Everything is design

MARIANNE VINCENT

A PEEK INTO THE CREATIVE WHIRLWIND THAT IS INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN AT PEOPLE POTENTIAL

People Potential

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A peek into the creative whirlwind that is Instructional Design at People Potential

This essay is dedicated to our clients and to the learners in our classes.
It is because of you, and for you, that we design.

Marianne Vincent

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For Terry ~
for the early adventures set everything in motion; and still, they continue.

And for Josh ~
for taking on what I could not.

Author's Note

When I was working on a near-final draft of this essay, a good friend said to me: "I don't mean to be rude, but who is going to read it?"

This short note is to say that I don't expect that many of you will read the whole essay, since you may not be interested every aspect of our story of Instructional Design. These days, we only plough through "the whole thing" if it is something central and crucial to us. Even then, we might not.

However, there are quite possibly certain parts that will speak to challenges you are grappling with. There will be parts that resonate, and some parts will address questions that have been on your mind.

The chapter titles in the table of contents are a good starting place. Just click on the title that most piques your interest.

I have written the essay as one story, but really it is made up of three smaller stories (the three parts), and nine even smaller stories (each chapter). While each chapter leads to the next, I have written them so that they can stand alone. This is so that you can move through the book a chapter at a time, or read only the chapters that you are curious about.

Essentially, wherever you find yourself starting will be the right place to start.

Prologue

I was initially disappointed with the Van Gogh Alive exhibition in Kuala Lumpur because I was expecting something more (I don't know what) from the organiser's tagline: "the most-visited multi-sensory exhibition in the world". But disappointment quickly disappeared, making way for something profound.

What struck me first was how simple it was: two exhibition spaces.

First, you entered a 'traditional' space where miniature reproductions of Van Gogh's works were mounted. You could pause, look, read, and learn. Every description was clear. It was like learning your ABCs. Off to the side was an interactive area: you could stand in front of an easel, use a pencil, and make a line drawing of one of the paintings.

In the second space, there was a floor-to-ceiling slide show of Van Gogh's paintings and quotes. The colours changed so dramatically in the large space. You absorbed animated paintings – trains that circled the room, crows that flew out, short sections of text telling you about the different phases of his life. I found myself whispering to my colleagues who were with me: "Oh, that's Gaugin…That's when Van Gogh checked himself into the asylum at Saint-Rémy…Ah, this is when he wrote to his brother Theo…This is when baby Vincent was born…Look at the contrast of colour – these dark ones compared to the sunflowers that we know so well…"

I knew none of this before. I realised later how well the first exhibition space had done its job. It was curated for novices like me – so well-thought-out, with an invisible structuring of our experience as we moved through the spaces. Having learned and understood, we could respond to what we were seeing in the second space with names, terms, and concepts that many of us would not have known.

Reaction to the exhibition had been mixed. I could see why those who know art might hate it. It was not designed for the specialist. I suppose an expert might not marvel at the minds and skills that made the crows fly out towards you at the sound of a gunshot. Perhaps it was only us neophytes who were moved when – at this precise moment – we realised that Van Gogh, who gave us *Starry Night, Sunflowers, The Potato Eaters, The Bedroom in Arles, Café Terrace at Night, Almond Blossoms,* was close to his death, close to taking his own life, and perhaps knew it as he painted

Wheatfield with Crows.

I had visited the Van Gogh Museum in the Netherlands years ago. I remembered the awe I had for the artist, and the deep sadness when I walked through the final space, reading and looking at his last paintings. Someone, or a team, designed the experience that helped me to learn and to feel deeply in an area about which I had very little knowledge.

The Kuala Lumpur exhibition will count as a defining moment in my life, because I was encountering Van Gogh again at a time when I had become a writer. I was also working with instructional design teams at People Potential and so creation was a daily affair. Having recently turned 60, I could feel the phases of his life in way I couldn't when I was younger.

When one Van Gogh quote flashed before us that evening – *In the life of an artist, death is perhaps not the most difficult thing"* – it was as if the insides of me re-arranged. I turned slowly to my colleagues and said: "I think my decades-long fear of death has just dissolved." When something is designed so thoughtfully, your life can change in an instant.

The Van Gogh Alive exhibition booklet

Part One: Our Skill-building Methodology is Born, and Grows Up

A concert pianist tackles skill-building in corporate training

How can I be useful, of what service can I be? There is something inside me, what can it be?
–Vincent Willem van Gogh

In late 1986, I performed my final-year examination piano recital at the Conservatorium of the University of Melbourne. Before the official results were out, the Dean called me aside: "The examiners are so happy with your playing, they want you to stay on for an honours year." I chose the concerto I would play with the orchestra and spent the summer practising it. However, at the end of summer, the administrator at the Faculty of Music had exhausted all options that would have allowed me to remain. Being an overseas student, it wasn't straightforward, apparently. My fellow music course-mates suggested marrying one of them. I replied: "My father will kill you before you can finish that thought."

Marianne at her third year recital in Melbourne University

And so, in early 1987, with an extremely heavy heart, I returned to Malaysia. Our results had been released: I had won 'Most Outstanding Piano Performance'. I locked myself in the room at my family home where the piano was, and continued practising. I tried to resurrect my long-held dreams of starting a music school, but all I wanted to do was to practise.

I had to start working and so I started to teach music, but my music career was short: 1987–1991. During these four years, two turning points led me to a fork, and I chose the untravelled path.

First, I had fallen in love with Terry Netto through a year of writing letters – me in Melbourne completing my final year of studies, and Terry in Kuala Lumpur after returning from the Ateneo de Manila, having decided not to pursue studies to become a Jesuit priest. Now that I was back in Malaysia, we were getting to know each other in person. When we were not riding around on his motorbike, I was in my room practising, and later, teaching.

Terry had come across an approach called NLP (Neuro-Linguistic Programming). As he talked about it, I realised I didn't understand what he was going on about. Since he was helping to organise a basic course for a friend who was teaching NLP, I decided to attend.

I could not believe what I was learning. NLP presupposed that *the meaning of your communication was the response that you got*. If this sounds weird now, imagine encountering it in 1987! I was intrigued by the idea that we distort, delete, and generalise information; that we each carried a distinct "map" of how we interacted with the world around us. The internal strategies for pacing and leading, goal-setting, perceptual positions, association–disassociation, anchoring, representational systems and sub-modalities suddenly offered a view inside my head, and I could also see the world outside differently.

There was an entire new technique to build. I knew even then, at the very beginning, that there was material I could keep learning and returning to for the rest of my life.

A while later, Terry designed a three-month learning to learn programme for secondary school students. After the first batch of students completed the twelve-week course, I started refining the programme with him. We invented methods for time management, and designed planning worksheets. We devised speed reading, concentration, and photographic memory exercises. We developed study methods

using Mind Maps, and innovated by building in ways to review material based on memory principles. We taught goal-setting strategies from NLP. We included a module on how to design home environments to reduce distractions.

As I saw students apply what they were learning and improve in their studies, I was certain that there was nothing better to focus on than these two areas: building a technique to be able to feel, think, work, and interact better every day of your life, so you would be able to keep growing; and learning how to learn, so you could learn anything you needed, at any point in your life.

The second turning point was that my younger sister had a profoundly brain-injured baby. She and I, 22 and 24 years old, refused to accept the prognosis of a leading paediatric neurologist: *your baby won't live much past eight years; there's nothing you can do for her.* In that time before the internet, and with the help of a friend who was a new doctor, my sister and I wrote out baby Patricia's case history by hand, made multiple copies of the 20-plus-page document, and mailed it to friends in different parts of the world.

We discovered the [Institutes for the Advancement of Human Potential in Philadelphia](#) and that they had a branch in Healesville in Victoria, Australia. They were developing methods to help children just like Patricia to move up a developmental ladder. Their method was unconventional, detailed and structured; it was not easy to execute. They were people on a mission – just our kind of people. In the days before crowd-funding, we raised funds to travel to Healesville, and then to Philadelphia.

With my sister, and through the books of the Institutes founder Glenn Doman, I learned about developmental stages, and about the intensity needed for crawling, creeping, patterning. We designed a daily twelve-hour programme of movement and stimulation. Our family and community in Petaling Jaya volunteered to learn and run the programme. Friends offered expertise to build equipment like the patterning table, the inclined plane, and the vital stimulation box.

My sister and her baby moved to the US a couple of years later where Patricia, even with the disabilities, led a full and rich life until she passed on at 21. I learned that the impossible was possible.

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By 1991, I had obtained my Practitioner Certification in NLP and had decided, together with Terry, to join CREDO (the Centre for Research, Education and Development of Organisations) upon the invitation of two of its founders: for Terry to be the new CEO and for me to produce fresh, new programmes. CREDO was delivering management and leadership programmes to multinationals.

Not knowing anything about corporate training, I attended programmes by different providers. I sat at the back of the classes CREDO was offering to our clients. A few things stood out: very little seemed to be achieved in a two-day or even three-day training programme, and learners, me included, were bored. Not much was expected of them and there was so little for them to do.

I contrasted this with the experience we had when CREDO brought in Jerry Perez de Tagle to teach educators. We were thrust into the world of [Integrative Learning](), [Multiple Intelligences](), and [Educational Kinesiology](). Jerry's programmes were highly engaging and filled with multi-modal learning activities. They were awareness programmes that opened you to possibilities you might not have considered. But Terry and I both wanted to be able to impart skills that could transform a person's life at work – daily.

We had also come across literature on creativity, and again, we thought: surely everyone needed these skills and tools. Learning to learn, NLP, creativity skills – there couldn't be a more potent bundle of generative skills. I oscillated between the highs of designing and delivering programmes that I was sure would change the lives of the learner, and grappling with the fact that very few clients were interested.

One day I had a thought. *What do many clients want, and what are they going to other providers for?*

The answer came quickly: presentation skills. But next to the richness and life-changing potential of learning to learn, NLP and creativity, presentation skills seemed like the most mundane programme to work on.

Slowly, it dawned on me: with my music performance background, I was poised to design an unusual programme, one that could get to the heart of practice and of skill-building. I had so much knowledge and experience, so many stories to share about practice, how to prepare, how to face an audience, and how to remain calm.

The details multiplied as I designed. Terry taught me MS Word's Outline function

and I built my first outline. The outline allowed me to capture everything, but it kept growing – when I thought I had a workable draft, another layer of distinctions would surface, not unlike learning to play a complex piece of music.

Still, I was overwhelmed until I realised that the presentation skills programme with a difference that I wanted to design lay precisely in the wealth of detail that only I could see. The long strings of black letters in the outline were not so different from the black notes of a sonata. If I mastered every single one of them, we would have something amazing at the end – an original composition that could be *used*.

I designed ways for learners to practise skills, adding much more repetition than I'd seen in the classes I had attended. I added drills; I layered skills, adding levels of challenge for the learner. I designed strange ways – flexibility exercises, we call them in NLP – to free the voice, and to get eye contact and gestures into the muscle.

I knew about breathing from my teenage days of singing without a microphone to a large congregation. I had just completed a vocal intensive with a teacher in Brisbane who could help people who thought they were tone deaf, to sing in pitch, and in harmony with others. I was studying martial arts, and it was obvious that the principles of stance would be useful for nervous presenters. I combined this into a calmness and confidence routine: warm up your body, warm up your voice, centre yourself – a model that was easy to remember and personalise, even if you forgot the details you were taught.

I focused on building the overall conceptual model of the programme: text to visual aids, then non-verbal communication. This seems so simple now. But I had seen from decoding music technique: people often delved straight into playing the notes without first knowing the structure of the piece, and so their playing had no sense of shape. They practised without working out the fingerings and so there were inaccuracies, and therefore could not move the listener. I was certain that in organisations, people would make similar mistakes: go directly to visual aids because time was limited, or think that they can't present well because their voice was not as good as someone else's – not realising that structure was the key to their success.

Each module then needed an internal rhythm: the types of learning activities, the groupings, the modalities used, how the teaching and activities were sequenced. A piece of music you love moves you with how it begins, develops, and gets to the end. Why not a training programme? If every note in a music piece is important,

shouldn't it be the same for the learner in corporate training? Shouldn't the first minute to the last matter?

