

Notes and Design of Bruce Gibbs' Focusing Class Taught Primarily by Instancing

“Each of them had taken many different kinds of workshops and done much personal growth work prior to this class. When I asked each of them about the class, each of them responded similarly:

‘This is the first time ever that it felt like I didn’t have to stretch in order to understand something. The information and learning came to me, rather than me having to work and go to the information.’

Each had told me that they had looked at Focusing before my class, and each said that they felt ‘Uh, oh, this looks as though it is going to be complicated.’

They found themselves very pleasantly surprised.”

- description by two students who took Bruce Gibbs' Focusing class taught via instancing.

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Introduction

The [Perceiving Focusing Instances article](#) suggests a novel process to help people learn Focusing. Upon reading it several years ago, Bruce Gibbs was inspired to teach a ten-week Focusing class in this manner.

This summary is based on an interview with him and includes some of his class notes as well as feedback from students.

Whether you choose to use instancing as the core way to access experiencing, as Bruce did, or whether it might be an adjunct to your present forms of teaching, it is our hope that you will find some value from it.

In terms of success, Bruce was happy that the way he ran his class resulted in the **intended benefits of the instancing approach**:

- students experienced Focusing as something inside oneself, as a natural human process
- students practiced connecting with their own experiencing regularly, not just when there were issues
- it minimized two major learning inhibitions: anxiety of “am I doing it right?”, and shame of “doing it wrong”

Overview

Bruce used the Perceiving Focusing Instances article to help him find his own ways, and to point to the kinds of things he could do. He also improved on the original model in many ways.

In terms of the demographics of this class, there were about 15 people all together. 3 knew Focusing well already, 4 knew some, and 5 had no previous experience with Focusing.

There were 10 weekly classes, 90 minutes each class. Homework was always given after each class.

Materials:

[Bruce's contract](#) given at the beginning of class 1

[Neil Friedman article on listening](#) given at end of class 3

ACTUAL CLASS BY CLASS DESCRIPTIONS

Classes are described somewhat sequentially. Some comments are in the text, and others will be at the end. Bruce's are in black, and mine are in green.

First Class

- 1) Bruce began with a go round of introductions, asking people why they were taking this, what their interest was and what they hoped to get out of it.
- 2) He also handed out [his contract of what participants could expect from him](#), and what he hoped he could expect from them.
- 3) Then, he informed the students of his intentions for this class:
 - a) he was going to teach Focusing differently than some were used to.
 - b) he was going to teach it in a way where people did not have to learn it as something separate from their experiencing
 - c) that they were going to learn Focusing from their own experience.
- 4) Following that, he introduced the relationship between what happens in your body and your emotions, of that strong sense one can feel.

[As you read this and what follows, you may wonder where the distinctions are between a felt sense and a feeling that are often taught in Focusing. In this approach, this distinction was intentionally NOT taught or pointed to initially. It was encouraged to emerge from experiencing. More discussion on that in the description of the Second Class, and commentary at end.]

“A lot of you may not know what a “felt sense” is. That is ok.....

.... There is something that I would like your help with.... Because there is a way that I usually introduce felt sensing, which is something like this:

“Imagine yourself driving, feeling ok. Then, as you glance into your rearview mirror, you notice red and blue lights flashing behind you (a police car). What happens for you, in your body?”

“That is my usual example. But, I would like more examples than just that one...”

“Even if you don’t know anything about Focusing, can you consider some other examples, some time that you were aware of something important was happening inside you, could feel something in your body, in relationship to something that was happening?”

Participants then began to offer examples

“Well, when I was in xx situation, ...”

.... and this set the tone of participants offering creative ideas from the beginning of class.

This was exciting to everyone. From there, they began to talk about the body-mind connection, and the place of bodily reactions in daily life.

5) This led to another inquiry:

“Where else in your life do feelings come up, where you can feel them?”

