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Dear Reader,

Why doesn't learning last? What learning should last? Is it easier for some learning to last while other learning doesn't? And how can we design programs that increase the chances for lasting learning? These are the questions that we explore in this issue. We hope you find it challenging and that it inspires you to question your own assumptions.

Enjoy the reading!

Isabel Rimanoczy
Editor

Quote of the Month

"Learning is acquired by reading books; but the much more necessary learning, the knowledge of the world, is only to be acquired by reading man, and studying all the various editions of them."

*Philip Dormer Stanhope Chesterfield (1694-1773)
English politician, writer*

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A SYSTEMIC PERSPECTIVE FOR LASTING LEARNING

By Isabel Rimanoczy

Management and training articles repeatedly mention the importance of making learning last. This sounds, in fact, paradoxical in an organizational context where change is a constant factor! Why would anyone want to cast her learnings in bronze, so that they really last for a long time? As a popular saying goes, "When we finally knew all the answers, the questions changed!" Indeed, isn't it possible that deep learnings from say, a past crisis, hinder us from looking with fresh eyes at a new challenge? Can our convictions prevent us from accepting new possibilities?

To address these questions, we need to define what we mean by learning. Jack Mezirow ^[1], a renowned author in adult education, distinguishes between three types of learning, which he takes from the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas ^[2]: instrumental, communicative and emancipatory learning. *Instrumental learning* is technical. It is content-specific, and helps individuals solve concrete problems that have mostly a right/wrong answer. Instrumental learning determines cause-effect connections; it involves a prediction about observable things or events, is task oriented and helps us deal with daily challenges, such as operating technology, using another language, playing sports or music. Instrumental learning can best take place in directive settings, with experts who teach and guide.

Communicative learning refers to how we relate to others: how we express our thoughts, understand others; it involves values, feelings, ideals, decision making, ethical considerations, self awareness, social norms impacting our perspectives and actions. We need communicative learning to deal with complex problems, ill defined situations that don't have a simple, single solution.

Emancipatory learning is what leads us, through reflection, to identify and challenge our adopted points of view, opinions, and perspectives. It helps us become aware of how our upbringing, our social and cultural environment, and our experience have shaped our values, feelings and interpretations. It helps us identify the assumptions that ground our thinking and our decisions, and how they are influenced by our habits of thinking. It also helps us recognize the power relationships we are in, the tacit social or organizational rules and expectations which frame our roles. This type of learning calls for reflection, for critical thinking, for personal insight. Its effect is powerful, sometimes transformational, resulting in a deeper self-awareness and changes in our interactions with others. Individuals expand their thinking, and develop a more discriminating and integrated understanding.

Types of learning and management education

Management education programs typically use an instrumental learning approach, based on the illusion that what is taught will be learned, adopted and used. Cognitive learning is often overrated and the paradigm is that the expert knows what the manager needs to know, so he simply "fixes the ignorance gap" by sharing his knowledge. The Brazilian educator Paulo Freire ^[3] called this the "banking approach" by which a teacher makes deposits of knowledge into the minds of the students. Lectures, conferences, seminars follow this approach.

But managers deal with complex problems. Whether the content of programs deals with strategic planning, techniques for conflict resolution, negotiation, change management or new auditing practices, managers cannot apply this knowledge in a purely technical way. They need to understand and learn new concepts, develop new perspectives and attitudes, generate new ways of thinking acting and behaving.

While there is a need for some instrumental learning given the nature of management's challenges, development programs mostly fall into the realm of communicative learning. Individuals need to learn the concepts but also how to apply them in real situations, where the complexity of individual psychology, team dynamics, and organizational aspects come into play. Not to mention the impact of external environment: community, regulations, market, competitors, suppliers, clients, and shareholders. Participative learning settings that respond to the learning needs of the individuals, and that include experiential activities with facilitated debriefs, are good fits for communicative learning.

In some cases, participants are invited to go one step further, and delve into their personal assumptions, belief system or values. Depending on the readiness of the individuals, this may lead to critical reflection or emancipatory learning. Dialogue sessions, reflective exercises in appropriate settings, and individual coaching are environments that enable and foster emancipatory learning.

What type of learning should last?

The most common concern voiced by professionals in charge of launching development programs is related to the applicability of the contents, the usefulness and ease of transfer of the learnings into "real work settings", as well as the change of mindsets, attitudes and behaviors. The wish of lasting learning is not related to maintaining an immutable knowledge; rather it seems to be connected with taking advantage of the benefits of what was learned to have a better relationship with others in the workplace, to achieve better results, to increase efficiency. From this very pragmatic perspective, it seems that it is mostly the communicative and perhaps emancipatory learning that should last.

Through the analysis of Action Reflection Learning^[4]-based designs of individual and collective development programs, we have found that for learning to last, it has to be integrated in a multilevel perspective, paying attention to five levels.



Professional level

The professional level refers to the **knowledge, competencies and skills** that are targeted in a program. It may be a mix of new information, processed to expand a mental framework, combined with practical guidelines of "how to" implement the new behavior. To give an example, if the learning objective is to develop feedback skills, the facilitator will present frameworks for leading feedback conversations with checklists, processes, and tips for preparing the best setting

for feedback. All these combined with practice, should lead to successful feedback conversations. **We try to help the learners change the way of doing things.** This is partly instrumental, but mostly communicative learning.

