Lab" as a kind of challenge to my own creativity, something that seemed worth doing for the intellectual excitement of exploring uncharted territory. I had been living and working in Europe for a couple of years and was given several opportunities to conduct T groups. I found the groups low in energy and participant involvement, and I was curious to test my ideas about the causes, and test alternatives that I thought might work better. When I conducted the first Autonomy Lab, together with Jacques Mareschal of IBM, it gave me a great thrill to see the impact it had on participants. Shortly thereafter I decided to devote most of my time and energy to the further development of the method.

That felt risky. I had practiced in the UK for several years and had succeeded in establishing a thriving practice as an organization development consultant. It would be a major transition in my professional life to recast my work as that of management educator. However, I was a little dissatisfied with the impact I was able to have on the very large, bureaucratic organizations with which I was then working. I hoped that by changing my focus to the exploitation of this powerful new tool, I might be able to do more good in the world. I conducted the first Autonomy Lab in the summer of 1971, and after a year's experience with the method, I was ready to make the shift. By 1973, when I published the paper, "Developing Autonomy, Initiative and Risk Taking through

a Laboratory Design," I was well launched in my new career. In the early seventies I designed and promoted a host of variations on the method in all sorts of management education settings, and I took it as far afield as southern Africa. I used the method in business schools under the auspices of Charles Handy at the London Business School, and Hans van Beinum at the Stichting Bedruijskunde in Rotterdam. I designed a self managed learning approach for training organization development consultants, applying it with Fritz Steele in the NTL Institute's Program for Specialists in Organization Development. Then Ian Mangham and I created a three month program in the management of change in the UK, using a self directed approach.

Eventually my use of these methods led me, together with David Berlew, into the development of the Positive Power & Influence Program, described in the next paper, and the creation of a management training business that involved me until 1981, when I once again turned my attention towards organization development. Although I have done little training in recent years, I have never lost my enthusiasm for the principles described in this paper, which I have found to provide a strong and flexible foundation for the empowerment of the learner, in whatever setting they are applied.

Developing Autonomy, Initiative and Risk Taking through a Laboratory Design

The scene is a fifteenth century castle converted into a hotel standing in the midst of rolling countryside somewhere in Northern Europe. The characters are twenty middle managers, about half line and half of them staff, and two behavioral scientists. The time is a Sunday evening, the opening session of the first Laboratory in Initiative and Autonomy. The first behavioral scientist is speaking.

"Most of us, most of the time are so bombarded with expectations, demands and influence attempts of others that it often becomes very difficult to hear messages from *inside* about what *we* would like to do, how *we* think the job ought to be done, what experience *we* think would be interesting, exciting and good for our own growth. In most management development courses it's the same: We're exposed to a lot of pressure to be more sensitive to people, or more rational in our approaches to planning, to be more receptive or more proactive, and in general to follow out someone else's formula for managerial success. Everyone seems to have a slogan, a package or a formula they want to use to change our behavior, our values, our styles.

"In contrast, this laboratory is an exercise in finding your own interests, strengths, and paths to growth and development. We don't believe there is one right way to do any job as complex as the ones you hold, not least because you all have different strengths, motivations, backgrounds. We believe neither that managers are born nor that they are made; on the contrary we think that in large part they create themselves. This laboratory will provide, we hope, a week of open time and a wide variety of resources for you to do just that. We hope that by Friday you may have a clearer idea as to some of the ways in which you would like to grow and develop and that you will have learned quite a lot about how to explore and use the environment actively to further your own growth.

"In order to facilitate listening to yourself we will place as few restrictions on you as we possibly can. In fact, the only required activity in this laboratory is a two hour meeting from four to six each afternoon for which you will be divided into two

groups of ten, each meeting with one of us. These meetings are obligatory, and in them you will be expected to share with others what you have been doing. The meetings are a chance for the staff to keep in touch with everyone in the lab, and we hope that they will also be an opportunity for you to learn from one another's experiences, help each other to make best use of the learning resources here, and to deal with any of the issues which arise between you and the staff.

"There are no times which are arbitrarily assigned to work or to free time. The time is all free for you to use in your own best interests: to work, to play, to contemplate, to be responsible or irresponsible. Unfortunately the hotel management is not as flexible as we are: The hours between which various meals can be taken are posted over there on a flip chart. So far as we are concerned, the only requirement that you be anywhere or do anything in particular is the two hour daily meeting.

"Before our meeting began those of you who were wandering about will have noticed that this main conference room is stocked with a large variety of learning resources. In selecting them we have tried to offer as many options as possible as to learning processes. What they all have in common, however, is that they have been selected to enrich your thinking, experiencing and understanding of yourself as a person, in relationship to other people, and in your role as a manager. On the table over there are various diagnostic instruments which you can use to assess your own management style, your blocks or difficulties in creative problem solving, your preference for one or another learning process, your dominant motives and so on. Across the room there is a collection of books and articles. We have included writings

about behavioral sciences in management, humorous and serious observations on organizational life, messages on how to achieve fulfillment and personal growth, and even some fairly subversive writings about how to change organizations from the inside. The library doesn't necessarily reflect our views about what is true, good, or right; it does, however, represent our choice as to what is interesting, significant or worth thinking about.