More than anything, I was determined to design for transformation of skill. A pianist experiences this in such a tangible way that it changes them for life – *if I practise something using a specific method, and if I practise frequently enough, I will be able to do what was impossible just a few days or weeks or months ago*. I wanted every learner to experience this.

Our programme was initially called Effective Presentation Skills. At the end of one of my early classes in the mid-1990s, a young engineer stood on his chair, lifted his head to the ceiling as though looking at the stars, extended his arms and started flapping them slowly and gracefully. One of his colleagues said: *Something in him has been freed, and he can now fly. He can do today what was impossible for him yesterday.*

The transformations continued, for most learners in every class, and I knew that we had version one of our skill-building methodology. After several years, we wanted to show what happened to people and their ability to present in under two days; this is how *Presentations Alive!™* got its name.

As I trained other trainers to deliver the programme, it was evident that even with their different backgrounds, the results were the same. And so, we learned that design was the key.

A client asks us to design a programme that is not presentation skills

It is looking at things for a long time that ripens you and gives you a deeper meaning.
–Vincent Willem van Gogh

Though we are both skill-builders, Terry is very different from me. I was a music graduate: practice, performance and standards were paramount. He read philosophy: thinking, reading and ideas were everything.

In 2003, Terry ran *Think on Your Feet®* for a high-tech organisation. This is a programme that teaches a method for how to speak and answer questions clearly on the spot. After the class, a learning and development manager for their Finance

department called him. *Could you design a programme that's not presentation skills, not about the ability to speak off the cuff, but will address how to present ideas internally to senior management clearly – in a way that proposals don't get sent back multiple times?*

If presentation skills was the perfect programme for a concert pianist to tackle, this new programme on persuasion – which we called *The Case Maker*™ – was surely perfect for a philosophy graduate who minored in psychology.

Terry grappled with a few challenges.

Persuasion versus a persuasive presentation

As Terry designed *The Case Maker*, it became clear that the programme would address a highly specific need: getting buy-in during a presentation – *very* different to persuasion in the broader context. In a business presentation, the manager or engineer would have a few minutes to persuade the listener. The concepts and tools had to help learners to do just that.

The main tool of *The Case Maker* went from a *Yellow Circuit*™ (a flowchart with yellow boxes showing that the challenge came after the situation), to software (which we ditched because we did not have resources to iron out bugs), to the current *Clarity Boards*™ – a set of tools for each step in the case-making process.
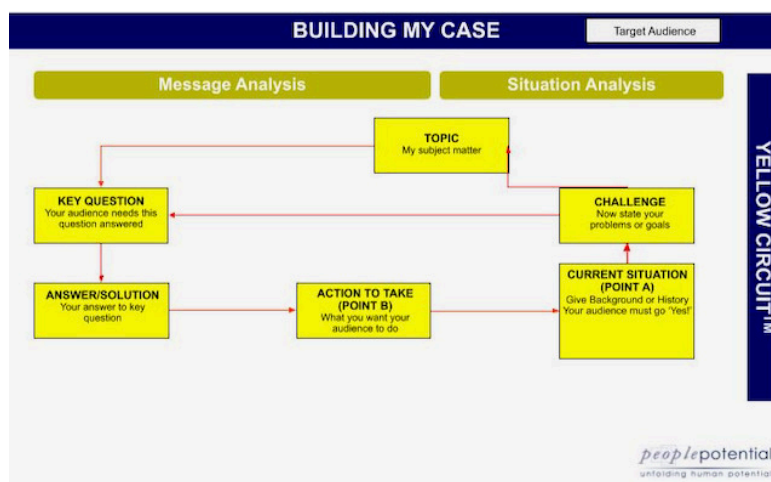
The old Yellow Circuit™
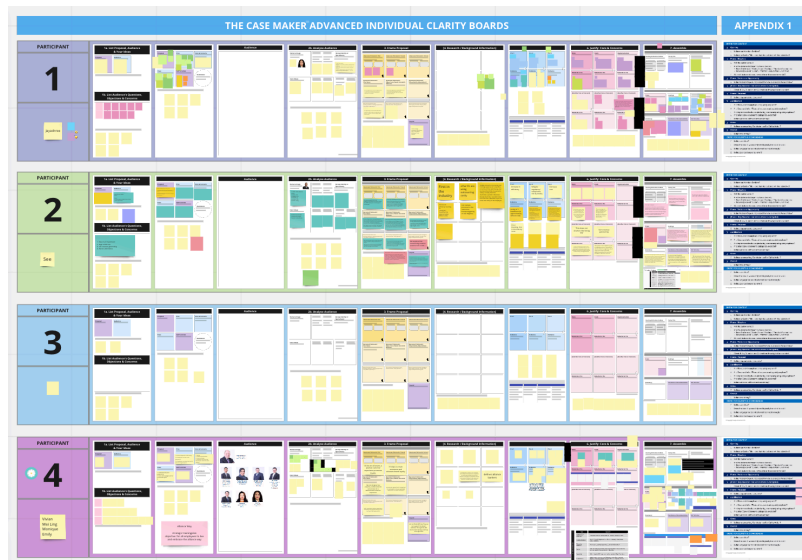
The current Clarity Boards *of* The Case Maker™ Advanced *on a virtual whiteboard*

For example, the boards now show the learner *how* to get from the situation to the challenge, something that was not present in the *Yellow Circuit*. Now, when the learner is done with one part of the thinking process, the next board is waiting. They don't have to spend a second wondering what comes next; they can focus fully on strengthening their proposal. All the prompts they need are built into boxes within each board.

The difference between rhetoric and what organisations needed

As Terry continued to research, he came across the literature on [rhetoric](). Compelling as it was, he realised that managers would not have time to study rhetoric well enough to use it effectively. Most of the books on rhetoric were targeted at public speaking. But the manager at the high-tech organisation wanted persuasion skills for an *internal* audience, an audience that needed to make decisions speedily in an industry that was moving rapidly.

The balance between effective persuasion and simplicity of the model

While the literature on persuasion covers the importance of naming the situation and the challenge, and while ways to structure arguments were common, the concept of *framing* was less common. What eventually went into framing in *The Case Maker* was even less common: how the situation was *broken down*, how the various elements were *sequenced*, in specific rows – making it easy for anyone to use; making

the start of the proposal compelling and tight.

One of Terry's strengths is reading widely. He recognises ideas that might be useful and puts them together in a unique way. He brought ideas together from books, from questions learners asked in class, from comments they made, and from the language they used. In fact, the term, 'justification', came from a learner. Terry noticed it, captured it, grappled with it, and built it in.

Aiming for 'head nods' was a concept Terry had come across in his research. He built it into the model and it has captured the imagination of learners: giving them something concrete to shoot for, giving them evidence as to whether they are succeeding early on in their proposal.

And one day, while on a working retreat in Fraser's Hill in 2017, he found a way to bring Audience Analysis, done at the start of the programme, *into* the Frame. Audience Analysis was always separate in presentation books or programmes, including *Presentations Alive!* It would be up to the diligent presenter to check if their presentation did actually speak to their audience. Terry had created a method where you could not escape using Audience Analysis as you were building your case. I knew it was a breakthrough.

Here are two examples of what can happen when Audience Analysis is done differently:

- In one of Terry's early classes for the high-tech organisation, one group was using the time in *The Case Maker* class to work on a challenging proposal that they had to deliver to a senior HR manager (the head of Compensation and Benefits for Asia-Pacific) at the end of Day 2. Not only did she approve their proposal, but she also said: *I have been dealing with these men for ten years, and this is the first time I feel they understand me.*

- Years later, in a class of one of our other trainers teaching *The Case Maker*, several groups were grappling with the Audience Analysis of their GCHRO. They were about to make important business proposals to her. She had come into the class for a short while and was looking at their analysis of her. She said: *It's not possible for this group to know me so well. I don't work directly with them.*

When decision-makers who are listening to a proposal get this kind of feeling, they

will *want* to hear more. This is the kind of response we want all learners to strive for. And if it is currently a rare occurrence in organisations, *The Case Maker* aims to change that.

When we are teaching *The Case Maker*, we tell learners: *These are not skills to be applied only in the days and weeks after you attend this programme. These are skills that will serve you for decades.*

You can see that Terry is no ordinary philosophy graduate. Yes, he is deeply interested in ideas and concepts, but only if those concepts end up in tools that can be used daily – like the Audience Analysis tool and the *Clarity Boards*.

For years, we referred to ourselves as skill-builders and tool-makers because that was one way – our way – to help change the lives of people in organisations, and through them, make the world a better place.

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Many concepts have taken root and have burrowed deep into our lives at People Potential from something Terry has read. *Kaizen* is one.

I remember Terry sharing how Toyota would take the first car off the assembly line and take it apart to see all the ways they could improve it. We were captivated by that radical concept. If [Toyota](#) used kaizen, so would we!

To model Toyota, he and I would take the first learner's manual on top of the pile that came from the printer, and write on the top right hand corner of the front cover: '*Terry's copy'* (or '*Marianne's copy'*). And underneath it: '*Edited*'. We would flip through the first copy and mark aspects that might need to change – whether it was a concept we were not happy with, or the wording of a description, or a typo we had missed.

Both Terry and I hated getting clarifying questions in class. We would capture the question during class and kaizen after class so that the question would never arise again. If we found ourselves repeating instructions in class, we captured those moments and kaizened. It's like when you have vacuumed the floors, and when everything is clean, you can now see the areas you missed earlier. Doesn't it irritate you enough to want to eradicate those bits forever?

When programmes become settled, we collect improvements over several classes. We keep them in MS Word outlines, so that the strings of kaizens are there waiting for us when it is time for an update. Over the years, I have worked on so many outlines with so many kaizens, and I have often thought: some of these kaizens are probably really disappointed to be demoted to the bottom of the outline, after having patiently waited in line for so long!

Kaizen captured *our* imagination and entered every facet of work at People Potential, not just design. We kaizen after classes; we kaizen after certain meetings. When trainers are training, if one of us is observing, we offer them kaizens to improve their teaching of the content or their delivery for future classes. We kaizen entire systems like our Trainer Accreditation system *while* a trainer is going through the process, so that the concept or details are fine-tuned for the next candidate. At the very least, kaizens are captured and worked on before the next trainer is due to begin an accreditation. When we are in our recruitment process, kaizens are captured *as* we move through each phase. They are processed so that this large system works better and more efficiently for the next round of recruiting, which might be a year down the road.

I asked Terry recently how many kaizens he might have captured and worked on, from 2003 to the 2017 breakthroughs for *The Case Maker.* He said: *Well over a thousand.* I strongly suspect that that is grossly understated.

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In 2003, the client who made the first request for *The Case Maker* also contributed to the design. She co-trained with Terry at several of their plants across the Asia-Pacific region.

In 2007, *The Case Maker* was delivered in Wall Street to a global bank; they then had us deliver it to their bankers in Singapore, the UK and Germany.

On the morning of the first day of the Wall Street class, learners were working on a 'work-life balance' case to learn the concepts. There was one banker who seemed to be doing her own work. Terry checked in with her a couple of times, encouraging her to work with the others, then decided to leave her to whatever she was doing. After lunch, to his surprise, she raised her hand:

Could I share something? I wasn't working on the work-life balance case. But I knew that a

person I have failed to persuade, about changing the timing of a big project, would be at lunch nearby. So, I re-worked my proposal, using what we were just learning: audience analysis, and especially figuring out the frame for him. The proposal was pretty much the same, but my frame was completely different. I grabbed a hold of him after lunch and presented my proposal conversationally as we walked. In those few minutes, he changed his mind. He told me that, yes, he would be able to adjust the timing of the implementation of his big project – something he never thought till then he would want to, or be able to do.

