

Creative interventions with a labyrinth

Alex Irving

Liverpool Screen School, Liverpool John Moores University, Redmonds Building, Brownlow Hill, Liverpool L3 5UG, UK

Contact: a.irving@ljmu.ac.uk

Abstract

Whilst researching tools and techniques to enhance creative competencies, I was introduced to a polished stone labyrinth installed on a beach at a creativity conference in Italy in 2008. For the next five days I walked the labyrinth and spoke with labyrinth experts from around the world including Jan Sellers, a National Teaching Fellow from University of Kent. Since then I've worked with the labyrinth to foster reflection and creativity with commercial clients and explored its infinite applications for a civic university by installing them in public festivals. This article traces the background of the labyrinth and its potential to impact on the creativity and wellbeing of students and staff.

Keywords

labyrinth; wellbeing; creativity; mindfulness; spirituality

Please cite this paper as:

Irving, A. (2017) 'Creative interventions with a labyrinth' in *Innovations in Practice*, 11 (2): 96-99



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Photo 1: A candle-lit labyrinth installation as part of one of the Liverpool LightNight Festival

Traditionally the core business of HE has been the advancement of scholastic abilities and expanding knowledge. However, with the advent of the digital age and increasing globalization, our graduates will be expected to face complex challenges in every sector of industry. Therefore, key creative competencies such as enterprise, problem solving and innovation are now essential qualities of being a graduate. The collective findings of the labyrinth community in HE, and other sectors such as health, are that creativity can be greatly enhanced by experiencing the labyrinth in its many forms.

What is a labyrinth?

Originating thousands of years ago, found in traditions across the world, this ancient archetypal pattern crosses cultural and religious boundaries and is currently experiencing a renaissance in US and Europe. The labyrinth pattern has been found in many different forms such as cave wall carvings, pottery decoration and man-made earth constructions using stones. At first glance it appears to be a maze but, unlike a maze, with many paths designed to confuse the walker like a giant puzzle, the labyrinth has only one path that meanders into the centre and back out again. Walking a labyrinth is often described as a ‘walking meditation’ offering a peaceful sanctuary from the vast amount of competing

appeals for our attention in modern life. There is no wrong or right way, or time to walk a labyrinth. It’s for the walker to choose. It may be a shared experience with hundreds of others in an outdoor celebratory festival or a personal moment of solitude for peaceful restorative reflection. The labyrinth experience can also be achieved by drawing and/or tracing the pattern with a fingertip.

As with meditation, walking a labyrinth is a visceral intuitive experience rather than an intellectual one. A valuable and rare opportunity to step out of ordinary ‘clock time’ into dreamtime yet fully present in the activity. It facilitates deep reflection capable of accelerating the creative process and, in doing so, gaining clarity, enlightenment, self-discovery, direction of action and heightened intuition. For this reason, a growing number of UK universities use portable and permanently installed labyrinths as a learning and teaching resource, with applications across all disciplines, from health to business and for pastoral care.

The labyrinth and the power of metaphor

Little is known about how labyrinths were used in the past but the unicursal path has long stood as a metaphor for life’s journey, it combines a sense of unity and purposeful wandering into a complicated symbol; events impacting on the walk are acknowledged for their symbolic interpretation. My general experience of harnessing metaphor in teaching and learning situations has led to rich teaching and learning experiences. It’s not surprising really as, since the origin of humankind, teachers have employed metaphor. Story has always been the language of the ancients, the religious and political leaders, the tribe elders past and present. Humanity has always used metaphorical communication to pass on their culture and its values whether it’s down the generations in cave paintings, in songs, in religious texts such as the Bible and the Koran, in the oral tales of tribal elders in exotic and ancient

cultures or even in contemporary society through the sharing of our own stories in the pub. Making sense of our world and finding meaning through unconscious absorption and visceral appreciation of metaphor is a universal human experience, as argued in Jungian theory, about archetypes and in particular why story is regarded as an archetype.