Personal level

The personal level deals with the **attitudes** that lead to behaviors. It is related to the mindset and emotional framework that make it possible for an individual to respond in a new way to a situation. When developing new behaviors, it is key that the person become aware of the results of the old behavior, what the new behavior may mean, and what attitudes must change in order to have a successful new response. To continue with the example, it is not enough to read and memorize a checklist in order to have a good feedback conversation: it is also important to develop a listening attitude, to discover that others have valuable ideas, that we need to be open to hear them, that we avoid being defensive and assertive, and need instead to ask more questions, etc. **We have to change the way of being.** This is partly communicative, partly emancipatory learning, as we begin to check our assumptions, patterns of thinking, and increase our self-awareness.

Team level

Individuals interact with others in multiple and diverse situations. Therefore every behavior we develop individually, will affect others.

To **comprehend how our behavior affects others** is therefore an essential part of our learning. Using our example, it is not enough to learn the feedback process and the mindset required; if we go back to our team but are unable to put into practice what we have learned elsewhere, there will be a disconnect, and a poor collective performance, which will scarcely reinforce the desired behavior. How many times have we seen our boss return from a development program with some "weird" behaviors, which she may have learned but can't quite manage to share with us? As a consequence, we instinctively rejected her unfamiliar behaviors --which in turn trigger her to go back to her habitual pattern of behavior. Nothing has changed.

The question to pay attention to is how will this person bring the new behavior into a social situation, into a team situation, to enhance his/her contribution and the performance of the group. **We have to change how we are and act with others.** This is mostly communicative, partly emancipatory learning.

Organizational level

We all belong to multiple and diverse systems (organizations). When we attempt a new behavior, it is key that the organization supports and accepts it. We all have experienced what happens if this is not so. Too often workshops are run to develop creativity but focus is on avoidance of mistakes; even though it is clear that creativity means to try out new ideas, which inevitably can lead to a higher risk of error. Learning is announced as a key value, but failure is punished. Teamwork is promoted but the compensation system rewards individual achievements. These organizational inconsistencies rapidly neutralize any attempt to reinforce a new behavior. So it is important to actively seek and uncover the organizational inconsistencies and to address them. It is not possible to solve everything at once, but it is possible to progressively detect them and confront them as organizational challenges to be solved.

At the same time, every individual needs to become aware of the organizational setting in which she will apply the learnings. How can she influence the environment? What actions fall in her

scope of influence or control, that could help avoid inconsistencies, correct them, role model new ways of acting? What will the individual do to transfer what he has learned to the other organizational settings to which he belongs and which he can influence somehow?

We have to learn how we can champion change. This is partly communicative, partly emancipatory learning.

Business level

This level actually refers to **the application of a learning, to the relevance of a behavior**. If we think back to our college student years, how much of what we had to learn and memorize, practice and repeat, was relevant to us? How much did we immediately put into action? More importantly, how much do we remember today?

Relevance has a dual impact: it is an exceptional arena for learning, and it is also an immediate reinforcement of learning. The American educator John Dewey ^[5] was an early advocate of integrating learning into the lives of the students, so that they learned by doing. In the corporate world, the business level refers to what the new learning will help to address, what current, real situation will it help to resolve more successfully. This level has not only been neglected in the educational system, but also in the world of corporate education. Many programs end with a good evaluation form, and the comments at the door "Now let's go back to real world"! What business problem/challenge will the person be better prepared to face tomorrow? How is the content of the program related to what is expected of the participant back in the office? It is not enough to request action lists, commitments to implement, next steps list – if the program is designed as preventive teaching. "Learn how to deal with conflict, and go out tomorrow to find conflicts so you can practice." seems to be the message.

By using real business challenges as the arena for learning, the natural learning needs will emerge, one by one: What knowledge do I need to solve this problem? What skills do I need to acquire or improve? What makes it so difficult to make progress on the task in this team!? Why are we not listening to each other, giving adequate feedback, planning better? What is it about me that makes it difficult to communicate with others?

All these learning needs emerge spontaneously when working daily, when dealing with "real life". The "just in time" interventions help to use the relevance to maximize the impact of the learning.

Conclusion

The systemic approach to adult learning, with the five levels described here, helps to cement and assimilate the learning. If any of the five levels is neglected, the chances for the learning that lasts are minimal. Checklists without the right attitude, attitudes without the technical knowledge, failure to learn from task, behaviors without organizational reinforcement for their transfer to the teams --all can contribute to learning that vanishes and doesn't last.

Should learning last in these changing times? Maybe what should last, is the learning about how to continually review what we know. 

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[1] Jack Mezirow is an American scholar who has extensively written about adult learning and developed the theory of transformative learning. See *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*, 1991; *Learning as Transformation* (2000)

[2] Jürgen Habermas (1929-). German philosopher, political scientist and sociologist. See *Knowledge and Human Interests* (1971).

[3] Paulo Freire (1921-1997). Influential Brazilian educator who championed literacy campaigns and social action. See *Education as the Practice of Freedom* (1967), *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970).

[4] For a description of the ARL learning methodology, see <http://www.limglobal.net/readings/70.htm>

[5] John Dewey (1859-1952). [American philosopher](#), [psychologist](#), and [educational reformer](#), leading representative of the progressive movement in U.S. education during the first half of the 20th century. At the [University of Chicago Laboratory Schools](#) which Dewey and his wife Alice ran, children learned much of their early chemistry, physics, and biology by investigating the natural processes which went into cooking breakfast—an activity they did in their classes



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