Straight Off the Deep End in Adventure Learning

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Editors’ Note: Numerous contributors to our 2009 book argued strongly for getting at least part of negotiation teaching out of the classroom and into real environments. So we tried it – in Istanbul, a famously negotiation-centric environment on many levels. In this introduction to a series of analyses of what happened and how adventure learning might be used in the future, the organizers take responsibility for a string of errors – each of which, it turned out, contributed usefully to everyone’s education in the end.

“The policy of being too cautious is the greatest risk of all.” (Jawaharlal Nehru)

Introduction
In this project’s first book, Rethinking Negotiation Teaching (Honeyman, Coben, and De Palo 2009a) and companion publication in Negotiation Journal (Honeyman, Coben, and De Palo 2009b), more than a few contributors (see, e.g., Alexander and LeBaron 2009; LeBaron and Patera 2009; Nelken, McAdoo, and Manwaring 2009; Shmueli, Warfield, and Kaufman 2009) expressed frustration with the assumption that so practical a discipline as negotiation ever should

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have been thought of as teachable almost entirely in a traditional classroom setting. We were struck by the vigor of these critiques and realized we were about to have an unusual opportunity for some experiments in a new direction. The venue of the second conference of our series – Istanbul – offered the tempting prospect of combining the strongly-desired cross-cultural elements, also argued for by many of our contributors, with some new procedural approaches to teaching.

In particular, we sought to address the post-Rome-conference critique that negotiation teachers: 1) over-rely on “canned” material of little relevance to students; and 2) share an unsubstantiated belief that role-plays are the best way to teach. Our solution was declared explicitly in the conference agenda:

Provide a “learning lab” to explore an adventure learning thesis: “authenticity as priority.” This suggests that all participants...experience directly some “real” negotiations as part of the meeting, and test existing perceptions against self-reflection on that experience (including not only “cognitive/rational” responses, but also emotional responses).¹

Much of the planning for the Istanbul meeting involved our first, and as the reader will see in the chapters to follow, flawed attempts to make good on this challenge. If we were talented cartoonists we would insert a latter-day version of the famous New Yorker “Back to the Old Drawing-Board” cartoon here; but the reader will just have to imagine it.

**Planning for the “Unplannable”**

As soon as we realized the level of interest among our 2008-09 contributors in getting away from traditional teaching venues, an overwhelming image presented itself: the Grand Bazaar of Istanbul, one of the world’s most storied environments for negotiation, going back half a millennium. It was irresistible.

It was also wrong. It was not until we arrived in Istanbul, and actually paced out the territory we expected our negotiating teams to cover, that we realized the Grand Bazaar was altogether too grand for our purposes, which involved getting teams of professional negotiation teachers to actually negotiate for something. The basic problem was that the 4,000 shops in the Grand Bazaar were heavily tilted toward the expensive, with numerous jewelry emporiums and a plethora of rug dealers. We could not reasonably expect our academic colleagues to invest hundreds or thousands of dollars in pursuit of our exercise.

Fortunately, an alternative became readily apparent. Down the hill from the Grand Bazaar is the Spice Market, which as its name
implies, deals in more rapid trading of less costly goods. For our purposes, it was ideal. Or so we thought at the time. In retrospect, while there was ample learning to be had, the environment was still so special as to raise questions about replicability, under more normal circumstances and in more ordinary cities.

Still, as the following chapters will show, the environment served at least one purpose extraordinarily well – it inspired our colleagues to analyze, to invent, to create, and to write. Mostly, our colleagues begin by describing our Istanbul efforts in some detail, to set the context for each author’s own take on the subject. So we will focus our discussion here differently, in order not to be repetitive. In particular, we will comment on our design decisions and the considerations which led to them, and discuss what we see as the particular results we encountered, warts and all. But our discussion of the activities themselves will be relatively brief, and we rely on the succeeding chapters to give the reader a sense of just how many ways the same activity could be experienced and interpreted.

The Gory Details
The two activities chosen, after much discussion, were a traditional negotiation in the marketplace (with a few twists) and a more “oblique” exercise intended to cause an internal negotiation within a team. (For a helpful conceptual framing of these assignments as “orienting” and “disorienting,” see McAdoo, Manwaring, and Cheldelin, Orientation and Disorientation, in this section.) The activities were designed to devalue the cognitive, to encourage creativity, and to focus on emotion.