In 2017, upon request from two other clients, *The Case Maker* became a suite of three programmes: *The Case Maker Advanced, The Case Maker,* and *Suggestions @ Work.* These clients wanted the persuasion skills taught to different levels in their organisations. We have had back-room staff say to us: *Finally, I can speak out.*

In 2019, we licensed *The Case Maker* 'to the West' – to a leading communications and presentations training provider in Europe. You can imagine that we are proud of this. And since 2022, we have started to license it regionally.

Taking design to world-class for a client's global roll-out

One must work and dare if one really wants to live.
–Vincent Willem van Gogh

Through the years, our friends who were training providers (and even some of our own colleagues) told us we were crazy to be spending so much time and effort on design. We had a string of failures. Here is a shortlist:

- We designed NLP and Creativity programmes, but very few clients wanted to buy them.
- We were so proud to design and deliver a Learning to Learn programme to lecturers at a well-known teacher-training college, but failed to customise it enough, and failed to develop specific ways to transform the teaching of particular subjects, like Science, Mathematics and History, which is what they were looking for.
- We taught the basic NLP skills to one of the big consulting firms and bombed. They were used to analysing business cases during training, so our skill-building methodology did not suit them.

- Terry designed an advanced modelling class. There were good results, but there was no one to transfer the programme to because it needed a trainer with at least a Master Practitioner certification in NLP, and a love and instinct for modelling. This might have been in the period when I had taken time off to care for my father after he suffered a serious second stroke.
- I designed a Telephone Techniques programme based on NLP concepts of rapport, focusing on how to use your voice to establish rapport. I only delivered it once.
- I designed a Voice Development for Presenters programme and ran it for a group of senior trainers of a leading oil and gas organisation. I wrote a handbook of voice exercises and warm-up routines. No one wanted the class to end, so we agreed to come back the next day, a couple of days before Christmas, just to sing. I thought I had a hit – a unique programme that many clients would want for their trainers. Again, I only delivered it once.

And so, why persist? Why spend so much time and thought grappling over conceptual models and developing tools?

When I asked Terry this question recently, he said: "The *Think on Your Feet®* experience. I always want to improve things. I spent so much time improving the exercises, and improving the way some of the concepts were taught so that it would be effortless, almost, for the learner. But the IP wasn't ours."

He continued: "I saw early on that if we were licensees for a global product, the learner materials were usually expensive, and so clients might not pay those amounts to train their lower-level staff. Therefore, the reach of the skills and tools were limited."

For me, I saw through *Presentations Alive!* that we could decode excellence, elicit tacit knowledge, and create the corporate version of original music compositions. The concept, structure and details within these compositions were helping people transform through the building of skills. The tools we were creating meant that people had the strategies of excellence with them, that they could *use*, long after they had forgotten us.

For a couple of years, we doubted ourselves and did the right thing business-wise: we stopped designing and focused on selling what we had already designed. But it wasn't long before a few clients started asking us to help design solutions for them.

The high-tech client for whom *The Case Maker* was built asked us to design an opposite programme to *Think on Your Feet®* – instead of training them to answer questions on-the-spot, to train their people to ask questions. Their bright, talented, driven people were not speaking up at Town Halls. And so, *The Art of Asking Good Questions™* was born.

The Project Pitch, *Data to Business Story™*, *I'll Answer That* and *The Business Storyteller* were all born because one client, a regional bank headquartered in Kuala Lumpur, wanted to lift the standards in the hundreds of presentations that were being given throughout the bank.

Recently, at the end of an *I'll Answer That* class, one participant said: *Amazing experience. Never thought answering questions could be this technical with proven methods. I realised anticipating questions and breaking it down made me realise and appreciate my work better. I'm definitely going to be using this more often from today onwards*.

This is what I mean about decoding excellence and transferring to others who need it. Sometimes, when we look back, it does seem crazy. But how can you stop, when there are so many needs out there?

We did not know it, but the craziness was about to ascend a few levels.

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In late 2018, a client from the Netherlands (let's call him Albert) contacted us to see if we could design two skill-based certification workshops for a global roll-out based on the model in his book. He wanted the learner's materials to be of similar quality to Stephen Covey's *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Ken Blanchard's *Situational Leadership* and David Allen's *Getting Things Done*.

That's not difficult for us, we thought. In fact, the request seemed tailor-made for us. We very much knew how to design robust skill-building workshops from a conceptual model. The only thing we would have to learn would be how to take the materials to world class.

Work began in May of 2019. The design team was Tan Wai Leng, a talent management specialist who was between jobs, Joshua Ng, a PhD candidate who had joined us the previous year at the age of 24, and me – three introverts.

It turned out to be the most difficult thing we had ever done.

We will never forget the day when each of us had read the client's book and we realised that the conceptual model and principles as sequenced and articulated in the book was *not* the sequence for the learner to use while doing the task. We tried using the principles, but could not do what he wanted the learner to do. We knew then that the learner would need a series of steps that were buried in his book. We would have to become learning archaeologists and start excavating.

Young Joshua (who, I think it's safe to say, was the most introverted of us) was tasked with doing the initial investigative work and creating a first draft of the steps. He created flip charts of the principles and analysed them. He taped them to the high shelves in the basement of an apartment building that we had set up as our early work area. He said to me only recently: *I would lie on the floor and look at the notes, and I slept there overnight for several weeks because I wanted to have all the material around me.*

Analysing the book and coming up with draft steps was one thing, but the real steps lay in Albert's mind, in his vast experience. And so, I would say that the most vital work we did was this: elicit his tacit knowledge, add our analysis, and codify it.

Those last ten words took several months and lots of arguments – or, should I say, highly energetic debates. Wai Leng came to design meetings with her copy of Albert's book that looked very different: pages were black inside where ours were white; they were black with her notes, thoughts, and challenges she was facing. When the three of us had blackened our books, you can imagine the arguments: one of us would be saying something, the other would pounce on it and say no, that's not correct, the book says so, here, on this page. We would fight it out and then have to resolve it with Albert in more animated discussions.

Something else happened. Because Albert could perform the skill at an unconscious level of competence, there was a lot that was missing in the book. Try telling this to a client who is an expert in the subject matter. As we tested out the material, we created distinct steps and a plethora of sub-steps because we could not go from one part to the next without needing something extra. We showed him the pathways we took to reach each step. We had to convince him that the learner would be like us – in fact, would know much less than we did.

Before we started, only Albert could perform the complex task. Now, we had

produced a brand new, seven-step process for the future user that had not existed before we started. This was a breakthrough for him. He now had his book with the principles and a how-to method that he could teach anywhere in the world. But the pièces de résistance were the worksheets for the learner.

Imagine eliciting, and then putting down the steps an expert takes; placing his accumulated experience, the connections and decisions he makes – into a worksheet. We developed seven of these worksheets, one for each of the new steps. We organised the material so that the learner could take the paths we had traversed and make similar connections and decisions. You could say that we downloaded what was in the expert's mind, added to it, and wrote the user manual.

We mounted two public pilot programmes and Albert flew down for the second. He was moved when he saw how learners, with much less experience than we had, worked through the steps and worksheets, creating end results he had not thought were possible for those so new to the content. Still, kaizens proliferated.

After the pilots, it was time to bring all the materials to world-class standards. The Level 1 certification workshop had 23 different materials; Level 2 had 24.

We worked with five different graphic designers: Badrun Badranaya for the depiction of the new seven-step process, Frankie Chiew, Kenny Lim and Murugesh Chandran for the two participant workbooks, and Liji Thomas for the slide decks for each workshop.

The icons and seven colours for the brand-new steps took weeks to develop. The colours had to mean something in themselves and in relation to each other – not just look good. Badrun painstakingly designed each icon to reflect the essence of the step.

Wai Leng created a bold, contemporary style for the participant workbooks. She worked closely with Frankie, Kenny and Murugesh. There were fold-out pages; large, artistic graphics. There was just enough text for the learner, with every word written either by the client or us. She designed a journal for reflective work, and produced creative work spaces on many pages for learning activities.

Albert had provided us with sample manuals of several global programmes. I do believe the team created workbooks that were unique, world-class, and, most importantly, that would help future learners think like he did, even without his experience, skills, and wisdom.

There were two other superpowers at the last stage: Peng Murray edited and proofread all the collateral – 47 items – cross-checking all the terms and content in the two workshops. It is not a job that any of us would have wished on anyone else. She didn't seem to sleep, either, working regularly through the night.

Anitha Abdul Hamid organised the final testing, printing, and coding of every collateral. She took on the final quality checks. In Anitha's hands, this included whether the thickness of the lines in the worksheets, all the font types and sizes, and all the colour schemes used were consistent throughout all the materials for both certification workshops. And this is in addition to the already-long checklist she had.
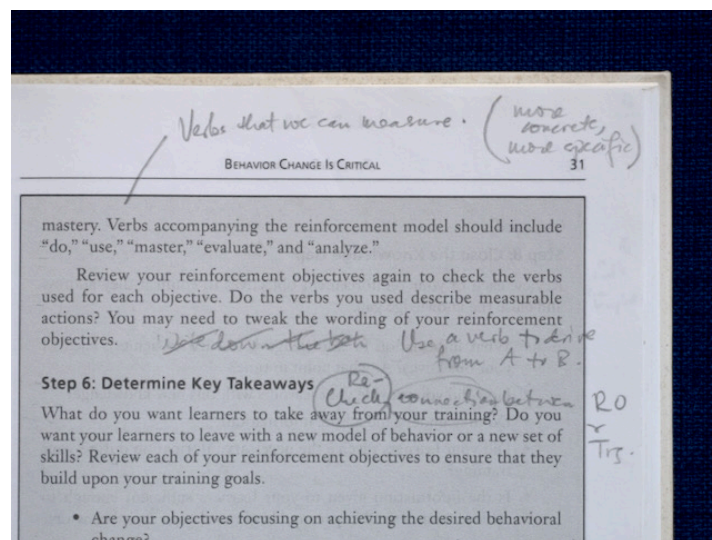
Analysing Albert's book

It was a strange time. Public holidays came for everyone else but were invisible to us; Christmas and Chinese New Year barely registered.

The project took ten months. Towards the end, Albert would liken us to a dream team that prepares an athlete for the Olympics. (He was a former Olympian.) Though we were so proud of what we had accomplished, all of us said we were not going to do something as crazy as that again, not for a Very Long Time.

The project was in its final stage in early 2020. I was planning celebrations for the team when the pandemic hit.

Part Two: The Dark Night Holds Light

Design or die

The fishermen know that the sea is dangerous and the storm terrible, but they have never found these dangers sufficient reason for remaining ashore.

–Vincent Willem van Gogh

We did not know the magnitude of the existential threat that we were about to face.

In February 2020, the Netherlands project was racing to the end. We were at our office performing final checks on the materials for the two certification workshops. One of our other clients, an award-winning regional bank headquartered in Singapore, was facing constraints from COVID-19, and called to postpone a class. Not just any class. A six and a half-day, face-to-face (F2F) *Train the Reinforcement Designer* workshop that had been confirmed for 27 February.

The sales team asked me just one question – could we run the programme virtually? Though the client (who we'll call Jane) was hesitant about this option, since we had not run virtual trainings before, she said she was willing to test us for one day. If she was happy, she would go ahead with one more day. If she was still happy, another day.

There was no answer to give but 'yes'. This was the moment I handed everything from the Netherlands project over to Anitha and Peng, and I called Francis Jee.

Francis had been an L&D manager and one of our clients in the late 1990s. He joined us for a while at People Potential, before leaving to work as an independent trainer and consultant, facilitating leadership classes globally. He had become our friend. For more than a decade, he and I would meet almost every week for breakfast, usually at a kopitiam in Taman Desa. We'd chat about what each of us were working on, and solve problems over wantan mee for me and wantan mee without the 'mee' for him. Francis is highly articulate, has detailed knowledge across a wide range of

topics, and keeps in touch with the latest in technology. He is able to find solutions to most problems you put in front of him. And he is generous to the extreme: not in paying for breakfast, but certainly in sharing what he knows.

12 February 2020. Francis and I were working in the People Potential meeting room at our office, a three-minute walk from the wantan mee shop. When I called him about the challenge before us, I found out that he had been delivering virtual training for the past six years.

