

**THE MATRIX FOR EDUCATION
STARTER MANUAL**

**Developing Psychological Flexibility
For Learners, Educators and Parents**

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Acknowledgements

My sincere appreciation goes out to Dr. Kevin Polk, Jerald Hambright, and Mark Webster for their dedication, creativity and hard work in developing the Matrix. The Matrix is based on Acceptance and Commitment Therapy and Training (ACT) as developed by Steve Hayes, Kelly Wilson and Kirk Strosahl. The goal of ACT is to increase valued living and decrease the struggle with suffering. Applying ACT to the Matrix for Education means helping students, teachers and parents move toward valued directions and goals as it pertains to learning and development. Many thanks also to Dr. Polk for his help and consultation with the development of this manual. My deepest gratitude is also extended to all of the learners, educators and parents who have given me permission to show them my point of view over the years.

For more information concerning the Matrix for Education please visit philtenaglia.com

For information about the Matrix, it's development or application to other settings, please visit drkevinpolk.com

For more about the Matrix in Schools please see educational chapter in "The ACT Matrix" book listed in the Resources section.

The Original Matrix

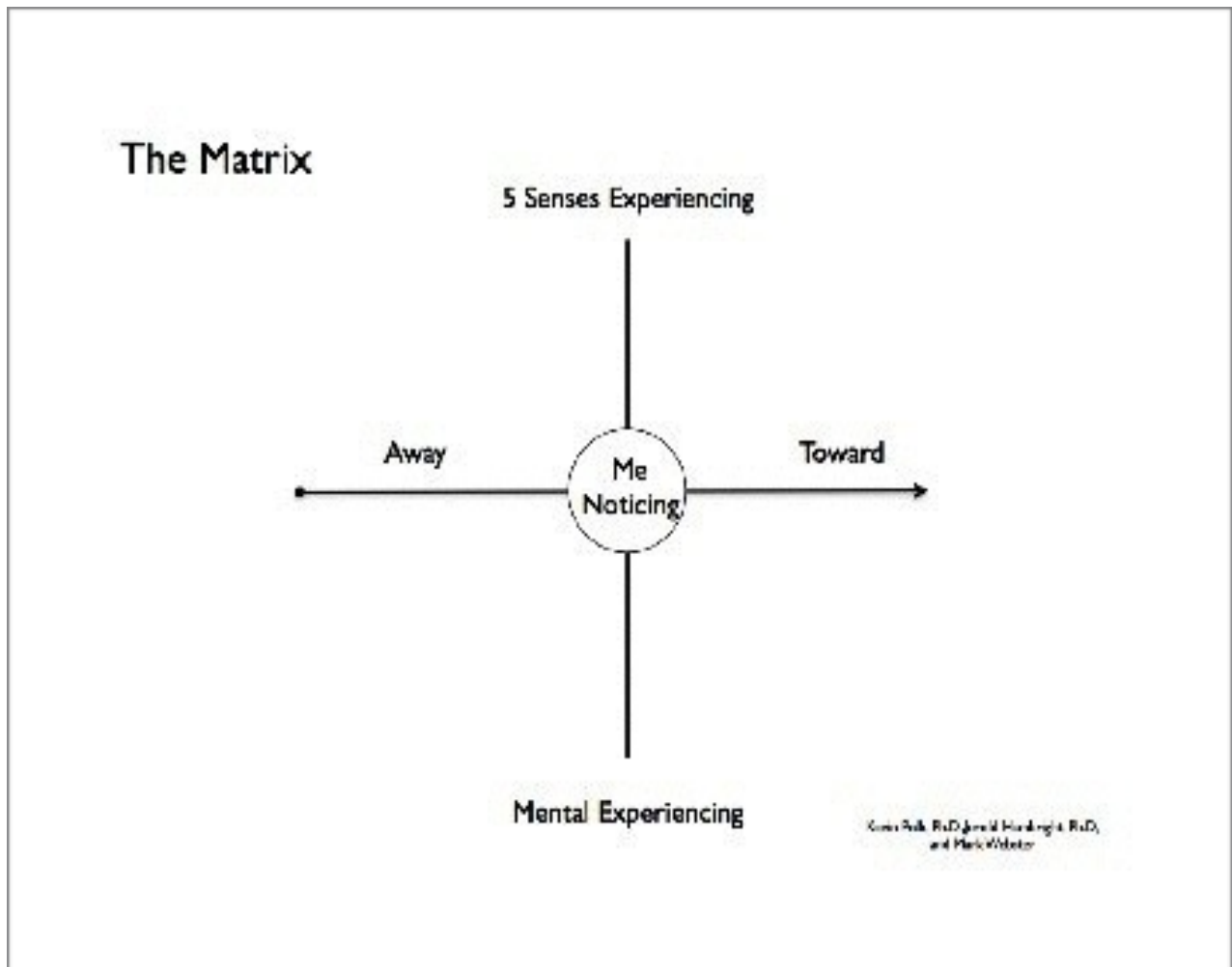


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Beginnings

"It's a dangerous business, Frodo, going out of your door," he used to say. "You step into the Road, and if you don't keep your feet, there is no knowing where you might be swept off to."

~ attributed to Bilbo Baggins

Using the Matrix is a lot like going out on an adventure. It is an invitation to let go of your usual preconceived ideas and step onto a road of uncertainty where what matters is noticing what is going on in the present moment and discovering what works to get you where you want to go. In Acceptance and Commitment Training (ACT) we call this “psychological flexibility”. Like any adventure worth having, each journey can lead in many directions and conjures up all sorts of wonderful and difficult experiences. Applying the Matrix in educational settings places the learner and the educator on equal footing along the way. Fortified with curiosity and creativity they engage in a process which leads to increased psychological flexibility for both. Without getting too technical (I’ll save that for later) psychological flexibility is something we all have. We have the ability to take in information through our five senses. What we retain shows up inside of us in what we call our minds. We use our internal and external experiencing to figure out where we are and where we want to go. This is the basic learning paradigm. Each time we use the Matrix we tap into that process which leads to new behaviors and solutions to problems we encounter on the way to developing a vital and fulfilling life.

