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Eric Bates

Dublin Institute of Technology, [eric.bates@dit.ie](mailto:eric.bates@dit.ie)

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## **COLLEGE IS WHERE THE REAL LEARNING HAPPENS: PERCEPTIONS FROM IRISH CRAFT APPRENTICES USING INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS**

**Eric Bates**

This research set out to examine the learning experience of three apprentice painters and decorators on the Irish Standards Based Apprenticeship from the Dublin Institute of Technology. This apprenticeship involves college based and work based learning. The main aim of the study was to explore the learning experiences of apprentices in their own words. This would provide for unique insights into their learning experience. The research method was one on one semi structured interviews and the data was analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis. One of the super ordinate themes that emerged from the data analysis was the perception among the participants that learning occurred in the college environs. This was contradictory as the full programme for apprenticeship requires learning at all stages in order to be effective. Such a perception may be detrimental to the learning experience of the participants and as such needs to be examined further.

Keywords: Apprenticeship, Learning experience, Interpretative phenomenological analysis.

### **Introduction.**

Apprenticeship has always been characterised by learning. Indeed the word apprentice comes from the Old English word 'aprentis' which is itself a derivative from an old French word 'apprendre' which meant to learn (Allen, 1990: 52). Over the last twenty years the Irish apprenticeship programme has undergone a radical change. Apprenticeship education in Ireland has changed from an inherited UK system of time served to a standards based system incorporating mandatory periods of work-based and college based learning (O'Connor & Mullins, 2005) and is now known as a Standards Based Apprenticeship (SBA). This system is implemented and monitored by Foras Aiseann Saothair (FAS) and brings new challenges to both the apprentice and the master. One major aspect of this change is the attendance by the apprentice at an Institute of Technology for a series of ten week blocks in which several assessments must be undertaken and passed in order for the apprentice to progress further. This is radically different to the old time served system where there was no requirement to achieve pre-set standards of skills, ability or knowledge (Steedman, 2010).

Under the previous system, the main requirement of a time served apprenticeship was the amount of time served regardless of the level of competence (O'Connor, 2005). Under a time served system not all apprentices got the opportunity to develop their skills and related knowledge particular to their trade in a structured manner (ibid). As such it would be difficult to ascertain if the apprentices produced by such a

system could meet the skills need of industry as there was no measuring of the learning undertaken. Traditional apprenticeships had problems with many apprentices simply serving their time and not taking any qualifications (Unwin & Fuller, 2005).

The new Standards based Apprenticeship required apprentices to pass assessments at various points through their apprenticeship. This research set out to examine the learning experience of the apprentices. A brief explanation for the Standards Based Apprenticeship will be looked at before moving on to the research.

### **The Standards Based Apprenticeship.**

The Standards Based Apprenticeship involves the apprentice undertaking 'structured training in the skills and knowledge of your chosen trade, and undergo specific tests and assessment to ensure that pre-set standards of ability and competence are attained' (Department of Education & Science, 2010). It consists of seven phases of training and is generally four years in duration (O'Connor, 2006). Each one of these phases has an assessment which must be passed in order to progress the apprenticeship. Phases 1, 3, 5 and 7 are work based training provided by the employer. The work based training has to be assessed by the employer and the results provided to FAS. The exams themselves are a standardised set of exam specifications drawn up by FAS (FAS, 2007). The apprentice must be competent in all of these tasks in order to progress further. Phases 2, 4 and 6 are off-the job training. Phase 2 consists of a twenty week course in a FAS training centre. Phases 4 and 6 are each ten week courses in an Institute of Technology (IT) (Department of Education and Science, 2010). Once again these phases are assessed by standardised test written by FAS.

It is the contention of this research that the new SBA has implications for the apprentices' learning. With this in mind this research asked, *how do apprentice painters and decorators on the Irish standards based apprenticeship experience their learning?* To probe deeply and try to gain a deep understanding of those experiences interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was utilised. IPA 'allows for a detailed picture of the psychological processes and rich descriptions of how individuals think and feel about the challenges they face' (Smith, Brewer, Eatough, Stanley, Glendinning & Quarrell, 2006: 487). Semi structure one on one interviews are recommended to gather data for IPA (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009).