There were a couple of large, long whiteboards spanning two walls of the meeting room, forming an L-shape. As I interviewed him, I built a picture on the 4 feet by 12 feet board: how does a Virtual Instructor-Led Training (VILT) class start? How does it flow? Does anything happen before the class? How do we measure the learner's connectivity? How do we know learners are doing the work if we can't see them? How do we keep them involved? What is the biggest challenge? As he talked, I plotted what a sample day would look like. I scribbled notes and questions.

We discussed design. Francis shared several principles he felt were crucial. We took a module from one of our programmes, and on the second whiteboard, he used sticky notes to show me how he might go about converting it from F2F to VILT. I got the idea, but a mountain of design questions arose in my head.

After he left, I sat alone in the meeting room for a couple of days, staring at the whiteboards, getting up to circle crucial elements, writing many more questions.

The to-do list for D-day

I tested the sticky notes method and tried to convert an entire programme to VILT. I think I chopped down quite a few trees in the process. We were a systems-based

organisation; we needed a method that many people could use over time. So, I built an Excel tool: F2F class on the left, VILT class on the right. Rows to break each class down into minute-by-minute chunks so we could check for short segments and build in state changes – two of the principles Francis had shared. Five columns for us to colour-code: red (does not fulfil the principle), orange (needs more thought) and green (fulfils the principle). This would help us to quickly zoom in and improve crucial areas. More columns to check for our usual F2F criteria like group size, energy levels, type of activity, modality, and whether an activity was pitched at the right level for the learner.

14 February 2020. For the class to work, I knew we would have to figure out VILT admin, delivery, and the user-experience. I brought Ibrahim Mariwa into the room. Ibrahim, now our Director of Training Quality for Delivery, was then a senior business presentations specialist and master trainer; he knew all the ins and outs of our classes.

I took him through the whiteboards. I showed him the big picture and details of what I had designed our VILT class to be like; what needed to happen before, during and at the end. I explained my Excel tool so he would know how the conversion from F2F to VILT was going to happen. I will always remember the look on his face that said: *Oh myyyyyy! We have lots of work to do. Impossible-looking work to do. I don't know how we're going to do it, but we're going to do it.*

We both knew we needed to see everything right in front of us. With the notes from the meeting with Francis Jee still on the long whiteboard, and with the Excel tool now holding our new design methodology to convert F2F to VILT, I cleared the second whiteboard. On it, I wrote our names and populated it with all the actions we needed to take to get us to D-Day. We had our War Room.

The training was going to be delivered by Dr Raymond Jambaya and Joshua Ng – both of whom were in our Behaviour Change team. Like me, Josh did not have any time to recover, as he was still working on the Netherlands project. At one of our whole-team Daily Huddles, Terry said to Raymond and Josh: "Day 1 and the remaining days are on your shoulders." I remember their faces, too. They knew what it meant for the organisation. Survival.

Ibrahim led the investigation and testing of Zoom as our communication platform. More team-mates came into the picture. Maria Ann and Shareeza Faruqui from the operations team worked with him to set up the two training spaces and equipment

that would be needed. They organised for new high-speed internet capability and tested it.

As this was going on, I had to re-create our F2F experience online and find a way for learners to do their activities and be fully engaged.

Thankfully, in the last quarter of 2019, we had started doing a little research for VILT classes because a potential client was considering it. We grappled with how to get our physical tools online, like the A3-sized *Clarity Boards* of *The Case Maker*. We reached out to Edmond Yap at the time. An engineer by training, to say Edmond is mission-driven would be to understate it. He is desperate, almost, to right a very deep wrong in education: students should not be failing their subjects in school – not when amazing teaching resources are abundant. So, he goes about working on projects to correct this situation. As these projects are going on, he lends his radiant, creative mind to others.

Edmond took on our little project. He was in our meeting room in late 2019, presenting a possible solution for online *Clarity Boards* when Francis sauntered in. Looking at what was on the projected screen, Francis asked: "What are you guys doing?" We explained the challenge. "Oh, you need Miro," says Francis. "Miro? What's that?" was my response. The rest is history, as they say. And so, this was how, in February of 2020, Edmond and Francis came to design our first-ever Miro Board for the class upon which our future hung.
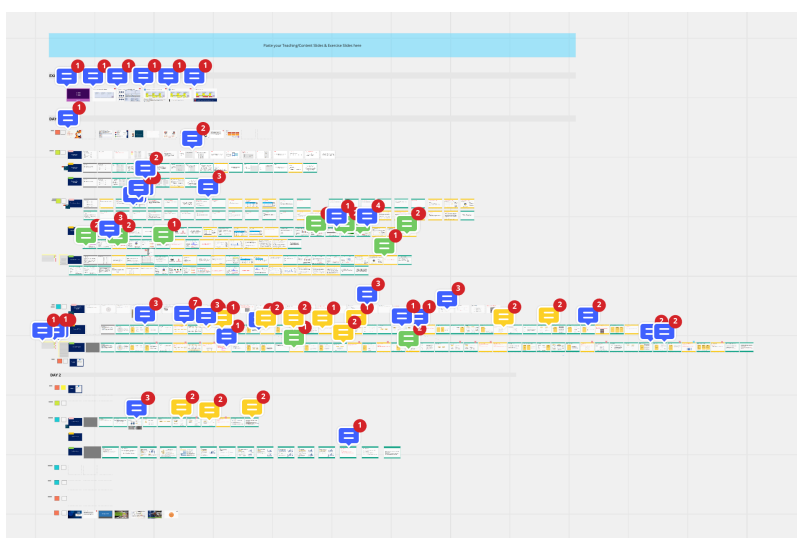
Our copious notes in Miro for designing Data to Business Story

D-Day: 27 February 2020. After days and nights of rehearsals, Raymond and Joshua were still nervous, but looked relatively confident. With Ibrahim, Francis and

Edmond at the office as our first technical support team, I went off to an annual medical follow-up. Francis called me around 12pm: "I think you'd better come back."

Some of the learners were finding it hard to navigate between Zoom and Miro and were feeling like they could not cope with the technology. It was as if we had all toiled to build a house, completed it in record time for the new owners to move in, but when they did, they had discovered a leak here, a faulty tap there, a door that did not open easily, a floor that creaked.

Throughout the lunch break, Terry, Ibrahim, Francis, Edmond and I worked furiously in the war room with Raymond and Joshua. The long whiteboard was now filled with the problems they and their learners faced. We solved whatever we could for the afternoon session. We assembled again at the end of the day, and worked together into the night, hoping for a Day Two.

Jane not only confirmed the second day of training; she continued on to do all of the remaining days virtually. She mentioned to Raymond and Joshua that our virtual class was different as compared to the talks, webinars and trainings that had surfaced: it was as engaging as a F2F class.

As our sales team confirmed subsequent programmes, we used the Excel Design Tool to convert each of our F2F programmes to VILT. We were determined that the learner would be involved from the very first minutes. The training delivery team kaizened like they were possessed, equally determined to solve every problem and to give learners a seamless experience at a time when virtual training was not seamless.

Though we don't spend time celebrating awards (there's always too much work to do), we are all proud to have won Gold for *Best Management Training Provider* (Malaysia) and Bronze for *Best Digital Learning Provider* (Malaysia and Singapore) in the Vendors of the Year Awards in 2020 – the pandemic year.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

Someone asked me recently how I felt after I said yes.

As I thought back, I realised I had known *immediately* that our survival depended on design. I had done it once before for F2F classes. It just meant learning very, very

quickly. I knew the design methodology had to be based on solid principles. I knew we had to get the same standards. Just because it was VILT, standards did not have to drop. I knew that learning activities would have to be interactive, engaging and we would have to figure out how.

I did not know about the technology. But Francis, Edmond and Ibrahim were there at the start, for those two fateful weeks. I knew that they would be able to solve enough for us to run that first class. We could look into everything else after that.

In 1994, I had sat alone in a meeting room, wrestled with my MS Word outline, and designed *Presentations Alive!* – giving birth to our skill-building methodology. In 2020, I was once again sitting alone, in a different meeting room. This time, I had to design the framework on which our future would rest. But this time, I had almost three decades of programme design muscles, and 53 years of muscles built from working at details until something big got achieved, starting with learning the piano at the age of five. This time, there was a bigger, stronger team. It was all going to be needed.

And so, I just went to work, making a few too many trips to the wantan mee shop along the way.

L&D's stubborn problem: Post-training Behaviour Change

In spite of everything I shall rise again: I will take up my pencil, which I have forsaken in my great discouragement, and I will go on with my drawing.

–Vincent Willem van Gogh

Let's go back a few years and talk about another major problem we faced. In 2016, Terry started communicating his nervousness about digitalisation. Uber and Airbnb were a few years on the scene. Amazon had long ago disrupted its field. Would the same happen to us? In L&D, e-learning was mature, and while clients had embraced it, it had not yet been a threat to upfront, skill-based training. But what was on the horizon?

Terry was concerned enough for three directors to attend the DevLearn conference and exhibition in the US in late 2016, an L&D event focusing largely on technology.

He had heard about it from a member of N2N Hub, a community of L&D networks and individuals who get together to help each other grow their businesses – the brainchild of Ken and Peter Everett of Australia (the licence holders of *Think on Your Feet*® in Asia).

At DevLearn (2016)

At the exhibition centre which hosted more than 400 vendors, we divided up the areas that each of us would investigate. I pulled the straw that was the most fun: VR and AR. I put on the VR headset of a provider with multi-million-dollar solutions for the biggest organisations, and tried to ski down an Alpine slope complete with obstacles – flying on to slim bars, skiing across them and landing (not so) safely. After two minutes of falling, shrieking, and twisting my body every which way at the turns, I took off the headset to find a circle of exhibition attendees laughing their heads off. I didn't have time to explain that I came from a no-snow country, and I couldn't even ride a bicycle unless the road was straight. The things we do in the name of research!

We exchanged notes every night. When we returned to Malaysia, we analysed the conference to decide what our digital strategy would be. We struck off VR and AR (no, not because of my ski adventure); it was still too far in the future for the kind of work we were doing with our clients. We decided against gamification – it did not appeal to our DNA. We grappled with e-learning: should we enter it?

In the end, the answer was obvious: post-training behaviour change.

Let me take you even further back. In 1994, after we saw that we had a method for transformation of skills, the next questions leapt out: What are our learners doing

after our classes? How do we know that they are using what they have just learned? As a former trained concert pianist, it was unthinkable that you would not practise a new skill until you had gotten it deep into your muscle.

In the mid- to late-1990s, we tried to address this in several ways. I had some initial success with post-training application details being faxed back six weeks after class. A few clients organised follow-ups or an annual refresher. Follow-up sessions were a good solution, but they were resource-heavy and not easy for HR to schedule. Another solution was for the managers of participants to provide feedback for post-training applications. But this was not practical; managers are often not familiar with the content taught at programmes, nor the specific skills to look out for, especially when it comes to soft-skills training. Aside from this, managers typically don't prioritise such work.

It seemed intractable so we stopped trying to solve this problem. Clients might have had their own ways to measure [Kirkpatrick's Level 3](#): post-training behaviour change for their programmes. But for us not to have a sustainable method for our programmes was a problem that would haunt me for most of my career, nearly compelling me to exit the L&D field.

At DevLearn, in late 2016, we met several providers who had cracked the code for behaviour change. We were thrilled, and that's putting it mildly.

In early 2017, we spoke with digital providers in the US, the Netherlands and Singapore, and we purchased a platform. A small team learned and designed our first post-training behaviour change programme. We tested, implemented it, and failed.

The platform provider could not handle some of the technical needs of our industry with learners in multiple countries, so we switched platforms. Terry and I worked with a slightly bigger team. The team's job was to address the conceptual aspect of our design for post-training behaviour change, to problem-solve, and to develop systems for smooth and accurate administration.

We were not prepared for two complications.

Complication #1: Our clients chose differently. In the same way that we had struck off several digitalisation solutions, it took us months – maybe up to two years – before we realised that our clients had also made choices. There were other substantial

issues they were dealing with: new digital infrastructure, the rise of mobile, and LMS. Many chose microlearning and gamification instead.