In the story from which the quote above is taken, Bilbo goes out on an adventure with a wizard and a dozen dwarves. He manages to keep his feet underneath him while being chased by overgrown spiders, trolls and a nasty dragon. Mustering his flexibility and openness, he develops the willingness to take all of his experiences with him and keep moving, which in reality, works really well to keep most adventures going! In the world you and I inhabit there are no actual dragons, spiders or trolls but when stuff shows up inside of us that we don't want it can feel like something is chasing us that we need to physically get away from. The same often holds true for students engaged in learning. Doing too much of this "moving away from unwanted stuff" can lead to getting stuck, less creativity and a lot less adventures.

If you are reading this manual you are probably interested in providing the best possible learning experiences for your students or children. You may be new to education or a seasoned veteran. You have probably spent many hours training and studying in classrooms, on kitchen tables, or with your peers. You have found many things that work (and quite a few that don't) to influence your learners. Teaching, coaching and mentoring require dedication, hard work, and commitment. It also requires navigating constant curricular changes, administrative demands, parent concerns and challenging students. The unwanted stuff that shows up can really bog you down but fortunately with the help of some psychological flexibility we can keep moving toward the important stuff and keep our creative juices flowing.

The response from students, educators and parents who have used the Matrix has been overwhelmingly positive. This manual is meant as an introduction to using the Matrix as it relates to learning and the educational process. It is a collaborative document which is the result of lots of discussion, trials and continual refinement on the part of Dr. Polk, my students (and their parents), colleagues and the educators I consult with on a daily basis. The Matrix is currently being employed in elementary, middle and high school settings with regular education and special education students. Many students have also learned how to do the Matrix on their own. They use it to solve difficult individual and social problems, work together and overcome obstacles. Reports from regular users indicate that the Matrix process enhances learning and creativity while reducing unworkable behaviors. Each invitation to engage in Matrix processing allows the learner and educator to come into better contact with what works to get them where they want to go. It is highly effective in this regard and a powerful prosocial learning experience.

A Brief Introduction

The Matrix process begins as an invitation. With your permission, whether you are a teacher, counselor, psychologist, parent or administrator, I will ask you a few questions:

Are you interested in being an influential educator who wants to help learners get the most out of the educational process? Do you want them to learn the academic and social skills that lead to success in life?

Do you ever feel frustrated in your attempts? Do you experience stress, annoyance or despair in your efforts?

Do you struggle with this uncomfortable stuff? Does it seem to get in the way of providing the best you have to offer? Do you notice the same process showing up in your students? “

If you have answered yes to some or all of these questions then learning the Matrix process will definitely lead to less struggling and more teaching and learning.

Format of the Manual

Most educators are used to verbal learning. We get a good bit of our information from print (you are engaged in the process of transferring the information contained in my written words from this manual to your mind right now), studying, administering and taking tests. In ACT we are more interested in learning by doing. Learning by doing allows us to get the information at a deeper level while the rest of the mind is along for the ride. Both verbal and nonverbal learning are necessary for success educationally and in life; and being able to apply both types of learning to our lives is vitally important in our ever-changing world.

The Matrix is highly user friendly and engaging. Children and adults “get it” quickly. All you need is a whiteboard, chalkboard or piece of paper to get started. It takes a few minutes to “set it up” but does not require downloads, applications or high tech wizardry for use. It is designed to be used in conjunction with whatever you are already doing that works for your learners and yourself. I have used the Matrix with learners as young as 6 years old. Primary school age students up to adults are using the Matrix daily and easily

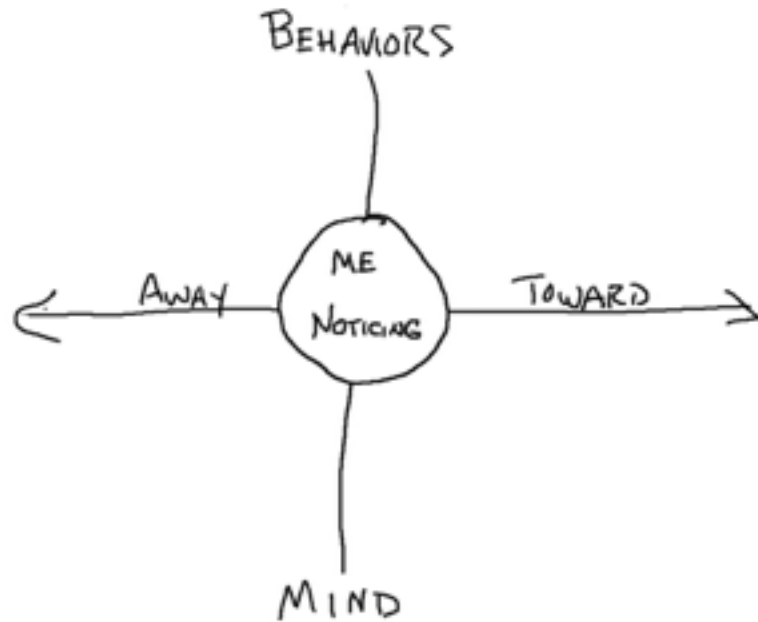
apply the basic ideas/concepts. The Matrix also works equally well with individuals or groups.

This manual will first introduce the language of the Matrix and we will play with that a bit before we take the Matrix out for a spin. The manual will demonstrate and you get to participate. Later on I will do some explaining and talk about ACT and Relational Frame Theory which is the science behind the Matrix.

Click on the link (or cut and paste into address bar) to see how to set up the Matrix

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QxQTlpOqGhk>

Below is how the Matrix looks on my whiteboard:



What follows is a simple Matrix setup and routine. Once you get the basic concepts and moves down experimentation is highly encouraged. It is very forgiving; trial and error are part of the process. It is a work in progress with many hours of field-tested experience behind it. Feedback is welcomed and encouraged.

Practice, Practice, Practice

Learning to use the Matrix is a lot like your early bike-riding experiences. When you first get on a bike you are pretty wobbly. There can be a good bit of confusion, falling down, scraped knees and general frustration. When you finally “get it” you learn how to balance, keep up some forward movement, and know when to brake while staying “loose”. It turns out to be a lot of fun and you can go on to do lots of stuff with your bike. Just “keep peddling” and you will get there!