### **Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.**

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) aims to understand experience through the insights provided by those best suited to provide them – the research participants themselves (Reid, Flowers & Larkin, 2005). Its aim is to explore in detail how participants are making sense of their personal and social world (Smith & Osborn, 1995). Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) 'allows for a detailed picture of the psychological processes and rich descriptions of how individuals think and feel about the challenges they face' (Smith, Brewer, Eatough, Stanley, Glendinning & Quarrell, 2006: 487). Idiographic research focuses on the particular and the individual in attempting to understand individual behaviour (Cohen, Mannion & Morrison, 2007) and as such IPA is idiographic in nature. Idiographic studies consider the participant on his or her own terms which serves to stress the importance of the individual as a unit of analysis (Smith, Harre & Van Langenhove, 1995). The attempt to make sense of a participants experience makes it an interpretative endeavour and is therefore informed by hermeneutics

(Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). Due to the hermeneutic nature of IPA the recommended bracketing by Husserl is seen as less relevant because researchers are inevitably intimately involved in making interpretations (Finlay, 2009). In fact there is a double hermeneutic at work as the participant tries to make sense of the experience and relay that through the interview while at the same time the researcher tries to make sense of the participants account of that experience. In essence the researcher is making sense of the participant making sense (Smith et al, 2009).

### **Data Collection.**

Gray (2004) states that interviews are particularly suited for collecting data when there is a need to gain highly personalised data which is required for this research. Tierney & Dilley (2002: 455) point to one utilisation of interviews being a desire to improve ‘our understanding of the social contexts of learning.’ Semi-structured life world interviews attempt to understand the themes of the lived everyday world from the participants own perspective (Kvale, 2007) and provides for a ‘planned and flexible interview with the purpose of obtaining descriptions of the life world of the interviewee with respect to interpreting the meaning of the described phenomena (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008: 327). This type of interview is particularly useful as it is close to everyday conversation but it has a specific purpose and a specific approach. Therefore it is neither an open, everyday conversation nor is it a closed questionnaire (ibid).

An interview schedule was written, see Appendix A. Similar to other interpretative phenomenological analysis (e. g Flowers, Knussen & Duncan, 2001) the interview schedule was not used rigidly but rather was a check list of topics and issues to be covered within the interviews while the questions were flexible, open ended and attempted to gently probe the participant (e.g. Flowers, Hart & Marriott, 1999; Shinebourne & Smith, 2008, Shinebourne & Smith, 2010). The purpose of the interviews was to obtain rich and deep accounts of the learning experience of the participants.

The interviews took place in quiet hotel lobby in a central location and lasted approximately one hour. The interviews were recorded using a digital Dictaphone and a mobile phone Dictaphone application. Both sets of digital files were downloaded to a computer. To allow for complete data immersion the researcher transcribed the interviews verbatim. The line numbered transcripts were printed and then photocopied onto A3 paper which was then bound. Using A3 paper meant that the researcher had plenty of room on both sides of the transcripts for notes during the analysis.

### **Data Analysis.**

The data was analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis which involved the following steps adapted from Smith, Flowers & Larkin (2009: 83):

1. Data Immersion: the data was read and re-read a number of times while also being interspersed with periods spent listening to the audio recordings.

2. Initial Noting: took place where semantic content and language use were explored. Any points of interest were identified. The aim here was to provide a detailed and comprehensive set of notes and comments on the data itself which have a clear phenomenological focus and attempted to stay close to the participant’s explicit meaning. There was also a degree of interpretative noting here as the researcher sought to understand how and why the participants spoke in the way they did. This element of interpretation involves looking at the language used and thinking about the context of any concerns while trying to make sense of a pattern of meaning in the accounts provided. These sets of comprehensive notes

were typed up onto a separate document to allow for easier analysis in the next step.

3. **Developing Emergent Themes:** the data set had grown considerably at this stage. The analysis focused on discrete chunks of transcript which had been identified in the initial noting phase as being of some interest to the research question. Through this process the data set was reduced as items of little importance were discarded. Producing themes from the data set meant producing a concise statement of what was important in the descriptive comments attached to a piece of transcript. In IPA these emergent themes represent the participant's original words and the researcher's interpretation of those words.