"You will have noticed that we have also provided a variety of games and exercises. Some of these are standard management training and group dynamics exercises where we have run off all the materials you need to conduct the exercise. Others are handbooks or manuals of exercises which you may want to thumb through and try out. We have also selected a variety of psychological games which we think you may find interesting, and we have on hand some tape recorded instructions which allow you to conduct group and interpersonal learning activities without staff assistance. Lastly, we have provided a set of exercises called the Blocks to Creativity which permit you to explore in a self directed way fourteen different barriers to personal productivity and creativity, and hopefully to overcome these to some extent.

"This array of materials is far more than enough for anyone to cover during the week, and we hope you will be as selective as we have been wide ranging in choosing it. In order to give you a good start in exploring these materials we have made four lists of activities which we believe to be interesting and useful. These are posted on the walls. We suggest that between now and the beginning of the meeting at four tomorrow afternoon you complete at least one exercise from each of the four lists.

There is one list of diagnostic exercises, things you can do to assess your styles, skills, or to uncover some difficulties you may have. There is one list of exercises which can be done alone, another for two person exercises, and a third consisting of learning activities which require a small group. It is part of your training in initiative that once having decided on a two person or small group exercise, you are responsible for recruiting from amongst the participants the other people required to carry out the learning activity. If you get really stuck, you will usually find that one of the staff will be glad to join in.

"In exploring the resources of the laboratory, you will find it important not to overlook those of the other participants and of the staff: That is, the human resources which are here. In any collection such as ours there is a vast array of experience and talent which can be of use to all of us in our own learning and problem solving. The problem is to find out what is there through taking initiatives to get to know the others and interact with them in various settings. As staff we will take some responsibility for making our resources more readily available. We will try to respond to any request for help, information or even advice, and we will initiate conversations with you about your activities and learning experiences when that seems to be appropriate. We do not intend to be passive observers of the scene, but rather active participants in it. We expect initiatives from ourselves as well as from you, but if our work is to be of most use to you it had best be shaped by the actions you take towards us.

"That's about all we have to say for now. We will be glad to answer questions from those of you who feel the need for clarification; for those who don't I suggest you get started with one or another of the suggested learning activities on the four lists".

The group breaks up. Some wander a bit aimlessly about the room looking at the materials; others study the lists of suggested activities, and some ask questions of the staff about them. Gradually most of the participants find something to do: Some go off towards their rooms purposefully clutching stacks of material; others drift off to the bar to discuss this new experience.

The scene shifts to 10:30 the next morning.

One participant is deep in conversation with a staff member who had observed that he looked a bit lost and had asked him how things were going. The problem, a common one, is that the participant has been unable to articulate any learning needs which he could see as related to any of the materials offered. The staff member is questioning him deeply about his work and career aspirations and will end by making several concrete suggestions as to diagnostic instruments or learning activities in which he might engage.

Several members are sitting about the room working on the "Personal Inventory" which is the diagnostic instrument for the Blocks to Creativity. These are learning materials developed by Sandra and Ed Nevis of the Cleveland Gestalt Institute (no longer available in any form in 1994). They will identify three or four "Blocks" such as Fear of Failure, Reluctance to Let Go, Frustration Avoidance, Impoverished Fantasy

Life, or Reluctance to Exert Influence. They will then take a workbook for each of the Blocks they have decided they would like to work on.

Each workbook contains about a dozen exercises designed to increase awareness of the Block and provide practice in overcoming it. The exercises use a variety of media and materials. Some can be done alone, while others require a pair or a small group of people.

Other participants are not in evidence at the moment and may be in their rooms, walking in the grounds of the castle or on some errand into the village. For the most part it appears that people are working alone. There are a couple of pairs, but they seem to be composed of people who have known each other previously. A few initiatives have been taken towards the staff to ask for information about materials, but the participants have so far treated each other rather gingerly.

Four o'clock Monday afternoon.

In the small group meetings the staff members issue a questionnaire asking participants to rate the level of their own risk taking so far, write down the number of initiatives they have taken towards others, and estimate the proportion of time they have been truly autonomous (i.e. doing what *they* really wanted to do, rather than simply following custom, or the influence of staff and other participants, or doing what they felt their home organization would expect them to do in this kind of learning situation). Each participant is also asked to rate his involvement in the laboratory at this moment, as well as the degree of positive or negative feelings he has about it.

