

Out of the Familiar: Learning Through Metaphor

“We have a saying,” says Duke Corporate Education’s Cheryl Stokes. “If you do something that’s really interesting and energizing and engaging, but you don’t link it back to the real business outcome and the learning outcome, all you’ve done is created a parlor game on steroids. And we’re not in that business.”

As an executive director on the Learning Innovations Team, Stokes is responsible for creating innovative ways to help people learn what they need to know as part of Duke CE’s customized education programs.

The learning methods team uses a broad range of activities to appeal to different learning styles and to help make the learning relevant, including behavioral learning labs, robust dialogues, content learning exploration, visual arts and multimedia. Working with each client to determine which method will achieve the most impact given the company context and culture, they draw on the team’s diverse backgrounds to imagine what is possible. For instance, Stokes’ interest in organizational learning began earlier in her career as an electrical and process engineer.

"Using non-traditional learning methods can provide safe environments for people to test new behaviors..."

A particularly unique and non-traditional method employed by the team is Duke CE’s Metaphoric Experience™ learning method that takes the participant out of his familiar environment, forcing him to experiment with new behaviors, skills and perspectives in an unfamiliar but compelling context.

“These experiences create a parallel world in which the participant is taken out of the comfortable context of his or her own role in the workplace to directly experience another less familiar, but very real context,” explains former director of learning methods Jane Kasper. “This provides a new perspective on the more familiar workplace role and allows the person to think differently about what he or she can do to make an impact in that role.”

For example, auditors at a public accountancy have become doctors engaged in medical diagnosis, marketers at a software company have become political consultants conducting polling, and executives at a global energy company have become tobacco executives facing a congressional sub-committee.

“Using non-traditional learning methods can provide safe environments for people to test new behaviors, to have a way to reflect on their behaviors, and perhaps try on things that they’d like to do differently,” says Stokes.

The key to a program – and the way Duke CE distinguishes itself – is to tie the memorable experience back to the business and learning outcomes. “A great experience takes people on a journey far enough away from their roles so that it is safe to take risks, experiment, fail, learn and be surprised,” says Kasper. “After the experience, we have the responsibility to take the participant all the way back home, back to their business so they can apply the lessons to achieve a business result.”

Those results are just what the learning methods team is aiming for. “Sometimes people will do a very cool experience, like have a person climb a mountain and think of the lessons of leadership related to climbing the mountain,” says Stokes. “That certainly can be effective. But what’s unique about Duke Corporate Education and how we use learning experiences, particularly those that are

continued on next page ►

non-traditional, is that they're always designed to business outcomes. They're always an integral part of a program, and they're connected to classroom content and designed with a very customized debriefing process."

Even when a non-traditional experience is the best choice, clients are sometimes nervous or wary. Duke CE strives to alleviate those concerns through conversation about the company culture and the learning outcomes that they are trying to achieve. The preparation culminates with a dry run that acts as not only a dress rehearsal of the experience but also an opportunity to craft the debrief – which is the way links are made between the experience and the learning outcomes.

"Once we have the experience, we're finding more and more that the less traditional parts of our program are actually the least risky parts," says Stokes. "They are generally well received, very impactful, and people remember them. Sometimes more traditional faculty-led sessions can be perceived as the 'riskier' part of the program, because they rely on a single person to make the connections."

Stokes has found that non-traditional faculty can gain as much from the programs as do participants. "I am always amazed that these non-traditional educators are excited and eager to work with us," she says. "They are excited that we see and understand a bit about their world. They're excited that they're connected to the business world in a way that they probably haven't thought of. And they've told me literally that they learn just as much working with us as we do working with them."

Craig Wolff, an author and journalism professor at NYU, has facilitated several Duke CE metaphoric experiences and explains that no matter the business issue, or solution, what it comes down to is connections between people.

"The bottom line is, everyone works with people, everyone is trying to solve problems, so I can help people step out of their lives and think about new ways of attacking their work," he says. "This is about truly taking the time and mental energy to say, 'I want to know what this person does. I want to understand.' It makes business more profitable and more spiritually rewarding. The longer-term benefit is that people are happier, in the workplace and in their lives.

"You're learning about people who are very much the same as you. That's the biggest lesson of all."