

Learning with the labyrinth

Two Book Reviews of Sellers, J. And Moss, B. (2016) *Learning with the labyrinth: creating reflective space in higher education*. London. Palgrave

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Many people in learning development circles will already be familiar with the use of labyrinths as contemplative spaces, perhaps largely thanks to the work of the authors of this book. However, trying to explain labyrinths and the potential impact of their use to someone who has never heard of them can be difficult. There is so much that could be said, and finding the right starting point is sometimes a challenge. Far better to actually walk a labyrinth with a guide and experience it for real; however, if the opportunity to do this is out of reach, then picking up this book is going to be an excellent first step.

Although not a huge tome, its content is dense and diverse; it draws extensively on existing literature to offer a history of the labyrinth and its adoption within university circles (and other locations and institutions). It mixes photographs, diagrams, poems, short vignettes and longer chapters to combine stories of labyrinth walks which cross disciplines and countries. Alongside more lyrical contributions it suggests ways in which to research 'the labyrinth effect' in teaching and learning and how labyrinths may be used to open up creativity.

Divided into four main sections, *Learning with the labyrinth* is written for anyone wanting to understand how labyrinth practices enhance living and learning. Part I offers a first steps introduction to what labyrinths mean across different cultures, and how to create one, including guidance on size and scale. Learning developers naturally have an interest in exploring different kinds of spaces, indoor and outdoor, virtual and physical; labyrinths made of chicken feed, shredded office memos, sand, lit candles, painted canvas, stone or a thousand other things all offer new territory for such exploration. As Katja Marquart

reminds us in Chapter 5, "space is more than what is visible to the eye" (2016:46).

Part II concentrates on examples of labyrinth use in higher education. This is the distinctive aspect of this book, adding to the more general contributions made to the literature on labyrinths by the editors and others. How labyrinths enhance learning and teaching across the disciplines is particularly illuminating, both for those who work in a distinct field and those who support students across a variety of subjects. The flexibility of the approach is further illuminated by myriad uses of the labyrinth, including for creative writing, Appreciative Inquiry and as a metaphor for delving into the tenets of transformative learning. There are many appealing and unusual juxtapositions and combinations; collaborations between landscape professionals, land artists, scientists and arts council; artists and midwives; universities and the local communities; rural medical practice in Australia.

While stressing the many benefits to be had from labyrinths, the editors are frank that this is a field that does not as yet have robust or large scale research into the impact of labyrinths on student learning. Alongside case studies and chapters on empirical experience, this section includes John Rhodes' excellent chapter on the undeveloped area of researching the labyrinth. His considerations and recommendations are one aspect of this book that make it as useful for a reader familiar with labyrinth walking as for a newcomer, as well as academics with research, rather than teaching foci.

Part III focuses on campus and community; a broad category encompassing chaplaincy initiatives, dance, entrepreneurship, counselling and more besides. Part IV faces forward to the place and value of labyrinths in a turbulent, demanding and uncertain world. Finally, in their conclusion Sellers and Moss express the hope that the reader will have found multiple moments of enlightenment as they have read, or at least sufficient encouragement to try out something that is described, or to create new forms of engagement with the labyrinth.

Throughout the book there are suggestions of ways to walk the labyrinth in order to draw the most personal benefit from the experience. However there is also a strong message too that there is no right way to do so, which gives the individual the freedom, confidence and ownership to walk, run or dance their way round as they wish. As an exercise in partnership working there are countless anecdotes of the ways in which students have

responded to, and taken over, the experience, to help them face up to all kinds of experiences and challenges. As an adjunct to developing meaningful reflective practice irrespective of role or status there is ample evidence to show the benefits of having a labyrinth on campus - including several mentions of making walks available at exam time.

The authors are not afraid of recognising when there is resistance to, or reticence concerning the labyrinth, as is often the case with the novel or unfamiliar. Even when people are reassured that the chance to walk is voluntary and that there is no religious connotation attached there can be misinterpretations or disbelief. I have seen this in action myself as someone who has been involved in several labyrinth workshops and had conversations with people who are dubious about what such an experience might entail. However there are equally as many instances in this book that show how such resistance or misunderstanding can be reduced.