They chose differently despite having witnessed the stubbornness of behaviour change. Despite their organisations not reaping the expected productivity gains from sending staff to training.

Let's take the example of an organisation whose annual revenue is 200M, with an L&D department budget worth 1M. With that budget, L&D is looking to achieve 80% post-training application from their staff. If they manage to get only 20%, and it contributes to a 2M increase in revenue, the problem is obvious: *what about the remaining 60%?* This remaining 60% is what we call *locked value. Productivity gains are locked behind learners not applying their new skills.*

Most of us have experienced the following: ask learners about the key skills or knowledge they have learnt and there is a high chance they can verbalise some of it. But we scratch our heads because we don't see a difference in their behaviour at work. Without behaviour change at work – with learners unable to move from knowing to doing – there can be no productivity gain from training.

What a massive opportunity cost this is for the L&D department above and for their organisation. The 60% of post-training application missing is a huge loss in their potential revenue.

This situation is exacerbated by [Ebbinghaus's Forgetting Curve](). His research showed that we forget up to 90% of new knowledge learnt within the first seven days. If you find that shocking, it gets worse: the initial steep drop is followed by a gradual degree of forgetting, until the learner cannot remember what they learnt at all. This is why *timed reinforcement* after training is crucial, and why we were excited to finally find workable solutions at DevLearn.

We were also excited for our clients. If they attached behaviour change to their training programmes, they would now be able to bring data to the C-Suite – something HR and L&D departments had long wanted. But apart from one client, an award-winning regional bank in Singapore (see their story in chapter 6), no other client wanted us to design behaviour change for their programmes, nor train their L&D staff or internal trainers to do so. We had placed our bet on providing a solution for a stubborn problem in L&D, and we had lost. We were devastated.

Over time, we also found out that many organisations were not set up with enough resources from the L&D team to learn and implement post-training behaviour change systems.

Complication #2: Learners had other priorities. For most calendar programmes in our clients' organisations, we were getting variations of this theme: *Oh, is there more work to do after class? Do we have to use another app?*

You might be surprised to know that we finally set a benchmark in 2022 for 30 percent completion for post-training application by learners in our classes. We had come across research that showed the average completion rate in Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs) to be about ten to fifteen percent. We decided that we would aim just slightly higher, given everything we had learned about our clients' and learners' priorities, and the situation that everyone found themselves in – a world where there was no end to the volume and speed of information coming to you.

We made three main changes to encourage learners to apply their new skills:
- First: fewer key behaviours to focus on after training.
- Second: a shorter post-training reinforcement period, from twelve weeks to four weeks.
- Third: we gave learners the option for self-directed learning journeys. For example, after completing our *Train the Virtual Trainer* reinforcement, a learner could opt in to work on several short courses depending on what they were interested in: Mastering Miro, Facilitating Virtually, Apps & Resources, or Designing for Engagement.

There was some good news: when it was a high-stakes programme with motivated learners, and a client worked closely with us to achieve their specific outcomes, we obtained 100% completion a couple of times.

Despite the complications, our team was on a mission: we decided that we would design a post-training behaviour change system for every learner in every programme that we delivered. With this, the fifth phase in our instructional design process was born: Discover, Design, Develop, Deliver, *Deepen*. To get learning deep into the muscle. We would later name it '*5D-ID*'.

Stopping the quest for post-training behaviour change is not an option for us. For what is it worth, how much is really lost in organisations, if new awareness,

knowledge, and hard-earned skills that have been paid for – are forgotten?

A learning academy head attaches behaviour change to her organisation's key strategy

I dream my painting and I paint my dream.

–Vincent Willem van Gogh

You might be wondering about our client, Jane, who engaged us for the multi-day *Train the Reinforcement Designer* workshop at the start of the pandemic. What made her choose this solution?

In December of 2019, Mints from our Sales team wrote to congratulate Jane on winning Gold for a leading HR award. We had talked to her a couple of years before, but our solutions did not work for her. This time, Jane was keen to learn more about our programmes and agreed to a discussion at her office in Singapore. As the meeting progressed, Ashley Chandran (who later became our Sales Manager) was not feeling good: once again we were not getting anywhere; we could not find solutions for Jane.

Instinctively, Ashley started sharing our Behaviour Change solution, demonstrating how it could measure and provide data for Kirkpatrick's Level 2 and Level 3 evaluations. Jane then shared how they had been running programmes with no measurement. She told us that she had been searching for a way to measure behaviour change from training. Ashley had a sample Behaviour Change report that we regularly provided our clients and took her through it. She started asking more detailed questions, including whether the report could be customised and summarised. At the end of the meeting, she asked for a formal presentation on our post-training behaviour change system.

Terry went down to Singapore a few days later to present. Jane is the head of the learning academy for the bank. To say that she had a lot of questions would be an understatement. They were all good questions, and Terry is energised when he is fielding good questions. (He usually asks the good questions, and by the way, he designed *The Art of Asking Good Questions*.) An intense, engaging discussion unfolded. Terry's answers to her questions quite possibly made sense to her, or perhaps he answered in a way that brought to light things she had not considered.

Let me give you an example. It is very common to think that a shift in mindset will bring about a shift in behaviour. If you are working one-on-one with a therapist, this likely happens often. In organisations, at motivational talks, yes, some people do change when they have an 'a-ha' moment. But most do not. So, striving for behaviour change immediately after training works better. If the learner changes their behaviour, a shift in mindset often follows.

Jane asked for references for everything we had mentioned. She wanted to see the dashboard in the portal where the data was being collected. She then asked us for a proposal for our *Train the Reinforcement Designer* workshop; negotiations went back and forth until she confirmed the six and a half-day programme for February 2020.

The bank's digitalisation strategy was so critical that she agreed to something radical for the start of the pandemic: a technical workshop that would not only involve moving between Zoom and Miro but would involve learning the Reinforcement platform and navigating the portal virtually. If this sounds easy to you now, in February of 2020, it wasn't easy. Added to this, Jane had not had a robust VILT experience internally or with any other external training provider, even for more straightforward programmes. And we had not done anything like it before. So, you can appreciate why she said: "We will do the first day and then I'll decide."

The workshop for Jane's trainers was extended to eight days during the early weeks when the pandemic hit. We had included a three-month post-workshop coaching period in our proposal, which had to be done virtually as well. The trainers' questions grew as their own D-Days loomed. This led to further negotiations, and the coaching was extended for another three months.

One of the main challenges the trainers grappled with was defining the key behaviours to be reinforced, and writing behavioural objectives. Not learning objectives that they knew how to do very well. We had grappled with this when we were designing post-training reinforcements for all our training programmes. We could rattle off all the learning objectives. But what change of behaviour was vital for the learner back at the workplace?

Let's take *Presentations Alive!* To reach the objectives of the two-day programme, there are five major new skills that the learner builds, along with several sub-skills. There are also components of awareness and knowledge. You can see from this that it is not possible to reinforce everything. But it is ingrained in us trainers: everything

that is taught in class should be used and applied. That's how I started, in 1994, when my learners were still faxing back their applications. Now, Josh was teaching Jane's trainers that they had to choose. And choosing behavioural objectives well is where the art is, where the thinking and debate is, and where the eventual success would be.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

As Jane and her team designed their own post-training behaviour change programmes on Miro, it became clear to her that Josh and Raymond had VILT skills that her trainers did not have. She could see that we had an entire methodology underpinning how we designed, delivered and administered VILT. She knew that if their new trainings for their digitalisation strategy had to be delivered virtually because of COVID-19, then all those programmes had to be designed and delivered to get high learner engagement. Only then would the post-training behaviour change component have a good chance to succeed.

And so, she engaged us again, this time putting herself and her trainers through our *Train the Virtual Trainer*: a four-day programme spread over several weeks with virtual coaching. Francis ran the class which focused on the principles for robust VILT design, the conversion of programmes from F2F to VILT (they were the first to use our humble Excel VILT Design Tool), and the new set of delivery skills. We included a module on technical support. We showed them how we onboarded learners to the new virtual platforms in the early days of the pandemic. In effect, we shared everything we had just learned, developed, used, and kaizened.

With their new VILT design skills, Jane's trainers went on to tweak the designs of more than 20 programmes in their digitalisation strategy. They found innovative ways to use Miro after experiencing how we did it. They experimented with other apps. Then they attached the post-training behaviour change they had been working on to each programme, with specific, well-thought-out behaviour change objectives to measure.

As this was happening, with Jane's trainers busy designing, delivering and monitoring the data, she contacted Josh to see if we could work with her to include behaviour change in their two-year Future Leaders programme. She could see more possibilities now.

I'll give you a glimpse.

- Jane wanted each learner in the 25-person Future Leaders cohort to have a section in the behaviour change app that would house a *personalised* learning journey – because the cohort came from different departments across the organisation. In this personalised section, they would do multi-week reinforcements for specific workshops that they attended. They were slated to do roughly one workshop a month over the two-year period.
- There was to be a section where the learner would access several multi-week reinforcements for common programmes that everyone in the cohort was attending.
- She wanted a separate section for them to reflect on meetings with their mentors throughout the two years.
- She also wanted several elective microlearning courses to be available for the future leaders over the two-year period.

As she worked with Josh to structure this two-year programme, she saw even more possibilities to achieve behaviour change.

For example, if one of the young managers was involved in a particular business project, she wanted them to receive several messages asking them to think critically about the project. Later, a few messages to reflect on challenges, their growth, their learnings. Apparently, some of these young future leaders would say: *How does the app know I am doing this project?*

Another example: a debate team would get a few push notifications about their topic to help them prepare. The opposing team would get different ones. After the debate, there would be some activities for the winning team while the losing team received different tasks.

More than 950 behaviour change messages were written and sent out to the future leaders. Jecilla Shanthi, who had learned the behaviour change methodology from us some years back, co-wrote those messages with Josh.

Order	Schedule	Objective	Type	Title / Question	
☰ 1 / 36	Week 1, Day 4, 09:00 AM	Not Applicable	Push Message	Fuel Up for a Leadership Journey	⋮
☰ 2 / 36	Week 1, Day 4, 09:00 AM	Not Applicable	Push Message	Tell me WIIFM	⋮
☰ 3 / 36	Week 1, Day 5, 02:59 PM	Not Applicable	Open Response	First Gear on Fuel Up	⋮
☰ 4 / 36	Week 1, Day 5, 03:00 PM	Not Applicable	Survey	My Leadership Journey	⋮
☰ 5 / 36	Week 2, Day 1, 05:00 PM	Not Applicable	Open Response	Post - Game reflection	⋮
☰ 6 / 36	Week 2, Day 2, 01:00 PM	Not Applicable	Survey	Could You Enjoy and Learn Something ...	⋮
☰ 7 / 36	Week 2, Day 3, 02:00 PM	Not Applicable	Open Response	I Spy with my Little Eyes...	⋮
☰ 8 / 36	Week 2, Day 5, 10:00 AM	Not Applicable	Push Message	Becoming an Influential Leader	⋮

Some of the behaviour change messages that were sent out

Towards the end of 2021, Jane made a budget presentation to the board of directors. Josh worked with her and her team to bring the behaviour change data out from the portal. Together, they analysed the data. He offered suggestions for the slide deck for her presentation. When Jane went in to meet the board, she was able to specify the *key behaviours that had been reinforced* – the central concept of the behaviour change methodology. She went in *armed with data*. It was clear to the board that the post-training behaviour change system was aligned tightly to their digitalisation strategy and producing results there, as well as for the future leaders of the bank.
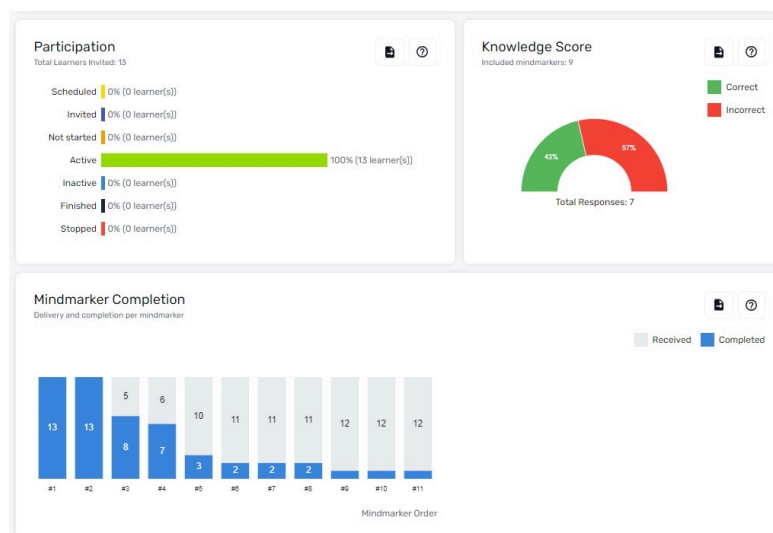
Data on post-training reinforcement

The board approved Jane's L&D budget for the following year, and she engaged us to refine the two-year behaviour change programme for their second cohort of future leaders.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

Jane went on to ask all external training providers to attach post-training behaviour change to their training programmes and to produce Kirkpatrick Level 3 data in whatever ways they could, even if they did not have an app like we did. We were humbled when we found out that she referred to us as her benchmark for external training providers.