These results are then tabulated and posted and discussed by the group at some length. One group is rather divided in their ratings. Some members are highly involved and see themselves as exercising a fair degree of autonomy and beginning to take some initiatives (though not so many as they would like to). Others are completely "turned off". They complain variously that they don't see the relevance of this kind of education to their work; that the materials seem disorganized and difficult to use; that when they try exercises in the Blocks to Creativity they "don't feel anything"; that even if they do learn to exercise autonomy and initiative in the laboratory, they will have little opportunity to do so in their jobs back home; and so on. The most aggressively outspoken and articulate of the "dissidents" is a former military officer, now Operations Manager for a large international trucking firm. The main burden of his message is that the staff should clarify the precise objectives to be achieved in the course and should set up and conduct those activities required to reach those objectives. He is strongly supported by other members of the group and equally strongly attacked by several others who claim that he has missed the whole point of the laboratory and wishes not only to give up his own freedom but to regiment everyone else into the bargain. The issues are hotly debated but are no closer to resolution at the end of the meeting than they were at the beginning.

During the meeting the staff member remarks that most of the learning activity that he has seen going on was individual or in pairs and asks the group members to explore some of the inhibitions and barriers which prevent them from approaching others and initiating activities with them. There is some fairly open sharing around

this issue. The staff member also points out that the staff are willing to suggest and if necessary conduct as highly structured learning activities as the participants desire, and that if those who are experiencing a lack of direction and purpose will come along for a chat, he will be glad to make some specific suggestions for learning activities. One or two of the participants visibly brighten at that, but the Operations Manager is not mollified. What *he* thinks the organizers should do is to establish a clear set of objectives for the course and conduct learning activities that are clearly related to these objectives. That is their job, not that of the participants.

Moving ahead to Wednesday afternoon.

The scene has changed considerably. The main conference room where the materials are kept has a disheveled, used look with books, articles and test papers scattered about where participants have left them. A group of four are gathered round the table playing a game of Executive Decision, a management game which emphasizes judgment and risk taking in buying and selling. Another group are in a corner rolling dice. They are playing a new game invented by one of the staff members on the inspiration of Rhinehart's "The Dice Man" (Rhinehart, 1971). It is an anti-decision making game in which players experiment with how it feels to give up control of their behavior to blind chance for an hour or two. Each of the players has listed several activities which he thinks he ought to or might like to engage in during the afternoon and they are rolling dice to see which ones they will actually carry out. The game is designed particularly for people who underuse or inhibit their own playful and creative impulses by an overemphasis on efficiency, planning and "making

every minute count". At the conclusion of the dice rolling one member goes off to get the hotel's vacuum cleaner and begins to clean and straighten up the main conference room; another goes out to the back of the castle to make a sketch of an erotic bas relief set into the wall there; a third takes a book and goes to his room to read; and the fourth goes off to arrange a talk with one of the laboratory participants with whom he has spoken very little because his initial impressions of him were rather unfavorable.

Another group are having an "encounter session" in one of the smaller rooms. They are using a tape recorded set of instructions to guide their activities. They have had one session already, have become very enthusiastic about this (to them) new way of learning and getting closer to others, and the members are developing a certain elitist and cliquish attitude towards themselves.

There remain some who are working as individuals or in pairs. Two or three have developed rather well articulated self development plans using the Blocks to Creativity. The Operations Manager is still aggressively skeptical, and although he does not resist attempts to involve him in the activities of others, he initiates none himself and professes himself to be unaffected by those in which he does participate. Another, sadder case is presented by a middle aged bureaucrat who is simply bewildered by the proceedings. On inquiry by the staff member who has been working with him, it has developed that when he was offered a chance to attend the laboratory by his Personnel Officer he agreed without questioning what kind of a training course it was to be. Asked why, he replied that "if the company asked me to go to the seashore to dig holes in the sand for a week with all expenses paid, I'd go

along just for the holiday". With no objectives of his own and no daily routine to march to from morning rising to bedtime at night, he seems a rather pathetic figure. He reads a bit, walks occasionally in the countryside, but only really comes to life in the late evening in the bar. Other participants are gentle with him and invite him to join in their activities, but occasionally a little contempt shows through.

The scene on Friday.

The last day presents some marked contrasts. The high tide of group activity having been passed on Wednesday and Thursday, many of the participants are back to individual and pair activities. There is a renewed interest in the Blocks to Creativity and in some of the diagnostic tests. Those who are still working in groups are mostly engaged in some kind of life and career planning exercise which is intended as a bridge between the laboratory and the back home situation. Some few are using a closed circuit video tape recorder which was brought in on Thursday to "see themselves as others see them" in face-to-face situations. Others are taking inventory of the library materials with an eye to acquiring copies for their own use.

The closing session of one of the ten person groups proves a serious, hardworking learning experience rather than the expected round of farewells and testimonials. Instead, the group works intensively on exploring the difficulty they have had in using the resources of the staff member during the laboratory. Earlier, there had been a confrontation between some group members who asked that the obligatory afternoon sessions be shortened, and the staff member who was unwilling to do so; this had occurred on Tuesday afternoon. The staff member had

subsequently felt left out and underused, while some of the participants had been determined to "show him" that they were competent to carry out their learning without his help. There now takes place an exploration of the role of authority in learning and some attempts to generalize this back to the organizations from which the participants have come. Participants try to think of ways to help themselves to maintain their new-found autonomy in a situation where authority will at best be neutral to their efforts. Deeply involved as the members are in these issues, the meeting goes overtime and eventually breaks up on a rather thoughtful and serious note.

