

HELPING ADULTS LEARN HOW TO LEARN

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Practice makes perfect. Most people understand the concept of working hard at something to get better at it. Whether it's improving a golf swing or building a relationship, people realize that good things happen when they persevere with their goals. And most people are aware that many resources are available that can help them achieve their self-improvement goals. There are videos to watch, books to read, courses to take, and mentors to utilize. Not only are there a variety of ways to learn, there are also a variety of ways for us to become more proficient as learners. The focus of this paper is helping people develop competence in learning how to learn.

All people are unfinished products as learners. All learners have room for improvement, and adult educators can perform a great service by helping people learn how to learn. A colleague of mine, the late Robert M. Smith, developed a framework for the learning to learn concept that allowed the rest of us to understand its relationships with knowing and learning. He described learning to learn as a means of becoming more effective as a learner -- regardless of the context that you encounter. This chapter will focus on select aspects of learning to learn:

- o Increasing the awareness of self-as-learner
- o Developing active and assertive learners
- o Extending the learner's repertoire of learning strategies
- o Compensating for personal learning deficiencies
- o Building skills in self-monitoring and reflection
- o Facilitating learning to learn

Increasing the Awareness of Self-as-Learner

Regardless of the time and effort that people devote to formal education, few adults take the initiative to intensely focus on themselves as learners. For many adults, the **outcomes** of learning activities have dominated their attention. In fact, most people believe that the processes of learning are not as important as the products of the learning activity. You can probably think back to school-based learning in which "getting the right answer" was all that mattered.

Each semester I teach a learning how to learn (LHTL) course in a laboratory format at Northern Illinois University. The course helps participants learn how to plan, monitor and reflect on their learning processes. This intense focus on their learning processes feels strange and uncomfortable for many of the participants. It's odd when you think about it. These are advanced level graduate students, and after 15-20 years of formal education, most of them have not examined how they "came to be" as learners. The same can be said about most people -- they have not

systematically undertaken the task of improving themselves as learners.

I begin the LHTL laboratory by moving people toward a personal critique of their learning processes. This begins with the initial ice-breaker (getting acquainted activity) of the laboratory. I don't use ice-breakers in all of my courses, but I purposely use one in this course. My intention is to create tension with their preconceived notions of ice-breakers. I know that the predispositions of participants can alter what they gain from the experience. For example, participants might initially question the value of learning that takes place with an ice-breaker, or they might have negative predispositions regarding experiential learning. They might think ice breakers are a waste of class time. Their concentration might waver. For example, it is common for participants to be thinking about what they are going to say as opposed to listening to others who are speaking.

After the ice-breaker I ask participants to write down why ice-breakers are effective or in-effective learning activities for them. I probe their predispositions. Many have never considered ice-breakers as an opportunity to learn. I ask them to cite what they know about themselves as learners that helps or hinders them in this type of activity. And I ask them to describe what they might do in the future to magnify their learning in ice-breakers. After this personal introspection, we discuss our perceptions of learning from ice-breaker activities. Typically, two insights emerge: (1) Participants sense the value of reflecting on their learning **processes**, and (2) participants begin to realize that different strategies can serve the idiosyncrasies of varied learning situations. This personal reflection heightens their awareness of themselves as learners.

Helping people build awareness of self-as-learner is central to learning to learn. People need to step back, look at themselves in the mirror, and ask, "How did I get to be this way as a learner?" I encourage participants in the LHTL laboratory to develop an honest assessment of themselves as learners. For some folks, it will not be a pretty picture. They may be carrying baggage from unsuccessful learning experiences that they encountered in earlier formal learning settings. The socialization process that they encountered in their formative years may have may have wreaked havoc on their confidence as learners.

I use a variety of activities that have been refined in the LHTL laboratory over the years. For example, I ask participants to reflect on and discuss successful and unsuccessful prior learning experiences. Their successful experiences typically include incidents such as learning to ride a bicycle, developing skill in a sport, or receiving special attention from a teacher or mentor who believed in them. Unsuccessful experiences typically include embarrassing or frustrating situations, incompetent teachers, or unpleasant learning conditions. Our discussions of these issues help

participants recognize the environmental factors that can hinder or help their learning processes.