And so, our decades-long dream for L&D to bring about significant behaviour change after training had finally come true.

All of us in our organisations have had a perilous journey to traverse during the pandemic. There are so many stories of courage and triumph. Jane and her team are one such story.

Part Three: Instructional Design as a Practice Area is Born, and Swells

The search for a leader

What would life be if we had no courage to attempt anything?
–Vincent Willem van Gogh

It is late in 2020. Terry asks me: "With the design capabilities we saw in the project with Albert from the Netherlands, and now, our success in VILT during the pandemic, along with our long history of designing original programmes, shouldn't we set up an Instructional Design (ID) practice area?"

Me: "What???!!! Oh…I mean…Yes, that's a great idea! But do you mean now – when we're just starting to be able to rest a little, and do you mean me, heading it?"

Terry: "Yes."

Over the next weeks, I said "I can't" several times. Two rare words to come out of my mouth. I knew I could not take this on. To build an entire practice from the skills, philosophy, and methodology we had developed over 30 years would be a several-year-long project. It was too big a task, following my roles in the Behaviour Change project, the licensing of *The Case Maker*, the world-class project with Albert, the pivot for survival during the pandemic and the other leadership roles I was currently holding.

On a Friday evening after work, during the Recovery Movement Control Order in Kuala Lumpur, restaurants were just starting to open. Terry and I walked to our favourite open-air roadside stall around 5pm, just down the road from our office. Saras, we call it, short for Saravanan's, the owner's name.

Over a dinner that probably consisted of Nasi Goreng Kampung with Telur Mata for me and Singapore Mee Hoon also with Telur Mata for Terry, plus their signature fried chicken and several teh si kosongs, Terry and I wracked our brains for every

person who could head the ID practice area and build it. We discussed former teammates, clients we knew who had left corporate life, all the associate trainers we knew, including those overseas. Hours and bowls of fried chicken went by, and for a different reason each time, no one fit the bill.

It must have been close to 10pm. We were feeling down and dejected. We were both quiet, sitting back on our chairs, when it came to me: "Oh…my…gosh. There *is* someone, and he has been right under our noses the whole time – Josh!"

We talked through Josh's history at our firm.

Joshua Ng joined us in 2018, some months before his 25th birthday. A former teammate had told Terry that Josh was a really nice guy, very smart, very disciplined, diligent, did a lot of NGO work, and was about to start a PhD in Psychology. We didn't have a role for him, but we hired him.

He started in the Behaviour Change team writing reports for our clients. In 2019, he was part of the three-introverts design team that produced the world-class certification workshops and materials for our client from the Netherlands. In February, he and Raymond designed with me, and he co-delivered with Raymond, that fateful, first-ever virtual class for Jane and her team in Singapore. He had gone on to design and train solo the remaining days of the programme. He had coached Jane's trainers in designing and implementing behaviour change for their digitalisation strategy. Now, in late 2020, he was supervising our designers in the remote team that was creating *Data to Business Story*.

Terry and I had always put young trainers to work in the background, if they joined us when they were 25 or thereabouts – to learn everything possible related to design, so that they would see how design connects to delivery which then leads to the results. We knew that this grounding would serve them well when we finally we sent them out in front of our clients.

If I recall correctly, Terry called Josh right away, and we spoke to him that weekend. Terry's mandate to him was: *Set up ID as a Practice Area, and build the team. Transfer the knowledge and skills from Marianne to the team. Build the managers and leaders. In three years. Can you do it?*

Josh had just turned 27 when he said: "Yup, I'll do it."

ID co-creates four Collaboration workshops with a client, for a company-wide roll-out

I am always doing what I cannot do yet, in order to learn how to do it.

–Vincent Willem van Gogh

In mid-2021, we won an RFP (Request For Proposal) to co-design four Collaboration workshops with a client for an organisation-wide roll-out, based on one of the focus areas of their strategy. This was just a few months after Josh said, "Yup!"

Work with the client started towards the end of 2021. Design muscles from the Netherlands project and the pivot during the pandemic came in handy, because to pull this off, four teams had to work simultaneously and mostly remotely.

Wai Leng, the talent management specialist, led the design for Workshops 1 and 3. Divya Chandy, who had just joined us, worked with me to design and develop Workshop 2. Charlene Nicholas, who had been in the Behaviour Change team, and had learned from me how to convert our programmes from F2F to VILT during the pandemic, worked with me for Workshop 4. Kheshini Vijayakumar was project coordinator, and later project manager.
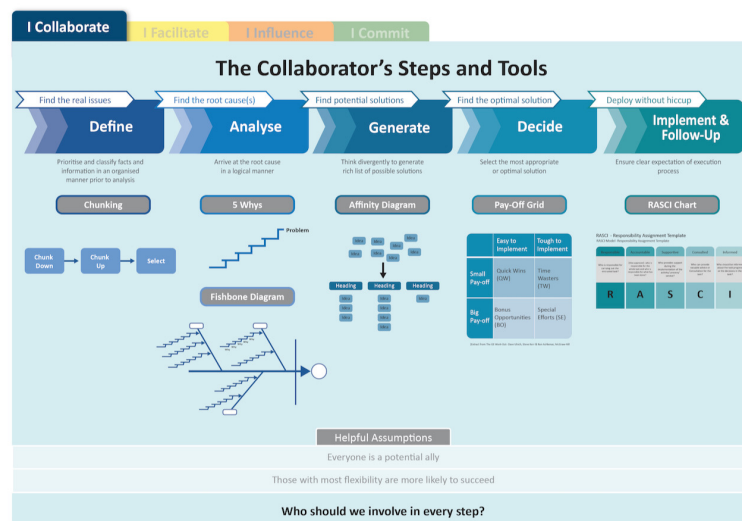
The take-home summary sheet for Workshop 1

Darrel Lourdes joined us for this project. He was a former global talent manager in an oil and gas multinational and former HR Director in one of the leading high-tech organisations. Darrel and Terry were our subject matter experts. Lee Choong Yin, who had also just joined us, was a thread in all our Design Labs, as we developed

the conceptual model for each workshop.

Several of the design labs were held in our physical offices, with all of us working on the same two whiteboards that had held the seeds of our VILT design methodology, and many other designs in previous years. Other than a few of these physical labs, the four teams designed remotely on Miro boards. Those boards eventually held so much detail that a colleague would say: "That looks like a mega infrastructure project – with a mall, residences and offices in one blueprint – a mini city!"

As you can imagine, we learned a lot.

We learned about criteria. The client's team rejected our first design for Workshop 1, and we had to go back to the drawing board. We grappled with them to find the content and processes that would work for everyone in their organisation. Workshops 2 and 3, for a smaller group, were easier to get right. Workshop 4, also for the entire organisation, plagued us for quite a while, until we learned enough for the designers and trainers to be able to adapt it as different levels of learners attended the early classes. *Discover*, the first 'D' in our *5D-ID* process, was now fully fledged, as we strove with our client to get to the root of what they wanted.
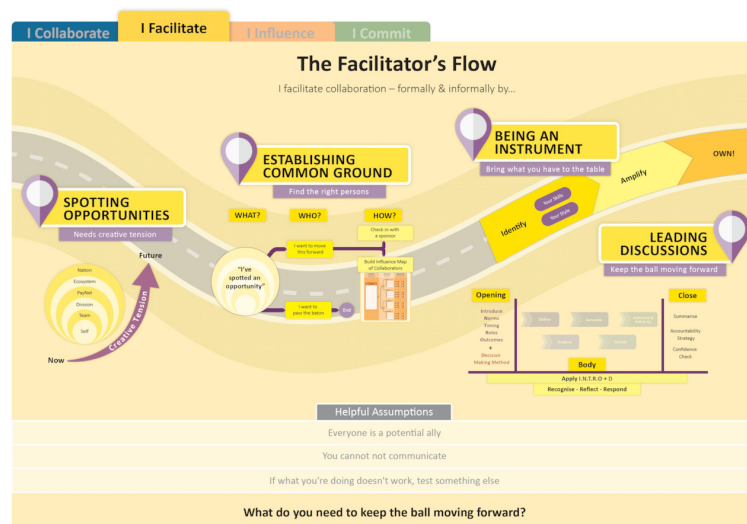
A different design for the summary sheet for Workshop 2

We learned how much to do together with our client, and they learned to trust us to do the rest. Co-creating is not easy. It is not easy to draw the line as to where we want the client's input to stop. Equally, it is not easy for them to say: *okay, take it from here*. To do that, we had to be sure that we really understood their pain points, their unique, changing situation, and the details of the goals they wanted.

We learned how to discuss and agree as to what was in the scope of each workshop. When you're designing a suite of programmes, it is understandable that the client would want to use the opportunity to address many different issues in the organisation; to align the project with other projects; to want to design such that their people would change their behaviours even as they, and the world, were moving at breakneck speed. As we brought drafts to design meetings, different needs would arise. We learned to say why certain things were better not done, so that their people could focus.

We learned that we had to stop, though we might not want to. Each *Design* team had to pass the baton on to the *Develop* team. Frankie and Murugesh from the Netherlands project worked with us to develop the materials for these four workshops including the learner-friendly yet beautiful tools and job aids for the entire series. The team worked with Edmond to develop the Miro boards for each workshop.

<p align="center">***</p>

A vital part of our design process is to pilot every new programme at the *Deliver* stage, and kaizen it after. Our client organised four pilots with their staff as participants, and together with us, process-observed and filled up our kaizen file: a Google spreadsheet with separate tabs for each observer to capture anything they felt could be better. We asked the client to focus on kaizens for the content, while we captured kaizens for the ID methodology, learning activities and materials.

Our team held an internal *Kaizen Lab* after each pilot, analysed all the kaizens, then presented our recommendations to the client in post-pilot kaizen meetings. When the clients signed off on the kaizens after each pilot, we cheered for 30 seconds, and the *Deepen* team would spring into action. It was time for them to build the post-training behaviour change programme that was a crucial component of the RFP.

After that, it was a race to launch day. Our trainers fronted up to deliver the new workshops and the Behaviour Change system was triggered for each learner.

It's possible that we might have won the HR Vendors of the Year Gold Award (Singapore) for *Best Leadership Development Consultancy* in 2022 because of this Collaboration project. We thank this client for trusting us, for throwing us challenge after challenge, and for working so closely with us that we felt we were one team. Perhaps all of us co-designed and lived a fifth collaboration workshop in the process.

As you probably can guess, we did not have time to celebrate. But Josh, Choong Yin, Charlene, Khesh, Divya and I did go out together to visit the [Islamic Arts Museum](). We paid for the tickets with our "Team Experience Pot" or "TEpot" as it's affectionately called – a benefit everyone at People Potential reaps when different teams meet specific targets each quarter. It can only be spent by physically meeting up with at least one team member and the outing can include former team-mates, family and friends. None of us wanted to leave the museum. Centuries of design philosophy, methodology and expertise. Exhibits that etch themselves in your mind. So much inspiration to propel us forward.