The first class was basically about:

- how/when do you notice your body?
- what things get you to notice what is happening in your body?
- and, what is that like, what do you notice?

The examples that the class shared were different from many other Focusing classes.

A few of them were personal (“when I argue with my partner, I can feel something” for example), but, the majority of the examples given during that first class were in the context of **sports**.

Sports is a realm where participants already had experience in naturally attending to felt experience.

In sports, one needs to pay attention to these feelings in order to perform well. The most common example given was going **skiing**. Any skier has to be in connection with a body sense in order to ski....

Also, sports are something that many are familiar with, and less vulnerable. When asked about experiences that were more emotional, most of his students initially said that those were NOT the kinds of experiences that they wanted to pay attention to, because they could be too easily overwhelmed by them!

As this is the heart of teaching via instancing, it bears repeating. Bruce started by eliciting, and then exploring, the places **where people were already attending TO felt experience, rather than** starting in areas, such as emotional distress, **where people were already tending to AVOID felt experiencing.**

[Over time, the examples that participants gave became more and more personal, and less and less about sports, as they learned to apply this way of connecting to more areas of their lives.]

6) The last thing done in that first class was to ask each participant to go inside and check to see if there is anything inside of them that was really into taking this class, and what it would do to help make the class go well. [He did not use any more formal Focusing guiding. It was too early for that, he felt]

And, after that, he also asked them to check in to see what parts of them were really holding back, and might want to not contribute or get involved?

Then, with a light and humorous touch, he invited the class to share in the group anything they wished about each of these – what they might do to help make it successful for themselves, and what they might do to ‘screw the class up’ or disengage.

7) Preparation for next class

Homework was ALWAYS given after each class.

First week homework was to **collect/notice more instances of places where they really noticed their body, to notice during the week when this was happening, and how their body was affected when emotional things happened to or around them.**

8) Conversation, Cookies, and Milk

After class, they would have cookies and informal hanging out, conversation, which really helped a great deal, as well. (Maybe it was the cookies more than the instancing that made the class successful?!)

Second Class

This one began with people sharing their experiences with the homework (which was their collecting instances of their felt experiencing).

Then, at some point in time, Bruce would ask “Would you like to pursue that a bit deeper?” If they did, he would guide them into their instance. Participants would get a lot out of doing this, and out of seeing others exploring their own processes.

At times, someone would be sharing about an experience during the week.

Bruce might reflect back **the aspects of steps of Focusing** that they were doing:

“So you felt that, and then these words came, and then you checked to see how well that fit. That is checking and resonating in Focusing.”

This is a good time to talk about how Bruce allowed encouraged the distinctions between a feeling and a felt sense to occur for the students. He felt that this was a very important area, requiring a great deal of sensitivity.

Talking about felt sensing early on is delicate. He wanted to avoid shaming people, or having them think that there is something that they don't have, that there might be something missing in them.

As Bruce saw it, if you are working by instancing, and if you ask if someone ever pays attention to a felt experience and see how it unfolds, most people (except the natural focusers) will say “no”. So, where is their instance that they can connect with?

*So, he did **NOT** try to distinguish between a feeling and a felt sense for the first few weeks, until after the class really began to explore felt sensing. He allowed this distinction to be made after people had more experience.*

Bruce allowed these kinds of experiences to occur by:

- a) “we are going to pay attention to obvious felt senses” (examples people came up with)
- b) “ and, we are going to extend the time we spend with them, and see what happens”

So, by doing this, Bruce helped them have experiences of being with felt experience longer and longer, and noticing what happened as they did.

In addition, he might ask a student a question with some curiosity about their experience, to encourage deeper sensing. For example “Could you check and see exactly what that feels like for you when you prepare to make that turn in skiing?”

Of course, those are Focusing instructions, without saying that they are. When one follows them, they ARE pausing, and sensing into. Now they have an instance – right then, in that very moment - which can be referred to. “Exactly, that is pausing and sensing”.