4. **Mapping Emergent Themes:** the next step involves mapping emergent themes directed by how the analyst sees the themes fitting together. Some emergent themes may be discarded depending on the relationship to the research question. The themes were drawn together in a structure allowing for the most important and interesting aspects to be explored. A graphic representation illustrates these emergent themes as well as the super-ordinate themes that develop for each individual participant.

5. **Next Case:** this step involves moving to the next case and repeating the whole process again. It is important to that the next case is analysed on its own terms and thus fulfil the idiographic requirements of IPA. This required a bracketing of the themes that emerged from the previous analysis. A rigorous analysis following the steps outlined above ensured that such processes occurred.

6. **Cross Case Patterns:** the final step involved looking for patterns across the three cases. In this research the individual table of themes for each participant was cut up and spread out on a table. Similar themes were grouped together and links sought among those groupings. This process led to some re-labelling of themes and to a focus on some of the more potent themes in the analysis. These themes were then grouped together into super-ordinate themes.

#### **The participants.**

The participants in this research were three painting and decorating apprentices from the School of Construction, Dublin Institute of Technology. Reduced numbers of participants can provide for a richer depth of analysis than a larger number (Smith et al, 2009). The names of the participants have been changed to ensure their anonymity. Colm is a 23 year old male who has been painting for nearly five years. He comes from an agricultural background and works in a mainly rural area. He has worked in no other area since beginning painting. At the time of the interview Colm estimated he had about six weeks left of his apprenticeship and then he would be fully qualified. He was working at the time of the interview and has worked for the same employer throughout his apprenticeship. The company employs between three and five employees including apprentices.

Stephen is a 21 year old male from an urban background who has been painting for nearly four years. Stephen started painting immediately upon leaving school and has worked in no other area. At the time of the interview Stephen is unemployed although he estimated he had twelve weeks left on his apprenticeship before he would be fully qualified. Throughout his apprenticeship he has worked only for the one employer. The company employed between two and six employees depending on the work that was booked in.

Darren is a 24 year old male from an urban background who has been painting for four years. Darren did a two year college course after leaving school. Once this was completed he started serving his apprenticeship. Throughout his apprenticeship he had been employed by the same company which consisted of Darren and his boss. On exiting his last college based phase Darren was made redundant but obtained a place on the redundant apprenticeship scheme. This means he is guaranteed to finish his apprenticeship and get his qualification.

### Overview of super-ordinate themes.

The interview scheduled has been structured along two axes – positive learning experience and negative learning experience. These are explored in the work based and college based element of the apprenticeship. In an effort to make the participants comfortable and build a rapport the early questions focus on early learning experiences and their route into apprenticeship.

By using IPA it was intended to privilege the accounts of the participants and to unfold layers of meaning in terms of the experience of learning from the apprentices. Three super-ordinate themes emerged from the analysis. The first was the complex relationship with the employer. The second was the transformative power of learning. This paper focuses on the final theme which was that college is for learning. As Pringle et al (2011: 24) point out ‘the findings of IPA studies are firmly rooted in the evidence of the words of participants’. As such extensive quotes from the interview transcripts will support the presentation of the findings and inform the analysis.

### College is for learning.

#### Darren

In the following revealing passage Darren talks about how he views his college based learning. This passage comes from a section in which Darren criticises a particular college teacher and his methods of teaching for being very structured with no leeway for individuality from the learner. Darren is asked was all of his learning very rigid and he replies,

*Emmm, nooo, it wasn't that it was rigid, it was more... like, you are in college, you go in there to learn, that's grand, its college so you know you're going to learn... right? Ok, and they know what they are doing. That's fine I get that, that's the idea of the college part. It's more like this particular teacher did it one way – his way. (l. 468-471).*

This passage is illuminating as it reveals three things. – Darren's attitude to college, his expectation of his own learning and his attitude towards work based learning. Darren's attitude to college is that it is a place of learning. He states quite clearly ‘you are in college, you go in there to learn.’ For Darren the college has a primary function – a place of learning. Earlier in the interview Darren spoke about going to college after completing school. Darren spoke about his motivation to go to college, ‘Emm, I always wanted to go to college for a couple of years and just have the crack’ (1.45). He did not say then he was going to learn, he was simply going for enjoyment and fun. He now has experience of college and its environs in the context of that two year course and in the context of apprenticeship. His attitude now is that college is for learning.