A New Design for Personal Development

These vignettes from actual training sessions illustrate the core process of a cluster of training designs called Self directed Learning (SDL). The core process in SDL is autonomous learning. Autonomous learning can be said to have occurred in an educational situation when it becomes hard for educators to find participants who need a helping hand in finding something interesting or productive to do. From this point on, the educator's role becomes truly ancillary and peripheral; the participants genuinely manage their own development. Under various titles ("Motivation Laboratory", "Laboratory in Initiative and Autonomy", "Creativity Workshops") the basic design has now (1972) been used with upwards of 215 participants in some thirteen separate educational events conducted in five different countries (Belgium, England, Ireland, Netherlands and the United States). The basic design and philosophy of the laboratories are described above in the opening remarks to the participants by the

staff member. The content of the learning materials may vary quite widely, depending on the educational purpose of the event and the background of the participants. The duration of the laboratories has varied from three days to seven, with five or five-and-a-half seeming about the most effective compromise between the ideal and the practical. With one or two exceptions, the laboratories have been exceptionally well received by participants. I generally consider an experience a "success" if the community develops an *autonomous learning process* and this usually occurs somewhere in the middle of the laboratory if it is to happen at all. One recognizes that an autonomous learning process has developed in the community when he begins to find it hard to discover participants who need a helping hand in finding something interesting or productive to do. At such a point, the staff member begins to feel a bit useless and out of things and can take a certain melancholy satisfaction in his loneliness in realizing that things are now going well for the most part, and are largely out of his hands anyway.

Antecedents of a New Experiential Design

The educational design which is the subject of this paper bears some resemblance and owes considerable debt to the work of others. Particularly notable are Richard Byrd's "Creative Risk-Taking Laboratory" (Byrd, 1967); "The Organization Laboratory" developed by Jerry Harvey, Barry Oshry and Goodwin Watson (Harvey, 1967, Personal communication); and the "Laboratory with Flexible Structures" created by Max Pagès and his associates in Paris (Pagès, 1971, Personal communication).

I came to this radical focus on autonomous learning by stages. During the Sixties I was deeply involved in the sensitivity training "movement," working a great deal with the NTL Institute and sharing much of the value and philosophical base that has since developed into "encounter." We learned a lot about how to produce group learning experiences that were deeply moving and impactful for participants. But participants all too often reported massive difficulties in implementing changes in their work relationships, frequently adding that the major impact of the sensitivity experience was on their family lives. It began to be apparent to some of us that the "soft" T group culture was difficult to apply in "hard" situations where power, authority, and productivity requirements dominate. We began to feel the need for educational designs that would send the participants back into the world tougher and stronger, ready to deal with the pressures they found there.

It also became apparent that the people who came to places like NTL's Bethel, Maine, training facility were increasingly "soft" people. As sensitivity training became better known, participants were selecting themselves on the basis of their values and personal styles, and we began to see an increasingly skewed population of professional helpers, teachers, staff (as opposed to line) personnel, and a growing proportion of participants who either currently were or recently had been in psychotherapy. Such participants found the T group culture comfortable rather than confronting, and they tended to become dependent on it. Some people became "groupies" who came back again and again to "charge their batteries," unable to create for themselves in the outside world the closeness and openness they so valued in the

group. As a social movement, sensitivity training began to feel more and more inbred and encapsulated.

Thus, when I began to live and work in Europe in 1968, I was already beginning to explore ways in which the richness and immediate impact of the group experience could be preserved. This personal weaning process was hastened by my rather unsatisfactory experiences in conducting T groups with British and European managers. The groups I conducted seldom seemed to develop a great deal of depth or involvement on the part of the participants, and they seemed to require an inordinate amount of energy and skill on the part of the staff in order to make them go at all.

Existential Differences between European and American Managers

I thought a lot about the possible causes of these difficulties. After discarding the quite plausible hypothesis that I just wasn't very skillful with such groups, I concluded that possibly the differences I experienced between American and European T groups had something to do with cultural differences in existential issues. This mouthful of words means that I had decided that the problems or "hang-ups" which most deeply disturbed European managers were different from the ones that were bothering the Americans I had worked with, and this difference was somehow a cause of their responses to sensitivity training. American managers seemed to me, by contrast with their British and European counterparts, to be rather more lonely and alienated, more disturbed in their family relationships, hungrier for a missing depth and intimacy in interpersonal relationships generally, and more willing to expose

themselves and take personal risks to achieve rapid and satisfying connection with others.