I use another activity that encourages participants to examine fears associated with learning. Examples of fears are, "I can't learn this because I am too old," "There is too much information here for me to learn," or "I am uncomfortable learning about computers." Once again, independent reflection and then discussion (dyads/small group) about these types of fears help learners recognize how they can overcome personal learning blocks and barriers. Creating a personal awareness of "self as learner" is the catalyst I use for helping participants move toward becoming active and assertive learners.

Altering predispositions toward learning

I have found that reflecting on past learning experiences helps participants bring to the surface characteristics of themselves as learners. Personal reflection can bring out the calcified learning habits and patterns that people have unwittingly developed over the years. Once people become conscious of these characteristics, they can begin to take charge of their learning processes and initiate desirable changes. In other words, they don't have to remain passive and content with their limits as learners -- they can become active and assertive learners and seek ways to improve.

One of the participants in a recent LHTL laboratory explained how she helps students become active learners, "I ask students in my ESL reading class to bring in one of their most frightening texts to this class. Then collectively we use an active reading exercise that introduces great pre-reading skills. In dyads and small groups we discuss how all of the students can use active reading strategies with any book in the future."

In the LHTL laboratory I model self-questioning techniques that fit my approaches to learning. Self-questioning is a requisite skill for building awareness of self-as-learner. Learners need a critical eye to detect tacit attitudes, knowledge, and/or behaviors that impede their learning efficiency and effectiveness. I use an example in which I take a helicopter view of myself in the writing process. I develop a concept map for the writing on the black-board. I periodically prompt myself with the following self-monitoring questions:

- o What are the most important issues here?
- o What seems to be working?
- o How are these concepts, authors, world-views related?
- o Which strategies hold the greatest probability of success -- given what I know about the easy or difficult nature of this task?
- o Where is this taking me?

This modeling exercise is intended to nudge participants toward considering their own learning processes. Are they passive as learners? Do

they approach learning situations with low expectations? I have found that demonstrations and guided practice can help learners become more active and assertive as learners.

Helping Adults Become Active and Assertive Learners

I recently facilitated a LHTL workshop with a group of factory workers in a rural manufacturing facility. This plant has an exemplary learning center that is open to all floor workers. The learning center serves workers on all three shifts.

I met a woman in the learning center who is the epitome of an active and assertive learner. She is in her 60s and performs a rather routine job in a highly automated plant. But she is a lifelong learner who spits in the eye of fear when it comes to learning new things.

She viewed the learning center as a place where she could keep her brain active in ways that weren't feasible on the shop floor. Initially, she used her time in the learning center to develop basic computer skills. Using the resources within the learning center, as well as her own skills in self-directed learning, she soon mastered several software applications, including desktop publishing. Soon after that she published an award-winning newsletter for the learning center. Her interest in computers continued to grow. She can now disassemble, assemble, and custom build a computer to her personal liking. Not bad, considering that two years prior she had viewed computers as mysterious boxes that only supervisors were able to use on the shop floor.

This woman, like other active learners, are experimenters when it comes to learning to learn. They seek out the mysteries of their personal learning. They take risks. Active learners creatively look at contexts and ask: What might work best here? What can I make of this mess? Given what I know about myself, how might I go about this?

As a facilitator of learning to learn, I try to help people recognize the tools that are at their disposal for different learning situations. I want them to deconstruct the learned helplessness that they may have developed toward certain learning contexts. By learned helplessness, I mean reactions to learning tasks that imply naiveté or resistance to advancing their learning. "I have no artistic skill," "I cannot learn in a group," "Why don't you just tell us the answer (as if there is one)," "I have no mechanical aptitude" are reactions that infer an underdeveloped set of learning skills.

People tend to think and learn according to established patterns and habits. They get in a rut. I try to bounce them out of it. In the LHTL laboratory I push participants to gain fluency with several learning strategies and to develop versatility in their applications. An initial activity that I do with participants is to have them repeat after me, "Suspend Judgement! Suspend judgement! Suspend judgement!" Granted, this is a goofy activity, but the

chant stays with them through the course. I explain that we will experiment with a variety of learning techniques, and that some activities might stretch their comfort zones. I request that participants should not quickly dismiss activities because of their prior experiences (or lack thereof). Rather, I ask participants to examine the elements of the activity and to **scrutinize their reactions to it**.