While Darren sees college as a place of learning his expectation of his own learning is that he will learn once he is in college. As he explains, ‘it's college so you know you're going to learn’ (1.469). Darren has an almost automatic assumption that once he is in college it will follow that learning will occur. In Darren's mind it is natural that once you are in college the net result will be learning. He does not put any proviso or limitation on this statement. It is simply stated that you know you are going to learn when you are in college. This passage came after Darren was criticising a particular teaching method. He does not seem to be any doubt that he will still learn despite the restrictive teaching method as he is in a place of learning.

Finally, this passage reveals something of Darren's attitude towards his work based learning. There are several key phrases in this passage. They are ‘you are in college, you go in there to learn’, its college so you you're going to

learn' and that's the idea of the college part.' This particular reference to the college part is revealing because it highlights an unspoken attitude towards the work based element of Darren's learning. He is pointing to the college based element as being designed for learning. By highlighting it in this manner it would seem that Darren does not see the work based element in the same context of learning as college based learning. He is almost at pains to point out that college is for learning, he will learn in college and it is designed for learning.

### Colm

When asked if he thought there was more support for college learning Colm answers,

*Oh there would be yeah, cos you spend more time and you can ask more questions and eh hh cos everyone else is at the same thing and ...you get practice at it too like so ...if you were on the outside like outside working (laughs lightly) you just like go into a house and you've to wallpaper it, it would have to be done the way... the employer wants you to and its probably more interesting in college cos you can ask questions and if you did it wrong it be alright like (1.306-311).*

Colm talks about asking questions in college twice in this passage, at the start and at the end, reinforcing its importance to him. There is an interesting narrative arc throughout this passage. Colm begins by talking about college based learning, moves to work based learning and a criticism of it and at the end comes back to college based learning and praises it. At the start of the arc Colm says 'you can ask more questions.' By stating you can ask 'more' questions would imply the ability to ask questions is present in his work based learning and when in college you get to ask 'more' questions. However, after passing through the different phases of this passage by the end he says 'it's probably more interesting in college cos you can ask questions' (1.310). At this point Colm is saying that in college you actually get to ask questions. He has dropped the assertion that you can ask 'more' questions. This calls into question his first statement and implies that in college you can ask questions whereas in work you cannot.

Colm points out that in college you can 'you get practice at it too' (1.307). Colm does not refer to any one specific task rather he is generalising that in college you can practice. This should also be the case for his workplace learning. If he is not given the freedom to practice his craft then he is unlikely to progress. Following this Colm also refers to the freedom to make mistakes in college without repercussions – 'if you did it wrong it be alright like.' Once again this would imply that in the workplace it is not alright to do something wrong. While mistakes are not to be encouraged they will nevertheless occur while an apprentice is learning the craft. An apprentice should have the freedom to make mistakes as they learn their trade whether this is work based or college based learning.

In contrast to this interpretation of Colm's college based learning is a particular work based learning experience that Colm relates. Colm talks about a task where he was left alone by the boss. The particular task involves new learning that Colm is unfamiliar with – glossing a door. He describes how it felt as follows, 'I was panicking... I knew he was going to go mad like. I was out of me depth doing it' (1.263). Colm realised very quickly he could not do the task and probably more importantly he realised what his employer's reaction would be, 'he was going to go mad.' If this is Colm's experience of his work based learning then it is understandable that the freedom and space in college would indicate that for Colm college is for learning.

### Stephen

Stephen identifies college as a place where learning is meant to occur. He begins this next passage by describing college,

*Well, it was... very easy to learn I suppose. You could ask questions and you knew people weren't going to go off the handle about the question (l.415-416).*

Stephen identifies an important factor that contributes to his ability to learn. It is the ability to ask questions without fear of repercussions. This should also be the case for his work based learning but from his descriptions of his employers histrionics when mistakes are made it can be seen that is not the case. Stephen further elaborates that in college 'you had space to learn [...] you knew you were going to learn when you're here' (l.418-419). Space to learn is important for any apprentice learning their trade and employers should be providing this. It is also significant that Stephen implies that he had an expectation that he would learn whilst in college. When asked how did he know he would learn in college he responds, 'Well, it is college for one thing' (l.421). This is a very strong indicator of Stephen's orientation towards the perception of the learning environment. For Stephen it is clear that college is for learning. He fully expects to learn simply because he is in college. It would seem that Stephen has an image of what happens in college, which is learning, and thus he learns while he is there. When asked directly would he expect to learn more in college Stephen answers, 'absolutely' (l.428).