At the Islamic Arts Museum

New leadership solutions, a 30th anniversary, 7D-ID and AI

> *The only time I feel alive is when I'm painting.*
>
> *–Vincent Willem van Gogh*

Josh could not have known how ID was going to expand when he agreed to head the practice area.

In 2021, Terry re-established our *Leadership Development* practice area after shutting it down some years back when a senior practitioner left us. As you know, we started as skill-builders and tool-makers. Now, with new subject matter experts in our circle, we are designing group process solutions, awareness programmes, and we are still designing skill-building programmes, but for a specific target group.

Group Process solutions

There are two general (and overlapping) objectives in group processes that are highly participatory, inclusive, and solution-oriented. The first is to address challenges and opportunities, and the second is to bring out what is latent in a group.

Addressing challenges or an opportunity

Here are two examples:

Example 1:
In February of this year, the client with whom we co-designed the four Collaboration workshops engaged us to design and facilitate an *alignment workshop*. They had just released their new strategy and had discussed it at a Town Hall. They wanted a space to hear more from the GCEO, the senior team (C-1) and their direct reports (C-2).

Darrel and the ID team had ten days. They worked with the client's team and the GCEO. In group process work, you design mostly for the participants to explore and move, but you will only know where they actually move on the day itself. You design to foster a sense of commitment and ownership. Your design objective is to address issues and find answers in a highly inclusive and interactive manner.

When you are facilitating, you adjust on the spot, responding to what is happening. Darrel mentioned that even as late as 3pm on the day of the workshop, he and the GCEO were still discussing, and Darrel was tweaking the design for the final session of the day. If a skill-building programme is like playing a structured piece by Mozart, group process work is jazz; you are more like Duke Ellington.

Example 2:
Choong Yin will be running Jimbo Clark's *The Box*. The design focus of *The Box* workshop is to help the learner identify and understand the limitations they place on their thinking. The process involves participants customising a specially designed box, representing an invisible layer that limits their thinking. Each side of the inside of the box shows a different limitation.

By recognising the confines of their thoughts, participants are better equipped to open up those walls. And if they are to go beyond their own confines, to think of opportunities or solutions out of their own boxes, they have to improvise, again like a jazz musician, to get to a new place.

Bringing out what is latent in a group

Using [Appreciative Inquiry](#) methodology, you can capitalise on your organisation's strengths and develop a common future vision. Appreciative Inquiry aims to find and emphasise what is already effective within the organisation in order to foster a positive, forward-thinking mindset.

Tadej Pugelj joined us in December of 2022. Tadej and the ID team designed, and Tadej facilitated an Appreciative Inquiry workshop in conversation with the CEO and C-Suite of a fast growing video game and animation organisation. The target audience was the first group from a cohort of 94 emerging leaders (and some senior leaders who had not attended formal training). The goal was to uncover the development needs for the year – from the leaders themselves – then design three more workshops to meet those needs.

Awareness programmes about good practices

Though we still do not do awareness programmes that focus on emotions, we are developing several that will open the learner's mind to areas that may not be on their radar. *The Big Shift* addresses the issues of individual contributors becoming managers. *Derailment* sheds light on what is usually invisible to high-performers. In *The Collaborative Professional*, managers and individual contributors grapple with the what and why of collaboration.

New skill-building programmes

Fresh new skill-building programmes are being designed and rolled out for a specific target audience: first-line and middle managers, rather than senior managers and leaders.

But why this particular group?

We have chosen to focus on this group because they often miss out on well-designed skill-building programmes delivered by specialists. Senior managers and leaders have access to strong programmes given by experienced facilitators. But most organisations don't have the budget to use these programmes for first-line and middle managers.

Two of these new skill-building programmes are *Engaging Direct Reports through Job Design* and *Influencing Collaboration.*
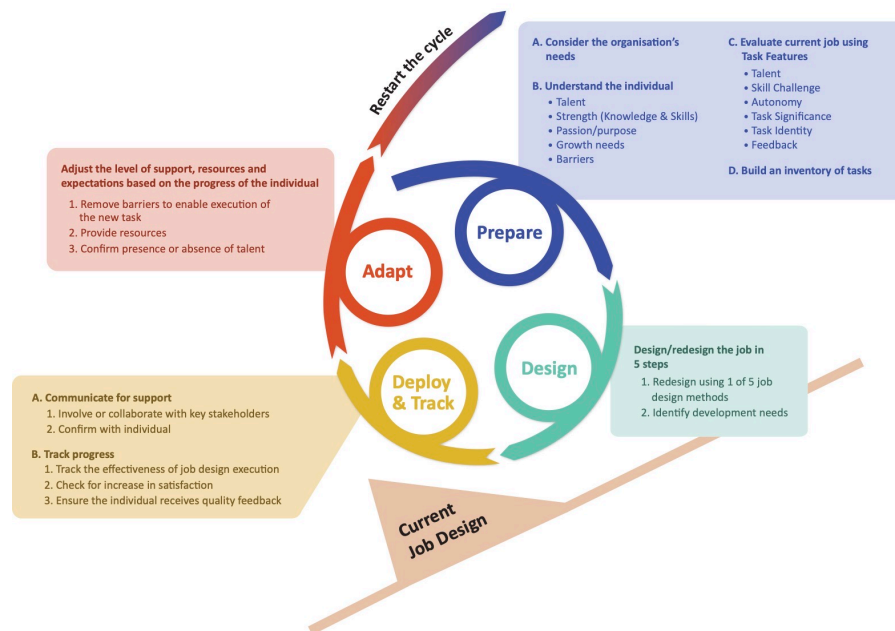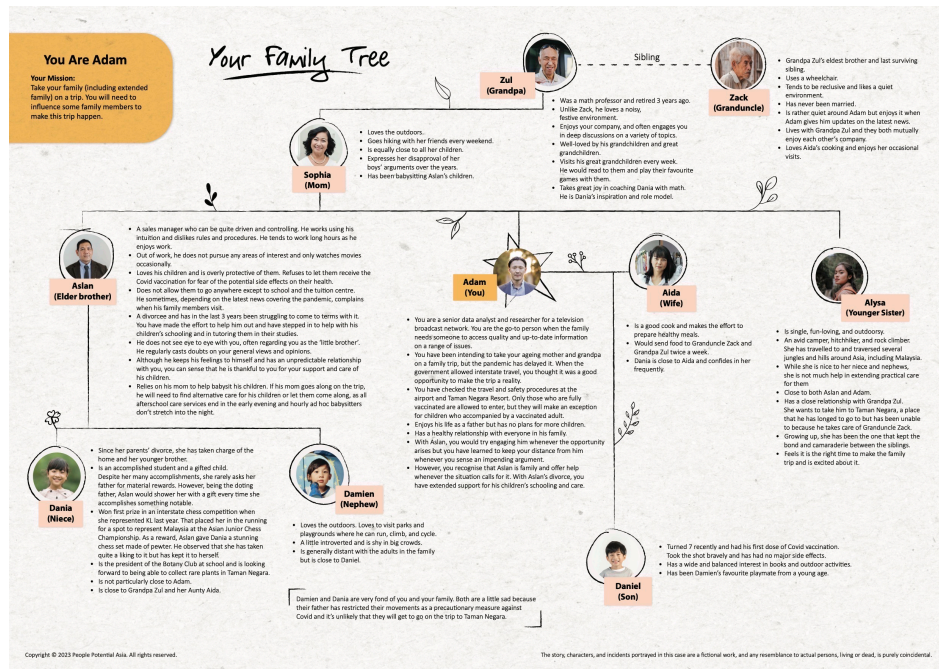

The job redesign model from Engaging Direct Reports through Job Design

Leadership suites and licensable solutions

These different types of programmes sit inside six Leadership Development suites:
- Collaboration
- People and Performance
- The Inquiring Leader
- Engagement and Culture
- Leadership Re-Imagined
- AI as Coach

A fun case study found in Influencing Collaboration

Terry has plans for three more suites: Learning Strategies, Self-Leadership, and Teams.

Our new focus is to design programmes that are licensable internationally. This means the solutions cannot address common subjects like problem-solving or critical thinking; they must be something new.

And so, you can imagine the fun for Josh and the ID team.

***

Meanwhile, at Business Presentations…

…we are working with the ID team to kaizen our recently launched *The Business Storyteller*.

Tools of The Business Storyteller

And after years of contemplating, we are now creating programmes for experienced sales staff. *The Case Maker for Sales* and *The Art of Asking Exploratory Questions* are being designed this year, with *The Art of Asking Challenging Questions* and *Storytelling that Sells* slated for 2024. These programmes will each give uncommon tools to sales professionals for that extra edge.

Presentations Alive! will be celebrating its 30th anniversary next year (gosh, this means I am 30 years older!) and plans are afoot for a completely new and revised version for presenting in the third decade of the 21st century.

***

Two overdue 'Ds' take us from 5D to 7D-ID

Discover
This continues to be the beginning for any highly customised ID intervention with a client.

Delve
The first overdue 'D'. We were happy to have Tammy Selvam join us in late 2022. She is taking on most of the research and design for many of the new programmes.

Choong Yin is out there delivering the *Collaboration* programmes for other clients (since we are co-owners of the IP from the *Collaboration* RFP that we won). He is strengthening the programmes further using the research processes that Terry developed while creating *The Case Maker* in 2003.

Research has been a significant part of our design process from the beginning. In Terry's hands, the standards for research were lifted and established.

Research differentiates how we design. It is a stage that sets the solid foundation for *Design*. A foundation that the learner does not see, but allows them to understand and grasp, then explore or practise freely in a class that is not 'flimsy'.

Terry's method has been codified into a tool. And with this, research – *Delve* – has its own place.

Design
As you have seen, design used to be just one person, either Terry or me, and one programme at a time. It is now multiple programmes being designed or updated simultaneously, in two practice areas, by several teams.

Labs have multiplied. We now have *Conceptual Labs* solely to come up with the conceptual model and outcomes of a programme. *Design Labs* tackle learning activities and the prototypes of the learner's tools.

Develop
Divya continues to work with our band of graphic designers to create the collateral for each new programme, including the class Miro boards and the all-important tools. I asked Frankie recently about his thinking process when doing the graphic design for our materials. He said something interesting:

"I design in two ways for People Potential. For a tool, I have to be sure the learner can use it easily. I have to maximise space and use it creatively. Things like size of font, and how the learner moves from one section to the next, are my priority.

"When it comes to the covers of the manual, I can think more Van Gogh-like."

When he and Divya were working on *The Business Storyteller*, they asked themselves: could the covers of the learner's manual be used differently? Frankie's mind went to work, and we ended up with a manual that when opened and placed face down became an art piece that tells the learner the whole story of the programme.