I try to help people develop inquiring dispositions as learners. Inquiring minds want to know -- and they should want to know how to be more effective at learning! To do this, they must develop skills at self-monitoring and self-evaluating. In the structured format of the LHTL laboratory I recommend that participants write a "learning process objective" prior to our experiential learning activities. This forces them to prepare for learning activities and think about the learning processes that will unfold. For example, they might write a "learning process objective" that includes use of specific note taking or concept mapping techniques as they listen to an audio-tape, or they might create metaphors for central themes of a group discussion. After an activity, participants write in their reflective journals about the learning activity and the utility of their "learning process objectives."

I tell participants that they need to lubricate their learning. And just like a 10w30 motor oil that changes viscosity with the weather, their learning strategies must adapt to the environment. This responsiveness allows participants to scrutinize learning situations for solutions that might decrease the friction of their personal learning processes and overcome their learning inertia. All of us experience learning inertia in certain situations -- it includes writer's block, a stalemate in collaborative learning, or fear of a new technology. We can develop repertoires of learning strategies that can help us overcome personal learning hurdles.

Expanding the Learner's Repertoire of Learning Strategies

One of my daughters is a freshman in college. She has one strategy for studying -- memorization. If she is asked to interpret text, for example, she struggles with the assignment. I believe that her learning skills are representative of most beginning college students. She has yet to develop breadth as a learner. That is, she has not yet developed a full array of learning skills, strategies, and tools that she can apply to diverse learning contexts.

Unfortunately, daughters don't always listen to dads -- even when they are supposed to be experts on learning to learn! I stress to my daughter the notion of strategic learning. Strategic learners can see the parts of a learning situation and devise possible remedies. They identify and refine deliberate tactics that they can employ in specific learning situations.

On the other hand, immature learners are paralyzed in certain

contexts because of their limited array of learning strategies. There is an old expression, "When you only have a hammer, the whole world looks like a nail." The expression implies that your world-view is delimited by personal resources. If you only have a hammer, then you will probably use it in every possible situation, regardless of the fit between the tool and the task.

People who rely on merely a few learning strategies are likely to over-use them and apply them in inappropriate situations. My daughter's over-reliance on her memorization techniques is an example of this. She applies these techniques in learning situations when other strategies would be more appropriate. Furthermore, she avoids courses (literature, for example) that require advanced skills in comprehension and interpretation -- skills which she has not fully developed.

Although my daughter will not listen to my advice about learning strategies, participants in the LHTL laboratory will. After all, they have paid tuition dollars to listen to me talk about this stuff! In this laboratory I model learning strategies and talk through my own learning blocks. For example, I mention that I find boring speakers a challenge to my learning. Although the speaker may have a droning monotonous style, perhaps the lecture contains valuable information for me. How can I stay alert and be effective as a learner? I explain a note-taking technique that helps me focus on interesting points. With my prompting, others explain their strategies in similar situations. Our discussions then usually drift to other learning contexts in which participants struggle. Group members divulge their personal techniques for dealing with challenging learning contexts.

It is at this point in the discussions that participants begin to realize the importance of becoming a balanced learner. They sense the importance of recognizing personal learning blind spots, hindrances, and learning deficiencies. I explain how learning strategies can be used as "mental prostheses" that can prop-up the learner against the demands of unfamiliar and intimidating learning situations. People who develop a comfort level with a full array of learning strategies can take stock of their performance in a variety of contexts, whether or not the situation is tedious, risky, solitary, confrontational, mundane or collaborative. Accurately assessing one's deficiencies as a learner is an important step in figuring out how to negotiate them.

Compensating for Personal Learning Deficiencies

In some instances we learn effortlessly, in other situations learning is a frustrating struggle. In both instances we must examine the processes in action. What coping strategies work best for mental blocks, blind-spots, and other barriers? People learn how to learn as they gain understanding, exert control over their learning, and cultivate their learning competencies. Analysis of both successful and unsuccessful learning experiences helps us

understand why we fly or fall as learners. Collins (1994) outlined a variety of situations that can frustrate learners. I have embellished the list with comments from participants in the LHTL laboratory.