The Matrix Language Lesson

The Matrix is designed to be experienced rather than discussed. That said you do need to know a little lingo before you get it up and running. The Matrix is a visual picture of two different types of experiences you can notice or engage in. The vertical line refers to whatever is going in the present moment both outside and inside of us. The word “**Behaviors**” is placed at the top of this line and refers to our five senses experiencing. Behaviors are actions we do with our bodies, such as seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, smelling. Talking, listening, playing, writing, eating, basically anything we do with our hands, feet and mouth belongs to the world of behaviors.

The word “**Mind**” goes on the bottom and this refers to our mental experiencing. This is the stuff that shows up inside of us that is unknown to anyone but ourselves, otherwise known as “the stuff in my head”. This is the world of thoughts, feelings, emotions, urges and memories. The basic idea is that we experience the world through our five senses and then it shows up inside of us (in our minds) as mental experience. We learn this process of transforming our sensory experiences into mental experiences very early in life, maybe even in the womb, so we get really good at doing it. You can notice the process by noticing what you are doing *and* noticing what’s going on in your mind at the same time.

In our minds we experience stuff that is important to us as well as unwanted stuff. In ACT we call our important ideas *values*. We continually move toward things like family, friends, work, education, fun, citizenship, health, etc. It is what gives our life meaning and fulfillment. Along the way toward values we may encounter unwanted mental experiencing such as fear, anger, sadness, frustration, etc. Because we are humans and have minds we can notice all of this stuff taking place inside of us as well as what is going on outside of us wherever we are. We use our behaviors and mind to navigate through the world and we do best when we are noticing feed back from both.

The second type of experiencing involves noticing where we are going inside of our bodies at any particular time. To get in touch with that we use the words “**Toward**” and “**Away**” on the horizontal lines with arrows on each end. The idea here is that we engage in some action or experience to move “toward” important ideas or “away” from unwanted mental experiences. Toward experiencing ends up on the right side of the board, away experiencing on the left. For example, I can exercise to move toward my valued (important) direction of health. I can also yell to get away from my unwanted feeling of anger. The idea is that we do things to move either toward what is important or away from what we don’t want. We are simply using words to point at experiences we are having without getting hung up on the ideas of “right” or “wrong”. The goal is to set up a process where we can notice what our bodies are doing, what is going on inside of us, and ultimately notice if the process is working to move toward values. The arrows

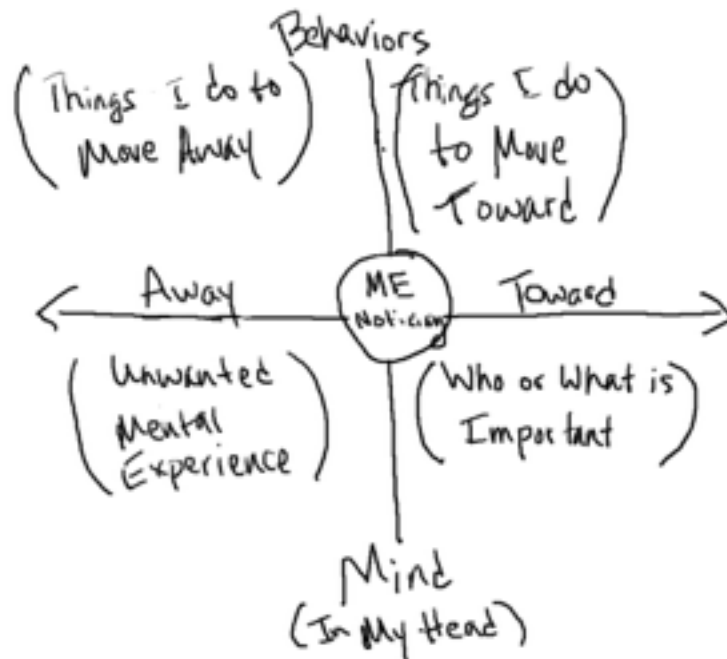
represent that we are always in the process of moving toward or away at each moment of our lives.

Next comes the “**ME**” who is “**Noticing**” . The “ME” is any one of us in the room at the time. You and the learner(s) are each a “ME” in the room together and noticing from your individual perspectives what you/they are doing as well as what is showing up on the inside. This ME the original “ME”, the one you were born with, the one that is naturally curious and accepting of all of your experiencing. This is the perspective we take when we are able to notice all of the stuff that shows up inside of us and around us. The ME doesn’t take sides or add commentary. It just notices what’s going on.

“**Noticing**” also refers to **noticing the difference** whenever we compare or contrast two different things or experiences. In education with start with basic terms like up-down, high-low, over-under and build to more abstract things like pleasant-unpleasant or or in the case of the Matrix wanted vs. unwanted. As human beings we want to have what we identify as important/pleasing/fulfilling and don’t want to have what we experience as unpleasant or painful. It is built into our DNA. **Noticing the difference** is referring to **how it feels to move toward** what is important to us as well as how it feels to **move away** from the unwanted stuff that shows up inside of us. Moving toward your friends feels different than moving away from feeling annoyed while sitting in a traffic jam. Most folks are able to tell the difference between these kinds of experiences and this turns

out to be very important in figuring out where you want to go in life and what to do to get there.

In parentheses I have written where you might write (or sort) the words the learners give you onto the whiteboard:



That's pretty much all the language you need to run the Matrix.

Oh yeah, there's also this thing that we do called sorting.

Sorting and the Matrix

Sorting is the engine of the Matrix. Remember when you were a kid and someone (probably a teacher) had you sort cards or objects into piles, e.g., “Put all the animals with four legs in this pile” or “Put all the things that begin with the letter S here and D there” ? You can sort just about anything. To sort something you need to notice what it is and where it goes according to some arbitrary rule (like two or four legs). Whenever we sort something we experience it through our five senses and in our minds, where we sort experiences into wanted and unwanted, workable and unworkable, etc.

When students read, for example, they are engaged in using seeing (a behavior) to observe words on a page. Those words represent objects or experiences which show up inside of them (a mental experience) that then get hooked up or related to other mental experiencing (“I like this book”, “This is boring”, “What is he talking about?”, etc.). Sorting helps them make comparisons between experiences and figure things out. When we use the Matrix we invite learners to sort their stories and experiences onto the board. You will see how this relates to the Matrix in a bit.

