

# Experiential Learning: Invention



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# Experiential Learning 2: Inventing

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This book is for sale at <http://leanpub.com/Inventing>

This version was published on 2014-08-26



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# **Sample from *Experiential Learning 1: Invention***

## **Failed Invention Phases**

Teachers attempting to use experiential learning often design fascinating experiences for their students, but fail utterly to follow up these experiences with similarly well-designed inventions. Why?

Perhaps it is the vast number of possible invention processes, making it hard to choose an appropriate one to match the exercise. Or, the learning leader may simply not know of more than one or two possible ways to lead an invention. In this volume, we'll introduce dozens of choices, which may remedy this flaw. Our experience, though, tells us that the vast majority of failed invention designs have one of two common flaws:

- too much telling (lecturing)
- not enough telling

# House of Cards

Conferences can be great sources of new ideas for experiential exercises. Still, I limit myself to two or three conferences a year. They’re simply too disruptive of my writing and teaching activities. But if a consulting client invites me to an internal conference, I usually have to add that conference to my schedule. That’s why I found myself in a remote part of Norway, attending a conference with about forty employees of a local software company.

Most of the conference was conducted in Norwegian, and most of the sessions were lectures, which put my non-verbal observational skills to a severe test. Finally, though, the next session was on teamarbeid, which my minuscule German told me meant “teamwork” in Norwegian. Sitting next to me, one of my Norwegian friends helped me follow the session, which went like this:

1. The leader explained to the group that this would be an experiential session. [Hooray!]
2. He reached into his briefcase and pulled out a handful of index cards, similar to the American 5”x8” cards.
3. “This is a card,” (Dette er et kort) he explained, holding one up for all to see. [I understood.]
4. He then said he would demonstrate how to build a “house of cards.” (korthus) [Even without translation, I could understand everything so far.]
5. He held up one card and folded it in half, carefully creasing the fold while ensuring it was precisely in the middle.
6. He stood the folded card on the floor, with the two halves at a right angle to each other.
7. He folded another card and set it down next to the first.
8. He took a third card and laid it flat on top of the two folded cards.
9. He then repeated the process, producing a second setup of three new cards next to the original three.
10. He then made a third triad structure, which he stood on the platform formed by the first two structures.
11. He then sat back in his chair, pointed to the cards on the floor, and said, with obvious pride, “that is a house of cards.” (som er et korthus).
12. Then he produced a large deck of cards from his briefcase and announced, “Your job is to work as a team and build a house of cards that is one meter tall.”

The group of thirty or so participants sat on the floor and began to fold and stack cards. After two or three minutes, they returned to their seats, leaving a huge pile of cards stacked just over one meter high.

“Very good,” said the leader, pointing to the house of cards. “Now you can see what teamwork can accomplish.”

He then stood, said “goodbye,” and left the room, never to be seen again. Before I had much time to think about what had happened, the master of ceremonies stood and introduced me to the group for my session.

I don’t remember what I did for the conference that day, because my mind was spinning with unrealized possibilities for the “house of cards” metaphor.

## Not Enough Telling

The experiential learning method is not the same as raw experience. Experience may be the best teacher, but much of the time, raw experience doesn’t teach us anything. Or teaches us the wrong thing. Mark Twain expressed it this way: “If a cat sits on a hot stove, that cat won’t sit on a hot stove again. That cat won’t sit on a cold stove either.” Without the invention phase, the cat’s experience with stoves may be worse than no experience whatsoever.

The cat could use some help with inventing some learning from its stove experience. It would be convenient if we could say to the cat:

“Poor Smoochie. Nice Kitty. Did that hurt? Next time you want to sit on a stove, approach it cautiously. Carefully touch it gently with your paw, to find out if it’s hot. If it is hot, don’t sit on it.”

Well, we can say that to Smoochie, but it won’t do any good—because cats generally don’t understand spoken language. People, on the other hand, can invent knowledge of hot stoves with a bit of help from a small lecture once they’ve been burned.

Why “small” lecture? Most people tune out if the lecture is too long, so in the experiential approach, we try to limit the lecturing—either with fewer words or some non-verbal approach to assist the invention.

Still, it’s possible to make the lecture too small, thereby missing much of the richness contained in almost any engaging experience. That’s what I saw in Norway, with the “house of cards” exercise. “See what teamwork can do”—those brief words failed to capture dozens of possible learnings from the card-building exercise.

## Not Enough Freedom

Building the house of cards contained many possible lessons, lessons that were lost because of the inadequate invention phase. But even more learning was lost because the house-building metaphor had not been fully exploited. Indeed, it had hardly been exploited at all. The participants’ explorations were so constrained by the leader, they never really had a chance to show “what teamwork can do.”

As given, the exercise had exactly one highly restricted goal—build a house of cards one meter tall.

Moreover, the exercise was restrained to exactly one method of building–folding the cards and stacking them the way the leader demonstrated.

It was also restricted to a single house.

In my mind, it could have been an exciting, lesson-filled exercise. Instead, it was simply 30-minutes of blah.

The week following this Norway experience, Jerry was in Switzerland with Dani and Don Gause, designing a workshop called the Technical Leadership Workshop (TLW). (Over the years, that workshop morphed into Becoming a Technical Leader (BTL), then ultimately became the Problem-Solving Leadership workshop (PSL). Over more than 30 years, that workshop has been taken by thousands of participants, and in every instance, the first major exercise in the workshop has been The House of Cards—but not the Norwegian version.