Negotiating the Spice Market (and Grand Bazaar):
Adventure Learning/Praxis Activity I
Participants were given from 12 noon until 3:30 pm to complete the marketplace exercise. We provided mini-bus transportation to and from campus, which we thought of as merely a precaution against the threatened rain. But this turned out in retrospect to have “normative” consequences too – no one eligible for the free ride wanted to miss it, and everyone made it back on time. The next day, as we will see, was different.

The exercise followed a brief welcome/introductory plenary session and (assigned) break-out groups, on topics which were both follow-up sessions from the Rome conference and intended to set the tone for the activity which followed. For the first exercise, participants were assigned to groups and instructed to go to the Spice Market and/or the Grand Bazaar and accomplish the following tasks as a group:
1) Negotiate a purchase of food (the group’s contribution to what the entire conference will share during the adventure learning debrief upon return from the market);

2) Negotiate for whatever else anyone in the group wants to buy;

3) Observe negotiations (including, of course, those conducted by the group members); and

4) Interview seller(s) as to their concerns, experiences and strategies.

In creating the assignment, we sought to provide an opportunity for participants to experience “real” cross-cultural negotiations directly, with the outcomes having at least some consequence for the group (e.g., quality of the food at the next break) – in other words, an exercise of authenticity (see LeBaron and Patera 2009: 59). Of course, in retrospect, we can easily see the folly in labeling as “authentic” the wanderings of multiple small groups of five or six academics through a confined marketplace interviewing people and bargaining (sometimes inadvertently with the same seller)! But as detailed by Melissa Manwaring, Bobbi McAdoo, and Sandra Chelde-lin (Orientation/Disorientation, in this section), there are many aspects of authenticity. At the very least, the assignment took us out of the conference facility and required participants to bargain “as themselves” as opposed to pretending to be a character in a role-play.

**Negotiating Images of Istanbul:**

*Adventure Learning/Praxis Activity II*

The second exercise was designed to be more oblique (i.e., its relevance to negotiation theory and practice was intended to be less immediately evident to participants). We instructed teams (this time self-selected, but with the exhortation to “stay diverse”) to go out and about in the city (where and how was left up to the group, but they were instructed to avoid the predictable and places where tourists usually go) and accomplish the following:

1) Agree on a photo taken by the group that the group believes best represents the crossroads of the sacred and the secular.

2) Agree on a photo taken by the group that the group believes represents the most dangerous thing you have seen during your walk about the city.

3) Agree on a photo taken by the group of the building that the group believes is most likely to be the “unmarked” CIA headquarters in Istanbul.

4) Agree on a self-portrait that best captures the essence of the group.

5) Add or change one thing about this assignment (before it is done) that would make this exercise a more effective learning experience for students of negotiation.
Our hope was that the “oblique” nature of the assignment (and its focus on creativity) would stimulate implicit learning, “knowledge gained without awareness” (Carey 2009).

The Unbearable Lightness of Being a Heavyweight Scholar

We found a good deal to celebrate in the experience as well as much that deserved self-criticism. The bazaar exercise might be hard to replicate in a more typical city, but it certainly has ignited plenty of thinking as to what might take its place (for helpful suggestions on implementation and variations, see Cohn and Ebner, *Bringing Negotiation Teaching to Life*, in this volume), and the discussions of culture that resulted have been richly satisfying to read. We think that as a single experiment, the exercise was well justified, even if one or another of the replacements becomes more appropriate for future efforts in the same direction.

Unlike the Negotiating the Spice Market exercise, which seemed generally well accepted (within the critiques which follow), the in-tra-team Negotiating Images of Istanbul exercise drew decidedly mixed results. If our bazaar exercise made us rethink our preconceptions the day before it was to run, our other exercise made us rethink our premises afterwards. In assigning people we think of as serious colleagues to perform a fun exercise, we made a bonehead error, in an area where any negotiator or negotiation teacher should know better: timing. We scheduled the exercise in the middle of the third day of a four-day meeting – in other words, after the group had already been together for a substantial time – and at a point in the day when they would have to come back and report on the same day. This resulted in a rueful lesson for us, as our wonderful colleagues proceeded to do exactly what they felt like for as long as it turned out to take.

Not only did some of the teams almost blow off the exercise entirely, by deciding that they deserved a good lunch and taking the time for it out of the exercise time, but our goal of an intensive group debrief in cleverly-managed randomized regroups fell apart, as the working groups straggled back at whatever time each group individually could bear to get itself back into a university building. Chaos reigned, at least for a while. Moreover, from our own observation, many (though not all) of the photos taken were trite, the product of discussions that were often nowhere near the level of intensity and commitment we had hoped for.
CIA Secret Headquarters: Group Three

CIA Secret Headquarters: Group Four
Such problems, mostly self-imposed through our failure to anticipate just how many things could go wrong, are themselves valuable learning for the future. One adaptation that seems mandatory in future adventure learning design is to be prepared for a less controllable, less predictable experience than is normal in the classroom – and to prepare, in particular, to be ready to teach whatever aspects of negotiation are reinforced or unearthed by the particular students’ idiosyncratic experiences with such an exercise. That, in and of itself, seems a development worth having for our next generation of negotiation teaching.