Setting Up the Matrix Journey

The Matrix is introduced by letting the learner (or group of learners) know that you would like to show them a way of looking at learning from a particular point of view, i.e., “Here is how I look at things when I am trying to learn something new or trying to solve a problem or teach something. Can I show you?” (Feel free to use your own words as long as you make it an invitation). You pause, look for some nodding heads or listen for some form of approval and begin.

On a chalkboard, whiteboard, or piece of paper, you draw the two crossed lines of the Matrix diagram, On the right side of the horizontal line is written “Toward” with “Away” written on the left. In the middle place a circle with the words “Me” and “Noticing” inside the circle. The word “Behaviors” goes on top and “Mind” at the bottom of the vertical line.

You are halfway there.

Let’s do the Psychological Flexibility Warm UP. Click the link or copy and paste:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jdArpzdc-n8>

The Warm Up

I will usually start beginning Matrix groups with a psychological flexibility warmup. It gets learners loosened up and promotes engagement in the process. Feel free to come up with your own version if you like. It is not critical that you start with a warm up, it’s just a lot of fun and gets learners curious and noticing:

“Is it okay if we start with a quick warmup? We can do this right from where we are sitting or standing”. I continue explaining that, “we all take in information through our five senses (for fun you can have them name them). “This is something we all do from the day we are born”. With younger students you may need to review the five senses and discuss examples of seeing, hearing, touching, tasting and smelling. Next have the stu-

dent/learner hold an object in his/her hand. I use a pen but any object will do for most school age learners . As they hold the object have them notice (observe) it by saying:

“See the pen in your hand. Look at it”

“Feel or touch the pen in your hand.”

“Hear the pen. Make a sound with it (tap it on something or click it)”

“Smell the pen”

“Don’t taste the pen” (This tends to get some giggles)

Referring to the Matrix diagram I point out that what they just did is called “Five Senses Experiencing”. Motioning toward the board you can also point out that they just performed some action which I call a “Behavior” (touching, tasting smelling) in order to have the experience of the pen. That’s how it works . “We do something with our bodies in order to experience the world.”

I then request that the learner put the object down so that they are not in contact with it and cannot see it. Then I say,

“Now I want you to experience the pen with your mind. Close your eyes and in your mind imagine seeing that pen with your eyes, hearing the sound the pen makes with your ears, touching the pen with your hand, smelling the pen with your nose and... you can even imagine what it would taste like.”

When they are done I ask:

“Did you notice a difference between your experiencing the pen with your hand and mentally experiencing the pen with your mind?”

I wait for the response. The learner(s) may register some confusion at this point but most of them will report that they notice a difference or report that the two experiences are not the same. What you are looking for is having them notice the difference between the pen they had in their hands and the pen they imagine in their minds. Then ask;

“Who noticed the difference?”

Common responses (perhaps after a brief pause) are “I did” or “Me” or pointing to themselves. You may get another little giggle as they become aware of their experience.

Noticing the difference is the key. If they don’t get it at first that’s okay as long as they get the idea that they can notice what they are aware of when they are seeing, hearing, touching, tasting and smelling and that what shows up inside them is mental experiencing. The pen in their mind is different from the pen in their hand. Again, it is the experience of noticing you are going for, not accuracy. Simply asking the question influences the learner to pause and notice what is going on at that particular moment. Accept whatever they notice and begin. [For example, a learner might say, “I did not notice a difference.” You could say, “Great, you are noticing no difference at this time.”]

Taking Your Own Journey

I want to let you in on something at this point. Before I showed anyone my point-of-view I tried it out myself. After training with Dr. Polk I drew the two crossed lines and asked myself the four questions you will see below. I then jotted down my responses in the corresponding quadrants as I have illustrated. I continue to do this and have found it to be very useful in keeping my own flexibility going. I believe in practicing what I personally value and it is a great vehicle for modeling an open, accepting stance with those I hope to influence. You are free to either do it or not do it and there is no need to share it with anyone. You and your learners will benefit either way!

Continuing the Journey , Part I

Four Questions

and

Noticing the Difference

Once I have done the psychological flexibility warm up I point to “ME Noticing” in the middle of the diagram. I then say,

“This ME inside the circle is you or I looking at the board. Each one of us is a ME (I point to myself) and we can notice ourselves running around the world doing stuff. We are all born into the world and as soon as we show up on the planet we begin doing things with our bodies. Babies, eat, sleep, cry,...you get the picture. You probably did a whole bunch of stuff before you came to school today, right? Well, it turns out that everything you do this ME can notice you doing it to move “toward” something that is important to you or “away” from something you don’t want (for emphasis you can move or motion to either side of the horizontal line). Just about everything you do is moving you in one or the other direction”

“So now, if it’s okay, I’d like to ask you a question. Here it is.”

“Who is Important to you?”

I then write the responses in the lower right quadrant. I usually hear things like Mom, Dad, Family, Friends, Pets, etc. Since I am looking for engagement I am enthusiastic about what they say and I want to reward them for their participation with words like “yes!”, “great!” and so on. We are all social creatures and we are built to want to connect and be with each other. Asking this question speaks to a primary motivator for all of us.

“What is Important to You?”

I get responses like, playing video games, having fun, being with friends, doing well in school (believe it or not), graduating/going to college/getting a good job (high school students).

Depending on time and circumstances there may be some discussion about the important people and things, particularly if I am presenting the with a group. I will also ask how it feels when they are moving toward important people or things. Responses will usually be comments like, “feels good, happy, sense of pride/accomplishment,etc.” and I will write them down as well since they go with the people and things.

In ACT/Matrix terms who or what is important reflect what you would normally call Values. They are usually chosen by us and make life meaningful and fulfilling. We move toward Family, Friends, Education and Fun all the time but they are not really destinations where we arrive somewhere. Instead we can notice what we do using our bodies and minds to move in one of these valued directions. For example, we eat or exercise for health, we talk to our friends and family or we play games for fun. While we move *toward* values we never *get there* because there is always more living and experiencing to do. Education as a value is something we promote and all students deep down want to be literate and successful in life. Usually I will write the value that the important person or thing represents right next to it (e.g. doing well in school-Education, playing games- Fun, etc.).

