

Professor Takes 'Liberating Structures' Methodology Around the World

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By Lisa Y. Garibay

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Mt. Kilimanjaro. Bratislava. Tokyo. Amsterdam. Little Rock. Lima. El Paso. These are just a few of the places that Arvind Singhal, Ph.D., Samuel Shirley and Edna Holt Marston Professor in UTEP's Department of Communication, has taken the Liberating Structures methodology, both in and outside of academic institutions.

Keith McCandless and Henri Lipmanowicz developed the alternative approaches known as "Liberating Structures." Singhal first met them in 2003 through meetings of the Plexus Institute in New Jersey.



Arvind Singhal, Ph.D., demonstrates the liberating structures method of storytelling to a group in Tanzania as part of a campaign to stop illegal hunting and poaching of endangered animals. Photo courtesy of Arvind Singhal.

“At that time, (Lipmanowicz and McCandless) had begun to experiment with and codify several liberating structures to replace or complement commonly employed instructional practices such as straight lecture, or free-flowing brainstorming,” Singhal explained.

LS can be described as a set of structured environments that enable people to interact in a way that releases their creative potential. This philosophy argues that conventional structures are too inhibiting, such as classroom settings, or too loose, such as open discussions; while liberating structures can allow individuals to be more productive.

Liberating structures can be implemented as easily as by removing students from a traditional rows-and-columns classroom setup and into a circle. The circle allows each participant to be equally seen, heard and acknowledged. Students are likely to get equal speaking time and reactions are more noticed, thus fueling discussion and debate. By the end of a semester where Singhal has taught using LS, the professor has noticed a pronounced increase in engagement, socialization, compassion and community among his students.

The tipping point for Singhal occurred in June 2004 when he, Lipmanowicz and McCandless served as co-facilitators of a workshop on complexity science and HIV/AIDS at Princeton University.

“We used a variety of LS – celebrity interviews, fishbowls, 1-2-4-Whole, storytelling, pattern recognition, and others. I was intrigued and hooked,” Singhal recalled. “Since then, Keith and Henri have served as my LS coaches, LS co-facilitators, and if I may say so, LS co-learners. I owe them a debt of gratitude.” By 2012, 33 different liberating structures were in place with proven track records and effective uses.

Singhal himself has implemented LS in more than a dozen universities in the United States, Canada, United Kingdom, Germany, Slovakia, South Africa, Sudan, Columbia, Peru, Japan, and India; integrated it in his teaching, research and workshop experiences with United Nations organizations; and used it to facilitate meetings and workshops with local organizations in El Paso.

Most recently, Singhal worked with the African College of Wildlife Management in Tanzania on a four-country media intervention project directed at wildlife protection and conservation and preservation of biodiversity. Just this week, Singhal lectured on the subject to a group of leaders and learners at the Clinton School of Public Service, where he serves as a William J. Clinton Distinguished Fellow and facilitates a monthly seminar in the Master of Public Service degree program on dynamics of social change.

Aside from the impressive list of institutions that he has enlightened with liberating structures, Singhal credits the method most with helping to liberate his classes here at UTEP. In an example of cross-disciplinary collaboration, short videos on the topic have been produced by the Department of Communication’s Media Changemakers program under the umbrella of the department’s Social Justice Initiative.

Since 2007b when Singhal brought LS to UTEP, he has happily observed a growing number of faculty and graduate teaching assistants implementing the method in their classes, including Assistant Professor of Rhetoric and Writing Lucia Dura, Ph.D.; Professor of Kinesiology and Director of the Center for Effective Teaching and Learning Harry Meeuwssen, Ph.D.; Civil Engineering Lecturer Ivonne Santiago, Ph.D.; and Assistant Professor of Social Work Eva Moya, Ph.D.

“Because of the focus on institutional and academic accountability and accreditation, I have been using some of the liberating structures to facilitate the faculty and advisory board meetings,” Santiago said. “I cannot begin to describe the amount of feedback we obtained over traditional meetings. Participant surveys indicated that 95 percent of the participants stated that their favorite part of the meeting was the interaction and exchange of ideas. I have also used liberating structures in my classes as a great tool for collaborative and team learning.”

Singhal hopes to continue spreading the good word about LS and all it can do for instructors as well as students by exhaustively documenting his experiences and pioneering new instructional materials for use by

anyone new to the liberating structures strategy. As part of this introductory process, 28 individuals (including three from UTEP) attended a two-day workshop in Seattle in January to learn how LS networks are created and grow and cross-fertilize the practice of teaching and research.

Proof of this methodology comes when students are asked to review their experience with it. Singhal quotes from a student's review after a semester of liberating structures in one of his courses:

"In Dr. Singhal's class we practice liberating structures in the way the class is structured and in the way activities are conducted. These structures provide an easy-to-learn atmosphere as they are adaptable methods for engagement that make it quick and simple for individuals from all backgrounds to integrate themselves into a discussion. This is exhibited by a simple rearrangement of chairs, removing order and hierarchy in conversation, and to even have space for a few moments to communicate free from course intentions. Through these practices we are working on decentralizing our thinking and actions. Through liberating structures we are learning to not adhere to an individual position and to not reject what others have to say."

And, of course, his work as a teacher has changed for the better, too.

"Now, when I prepare to walk into a classroom, I ask not, 'What is it that I need to do?' but rather 'What is it that **we** need to do?'" Singhal said. "With Liberating Structures, a classroom, its participants, and a professor are always a work-in-progress. And, that is what learning should be all about, no?"

Resources for Liberating Structures:

Web: www.liberatingstructures.com

Videos:

Liberating Structures: Simple, Subtle Powerful Clinton School Speaker Series, Arvind Singhal
<http://clintonschoolspeakers.com/content/liberating-structures-simple-subtle-powerful> 1'10"

Learning Six Liberating Structures by Henri Lipmanowicz and Arvind Singhal, UTEP.
<http://vimeo.com/60843778> 43"

UnScripted: Liberating Structures by Arvind Singhal <https://vimeo.com/51546509> 10'20"

Liberating Structures: Inviting and Unleashing All: Lipmanowicz in Convo with Singhal <https://vimeo.com/50352840> 8' 30"

Liberating Classroom: Lipmanowicz in Convo with Singhal
<https://vimeo.com/50347352> 8' 20"