**Learning by Doing It (Wrong)**
The hard lessons learned from this first set of experiments included:

- The importance of “field testing” the assignment prior to its use, including an effort to replicate the actual expected conditions. By definition, adventure learning takes place outside of the classroom, and therefore is impacted by all kinds of elements outside the control of the instructor. Issues to be considered include: What happens if it rains? Is the activity planned during rush hour, when getting anywhere on time is impossible? Is the market even open on the day and time of the activity?
- The need to provide sufficient time for the activity. If the activity is to be completed over a traditional mealtime, build in extra time, because there will be some groups who will use...
the allotted time to eat at a sit-down restaurant, thereby losing valuable time for the work.

- The need to “position” the activity at a time that allows for the eventuality that participants will complete the assignment at different rates.

- The need not only to plan a significant debrief but to ensure that its timing will actually work for the group as a whole (for incisive critique on this issue, see Panga and Grecia-de Vera, *A Look at a 2.0 Negotiation Classroom*, in this volume).

- The need to recognize that adventure learning activities, because they are “authentic,” may actually chill, rather than inspire some negotiation students (see Kamp, *A “Semi-Student” Perspective*, in this volume). As observed by Roy Lewicki during a debrief the evening after our first such exercise in Istanbul, you could “smell the fear” in the room as assignments were given out (and, keep in mind, the recipients were experienced negotiation scholars and practitioners, not typical students).

- The risk that adventure learning might chill, rather than inspire, pales compared to the unintentional harm caused by failing to consider accessibility issues in adventure learning. As outlined by David Larson (*Not Everyone Gets to Play*, in this section), risks of exclusion are not just physical, but also carry ethical and moral dimensions. Indeed, the ethics issues raised by adventure learning got relatively little attention in this first round of writing. Perhaps post-Beijing conference writers will have more to say on this point.

**Conclusion**

Our analysis right after the successes and failures of our Istanbul experiments suggested that it would be well worth trying at least the oblique/conceptual exercise again as soon as possible, in a version that would attempt to remedy the more obvious errors of our first try. Fortunately, wonderfully diverse opportunities soon emerged, starting within weeks.

In December 2009, Sharon Press and Christopher Honeyman (see *Second Dive Into Adventure Learning*, in this volume) ran a version of the orienting and disorienting activities with graduate students from twenty-one different nations, all attending a European Union-funded masters program in transnational trade law and finance at the University of Deusto in Bilbao, Spain. And, in spring semester 2010, as detailed by Manwaring, McAdoo, and Cheldelin (*Orientation and Disorientation*, in this volume), Sandra Cheldelin did the same
with thirty students in her graduate-level, semester-long course on Reflective Practice, located in the greater Washington, D.C. area.

Suffice it to say, borrowing a phrase from William Faulkner, “[a]ll of us failed to match our dreams of perfection.” But we hope you will agree that both chapters suggest extremely promising futures for adventure learning outside the negotiation classroom. Other writers in this section offer more incremental stages, including some strategies for achieving some of the same results within (or close to) the classroom.

Notes

1 Our conference agenda declared a second objective as well – that participants “produce scholarship that challenges the field to think more about adventure learning opportunities (and how to implement them in typical instructional settings).” Given the eight chapters in this book on the subject, we deem it fair to claim “objective met.”

2 The sessions included: Finding Common Ground in the Soil of Culture, presented by Phyllis Bernard; Negotiation Philosophy in Chinese Characters, presented by Andrew Lee and Vivian Feng; Know Your Students: Variations on How to Begin Trainings, presented by Maude Pervere and Melissa Nelken; and Building an “Emotional Vocabulary,” presented by Mario Patera.

3 Groups were structured to create the most diversity possible. Characteristics considered included: gender, discipline, ethnicity, nationality, and immediate past influence (i.e., which session someone had attended in the morning.)

4 Transportation to the Spice Market was provided via mini-bus, but once there participants could walk or take public transportation to the Grand Bazaar. In a test of the activity the day before, program organizers started in the Grand Bazaar and then walked to the Spice Market.

References