My next move is to say something like, “ So usually when we are moving toward our important stuff it feels pretty good but sometimes stuff shows up inside of us that we don’t want, like uncomfortable feelings, thoughts, etc. They kind of show up and it doesn’t feel very good. Have you ever had that kind of stuff?” (since most of the folks on the planet have had this experience I usually get a lot of head nods and yes’s).

I continue...” so something like Fear shows up inside (I write “Fear” on the board in the lower left under the AWAY line) of us and it feels pretty yucky, right.? Like if we just stepped in the street and a truck or bus is zooming toward us and we feel what?... (wait for it)...that’s right...Fear! And what do we do next?...Yes ...we get out of the way. We do something with our body and get away from the fear and the bus.”

Noticing the Difference

Once again we can ask “And who is the one noticing all of this?”

“I am” or “Me” will probably be uttered. If the learner is unsure I might ask “Who is in the room right now besides me?” I am looking once again for the ME to show up. I can then say,

“Yes, the ME can also notice what is important and how that feels AND what is the unwanted stuff that shows up inside of us and how that feels. Can you notice the difference in how your important stuff feels inside when you are doing something important and how your uncomfortable stuff feels. Do they feel different to you?. Being with your friends (for example) feels different than trying to learn math, right?” The question doesn’t need to be answered accurately as we are going more for the experience being brought up inside the learner as I say the words. The question is the beginning of pointing them toward internal experiencing. Being able to discriminate what shows up inside of each of us as we travel through life is an important skill to learn so that we can figure out what to do to keep ourselves on track as well as noticing when we get off track.

Now on to the next question:

“ What do you or other people do do to move away from the stuff inside of you that gets in the way of you moving toward your important people and things?”

In ACT, we know that the unwanted stuff shows up all of the time and it can really bog a person down. Here we are simply noticing together what shows up inside the learner that gets in the way. Depending on the situation I may prime this by saying something like, ‘What shows up inside of most people when they are in a class or doing school-work?’ It never fails that someone will say something like “boredom” to which I say “Yes! boredom shows up a lot. It showed up inside of me a lot when I went to school. What other kinds of stuff like that shows up?” Before long I am writing down responses like anger, sadness, worry, frustration, doubt, etc. I also ask for thoughts that might get in the way (“I don’t like to read, do math, go to class, etc.” or “it’s too much”, “the teacher doesn’t like me” or “I can’t ...fill in the blank”). I write all of this down in the lower right since this is all of the unwanted mental experiencing that shows up in our minds.

The older the student, the more sophisticated and varied the issues. Just write down whatever they notice. With a group a longer list of experiences is generated and a cool side effect to notice is that they soon realize that everyone has stuff that shows up inside of them they don’t want (including you and me). What we are after is having learners notice all of this and that the unwanted experiences get in the way of moving toward what is important.

Once we have a bit of a list going I ask:

“What do you or other people do to get away form the stuff inside of them that they don’t want? What kinds of things have you tried?”

What the Matrix point-of-view is now beginning to set up is the fact that just as they can notice themselves moving toward important people and things they can also notice themselves doing things with their bodies to move away from the discomfort showing up inside of them. They can notice engaging in some physical activity to move away from the unwanted mental stuff. These “away moves” get in the way of moving toward what is important.

When we move away we do something with our bodies. We yell or hit things to get away from the internal feeling of anger or frustration. We leave or avoid situations where we feel anxious. We try to distract ourselves from worrying thoughts by watching TV, eating, or sleeping. Students in school will demonstrate away moves such as day-dreaming (my personal favorite as a student), putting their head down, going to the bathroom, “forgetting” assignments, etc. The basic idea is that the behavior is done to move away from some unwanted mental experiencing.

I continue:

“An example is this stuff called “fear” that we just talked about. We feel fear inside of us when the bus is zooming at us and we do what? ...Right, we get out of the way! We do something with our body to get away from the uncomfortable feeling of fear (and the bus if there really is one coming toward us).”

“So how about the rest of this stuff down here? What do you or others do to move away from boredom? (jot it down) Anger? Sadness?” developing the list of what they do to move away. You are likely to hear away moves like “put my head down, stare out of window, text my friends, yell, not work, leave, etc.” All of this gets written down in the upper left while being sure to verbally acknowledge the learner for sharing.

As this happens you are modeling the “ME Noticing” by listing the behaviors in the upper left/behaviors/five senses experiencing box. We are not commenting or trying to judge the rightness or wrongness of what they are doing. We are helping them to notice with the ME what they are experiencing internally and what they are doing with their bodies in response to those experiences.

At this point I slide over to the upper right hand side of Matrix diagram and ask:

“ What kinds of things do you do or do you want to do to keep moving toward your important people or things?”