The European managers, on the other hand, seemed less geographically and socially mobile than the Americans; they were much more likely to have worked with the same company all their professional lives. They frequently lived close to their own and their wives' parents, and they were much less often transferred between departments within their firms. They were thus securely embedded in a matrix of organizational, family and community relationships which appeared to meet their relationship needs much better than was true for most of the Americans. At the same time, the Europeans paid for their stability with a sense of immobilization, entrapment and a degree of impotence within their organizations. They seemed more often dissatisfied with the amount of authority and responsibility they had, and they were more likely to express themselves in defeatist terms about the possibilities of initiating and carrying out change and innovation. To a person in such an existential situation, a group may be less a source of needed intimacy and acceptance, and may rather have the function of encapsulating the individual and frustrating his individual growth and development. In my thinking about the problem I began to become fascinated with the possibility of designing experience-based training that would make use of the insights gained in sensitivity training but would boldly abandon the forms and technology of the T group and build afresh something more appropriate to the cultural milieu in which I was then working and living. I set myself the following objectives for the design:

- The learning experience should radically avoid the creation of dependency relationships. In contrast to sensitivity training and encounter experiences, the learning should not depend on the support of a small group, the leadership of charismatic educators, or the use of powerfully coercive educational technology like the T group (Harrison, 1965c).
- The learning experience should strengthen the learner's initiative and commitment to the pursuit of his or her own learning goals. It should give participants confidence in their ability to manage their own learning, through a toughening experience begun during the formal learning event. For example, participants are encouraged in my training designs to "be self oriented" in their responses to others who ask them to join with them in group activities. Both forming a learning group and leaving a learning group build autonomy. Passively joining a group and staying in it does not.
- The learning should foster the perception of oneself as a center of energy and action—an origin rather than a pawn of outside forces.

An Experimental Design for Developing Initiative, Autonomy and Risk Taking

With my like-minded colleague, Jacques Mareschal, the first such laboratory was developed and conducted for a group of middle managers in Belgium in June, 1971. That is the one which is described in the opening paragraphs of this paper. This first laboratory was called a "Motivation Laboratory" because we had the idea that it was necessary for a person first to understand his own needs and motives, those most basic wellsprings of energy and activity, before he could take in hand his own personal

development and growth. I do not use this original term any more because it does not communicate very well to the public; but I still agree with this original principle.

The "Laboratory in Initiative, Autonomy and Risk-Taking" (my current name for the experience) is too new to have been evaluated by research. It has been enthusiastically embraced by most of the participants who have experienced it, but I want to assess it by other criteria. I propose to do this by considering the method as an attempt to put into practice a number of principles or theories about learning, some of which are generally accepted, and others about which there may be more controversy. I shall not rely heavily on the perceptions of staff and participants in judging the success of these laboratories, even though this is probably the basis on which the acceptance of the innovation and its use by others will depend.

The Principle of Internal Motivation

The first principle against which I should like to compare the laboratory is a motivational one.

Effective training designs make maximum use of the learner's own internal motives, values, interests and "felt needs".

They facilitate the channeling of the learner's own motivation into productive learning activities. They use a minimum amount of energy on the part of the teacher or learner in overcoming "resistances" and in blocking or opposing the expression of the learner's needs.

Thus a corollary to the first principle deals with the control of behavior during the learning process.

Needed control of the learner's behavior is accomplished by providing intrinsically rewarding options, rather than by telling, selling, or coercion.

The Laboratory in Initiative, Autonomy and Risk-Taking is designed to be consonant with these motivational principles, and that is one of its greatest assets. It evokes little resistance on the part of participants, because of the respect we show to their needs and wishes. The learner is presented with an opportunity to follow his own interests and values wherever they may take him. Much of the design effort is devoted to providing materials which will be experienced by participants as interesting, useful and rewarding. The message conveyed by staff-participant interactions is well summed up by the phrase, "try it, you'll like it." Throughout the laboratory experience, participants undertake activities on their own, find them rewarding, and are thereby encouraged to higher levels of independent activity and initiative. By providing a wide variety of materials, each participant is able to find some outlet or connection to his "felt needs" in what has been designed to be a rich and responsive learning environment.

A Coercion Free Learning Setting

As I experience these laboratories, they are the least coercive of any educational experiences which I have conducted, or in which I have taken part as a participant. In this regard they embody the principle of using *internal motivation* which I have set

forth in two previous papers (Harrison, 1969*), (Harrison, 1970*). The entire thrust is for participants to listen to their own needs, wants and desires, and even gentle persuasion may shift the focus from the self to the person of the educator. Gentle persuasion is sometimes needed (see below) but once it has done its work, we move back into a supportive stance.

The Vulnerability of the Learning Process to Participants' Willingness

This lack of coercion is also the Achilles Heel of the method. By contrast with the coercive and norm-setting power of the small group, and/or the charismatic leader, in other experiential learning methods (T groups, Synanon, encounter groups, etc.) the Laboratory in Initiative, Autonomy and Risk-Taking applies little or no pressure to keep the learner involved with the learning situation. It helps a lot when participants make a truly voluntary choice to attend such a laboratory and start out wanting to have a positive experience. In a number of our programs there have been individuals who were sent by their organizations without much respect for their own wishes, who found in the program little to generate enthusiasm, and who opted out of the action for most of the laboratory experience. In the one or two unsuccessful programs we have had there was a "critical mass" of such people, who absorbed so much of the energy of the others that there wasn't much left for learning.