While being practical and appealing for readers attracted to alternative spaces and ways of handling the ups and downs of the academic experience, *Learning with the Labyrinth* also makes clear through its many examples that it is highly relevant to current HE sector priorities; student attainment, retention, managing stress and anxiety, supporting first generation learners, understanding what it means to be a student, supporting transition and rites of passage during the student journey. While all chapters are clearly written by true believers in the worth of labyrinths, where these have really taken hold in universities has been due to institutional commitment supporting the innovation of the few. This must go some way to offsetting what Sellers and Moss refer to as the "toxic managerialism" that threatens to pervade the present day market and metrics-driven culture of many HEIs. All authors emphasise how the labyrinth effect defies explication; this for learning developers I believe is welcome in an age where we are expected to measure, explain and prove the value of everything.

I found it a very soothing read - clearly living out the labyrinth effect through its pages. Its language is clear, thoughtful and calming, and the contributors are generous with their materials and ideas. As with any good read, there are new quotes to be enjoyed from other writers and threads to follow up on, within and outside its pages. For me, although I read it in pretty much one go it will be a handy "dip in and out" read too; one that can be referred back to when enthusiasts or experimenters want to try something out, understand something better, see how someone else did something and why. In places it is funny, in

others it is thought provoking and moving. Taken as a whole, this book also demonstrates the astounding creativity of university staff irrespective of job title and of the transferability of labyrinth use in subject related, contemplative or work-based situations.

The editors do not set out fixed objectives for either themselves or their reader to achieve by the end of the book, rather each section is set out in the language of invitation to share, explore and be unafraid to experiment. In the ways they and their contributors draw us into their diverse labyrinth worlds, such an invitation is welcomed and the journey enjoyed.

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If you mention the word labyrinth to colleagues across the sector, some will look blank while others will smile. They are the ones who have walked a labyrinth in connection to learning development and will know exactly what you mean. *Learning with the Labyrinth; Creating Reflective Space in Higher Education*, edited by Jan Sellers and Bernard Moss, brings together a unique collection of writings and images on the use of the labyrinth in a variety of higher educational settings. Those who have experienced a labyrinth walk, or are familiar with the concept, will find much to identify with, while those new to the subject are almost the lucky ones; they have yet to discover how something as simple as walking or tracing the labyrinth's twists and turns can be such an effective learning development tool for both staff and students.

What is a labyrinth?

A labyrinth can be made anywhere. It can be on the ground to be walked on or printed on paper or carved from wood to be traced with a finger. Labyrinths can be temporary or permanent. They offer a long walk in a small space. An 11 circuit labyrinth 13.03 metres (42 feet and 9 inches) in diameter is 0.5 km (one third of a mile) into the centre and out again (page 58). Often seen as the metaphor for a journey, when you walk a labyrinth it might feel like you are lost but the path always takes you into the centre and safely out again. To engage with a labyrinth is to take time out from the busyness of everyday life as concentrating on the circular path offers a rare opportunity to clear the mind. This original

and fascinating book aims to show how labyrinths offer creative and mindful approaches to providing the reflective space which is so essential for developing effective higher education experiences.

Is a labyrinth the same as a maze?

The book is clear about the difference between labyrinths and mazes; an inaccuracy reinforced by dictionaries and encyclopaedias which frequently confuse the two. A labyrinth only has a single path, whereas mazes are designed to frustrate and frighten with their multiple barriers and dead ends. The key difference between them is you can get lost in maze but not in a labyrinth.

What in the connection between labyrinths and learning?

Jan Sellers has played a leading role in bringing the experience of labyrinth walking to higher education. In the 'Introduction; the heart of learning', Jan explains how labyrinths can be used to support learning and teaching. A higher education experience is always about more than access to and interpretation of knowledge. It is also about creative and reflective thinking, self-development, contemplation and change. Any educational journey can be challenging on multiple levels, the personal and practical as well as the cognitive and psychological. What is needed, but so often missed, is time to pause, review progress and consider the wider rationale for being at university in the first place. In particular, during periods of anxiety over presentations, assignment deadlines and exams, it is important to make time to relax and take care of ourselves. The labyrinth can provide opportunities to destress by offering the mindful, meditative space which is often missing from our lives.

Salvator ambulado (It is solved by walking)

Attributed to Diogenes (@400 BC) and St Augustine (@400 AD) the physical process of movement offers opportunities to reflect and reconsider life aspects which might be troubling or require new perspectives. Jan Sellers quotes Kierkegaard (1978:214) 'Above all, do not lose your desire to walk...I have walked myself into my best thoughts' and throughout the book there are further references to the value of walking which underpin any labyrinth experience.