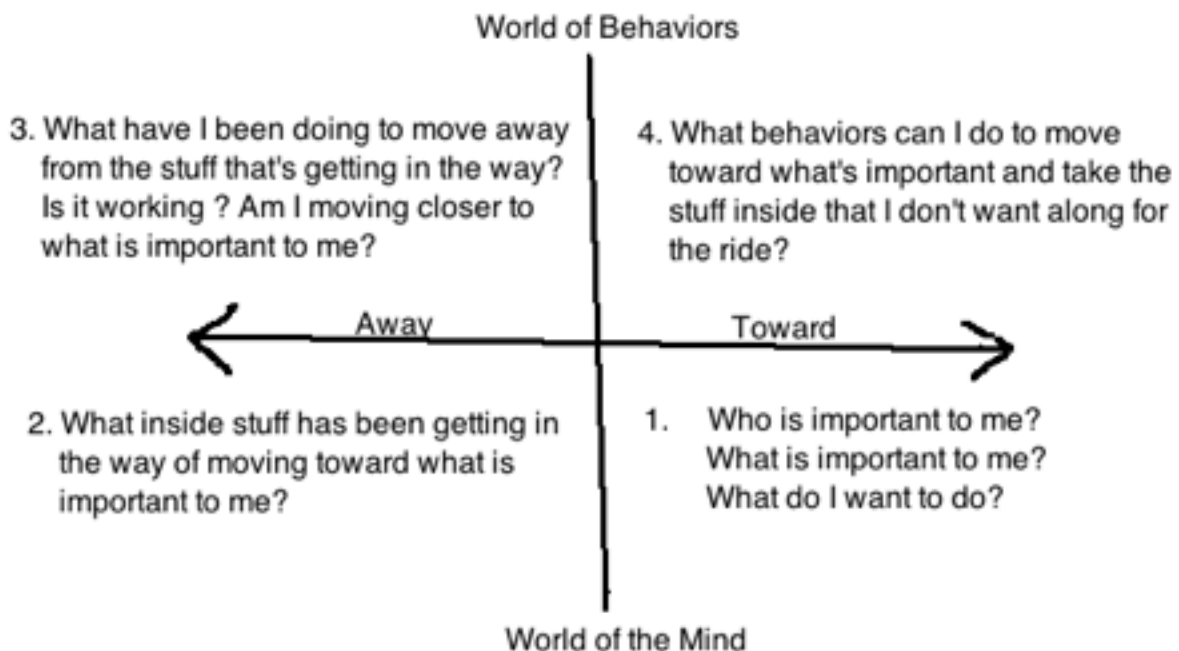
The important stuff has already been listed The learners will typically respond with moves like, go to school, do my work, talk to my friends, play video games, eat with my family, etc. The idea here is to highlight the behavior that is done to move toward a valued life direction. The learners can notice visually via the Matrix that they are engaging in a behavior for a purpose and give themselves credit for that. Of course I give them credit too:

“Cool! So you go to school and do your work to move toward your education” or “ You talk to other kids or play a game to move toward fun, friendship, etc.” Younger learners have more immediate valued moves than older students.

I keep the language and descriptions simple and descriptive of what can be observed. In keeping with the theme of education as a valued direction it can be observed that one sits, stands, walks, reads, goes to school, attends class, takes notes, etc., in the service of moving toward education and learning. Having learners come up with examples of things they do to move in their valued directions is a lot of fun and gets them noticing.

The behaviors of moving toward can be thought of as goals. They are five senses experiencing signposts that tell us if we are moving toward what is important. Values are the mental experiencing or directions we are heading in. It is helpful to know where one is going so we know if we are on track or off course.

Below are two Matrix diagrams. The first has the four questions embedded into the corresponding quadrants. The second is an example of how it looks on the board with learner responses added:





Here is the Four Questions video link:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C1-kcs_gZ7Y

Putting It All Together

You now have introduced all the aspects of the Matrix diagram. You will be sitting with the learner(s) looking at the Matrix you have just created with them. They will be noticing the two differences (**Behaviors** vs. what shows up in the **Mind** AND **Toward** vs **Away** moves). Their individual or group Matrix illustrates what is important to them and what is showing up that they don't want. We call this whole enterprise the psychological flexibility point-of view.

I summarize with:

“So your “ME” notices what you are doing with your body (I call that Behavior) and what is showing up in your head (which I call your Mind). Your “ME” can also notice moving towards important stuff as well as moving away from unwanted mental experiencing. The ME can also notice the difference between how your toward moves feel and how your away moves feel. One more thing your ME can do is notice whether or not what

you are doing is getting you where you want to go. And that's the psychological flexibility point-of view".

When the "Me" is noticing all of this, psychological flexibility, choices and options are more likely to show up which allow movement toward valued directions. The student learns from their own experience what works to keep moving toward what is important while taking the unwanted stuff with them.

Of course I will also ask, "Who is the one noticing all of this?"

Continuing the Journey- Part II

Having invited them into the Matrix experience, I will ask for permission again. This time I will say, " So since I have just shown you my point of view is it okay If I work with you using this diagram?" Just about everyone I have ever worked with has answered "yes" so I continue. They are ready to experience "the struggle".

The Struggle

I return my focus to the left side of the board. I orient the learner to the behaviors they do to move away from what they don't want down there in the mind and ask,

" Does doing these things up here (Behaviors) work to make this stuff down here, the stuff you don't want, (Mind) go away?"

I am inviting the learner to "notice" if their behaviors "work" to reduce and/or eliminate their unwanted mental experiencing. To continue:

"So, for example. If you are in class and boredom shows up inside of you and you go up here and do something like put your head down, does boredom go away?" I will draw a curved line from "boredom" to the behavior "put head down" (see below). I pause and the learner may first look puzzled but will in most cases say "No, it doesn't" or "a little bit". Again my response is "yes, and how does putting your head down work to make boredom go away and stay away. Does it end up showing back up at some point?" Almost everyone will say that it doesn't or that it whatever they don't want returns. I illustrate this by drawing another curved arrow back down to boredom which has not gone away, either in their minds or in the diagram. I will then continue with the rest of the unwanted list and what is done to move away. The curved lines get tighter. Finally, I will add, "and the problem is, if you keep on doing the away moves you can really feel like you are going around and around (now the curves become a tight spiral) and feel real STUCK (putting a dot in the center of the spiral). Have you ever felt stuck, like you didn't know quite what to do next?...Me Too. It doesn't feel very good, does it?"

The "formula" is to ask some variation of "Does doing x [five senses experiencing or away moves] make y [unwanted mental experiencing] go away"? Does anxiety, frustra-

tion, anger, etc. go away when they sit and stare, yell or leave or does it keep showing up? It may go away temporarily (which is why we all do away moves) but in the long run



unwanted experiencing returns or frequently gets worse when people do these things. In the diagram the loops get tighter and tighter until they become a spiral where the learner feels “stuck”. Stuck here refers to feeling like they have less choices and options. It is illustrated below:

The struggle also makes it harder to notice what they want to move toward. Every learner I have ever met has a ME that wants to be successful. Helping the ME “notice” is what keeps psychological flexibility going and with it the ability to CHOOSE what to do next. When they can do this it backs them up off of the stuck stuff a bit so they can notice other things, like what’s important to them. In fact, a nice side effect when I do this with a learner is that it helps me to notice what’s important to me as well. I can then choose what I do and say next to influence the learner toward learning.