Deliver
New programmes continue to be piloted. This stage also differentiates us. The *Develop* team rushes to get the full set of materials to the finish line and passes the

baton to the trainer, who will study the material, then go out and bring the programme to life. Our kaizen tool is set up, and the team captures kaizens as the pilot is running. Often, within 24 hours, the team assembles for a *Kaizen Lab* for more fun.
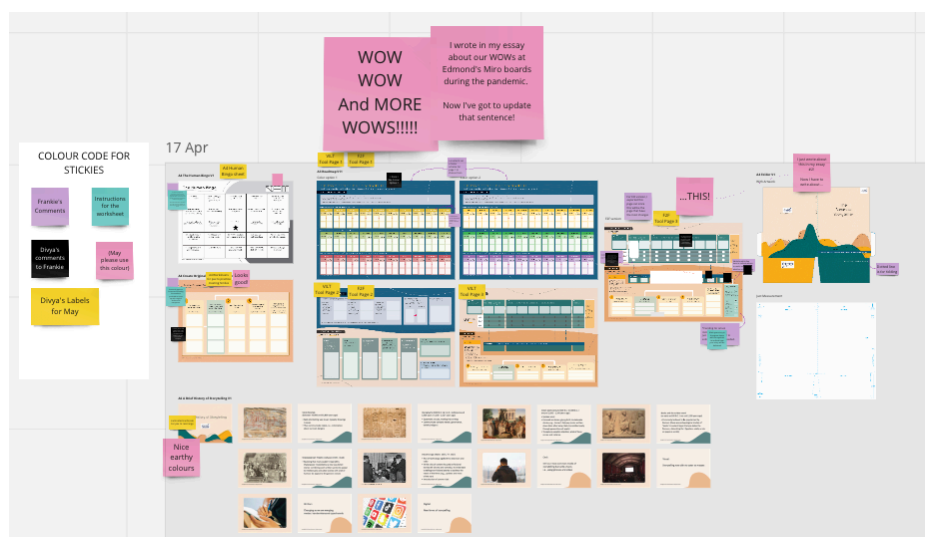
Deepen

A crucial differentiator in our ID process. Charlene is now the manager for the *Deepen* team. Since 2017, every new programme has a multi-week post-training behaviour change system attached to it. She designs this system, and other team members write the reinforcement messages that the learner will receive on the app. She also supervises the updating of the behaviour change system for our existing programmes.

Data

The second overdue 'D'. As you can imagine, we now have so much behaviour change data for the programmes we run. This is part of Charlene's fun: to get the data analysed, to find insights we can use to beat the Forgetting Curve into submission, and to get reports out to our clients.

Remember Jane, the Learning Academy head of the award-winning regional bank in Singapore? She is currently working with Josh and the *Deepen* team to refine and build the two-year behaviour change programme for their second cohort of future leaders. We are all looking forward to the data.

And so, we are now *7D-ID*: *Discover*, *Delve*, *Design*, *Develop*, *Deliver*, *Deepen*, *Data*.

This is the moment before the kaizens start pouring in

Designing in the time of AI

You might be wondering how the "transfer from Marianne to the ID team" part of Josh's mandate is going. Well, we have put *Design*, *Develop* and *Deepen* accreditations in place. And by the end of 2023, most of my knowledge would have been transferred to people and systems. Then it will be a matter of figuring out how to bring out my tacit knowledge.

But really, we are trying to complete this transfer as quickly as possible because everyone is testing and using AI: where and how and whether to use Chat GPT, GPT-4, and the wave of other AI tools that have landed seemingly overnight upon us. Early results are promising, slashing time spent on certain tasks, allowing everyone to tackle and learn more things.

If AI is about to change training forever, I wonder what of our design methods, systems and processes will be left standing. Only our philosophy of design? Only our flexibility and creativity?

Should this be the case, if we have to let go of many things we have created, so be it. To be living and working at a time of a turning point for humanity, with ethical and moral questions, with the potential to quickly and dramatically alter work and the way we live, is, on the one hand, scary, but on the other, surely a privilege.

And it might be exciting, too. Who knows – with AI upon us, and if VR becomes accessible and affordable soon, if we can help our learners to become masterful alpine skiers for the skills that matter to them at work, perhaps learning might become for them the adventure it truly is.

Epilogue

To close this essay, I asked Terry what he was most proud of. After saying "my wife" (yes, I will be buying him dinner at our Friday date nights for the rest of the year), he said:

"Our range of programmes. The design process that evolved, including pilots.

"Our collective ability to pull from several fields. For example, *I'll Answer That* took from my days in philosophy preparing for oral exams: anticipate questions, speak on various topics, answer follow-up questions from professors – then we simplified that process.

"In *The Art of Asking Good Questions*, we brought together NLP, Clean Language, Business Thinking. This type of breadth is not common. We are able to take from various fields: me from Philosophy and Psychology, you from Music Performance; both of us from NLP, and now that breadth continues to grow with other subject matter experts.

"We didn't come from corporate, from L&D, and so it allowed us to view everything differently, to not be bound by how things 'should' be. And as we learned over the decades through failures and successes, about how organisations functioned, we were able to design better."

As for me, I am most proud of our ability to decode the strategies of excellence from exemplars, then create training and tools for the learner to do what they could not do before, or do much better – giving them resources that they can use daily, for decades.

I also asked Terry: "What is your advice to our current ID team?"

"They need to have a strong grasp of adult learning principles, design methodologies out there, and technology. And if we remain doing classroom training (virtual or F2F), they will need to come up with highly engaging designs for people who are learning most things, fast, from the internet, and now with AI."

And my advice?

If the right learners are in the class, most of the problems they face can be traced to a flaw in design. Grapple with this.

A blank canvas is where ID begins. To fill it, you will need detail (lots of it) and the big picture. You will need method and flexibility. You will be working with structure, and you need to cultivate *gestalt*. Build these opposites. Recognise when they are needed.

There will be overgrown paths and busy highways, rivers and mountains to get across before you hand over your designs to the trainers. You have to thrive on these adventures because you will be going on them, over and over.

Finally, to build powerful design muscles, design every day, in every facet of your life. Design at work, design for yourself, and design for everyone who matters to you. Opportunities are everywhere.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

I visited the Van Gogh Alive exhibition again with Charlene, Khesh and Frankie. Divya had gone earlier, on her own. This time, during the slide show, I had tears when *Starry Night* came on and enveloped us. I had only just found out that *Starry Night* was the view Van Gogh was seeing from his room at the asylum. Imagine not knowing that detail until now. Khesh whispered to me that her head suddenly felt light, like all her cares, tasks and thoughts just melted away.

As we walked out of the exhibition, it dawned on me: all our programmes are now a collection – a growing collection. We have a gallery that can be *used*, even as we create the next works.

Our foundation, though, is not NLP or Accelerated Learning, ADDIE or 4MAT, Agile or Design Thinking. Our foundation comes from a lineage of artists, composers, and poets. From before and continuing after Van Gogh, Bach and Kabir. The instructional design methods and tools that we use, whether for training programmes, group process solutions or behaviour change, are our palette.

I am not equating our programmes with Van Gogh's art, Bach's music or Kabir's poems. But our *process* is similar. The struggles are similar. That is clear to me. Our heart is the same heart. We work with the same passion. We strive to design every minute of our programmes not unlike the artist's innumerable brush strokes, a composer's shaping of every musical phrase, or every line break that a poet must

decide.

Everything is design. Every result you want from a training is about design. Not just any design, but robust design. Design is the beginning of the final result. Design is at cause.

We are the only provider to have won Gold or Silver awards for *Best Management Training Provider* for six consecutive years (2017–2022) and we know that our method for instructional design, our vision for creating original programmes and co-creating with clients is part of this success.

Ours is a practical art, with awareness, knowledge, skills and tools that can be used every day. And if used – like the banker did, walking down Wall St – the person you are talking to can be moved to action. An organisation's key strategy can be realised when behaviour change is attached to the training. And some people will learn to fly.

That's why we live in the creative whirlwind that is instructional design in People Potential. And why design is everything to us.

Now you know we are here: a team that is aflame with desire, ready with muscles, prepared to learn – to create new works, and new collections for the specific needs of your terrain. To lift high the skills and effectiveness of your people.

We hope you will reach out to us to design training programmes that you need, leadership solutions, and behaviour change systems – for goals your organisation wants to achieve, or to solve stubborn problems. And like we did with Jane, we so much want to work with you, so that you, too, can go to the C-suite or to your board of directors loaded with data about the effectiveness of training.

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To explore how our Instructional Design team can help you reach your organisation's goals, please contact Mints at min.lee.chin@peoplepotential.com.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank:

Our clients – who came to us with their needs, who trusted us to design, and in some cases, designed with us. We treasure the partnership.

All the unnamed former teammates – for contributing to our designs over these three decades.

The 'PPers' who helped with all the fact-checking – each of you made this big task easier for me.

All those in the ID team who gave me their time for interviews – what rich conversations we had, yielding so much information I did not have when starting this essay.

Terry Netto – for refining the section in Chapter 4 on *locked value*.

Joshua Ng – for reading the entire early draft when words, sentences and paragraphs had not yet been smoothed; for noticing what was missing, and correcting facts like how he grew older in one chapter then became younger in the next.

Lydia McClelland – for invaluable developmental and line editing help that strengthened the design of the essay on design.

Edmond Yap – for believing in me, and for assuring me that it is perfectly fine if only a few people who might benefit from it, read parts of this essay.

About the Author

Marianne Vincent is the Director of Training Quality at People Potential.

Marianne's parents were both teachers and so she grew up in a household where creating and conducting lessons was a tightly woven fabric. Her mother was always designing sessions for a children's group in their community. When Marianne was a teenager, she began designing alongside her mother, and she started to see that engagement came first through design, and only then through the facilitator. She discovered that the difference between excellent and poor results was largely due to design, though she did not yet know these terms.

From chapter 1 of this essay, you will know that Marianne and her younger sister, when they were in their early twenties, learned, and then co-designed a unique programme to help her sister's baby improve in the face of extremely high odds.

At what was quite possibly the peak of her L&D career at People Potential, Marianne's father suffered a devastating second stroke, robbing him of his speech, his ability to swallow, and leaving him with an extremely limited ability to walk and move. She took a couple of years off to learn about stroke rehabilitation and worked with an incredible group of doctors, allied health practitioners and nurses to design, develop and execute a recovery programme. She is writing a collection of poems about this journey. If you are interested, you can find the work in progress here: [A Man with Shining Eyes](#).

Many of Marianne's days have an 'SDR' and 'EDR': Start of Day Rhythm, End of Day Rhythm. Her SDR begins with a writing meditation using [Julia Cameron's Morning Pages](#), then she works on a poem or essay, before going on to strength training (which she often postpones), then walking. Her EDR starts with relaxing with an old movie or British detective series on YouTube while having dinner

(though she knows she's not supposed to multitask like that), a night walk, daily piano practice, reading, stretching and finally, an examen.

Most years, you will find her with her phone off as she puts herself through a self-directed end-of-year and start-of-year retreat, taking time to look back to find patterns that might inform or bless the way forward.

Marianne is currently learning from, and being inspired by Yoko Ogawa's *The Housekeeper and the Professor*; Rehman Rashid's *Small Town*; Iain McGilchrist's *The Matter with Things Vol 1*; Stephen King's *On Writing*; George Orwell's *Why I Write*; Luke Burgis's *Wanting*; and *Song of the Departed*, the selected poems of Georg Trakl, translated by Robert Firmage.

She is getting her fingers around Chopin's *Prelude Op. 28 No. 22* and *Étude Op. 25 No. 1*; Mendelsohn's *Songs Without Words Op. 30 No. 5*; and the fourth movement of Beethoven's *Sonata Op. 2 No. 1*. While writing this essay, she brought down her score of the Bach *Concerto in D minor* (what she would have played with the orchestra at Melbourne University had she stayed on to do her honours year). She is hoping to finally learn the whole piece over the next few years.

In 2021, she wrote the essay [Absolutely, Perfectly](#) to honour the passing of her music teacher, [Professor Max Cooke](#).

In early 2023, she wrote the eBook: *What is there to do for four hours? Inside an executive presentations coaching session with Ibrahim J. Mariwa* – her protégé at People Potential. You can find it [here](#).

And so, you can see – Marianne is not just interested in design. Everything *is* design.

About People Potential

We're a learning and development consultancy and training provider based in Kuala Lumpur – with partners as far away as Europe. In the last 40 years, we've worked with multinational corporations (including several dozen on the Fortune 500 list) in 24 countries spread across five continents.

Over the years, we're humbled to have won numerous accolades from the HR Vendors of the Year Awards, including awards for Best Leadership Development Consultancy and Best Digital Learning Provider; we are the only training provider to win the Best Management Training Provider award (gold/silver) for six consecutive years (2017–2022, Singapore/Malaysia).

Our accolades for 2022 at the HR Vendors of the Year Awards

At People Potential, we can help you in three practice areas:
- Business Presentations
- Leadership Development
- Instructional Design

Our interventions are all available as face-to-face or virtual interventions. For more details, go to our website, www.peoplepotential.com.

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