- o We have learned in a particular context and are having problems generalizing to other situations.
This is often encountered in public schooling. Students learn science abstractly, and then cannot relate science concepts to real world problems. Teachers can use authentic learning situations, such as community based projects, to open up the learning environment and let students apply their knowledge to real world problems.
- o We have learned to do things one way and have trouble picking up other methods.
Sometimes prior learning can inhibit new learning. For example, we have all learned to cross our arms a certain way. Have you ever tried crossing them the other way? How about driving a car on the left hand side of the road? Or unlearning inappropriate keyboarding skills? In some instances, unlearning something can be more difficult than learning something new.
- o We grew accustomed to a specific situation and do not recognize how to apply expertise to unfamiliar situations.
Most adults have learned how to drive in rear wheel drive cars. And, they have learned how to handle a car on icy roads in rear wheel drive cars. What happened the first time you drove a front wheel drive car on an icy road? Did you instinctively turn the front wheels into the direction of the skid? These types of situations require you to evaluate your prior knowledge given your "take" on this new situation.
- o We have lost motivation because of the ambiguity of potential applications of information in unfamiliar contexts.
Listening to a lecture do you silently ask, "what's in this for me?" If the answer evades you, chances are you will not stay focused on the content. You will need a strategy for sifting through information and mining the nuggets that have personal value for you.
- o You must overcome "learning inertness" because the situation is so different from your day-to-day experiences.
This problem is present in training programs that are abstract and not accurate portrayals of authentic problems in the workplace. Physically acting out a concept, demonstrating a technique, or brainstorming implications can help workers transfer learning to familiar elements of their work site.
- o You have problems retaining information because it is rarely put to use.
Emergency safety instructions might not be needed very often, but

when they are needed, people must quickly recall the information. Accelerated learning techniques such as mnemonics can help people remember infrequently used information. An example of mnemonics is imagery, where you make up a wild story to "place information." For example, as I **accelerated** in my Mercury **mnemonics** I passed the house of the three little **pegs**. I **first** saw the **number peg**. The **body peg** had a broken leg. The **peg of rhyme** was covered with slime.

Most of us have encountered the preceding types of learning dilemmas. They challenge us to develop comfort levels with a broad array of learning strategies. Strategies that we practice in the LHTL laboratory include rehearsing before a learning activity (in this dyad I am going practice responsive listening techniques); anticipating elements of a learning activity based on our prior experience and knowledge (I am not going to try to run the show, I am going to seek out assumptions of the group); and reflecting on preconceived notions of courses of action, potential outcomes, and respective implications (although this is a stretch for me, I am going to volunteer for this role play -- I need to develop these types of skills).

These techniques allow people to check on how the learning activity matches with their prior conceptions regarding it. They can judge the effectiveness of their learning strategies, determine whether their performance(s) are up to par, and whether or not their levels of comprehension are sufficient.

Learning dilemmas call for self-monitoring processes that allow people to make informed judgements about the best strategies for specific learning situations. Because all learners are different, their applications of strategies to learning dilemmas will vary. Self-monitoring can trigger a cautionary flag for individuals if learning is not particularly efficient or effective, and corrective actions are needed. With practice we can improve our learning strategies -- but it is reflective practice that allows us to make the most gains.

Building Skills in Self-Monitoring and Reflection

Some folks seem to go through life in a haze. We all know that **thinking** is hard work -- and many people prefer to avoid it. They choose to spend time in a mindless state, perhaps taking up space on the couch with a firm grip on the remote control. On the other hand, there are people who strive to grow and develop each day. They actively seek opportunities to learn new things and extend their knowledge. They mentally "keep tabs" of their learning by using self-questioning, monitoring and regulating techniques.

These periodic checks provide benchmarks of progress.

You have probably noticed these metacognitive strategies in skilled workers who have exemplary diagnostic skills. They can be found when a medical team considers an unusual case, when an automotive technician

solves a puzzling fuel problem, or when a caseworker pieces together the remnants of a troubled family situation.

Similar to the techniques of reflective practitioners from all walks of life, active learners use self-questioning processes as a corrective measure. Active learners critique learning in progress and they create critical consciousness of the process: What underlying assumptions are behind this? What is causing this mental block? What is the muddiest part of this learning? In the LHTL laboratory I use these types of questions to help learners develop self-monitoring skills. I pose questions to learners before, during and after experiential activities. Time is allotted for them to write their responses as part of the experiential learning cycle. Participants soon develop their own techniques that are integrated into their learning cycle. My facilitation goal in the LHTL laboratory is to provide and model LHTL strategies, and gradually recede from the picture as the participant gains competence with their application.