I end the presentation along these lines:

“How much energy can you put into trying to make stuff they don’t want go away?” A typical response is “a lot”. “How much is left to come over here and do the things you want to do to move toward you important people and things?”. You guessed it “not much”. I will leave them with a bit of a challenge by saying, “So, what do you think you

can do to keep moving toward what's important when the unwanted shows up. Which behavior up here would work out best?"

Tapping into noticing allows learners to choose toward moves which tend to lead to more options and choices. They can also choose to do away moves which tend to lead to less choices. Toward and Away are neither good or bad. They are just things that people do. Being able to choose "which move works the best" is what is important. For example, it is usually works to get away from speeding cars or to reduce hunger by having a snack. We can also eat to move toward a healthy diet. Noticing which moves "work" in any given situation and being able to choose predictably leads to educational and life success.

Here is the link to short video clip illustrating the struggle and toward moves with unwanted stuff:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f1khZpPLS-Y>

A Little Homework Please

At this point your learner(s) is/are ready for the introduction of homework.

Here is how I set it up.

"So now I want to ask your permission to try something out. I call it homework."

I wait for the rolled eyeballs and groans to come and then say, "Yeah, yeah, I know. I am not a big fan of homework either. This is the best homework you will ever get though. There is nothing to write down or hand in and you can either do it or not do it; it works either way. Would you be willing to give it a try?" Some lingering reluctance may remain but most get on board.

I continue, "When you leave here I want you to Notice what you do and whether it feels like a toward move or if it feels like an away move. In other words you will walk out of here and do something. You will be doing it to move toward who or what is important to you or to move away from stuff inside of you that you don't want, like anger or frustration. You don't have to do anything else just notice. When we get together again I will just ask you what you noticed about the homework."

Next time I get a chance to catch up with them I will have the Matrix up on the board behind me and I will ask them "What did you notice about the homework?" Most of the time they.....didn't do it. So then I say "Cool, you just noticed you didn't do it. What did you do instead?" and sort what they tell me onto the board. If they did the homework I give them credit and begin with sorting what they noticed onto the board.

.....

We give homework in ACT/Matrix work so that individuals and groups can take what they have learned and apply it out in the world. The "world" is basically anywhere they go when they are going through their day. Getting some noticing going amongst learners when they are out there in the world leads to more workable behaviors and satisfaction. In ACT we want what we do with individuals and groups to make a difference in their day to day interactions. We want to give them the best chance to come up with workable behaviors and be flexible enough to notice the consequences of their actions. Consequence here is simply whatever happens after they do what they do.

YES! and Where Does It Go?

Running the Matrix with learners is a lot like an improvisation routine. You are taking the words the learner(s) send toward you, saying "yes" to them (since you want to reward and encourage their participation) and asking them "Where would you put what you just said up here on the Matrix?"

Here is an example of a brief exchange:

Teacher: So you went to the movies this weekend. Great. Where would you put that on the Matrix?

Learner: That would go on the toward side since I went with my friends.

Teacher: Very nice. Hanging with your friends is important to you (said as she writes "went to movies" on the toward side with the Behaviors)

Learner: Yep, except we had trouble deciding what to see. That led to an argument and I was getting kinda frustrated.

Teacher: Great, so you noticed frustration showing up inside you. Where would you put frustration on the Matrix?

Learner: Well, I don't like arguments so I would probably put that on the away side.

Teacher: Great, let's do that (writing "frustration" on the away side where the Mind is).

The conversation just continues with the learners sharing their experiences and sorting it onto the diagram. As the learner sorts they come into contact with their toward and away moves/internal sensations and notice where their actions have taken them.

Noticing, Sorting, Flexibility and New Responses

To summarize the process when using the Matrix:

- Notice 5 Senses Experiencing (Behaviors)
- Notice Mental Experiencing (Mind)
- Notice the difference between 5 Senses and Mental Experiencing
- Notice who is noticing the difference (I, YOU, Me)
- Notice what it "feels" like to recall Moving Toward what is important
- Notice what it "feels" like to recall Moving Away from unwanted Mental Experiencing
and
- Notice who is noticing the difference between moving toward and moving away

Noticing Sorting and Flexibility are promoted via the Matrix in the service of learning and valued living. The learner is free to notice or not notice and to move toward or away since everyone has toward and away moves (again, it works to

move away from a speeding car). Noticing takes place naturally without force or coercion. Try to make someone do something they don't want to and notice what happens to their flexibility as well as your own. This does not mean that there are no consequences because life just comes at us and we keep responding. If learners can notice with flexibility they are in a better position to learn the lessons life has to teach AND come up with responses that work. There are no guarantees but the process of noticing and sorting improves the odds. The learners themselves routinely come up with new moves to try out and get less stuck in moves that limit them

Learners who have used the Matrix often say, "I like that I have choices now", "When "boring" shows up I take it with me and do what I need to do" or "It helped me stay with wrestling when I felt like quitting". Educators using the Matrix have used it to organize classroom learning and influence groups toward collaborative problem solving and staying on track to reach agreed upon goals.

Individuals and groups soon begin using the language of toward and away in becoming more aware of their actions and what is going on inside of them. The process of sorting experiences loosens them up and allows them to be in better contact with their inner and outer worlds. Since those of us who use the Matrix are not hung up on being 100% accurate the learner is free to come up with solutions to keep them moving while taking the unwanted mental experiencing along with them.

I have found that with really stuck learners or those who have developmental delays it is first necessary to train them in noticing the difference between five sense experiencing and mental experiencing. Once they can do this it is easier to teach toward versus away. Sometimes it is easier for learners to get the toward and away moves first and build in the five senses and mental experiencing later on. Being flexible in our own thinking and behaving helps. Other variations such as using pictures or cards to sort or doing the Matrix on the floor have been successfully utilized.

If you have gotten this far you are ready to take the Matrix out for a spin. It may seem a bit disorienting at first and confusion could very well show up. My experience is that while my mind might not be very forgiving most learners are appreciative of an open invitation to try something. Be brave like Bilbo and keep going. Keep in mind that in the act of presenting you are modeling a point-of-view that is based in science and field tested with thousands of hours of practice. Take a deep breath and start peddling!