Once participants begin working with the materials and with each other, and experience the fun and excitement of learning as "high play," there is little difficulty in keeping things moving. At first they are a bit shy and fearful of choice. They seem to be afraid of failure, as though there is some inner shame in making the wrong choice.

I provide an annotated card file of the optional exercises, games, and reading materials organized by focus, as follows.

- Intrapersonal: useful for exploring personality, skills, attitudes, values, creativity, imagination. Oriented to understanding and experiencing deeper aspects of the self.
- Interpersonal: useful for learning about one's styles of interaction with others, and for enhancing one's interpersonal skills through practice.
- Group level: useful for understanding how groups work, and for acquiring skill in working in groups.
- Organization level: useful for exploring and understanding organization dynamics, and the relationship of the individual to the organization.

The Educator as Emergency Road Service Provider

We have found it important to watch for people who seem at loose ends, and to help them find things to do that meet some inner need. I will interview a participant who seems a little "lost" about what he would like to learn, and then suggest to him some activities that might give satisfaction. Many people are not used to being asked, or asking themselves, "What would please (stimulate, intrigue, challenge) me right now?" It is hard for them to "tune in" and listen to their inner voices.

I don't press people to use the learning materials we have provided. Sometimes I will advise spending time alone, taking a walk, or reading. Most participants respond well to such help. They are like a car with a weak battery. Once we can get their motors started, they move along fine on their own. So I work with stalled participants

only until they find a direction of inquiry. Then I leave them to get on with it. That, and counseling people who want to reflect with an understanding listener on the experiences they are having is pretty much the extent of the staff's professional responsibilities during the free activity period. During the mandatory small group meetings we facilitate participants in making sense of the laboratory as an innovative learning experience, and we help them work through whatever feelings come up around their participation.

The Principle of Multiple Learning Tracks

The second design principle against which to assess the "Autonomy Lab" has to do with the individuation of learning.

The ideal design should permit the individual to spend time and effort upon different learning activities which are appropriate to his degree of background and preparation, his rate and style of learning, and the use which it is projected he will make of the material to be learned

There are really two lines of reasoning involved in this principle. One is that ideally each individual should have a program of learning tailor-made to his own needs. He should be able to go into great depth on some matters which are new to him or which are likely to be particularly useful in his work or outside life, and he should be able to avoid or deal superficially with other matters in which he may be well prepared or which are irrelevant to his interests and needs.

Choosing and Using One's Preferred Learning Style(s)

He should be able also to choose and use his strengths as a learner. Some people learn better through concrete experience, others through abstract conceptualization, and so on (Kolb and others, 1971). While it is desirable that an individual be stretched to strengthen those learning processes which he does not use effectively, I think that people learn most effectively when they are not blocked from using those styles with which they are most comfortable. The totally experiential learning design puts formidable barriers in the way of a person who learns most effectively through abstract conceptualization, just as a formal lecture and reading course is frustrating for a person who learns through active experimentation. Such persons find traditional classroom learning difficult to use and apply in their daily lives. The learning resources gathered together to stock a learning laboratory in initiative and autonomy can easily be designed to offer a wide range of learning *processes* to participants so that individuals can both use those processes at which they are adept, and gain increased skill in those with which they are less comfortable.

A major philosophical theme in this emphasis on individualizing learning is the concept of *equifinality* in learning and problem solving. Basically, the concept means that there are many roads to the same goal, and that each individual will learn best when left to use a road he knows and with which he is comfortable. One of the best examples of the concept is in Management by Objectives. The basic idea is that once a goal has been clearly established and accepted, each individual should be free to find his own best means and paths to that goal, using his unique talents and strengths to

achieve success. This is in contrast to the explicit philosophy of scientific management that there is one best way to do each job. In Management by Objectives a great deal more *trust* is placed in the capacity of the individual to attain goals without explicit programming regarding the precise steps or paths to be taken.

The Meta-Learning Goal of the Autonomy Lab

The Autonomy Lab makes a similar assumption about the individual as a learner and problem solver, trusting him to find the best combination of activities to his own goals, but providing him with opportunities for consultation and access to the resources of others. In carrying out this process the participant is *learning how to learn*: That is, he is learning how to establish and clarify his own learning goals and to explore the environment for resources useful in attaining the goals. The Laboratory in Initiative, Autonomy and Risk-Taking goes a long way towards actualizing the promise of learning how to learn which was often made but seldom kept by the early proponents of T groups and sensitivity training. It was difficult for the sensitivity trainers to keep this promise because learning in the T group depends upon the creation and utilization of a highly specialized learning environment and technology for which the trainer's skills are very central if not indispensable. This is not the case in the Autonomy Lab where the individual is encouraged to create his own learning program individually, using materials which are available in the environment and depending upon himself to build those relationships with others which are required to utilize them effectively.

