

Facilitating 'Impact Learning' by Durk Meijer

At one point I was part of a workshop that included participants ranging from people who had a doctorate degree to people who had minimal academic education and were primary oral learners. One of the topics was 'language briefs'. At that time, I had done much planning, but I had never heard of that phrase before. Since the presenter focused very much on that term, without explanation, it was initially very difficult to engage in the topic. I am literate, but about half of the attendees were oral preference learners and they had even a much greater obstacle to overcome. None of us understood what men's underwear had to do with language. The presenter was alluding to a supposedly brief statement of a project plan, which was not understood from the way that the presenter expressed it. This was definitely counter-productive in regard to impact learning.

'Impact' implies that the learning has a strong effect on someone. As such, impact is influenced by the attitude of the learner, as well as the way things are experienced, studied or being taught.

'Learning' is the acquisition of knowledge or skills through experience, study, or by being taught. In a real sense this is all discovery, but if we communicate theoretical information as a foundation, then we limit the opportunity for people to discover. In that case, they will have to deal with abstract and new concepts before they can experience them. It is like teaching babies a class on how to walk before they observe others walking and trying themselves. That just doesn't work. When they are ready, babies naturally will try and then we can come alongside and be a catalyst. That is a much better way of helping anybody to learn. Of course, the learner also needs to have an attitude of wanting to learn.

The concept of 'Knowledge' is awareness of facts, information, and skills acquired by a person through experience or education or the theoretical or practical understanding of a topic. Typically, education focusses primarily on acquiring knowledge. In the past, access to knowledge was limited to a person and later to printed documents. Currently, through the internet, access to knowledge is almost infinite. This should make us realize that our primary focus should be on a functional application of knowledge, where knowledge is needed only as it is relevant for the learner in regard to the application. In general, experience is the best teacher!

'Attitude' is a settled way of thinking or feeling about someone or something. Typically, our attitude is reflected in our behavior.

So, 'impact learning' considers the foundational issue that we are specifically facilitating our training for each unique people to see desired changes by helping to relate new information in a relevant way to their world. It is not driven by a principle of just gathering information. Therefore, 'impact learning' causes changes in the way people think about something. It helps them to embrace changes in attitude and behavior.

How can we facilitate impact learning? There are some great programs that address impact learning, like for example "Learning that lasts", so the aim of this article is not to generate another program, but to focus on core principles.

Here are some Core principles for impact learning. We will be empowering people when:

- We relate new things to things people already know.
- We facilitate connecting new things to desires and interests that people already have.
- We use settings that encourage learning, like using their local environment involving practical real life situations.
- We encourage learning that is natural and relevant, considering that most people learn best through discovery.
- We avoid teaching beyond the capacity of what the student can embrace (as relating to length of training sessions and the amount of new information provided).
- We use a pace that works for the trainees and use repetition to allow for new things to become part of their life.
- We let people define the vocabulary as much as possible, as they experience new things, so they can relate better to the experience.
- We facilitate a way of communicating clearly, so they can help others to engage at the same level. This must go beyond specific methods, which would likely make them dependent on outsiders and they would be helpless if the methods fail.
- We aim to use tools and technology that can be acquired locally and sustained locally. Carefully helping them consider whether there is a real need for outside tools and technology, which could make them potentially dependent.

In closing, I will share the story about a person who gets a car for the first time, but never experienced a flat tire. He may not even recognize the problem when he sees it is flat and he may not know how to fix the problem. How can this person learn about a flat tire and how to fix it, before it ever happens to him? There are potentially three ways of learning how to deal with this situation.

- The person could read written instructions. This provides steps and procedures, possibly accompanied by some pictures.
- The person could watch another person change a tire. This provides a visual experience.
- The person could be prompted by a helper to change a tire. This provides a complete hands-on life experience. The person who serves as catalyst helps him discover the location of the tools and spare tire. He helps him find the location on the car where the jack should be placed. The catalyst could tell about the danger of the car rolling off the jack. The catalyst could ask what could help stabilize the car. The person may suggest locking the parking brake and blocking the wheels. Next the person would do so accordingly. In similar fashion, the catalyst continues to guide the owner of the car through the rest of the process.

It is obvious that learning by guided experiences provides great impact. This is real impact learning and through repeated experiences, it will be easy for the trainee to become a catalyst for others.