### **Discussion.**

As it was questioning the way the participants experience the world it was phenomenological in nature (van Manen, 1997). It is important to note that findings from a phenomenological research cannot be generalized to a wider population they can still prove relevant to other people and other settings (Finlay, 2009). The data was analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) which is an approach that emphasises the importance of individual accounts (Pringle et al, 2011). However, identified common threads across accounts coupled with a critical commentary can lead to useful insights which have wider implications (Reid, Flowers & Larkin, 2005). In IPA studies it is recommended that the researcher should think in terms of 'theoretical transferability rather than empirical generalizability (Smith et al, 2009: 51). In such a case the researcher aims to provide an account which links the analysis with a personal and professional experience as well as the claims in the extant literature.

The perception that college is for learning is evident from the analysis. Darren says that 'you are in college, you go in there to learn.' Talking about college Stephen says 'you knew you were going there to learn' and Colm talks about the freedom to learn in college where an apprentice can ask questions and has the freedom to make mistakes. Both Darren and Stephen highlight the idea of learning in college simply because it is a college. They both therefore expect to learn in college. Billett (2002) argues against just such a stance. He proposes the terminology of learning environments contributes to a situational determinism whereas learning should be 'inter-dependent between the individual and the social practice' (Billett, 2002: 56). If the apprentices could see that such social practices included their work place activities then this could help with regards to an expectation of their learning. Specifically, the notion of learning could be extended to include places outside of college such as the workplace.

It could be that the apprentices see the college as an educational institute and therefore have an expectation of learning within its environs. Zimmerman (2002) talks about the learning that occurs in reaction to teaching. The teaching that occurs in college is much more explicit and visible for the apprentice than teaching that may occur in the workplace. The college based assessments are part of the structure and are timetabled into the college based module. Similarly the assessments are timetabled and as such are highly visible to the apprentices. In essence the vernacular of the college based modules is all about learning and assessment. This may not be the case with their work based modules. The focus on the work place as a learning environment in any business organisation is of secondary importance to the goal of making profits for the company (Yoong Ng & Cervero, 2005). This is understandable given the requirements of any company. Nevertheless there has to be a balance struck and the needs of the apprentice should be considered also. As O'Connor (2006) points out some employers see apprentices as



cheap labour. Such cheap labour may not have the chance to avail of all the aspects of an apprenticeship as it is likely that they will be used on menial, repetitive tasks. This will not provide for a comprehensive learning experience nor will it produce a fully rounded and capable tradesperson. Perhaps more importantly it may contribute to the perception that learning will only occur in college.

Learning will not simply happen to an apprentice in the structured environment of a college only especially considering the structure of the SBA is designed for learning. Indeed the very foundation of the SBA is for learning to occur throughout the term of apprenticeship. As Scott (2005) has said the learners must take some element of responsibility for their own learning. For the apprentice to adopt such responsibility would contribute to self regulation with regards to their learning. Zimmerman (2002) defines self regulation as a self directed process of learning. The self directed student views learning 'as an activity that students do for themselves in a proactive way rather than as a covert event that happens to them in reaction to teaching' (ibid: 65). Such a self directed view and proactive perception of learning is good for any student. If the participants adopted such a proactive stance with regards to their work place learning then it would increase their chances to learn.

Stacey, Smith & Bartyt (2004) have pointed out that people in a workplace construct knowledge with their colleagues. It is therefore essential that apprentices see this possibility in the workplace and not just confined to an institute like a college. Participatory appropriation is the process whereby 'individuals transform their understanding of and responsibility for activities through their own participation' (Rogoff, 1995: 65). When apprentices are in college they expect to learn and through participatory practices they endeavour to learn. However, it would seem then that the participants in this research did not see the processes occurring in the workplace.