After the class continued on, this way of sharing experiences and using experiences as a resource for self and for the group became the predominant way for the group to move together. It became the usual operating mode for the class.

This describes what happened for the first three classes. As Bruce described, much of these classes involved asking them:

“Go search around in your experience and see if you can find something like (whatever they were exploring)....”

Another way to describe this was that the group was encouraged to reflect upon their experiences that they already had. Often, this was done by Bruce asking along the lines of:

- “help me out. I am wanting to explain something like xxxx, and ...”

- “ why not instance your own experiences as ways to contribute to our learning?”

The message given was “You are already doing this...”

Since the class began this way, it set a strong tone for it being a very collaborative shared learning process, with everyone exploring their own experience, and feeling that they had something to contribute.

Homework was the same - collect/notice more instances of places where they really noticed their body, to notice during the week when this was happening, and how their body was affected when emotional things happened to or around them.

Third Class

1) This one began the same as the second class. But it was more exciting from the start. The class was very much into doing this. They could tell that they were all doing something together – they could FEEL it.

From Bruce’s perspective, the first three classes were **pure play**, no work.

Also, each of these classes were **instances of offering interested curiosity towards** one’s own, and others’ **experiencing**.

All of these classes **encouraged mindful attention to one’s felt experiencing during the week, as an ongoing process**.

All of these classes **encouraged looking inside and outside for learning**.

At times, there was a challenge in that those who knew Focusing already often wanted to explain Focusing to the others. They might need to be restrained from telling others how to do Focusing. Bruce did this by saying “Well, let’s just wait until we get there for that”

This seemed to work well. Even those who already knew Focusing could see how the class was unfolding and were enthused. In addition, the already-focusers were great models to others – the others could learn from their processing when they shared.

2) At some point in time, after the group had checked in and shared their ‘homework’ experiences, Bruce introduced listening.

He began along the suggested lines of [Module C](#) of the Perceiving Instances article:

- a) When you are listened to, what does that feel like?
- b) What did the other person do that helped you feel heard/gotten/comfortable?

Then there was some sharing and discussion.

3) Then, near the end of the third class, Bruce pointed towards the next class, on listening.

“In order for you to do Focusing **with each other**, it is helpful to have some skills.”

The **homework** was to read the late [Neil Friedman’s handout on listening](#).

Bruce likes it, as it describes listening in a way that works for him. He suggested:

“Here are some ideas about how to listen, written by a Focusing teacher. Take a look at them, and then we will talk about them next class.”

Bruce felt that this article is not perfect, but is still quite good and stimulating. Also, he likes the way Neil describes listening in a way that does not collapse it into mere reflections. The primary core of this article revolves around understanding, rather than reflecting.

And, some of what Neil did went way beyond that, as well...

Fourth Class

1) This began by asking the class what came for them when they read the handout.

Bruce had gone over the article in detail ahead of time, and had taken notes on it. Then, the class read some of the parts Bruce felt were more controversial or stimulating. He would ask the class, along the lines of:

“Let’s look at whether this works for you. It is written for therapists, so some of it may not totally fit your experience.

“ How does this strike you?”

“What would it be like to do this with someone?”

“What would it be like for someone to do this with you?”

“Would you feel heard if happened?”

The class had many questions, and went over it in great detail, how each of the items mentioned in it felt to them, how it fit their experience or ideas (*of course, this is sensing and checking and resonating*).

2) Then, Bruce did a demo with a student, on listening.

3) He then asked if anyone had questions, and then the students paired up. Bruce would go around, offering help if needed, acting as a consultant.

Homework was to focus with each other during the week, and talk about it next class

Fifth through Tenth Classes

All of these classes were essentially run along the following format:

- 1) Go over the participants’ experiences with the homework, which was usually to do Focusing with someone

This often led to general discussion about listening, or their specific experiences in trying to listen and trying to focus, about what works and what doesn’t.

One thing that came out of this exploration was noticing the differences between listening like a therapist, and listening like a person.