As infants we're introduced to story through fairytales. In his prize winning book *The Uses of Enchantment*, Bruno Bettelheim explains the meaning and irreplaceable importance of fairytales. He argues, "Fairy tales, have great psychological meaning for children of all ages... Rich personal meaning is gained from fairy stories because they facilitate changes in identification as the child deals with different problems, one at a time." Central to story is metaphor which, even as infants, Bettelheim argues we are unconsciously interpreting as it is this language of symbolism, which we're hard wired to understand. This is a theory underpinned by cognitive scientists such as Roger Schank who states; "Humans are not ideally set up to understand logic: they are ideally set up to understand stories" - yet 300 years ago in the West we demoted symbolic communication in favour of the literal. The Age of Enlightenment brought a sea change in Western philosophy and intellectual, scientific and cultural life, giving rise to the dominance of reason as the primary source and legitimacy for authority.

It's interesting to note, however, that a couple of powerful sectors in society have continued to exploit metaphorical communication as a key part of their messaging whilst appearing to be poles apart. Religion and advertising. One is conveying messages intended to transform and the other conveying messages intended to sell, but both promote belief.

Religious teachers and the commercial world of media advertising use tropes to embed profound truths about faith or bind us irrationally to the

belief that happiness is using a particular shampoo. They recognize that the promotion of belief can't be achieved by rationally reasoned persuasion. Instead they appeal to our sense of being rather than our thinking selves. This is fundamental to understanding how the labyrinth works.

Labyrinth projects

Some of the earliest projects I undertook were with LJMU clients from the business sector ranging from SME business leaders to international corporations (Irving, 2016). These were challenging projects as there was no prior model to consult that involved labyrinth interventions in commercial environments. It was all too easy to imagine some resistance when asking participants to remove shoes and walk an ancient pattern on a floor cloth as a way of processing their learning at the end of a business leadership course. Thankfully, the sessions, which were delivered with the business development team at The Automatic (LJMU's innovation lab), were a great success.

Over a three-year period, six labyrinth reflection days in The Automatic provided a colourful collection of anecdotal data about resistances, breakthroughs, joy, sadness, humanity, friendship and alliances. A few such stories (anonymised) are given below.

'Pauline' arrived late for the labyrinth walk after getting lost, and had only ten minutes to walk the path. She began her walk, but a pre-arranged change in the music, a signal to her colleagues to finish their walk, came as a surprise:

I kicked off my shoes and ran on. I walked at a steady pace ... Then the next track of music came on which was very quick tempo ... my walk got faster and faster, my colleagues started to leave to attend the next session.

Suddenly I realised that I had surrendered my wish - to walk the labyrinth at my own reflective 'me time'

pace - to the demands of the day's timed schedule, to the fast music and to the pressure of colleagues wanting me to hurry up. So I stopped. It was then I realised that this is how my life is. The demands of my clients, my employees, my children and other family members, my accountants leave no time for me and I need to address this from now on.

'Richard', the owner of a large building company, said that he wished he had known about the labyrinth months before when his workforce was struggling to process the death of a colleague in a site accident. He spoke sadly about how he had tried to find ways to help them grieve; he was sure the labyrinth could have offered them some support and peace.

'Sarah' announced she was going to sell her business and use the funds to start a support centre to help child poverty in a deprived area of Liverpool, citing the labyrinth walk as 'a moment of realisation'.

Labyrinths in the learning environment

As you reflect on the comments and, potentially, life changing decisions of individuals made during my project work, I am convinced a labyrinth has a place at UK HE institutions. One only has to look at recent papers imploring the need to create more mindful and positive spaces at university (Seldon and Martin, 2017).

I leave you with this personal thought, 'Each twist and turn on the labyrinth path is an adventure. The labyrinth has taught me to expect the unexpected!'



Photo 2: In 2016, a small labyrinth was set up in a room at the LJMU Teaching and Learning Conference.

- **Alex Irving** is a Senior Lecturer at the Liverpool Screen School. Her current labyrinth project involves working with people with dementia. This is a cross-School collaboration with Elaine McNeill (School of Arts and Design) and Teri Howson (LJMU Drama Department).

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