If the participants in this research fully expect to learn in college because it is a college than the converse may be true also. Specifically, the participants may not expect to learn in work. There needs to be engagement with the notion of the workplace as being a place to learn. Billett (2002: 3) contends that ultimately it is the individuals themselves who determine the invitational qualities of the workplace in terms of their opportunity to learn. This would seem to be the case in this research. Such invitational qualities may be difficult given the power imbalance inherent in any apprenticeship.

Colm talked about the freedom in college to make mistakes. This could be absent from his own work place experiences and as such he sees it as being a particularly college based facet of his apprenticeship. Billet (2002) says that providing the opportunity to practice and avail of guidance is necessary for any work place practice. It can be seen that Colm highlights this aspect of college and associates this freedom with learning. Making such freedom accessible to apprentices in their workplace may contribute to their understanding that the workplace is a place of learning and it is not just restricted to college.

## **Conclusion.**

In the course of this research it became obvious that the participants saw their college based modules as the place where they expected to learn. The assessments in the college based modules are extremely visible in that they are timetabled and form an integral part of the college based modules. The apprentices are notified and given notes and study time in order to prepare for these exams. It has been said that assessment drives learning (Biggs & Tang, 2007). If that is the case then it is somewhat understandable then that the apprentices see college as a place where learning happens as it is here where the most visible assessment occurs. The downside of this assumption is that learning may not occur in the workplace.

This research indicates the need to refocus an understanding of the workplace and see it in the same light as college. Aarkrog (2005) argues convincingly that learning in the work place must be supplemented with school based learning. He concedes the unique characteristics of both the work place and the school which combined contribute to the effectiveness of such a programme where work place and school based learning are mixed. However, the school based learning should not supplant the work place learning.

An understanding that a workplace is a place of learning is required from learners engaging in workplace practices (Billett, 2002) and I would contend that there is an element of responsibility on the apprentices as well as the employers in this regard. This understanding is essential for apprenticeship to work effectively. This must be embedded within the mindset of apprentices to highlight the full potential of all the aspects of learning. As Billett (2002) points out, if learning is seen as something particular to educational institutes rather than as a product of social practices then this viewpoint may well inhibit understanding about learning and in particular learning through the work place.

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## Appendix A: Interview Schedule

### How do apprentice painters and decorators on the Irish standards based apprenticeship experience their learning?

#### General background.

1. Can you talk to me a little about your experience of learning in secondary school?
  - Prompts – How far did you progress in school?
  - Did you like secondary school?
  - Did you like particular subjects?
2. How did you become a tradesperson?

Prompt – Did you ever consider an alternative to an apprenticeship?  
 Did you ever consider an alternative career path?  
 Have you ever worked in some other area?

3A. Is there anything you like about being a tradesperson?

Prompts – How would you describe your work conditions?  
 Are you based in the one area/workshop?  
 Wages?

3B. Is there anything you dislike about being a tradesperson?

Prompts – What are your working hours?  
 Are they long?  
 Is the work hard?  
 What is your work commute like?

#### **Work based learning.**

4. Were you aware that WBL is assessed? Did your employer discuss this with you?

Prompts – how did this assessment make you feel?  
 Did you feel you were able to complete the assessment?  
 How did you feel doing the assessment?

5A. Can you talk to me about a positive work based learning experience?

Prompt – how did that experience affect you?  
 How did you feel during it?  
 Can you tell me what you were thinking?

5B. Can you talk to me about a negative work based learning experience?

Prompt – how did that experience affect you?  
 How did you feel during it?  
 Can you tell me what you were thinking?

#### **College based learning.**

6. Were you aware of that your college based learning was assessed?

7A. Can you talk to me about a positive college based learning experience?

Prompt – what kind of experience was it?  
 Was it a good experience or a bad experience?  
 What was good about it?  
 What was bad about it?  
 How was it for you?  
 How did you feel during it?  
 Can you tell me what you were thinking?

7B. Can you talk to me about a negative college based learning experience?

Prompt – what kind of experience was it?  
 Was it a good experience or a bad experience?  
 What was good about it? What was bad about it?  
 How was it for you?  
 How did you feel during it?  
 Can you tell me what you were thinking?