The Principle of Optimum Confrontation

The third learning principle by which I like to assess designs has to do with the management of anxiety and stress.

The confrontation and resulting amount of anxiety and stress should be maintained for each individual at the level where he is stimulated to explore, experiment and learn in an active fashion, and it should not be permitted to rise to the point where he becomes immobilized or where his normal ways of coping become so ineffective that he regresses to less effective behavior patterns (Harrison, 1965a), (Harrison, 1970).*

Groups Seldom Provide Optimum Confrontation for All their Members

Maintaining the appropriate level of stress and confrontation has been a perennial problem in experiential learning, particularly in sensitivity training and encounter groups. When working with a small group the problem becomes almost impossibly complicated by the obvious fact that the appropriate level for one person is likely to be too much or too little for another. Since groups tend to develop norms about stress (e.g., they can be "deep" groups or relatively more cognitive and "talky" in their process) all the members tend to be exposed to the same fairly narrow range of confrontation. This sometimes results in psychological damage to weaker members of the group. Or an entire group may avoid confrontation in order to protect one or two fragile members.

In the Autonomy Lab the potentially high stress of a learning experience which is very unstructured in time, space, and direction of activity is balanced by the opportunity for the individual to have free access to learning activities which are very non-confronting. For example, it is not uncommon to see members who are having difficulty with the lack of structure spending a good deal of time with books and articles until they gain more confidence and are able to use more active exercises. We also find that the more adventurous, emotionally stronger participants are likely to be the first to use such potentially threatening materials as the Group Therapy Game and the Encounter tapes. When the safety of this new territory has been explored and established, other members may feel free to join in, but there are always those who never take part in such exercises.

We also find that people often choose a cycle of confrontation and withdrawal for themselves which seems to make a rather sensible rhythm of stress and recovery. Of course, groups can be observed to do this as well, but the cycle does not necessarily meet the needs of all the individual members.

Participants Choose their Level of Confrontation Wisely

It is of course possible that if the individual is left to seek his own level of confrontation he will tend to operate at one which produces less than the maximum possible learning. In my experience with these laboratories this seems rarely to be the case where the individual is strongly motivated to learn. What I have been impressed with, is the way in which the level of confrontation tends to be maintained by the individual at a level where his learning seems to be *integratable*: That is, most people

seem to choose those experiences which take them on from where they are in a series of steps rather than in a great leap forward or "break-through".

A program in which the level of stress is self moderated in this way is not only safer for the individual, but probably results in a higher degree of retained and usable learning than more dramatic methods. One of the major advantages of the self directed learning design is the opportunity it presents for self-control of confrontation and stress. In my experience with this design I have seldom had cause to be concerned about the effects of psychological stress on individual participants. I could not make a similar statement regarding my experience with sensitivity training.

Evaluating Self Directed Learning

What Good Is It?

When I get to this point in the exposition of the Autonomy Lab to colleagues or clients, they are likely to raise a potentially embarrassing question. "It all sounds very good and quite effective," they say, "but of what real use is it likely to be? How many organizations do you know in the current economic climate who want to train their managers to be autonomous? The whole thing has a very anarchistic ring". Even those who see very readily the utility of this training to organization improvement usually say that as far as they can see the market is far from ready for it.

Constrained as I am to making my living from my consulting and educating activities, I find this kind of feedback rather depressing. However, I don't completely agree with it. It seems to me that on the contrary the laboratory design which I have described in this paper, and the many variations upon it which are possible, have

substantial prospects for the short term, and an extremely bright future in the longer term.

Where my skeptical friends and clients are right is in suggesting that this particular laboratory design has not much to offer in educating managers to perform roles which are essentially bureaucratic in structure and process.

Towards Learning Organizations

Traditional management training is education for bureaucracy. It teaches the individual to look outside himself for the solutions to problems and for guidelines to action. These are amply provided by the bureaucracy in the form of job definitions, organization charts, procedural specifications and the like.

However, bureaucracy is under increasing stress from within and without. Donald Schon has very persuasively made the case in *Beyond the Stable State* (Schon, 1971) that the increasing rate of change in society, technology and in the marketplace means that bureaucratic organizations must increasingly give way to organizations which function as learning systems. And learning organizations require managers who can manage their own learning. The days when a highly centralized management could control or even adequately predict its environment are, I think, numbered. Attempts to deal with crisis by recentralization and increasing tight controls from the top will in the long run give way to movements towards building more flexible, internally committed organizations which adapt, innovate and change themselves more rapidly than could have been thought possible in the old style bureaucracy. The essential processes in such an active learning system seem to be as follows:

- Goal directedness: an awareness of own goals and the mobilization of energy towards them.
- Active exploration of the environment and of one's own resources, leading to an increased awareness of alternative means to goals.
- Action upon the environment.
- The search for feedback, for knowledge of results, and the use of such information to modify action.