As the weeks went by, it became a more general discussion, with space made for different perspectives.

- 2) There would be Focusing during class, paired up, with Bruce going around and helping or consulting as needed
- 3) Homework was to do Focusing with someone in the class.

General Comments

Overall, Bruce offered many exercises, and as little talk as possible about what Focusing is.

A nice perk was that participants already familiar with Focusing helped remind Bruce of things needing to be covered at times.

In retrospect, Bruce found two major ways that using instances was helpful – directly, and indirectly. Directly, having people **use their own experience to find instances related to sensing and Focusing** during the first few class sessions were quite helpful. They felt that it was something inside of them, and they practiced offering awareness to their experiencing often, not limiting that to formal Focusing.

The indirect benefits may be the greater ones. **Having classes be run in this manner set a tone, a way of working together** (Rachel Naomi Remen calls this the “Discovery Model”) by the third or fourth session.

There was never a lack of sharing – people enjoyed sharing what they had.

Participants felt that sharing their personal experiences was a contribution to the group, and they valued their experience, knowing that sharing it was truly a gift to others.

Additional Comments from my Perspective

Bruce believes that his results were directly related to using the instancing from the beginning.

Listening to Bruce’s description, there are many ways that he expanded upon the original Instancing model. I would like to point to a few of his additions that I consider quite brilliant:

1) Help welcome ongoing experience

Bruce found another way to help people acquire an attitude, or direction of intention, that is essential to Focusing. He asked specifically where and when in their lives were they **already relating to, wanting to connect with, or pay attention to, felt experiences**

This **learning to ‘lean into’ or welcome, experiencing**, is counter-intuitive for the many who are habituated to avoid distressing feelings.

As in skiing, where one needs to be coached to lean downhill to get more control, (or kayak rolling, where one needs to be coached to NOT lift one’s head out of the water before the boat), one often needs to be coached to pause, stay with, and welcome what arises in Focusing.

There are many skillful means developed to help us learn this rewarding practice.

The traditional ways developed to teach this is by repeated practice and support and coaching. Most of them benefit from having a skilled guide, who can catch when a person is slipping back into the old pattern of avoidance or not noticing....That may take the form of “Ok, see if you can say hello to that”, invoking Rumi’s Guest House “check and see if there is a guest here”, or other forms “can you check to see if it feels ok to be with that?”

To them, we can now add this one - discovering instances in one’s life (sports, art, etc) where one is **already and naturally performing this counter-intuitive move of accepting and being with and relating**

to felt experience. This offers a great deal of promise in showing people where they already do this, what it feels like, and how it pays off.

2) Creates daily mindfulness of experiencing.

Bruce's homework of **going home and being aware of sensations and what is felt in the body** is a simple mindfulness/awareness practice that helps people bring a felt sensitivity into their daily lives, not just 'when doing Focusing.' Very nice touch

3) Personal experience was repeatedly valued above any 'teaching'.

A few of the ways that Bruce created this container included:

- his [contract](#), which places the participants' experience as primary
- the instancing approach in general
- the classroom setting where much of the class involved exploring various kinds of one's own experience, and resonating with others.

4) Creatively extending instances by working with natural felt senses, and slowly encouraging participants to spend time with them, bit by bit.

Bruce gives an analogy from dressage:

" The secret of dressage is to **never ask a horse to do something that it doesn't do naturally.** From the outside, none of the dressage moves look natural at all. But, they are. They are having the horse prolong, and exaggerate, things that it normally does, and apply them into the dressage context."

The way Bruce taught his class included helping and encouraging participants to extend the time spent with their felt experience, until it became deeper, more intricate, and more expansive.

I feel very grateful and inspired to see how well Bruce Gibbs has carried forward the rudimentary idea of teaching via instancing, and developed it into a successful process for teaching and sharing. If you feel moved to carry any of these ideas forward, please feel free to [contact me](#) and keep me posted!

Thank you.