Facilitating Learning to Learn

As a facilitator of LHTL, I help people become aware of their personal learning habits. This includes examining the root causes of learning habits, critiquing their validity, and devising new strategies worthy of experimentation and testing. For novices, this practice can be awkward, illuminating, mind-expanding, puzzling and unpredictable.

I rely heavily on reflective writing as a facilitation strategy for learners. Reflection-learning journals help individuals pinpoint and critique their learning processes. I encourage people to connect concepts and actions in their journals. Reflective journals are marvelous communication links between the LHTL insights of the learner, the conceptual basis of the LHTL laboratory, and the facilitator (me!). They are tools that extend learning for all of us.

The journaling process can "prime the pump" and generate a flow of consciousness for people who are struggling to capture the essence of their learning. As a facilitator, I respond to reflective journals by providing alternative perspectives, personal challenges, metaphors, suggestions for further reading, and futile attempts at humor.

One of the writing assignments in the LHTL laboratory is to create a "learning obituary." I realize that this phrase conveys the morbid connotation that your learning is dead! However, killing your learning is not the intent of the assignment. I ask participants to focus on their past, present and future learning. I pose the question, "If you were going to write your obituary as a learner, what would it say?" This assignment helps learners focus on the following types of questions:

- o Why am I this type of learner?
- o Which past learning experiences have been the most powerful?

- o Why are some learning experiences easy and effortless?
- o Why are other learning situations uncomfortable?
- o What events of the future will effect me as a learner?
- o How do I want to end up as a learner?

This assignment documents the mile posts of a personal learning journey. It helps participants recognize the internal and external factors that can effect their learning from the past to the future. Not all adults will benefit from creating reflective journals, learning obituaries, and other written projects. However, the reflective process need not result in the written word.

I tell people that they don't have to be crazy to talk to themselves (although it helps). In other words, I suggest that people try a "learning conversation" with themselves as a reflective process. This is a technique of conversing with oneself about the processes of learning. Fox example, learners can talk out loud about how they construe meaning from a hands-on demonstration in the workplace or how they interpret the main points of a group discussion. They can talk out loud about the feelings and judgements that they connect to a variety of learning experiences.

For those who are sensitive about being perceived as strange people who talk to themselves, a companion can be used in the reflective process. Receiving your reflective thoughts through the eyes of another person can be a catalyst for learning to learn. Participants often discover this to be an effective means of uncovering underlying beliefs and assumptions that they hold about themselves as learners.

In the LHTL laboratory I utilize reciprocal teaching strategies such as summarizing, questioning, clarifying, paraphrasing, and predicting. These techniques enable participants to view the processes of learning from different angles. I try to use experiential learning activities that balance discovery learning and personal exploration along with systematic instruction and guidance. I try to create a supportive learning environment that contains structured activities that provide insight about the processes of learning to both the learner and the facilitator.

Concluding Thoughts

Learning to learn is an umbrella concept that subsumes topics such as metacognition and metacognitive strategies, learning styles, awareness of self as learner, learning contexts and a host of other issues related to improving the effectiveness and efficiency of learning. According to Robert Smith, learning to learn can be viewed as a goal, process, and area of inquiry. It is a vitally important skill for growing and developing as a lifelong learner.

This chapter stressed the importance of skill building by the learner and facilitation by the adult educator. For the individual learner, skills and processes such as self-awareness, self-monitoring, reflection, and active

learning were highlighted. For the facilitator, building supportive learning environments and providing ample practice opportunities for learners were recommended.

I believe there is something bigger than the previously mentioned processes and skills that engender learning to learn. It is something holistic and it encompasses the ways that learners approach learning situations with people, things and ideas in their environment. The more I examine the theory and practice of learning to learn, the more I sense that it exalts a unique world-view that is premised on the power of learning.

When people embrace the concept of learning to learn, they observe and interpret phenomena with a heightened consciousness. Their learning processes are the targets of personal critique and continuous improvement. For these learners, merely seeking expected outcomes from learning is not sufficient. The processes of learning are scrutinized: Can I be better at this? Why is this a struggle? What might work here? Perfection as a learner is never achieved. However, when you are skilled in learning to learn, the world never appears the same.

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