Introducing a labyrinth to university settings

Contributors to the book include academics, students, artists, photographers and poets and this combination offers a rich selection of perspectives and experiences. Chapter 4 by Debbie Holley 'Setting up and Sharing: introducing labyrinth practice in two university

settings' describes how existing research and experience can be used to demonstrate labyrinth walking as an enhancement of the learning experience in order to persuade institutions to support and fund development. Chapter 14 by Helen Malcolm 'Towards Medical Practice – a mindful journey' uses the writings of Thich Nhat Hanh to demonstrate the links between mindfulness and the practice of medicine for educators and students on university campus and in hospitals. Chapter 19 'A case study in imagination; drawing the labyrinth' by Liz Whitney describes introducing the labyrinth symbolism into midwifery workshops. Looking for methods to promote flexible thinking, empathy and compassion, Liz views art as a way to shift from logical, linear and reductionist science positions to more intuitive, multi-dimensional and exploratory ones. Using finger labyrinths as meditative tools in workshops, Liz asks students to reflect on an aspect of clinical practice, or an ethical dilemma or value before tracing the labyrinth pattern. Given time and space, ideas and insights emerge with part of the process including students reflecting on the therapeutic potential of the activity and how meditative practice might be used in wider clinical settings.

Permanent or temporary labyrinths.

Early permanent labyrinths in higher education include those at the University of Edinburgh and University of Kent. Chapter 21 'Chaplaincies: labyrinth pioneers' by Di Williams, describes how multi-faith and spiritual support services offer another dimension to the use of labyrinth within UK higher education. Di describes how a paved labyrinth in Georges Square in Edinburgh has offered inspiration for others who were interested in a growing labyrinth movement across the sector. In the 'Introduction; the heart of learning', Jan Sellers writes about the development of the permanent Canterbury Labyrinth, set in the campus grounds within view of Canterbury Cathedral, and providing a unique visual juxtaposition of old and new.

Practical guidance on constructing labyrinths

The book is practical as well as informative. It contains labyrinth images which can be photocopied and templates demonstrating the variety of labyrinth styles available. These range from the 3, 5 and 7 circuit classical labyrinths to the more complex 13 circuit medieval labyrinths such as the historic one set into the floor of Chartres Cathedral in northern France. In Chapter 3 'Masking tape and magic; how to draw and make low-cost labyrinths', Jeff Saward describes measurements and ingredients for constructing temporary indoor and outdoor labyrinths. The paths can be created by light projection, laid out with string, tape, birdseed, chalk, tissue and grass paint, or marked with pebbles,

tissue, sticks, cups, jars and candles. The only limit is imagination and attention to health and safety regulations when working with fire. In Chapter 27 'Finding resources for labyrinth projects', Kimberley Lowelle Seward continues the theme of labyrinth construction with advice on sourcing portable canvas labyrinths and offering a useful collection of resources for additional information and advice.

Labyrinths across subject disciplines

Part II Teaching and Learning Perspectives contains a range of case studies from subjects including health care, medicine, social work, art and engineering as well as educational and learning development scenarios. A number of academic approaches have been applied to the effectiveness of working with labyrinths such as Appreciative Inquiry, Transformational Learning, and Threshold Concepts while Chapter 7 'Research and the labyrinth in Higher Education' by John W Rhodes sets the context for labyrinth research and the emerging use of labyrinths in university settings. Table 1.1, page 11, has a list of permanent or temporary labyrinths at UK universities. Anyone new to the use of labyrinths in learning development might find this more extensive than expected. Chapter 7 also cites a useful range of studies into the positive effects of labyrinth walking on student health and learning.

Any book review can only skim the surface of its topic and hopefully stimulate interest to discover more. As Jan Sellers says of the spirit of good pedagogy (page 9), the intention is to get the reader thinking, to stir imagination and encourage the seeking out of further information. There has not been space to go into the history of labyrinths, which stretches back to early rock carvings from many thousands of years ago, their emergence on the floors of the great medieval cathedrals and subsequent destruction, or the recent labyrinth revival led by Lauren Artress in the 1980s. For all the lack of definitive knowledge about the labyrinth's origin there is still much to read about their usage over the centuries. This new resurgence of interest, as a learning and teaching tool in higher education, is symptomatic of its endurance. The hope is this brief review will not only stimulate interest, it will leave the reader wanting to know more and if the opportunity should arise to walk a labyrinth, they will now be encouraged and inspired to do so.

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