The Science Behind the Matrix

This section is only if you want to know more about what evidence the Matrix has evolved from. You do not need to know the science to run the Matrix but some background may be useful. It is discussed here in a very simplified form and I would encourage you to do further reading for more in-depth understanding.

I will begin with Functional Contextualism or FC. FC is based on a philosophy of science or world view that looks at things pragmatically in terms of “successful working” toward some end. It is concerned with the act you are engaged in (what you are doing/thinking/feeling) in the context you are in and how everything is contributing or otherwise influencing toward your purpose. For our purposes we are helping both our learners and ourselves look at the function of behaviors in the context we collectively find ourselves in. Teaching can be seen as a move toward the value of learning for the teacher which may or may not include some away moves along the way. The teacher can also notice that the students may engage in toward behaviors as well as behaviors which get in the way. Each student is engaging in behaviors for a specific purpose while the teacher is engaged in teaching. They may be working for something other than learning in the traditional sense. They may be trying to move toward having fun, getting attention or moving away from uncomfortable feelings showing up inside of them. Helping them notice the function of their behaviors (toward what is important/ away from what is unwanted) can be very useful so they can figure out how their behaviors are working to get them where they want to go. The questions are “Where are my behaviors taking me?,” and “How is it all working to get me where I want to go?”. Learners who use the Matrix can become functional contextualists and get really good at both noticing their actions and words and being able to figure out how workable their moves are in the short term and long term.

Built on top of Functional Contextualism is Relational Frame Theory or RFT. RFT is a laboratory based theory of how language and cognition develops in all of us.

As members of the human race we are natural born learners. From the moment we take our first breath we are taking in information and use it to move toward getting our needs met. As infants our five senses are the means by which we connect with our caregivers (mom and dad for most of us) and our immediate surroundings. We are literally built to take in the world through seeing, hearing, touching, tasting and smelling whatever we come in contact with. In ACT we call this our five senses experiencing. We seek to be fed, kept warm and held until we learn how to use our bodies to fend for ourselves. Soon our minds and the wonderful world of language show up inside of us. We begin to use words to describe experiences we have in the five senses world. RFT looks at the function of language much like the behaviors or things that we do with our hands, feet and mouth. The question here is “Is my languaging working to get me where I want to go? Are the words I am using (or experiencing inside of me, typically referred to as “thoughts”) bringing me closer to what is important to me?”. Language gets “hooked on” or related to experience, so much so that as we grow and develop it frequently takes the place of experience. Reading an engaging novel can instantly bring up a rich mental landscape that is taking place inside the reader. It as if you are “in” the story and along for the ride with all of the accompanying feelings of curiosity, excitement, apprehension and triumphs you experience being created by the narrator or characters. All of this takes place where? In your head! Language and being able to relate words to internal experiences makes this all possible.

Language and what shows up inside of us is what concerns us when we use Acceptance and Commitment Therapy and Training or ACT. ACT views language as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, language is what has helped us to get to the top of the food chain, improve our living conditions, and communicate as a species. It can also be used to influence individuals and groups to engage in destructive actions toward ourselves and others. Language is one tool at our disposal for influencing learners and we exist in the world as a whole organism. When we move toward what is important we do so with our body, mind and spirit . The same holds true when we try to move away from what life throws at us that we don't want. A byproduct of our having evolving language to communicate with the world is that we can have conversations in our heads ("thinking") with ourselves while we are living our lives. These conversations can help move things along or we can get bogged down in unworkable thoughts and uncomfortable feelings. This can lead to less time spent doing what is important and more time spent struggling to make what we don't want go away.

In ACT there is a saying which goes:

LET GO of the struggle with what we don't want

SHOW UP in present moment

MOVE TOWARD what is important

When we spend too much time “up in our heads” we tend to do less of the important stuff. This can lead to more struggling with the unwanted stuff. Learning is challenging, rewarding and improves our chances of having a vital, successful life. Learning is also at times frustrating, tedious, and can lead to feelings of vulnerability and incompetence. In ACT we learn to take ALL of the wanted and unwanted stuff of our minds with us as we pursue our goals. When learners are exposed to a model that promotes psychological flexibility their ability to utilize the full range of their sensory and mental experiencing is enhanced and they learn to struggle less often with the inevitable obstacles life presents them with. They can notice and move toward behaviors that lead to success.

When we sort with the Matrix we help to promote all of the above in real time. Each time we invite learners into the process we train them in the continued development of the ability to notice what is going on both inside and outside as they journey through their day or week or life. They learn to “back off” or get “perspective” from what is getting in the way. When this happens and they can notice both the inside and outside stuff then flexibility shows up and with it the ability to CHOOSE what they do next. Increased psychological flexibility helps to increase the odds of moving forward with workable behaviors. if they are already doing so they are validated for their efforts.

Sounds complicated? It isn't. It only gets complicated when you try to explain it. All of this happens in a matter of minutes without anyone telling them what to do. A lot of times when kids "get it" they get the giggles. That is a sure sign of flexibility and it feels very rewarding for them at the same time. When they don't get it, that's okay too since I am only showing them my point of view. They are free to try or not. There is something about being invited to do something though that generates enough curiosity most of the time...

Final Words

You have enough to get you started on your journey. The rest is up to you and your learners to discover together. The basics are here and you can add more if you want. There are traditional ACT routines and metaphors that can be easily incorporated into the the Matrix presentation and I am always coming up with a new wrinkle which more often than not comes from my learners and those I consult with. I plan on presenting more material in the future so check back to my website or sign up for updates. If you are so inclined I welcome feedback and look forward to hearing where the Matrix will take you and your learners.

Additional Resources

Polk, K.L., Schoendorff, B., Wilson, K.G. 2014, *The ACT Matrix: A New Approach to Building Psychological Flexibility Across Settings and Populations*, New Harbinger

Hayes, SC, Strosahl, KD & Wilson, K.G. 2012, *Acceptance and commitment therapy: The process and practice of mindful change (2nd ed.)*, Guilford Press, New York, NY US.

Törneke, N. 2010, *Learning RFT: An Introduction to Relational Frame Theory and Its Clinical Application*, New Harbinger

drkevinpolk.com website of Dr. Polk

contextualscience.org website of the association of contextual behavioral science learning and research community and all things ACT