In order for organizations to function as learning systems in this way it is necessary that managers be adept in the use of such processes, and this is indeed what the Autonomy Lab is all about. No matter what the content of the learning resources which have been provided (and they could run the gamut from human relations to economics and production control), the self directed learning *process* remains the same.

Managerial Tasks Which Need Self Directed Learning Now

Even now, at a time when economic and social difficulties are being dealt with by an attempt to increase control and direction from the top in most private and public organizations, there are parts of each of these organizations which either are or have a strong need to be non-bureaucratic in their structure and functioning. These are the parts which are in contact with the rapidly shifting, "turbulent" aspects of the environment, whether these be scientific and technological areas, marketing and purchasing functions, or social and governmental forces. Managers in these parts of

organizations have a current and pressing need to become effective and autonomous learners.

There is also a growing category of managers who are given important job responsibilities which are essentially non-bureaucratic or perhaps anti-bureaucratic in nature. These are jobs which require one to function outside normal channels of communication, to exercise influence without authority, and often to operate in the spaces between more traditional and highly structured subunits of the organization. These are managers who may find themselves in coordinating and liaison work, in project management, in many kinds of technical staff work, and in organizational change roles. They, too have need for a high degree of autonomy, initiative and risk-taking in learning and in working with the individuals and units with which they interact in the organization. These people need today the kinds of education which our design makes possible in a number of content fields, and it is my hope that tomorrow they will be the ones who will help organizations to find ways to change themselves from bureaucracies to learning systems.

Adapting Self Directed Learning to Other Content

Whether or not one shares my somewhat gloomy prediction regarding the viability of bureaucracy in the medium to long term, there is another way of looking at the initiative and autonomy design which I believe worthy of careful study by those concerned with management education (or indeed, with higher education generally). I believe that almost any *applied* subject can be adapted with profit to the same basic design that I have used in the laboratories described here.

Managers usually go on courses because they want to learn something related to their work. Typically the educator makes some guess as to what sort of work situations most of the managers are in and selects from among the things he knows those which he feels it would be good for them to learn. The success rate of these guesses does not appear to be very high. I believe the success of such courses in providing real help to managers could be dramatically improved if the resources were presented in a format similar to the design described above.

First, the manager entering the course would need to go through some sort of diagnostic procedure which would have to be carefully designed to relate the content of the course to his own difficulties, problems, opportunities or responsibilities in his job. The preparation of such diagnostic material is not familiar to most management educators and would probably be the most difficult phase of the course redesign. Such a task does not, however, seem to me to present any very formidable technical obstacles.

Resources for the course would be made available on a random access basis to the participants. These might include materials in a variety of media: books, articles, case studies, audio or video tape recorded lectures, and the educator himself. The diagnostic exercise would refer participants to particular learning resources according to the type and level of problem they presented, and the instructor would also serve as a guide to help match participant needs to learning resources. Participants could, as in the Autonomy Lab, be formed into mutual help and learning groups which would

exchange information about resources and perhaps assist one another in applying learning experiences in the course to individual back home problems.

Although there are some managers who will find this kind of learning design a bit difficult to get used to and to use effectively, prospective students are more ready for the design than educators are to give it to them. Partly this is a matter of developing the requisite technical and interpersonal skills to design and carry out such a learning experience, but perhaps more fundamentally it is a question of the personal needs for control and participation on the part of the educator, and of the level of preferred risk-taking and trust in the participants. Once a self directed learning activity is well launched, there may be very little for the educator to do. He needs to be available in case his expertise is required, but most of the time the participants are doing all right by themselves, and one feels distinctly redundant. Since many of us derive a good deal of the satisfaction that we have in education from the dependence of the students upon ourselves, this can for some educators be a rather depriving experience.

The same applies to the control of the learning process. In fact, we do not really control the *learning* process in most management education, but we do control the *activities* and the materials to which participants are exposed. In a self directed design, however, this control is given up at the outset and cannot be regained without a tremendous loss of confidence on the part of the participants, and loss of face on the part of the educator. This means that self directed education can be a rather risky business. If one gives up the responsibility to participants for determining their own

activities, and if they are not motivated to take it over, it is possible to have a very uncomfortable situation in which no one has the power to make anything happen. I have experienced this in two Autonomy Labs, and it was anything but pleasant. Thus the educator must be willing to take more risk than he is normally used to in order to experiment with and perfect a self directed learning design in his own subject matter area. One is always more highly criticized for an experiment which fails than for carrying on a more traditional process which is boring and ineffective.

The above *caveats* to the contrary notwithstanding, I have considerable confidence that self directed learning methods will produce significant increases in the relevance and effectiveness of educational activities, even in subject matter areas outside of the behavioral sciences. I believe my colleagues and I have only begun to learn what they can do. As explore and experiment, this first report will be followed by others detailing our further learnings.