

How to keep education from blocking learning...

Managing Unlearning

BY RONALD R. SHORT

Preparing this article has given me the opportunity to reflect over several years of creating, refining, designing, promoting and implementing an experiential, competency-based program in Human Resource Development. A major theme stands out. I am struck with the number of surprises I have had about how and what students learn.

"Obstinate" students simply have not learned *what* they were supposed to, *when* they were supposed to. For example, an "insignificant" side-comment has often had more lasting impact than the well-prepared lecture or laboratory design. The most significant student learnings have not been predicted, managed or measured. Learning objectives have been comforting to faculty and students, but largely irrelevant to important student changes.

Students have not been aware of what they have learned. Primary learnings have often been unconscious at the time. This is manifested in students having huge emotional swings that appear far more predictable than the measurable timing of their learnings. Graduates report hand-ling a difficult session with clients with competence, but not being able to say how or when they learned the skill. As an extreme example, of our current students has said, "I was asleep all year. I don't know how, but I sure learned a lot."

At first, these strange events surprised me. Then, after years of being surprised by the same phenomena, I slowly became aware that recurrent, predictable event should not surprise. I am now convinced I was surprised because they did not match my expectations – I was looking for something else. They simply did not fit into my educational myths and theories. The problem has not been "obstinate, counter-dependent" students, but my expectations. The focus of this article is that the "strange" events are defined out of our expectations which are formed by the dominant scientific myth about how people learn, derived for the most part, from research on rats, pigeons and babies.

This article challenges that myth because our job is to educate people in Human Resource Development. Unlike programs training mechanical engineers, our graduates are called upon to use themselves as the primary tool of their trade. They are people interacting and influencing other people. They are not merely technicians who have a tool kit of skills. Our graduates presumably are facilitators of others' growth. Our Program presumably facilitates our students' growth. The myth of how people learn does not cover the complexity of our task.

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the popular sense of something being untrue. In fact, my intention is quite the opposite. Our myths are the most real truths about our existence! They organize our reality, create our assumptions, expectations and behavior, give us identity, provide meaning for our lives and direct us in developing an educational process. The "scientific myth" about how people learn is not false. It is simply inadequate.

Other given characteristics of a myth play a significant role in examining our educational models. First, the validity of a myth is independent of individuals conforming to it. People may differ considerably with a dominant myth; in this case programs and individual educators may not conform to the myth but this does not discount the myth's validity and power. As we later explore how the myth of learning organizes us, you may think, "That doesn't apply to us. We do something very different in our program," or "I don't believe those principles." We can all disagree individually, but this does not alter the fact that a myth still remains the dominant reality against which we all define our differences.

Second, a myth is a collective reality, unconsciously agreed upon, that sets the rules for the game. The fame of educating practitioners in HRD is primarily determined by the myth and accompanying assumptions that surround the concept of learning. The dominant approach to learning has come from behaviorism and operant con-

ditioning. Our playing field is defined by concepts like “ competency-based, reinforcement, feedback, baseline data, objectives” and perhaps even, for the more sophisticated “trainers,” “successive approximation.” These concepts and the attending assumptions determine our boundaries, our rules, how well the game is played, who wins, who cheats, and why we are surprised by events that fall outside the rules of the game. They organize our expectations.

A metaphor which illustrates this more clearly is we educators are all exploring a dark, complex cave using similar flashlights. Unknown to us, however, the flashlight is in reality a projector. It projects onto the surface of the cave. We all explore the same cave, use the same projector, and “discover” the same things. We see what we project. Also note: just as in our daily lives, we attend to the objects that come into view under the light, and not to the light itself. We do not see the light. We forget it is the light which determines and organizes and limits our field of vision.

Reality, being the complex unpredictable mess that it is, inevitably intrudes into our visual field. Events that do not “fit” mess up our vision. These are viewed as abnormalities, if we attend to them at all. The intrusions and surprises are externalized. They are not *our* problem. Our dominant images predominate.

Behaving like every “rational” human being in the world, we seek to preserve our dominant projected images and ignore reality. We turn up the wattage of our projectors, making the light so intense that very few extraneous events challenge the way we “know” the world is. We refine our programs, add important courses, delete others, improve our instruction, and believe that if we can establish good behavioral outcomes, create a program within which a rat can learn and run at this or her own rate, we’ll achieve perfection.

If there is truth to the above, then what is missing? Only human processes of change.

My present belief is that the emphasis on competency-based, outcome-oriented curricula serves two major purposes: 1) it recruits students who also believe the myth, and 2) it provides a framework within which “unlearning” and more significant personal learnings can take place. The outcome-oriented emphasis has very little directly to do with what actually happens to students in our programs.

Examining

The Dominant Projector

As we do not see the light from our projectors, we do not “see” the assumptions that organize our world view. The following are a few organizing assumptions, derived from “scientific” learning theory, that I believe limit our perspective and our programs. They are the beam of light, not what we “see.”

1) *Learning is linear and sequential*: A pigeon learns to discriminate color by being reinforced on simple discrimination tasks and gradually, by successive approximation, working up to the more complex tasks. If people were pigeons we would design curricula that places students on an assembly line of courses and experiences, expecting them to take one step at a time, accumulating complexity on the way.

We certainly would not ask them to experience the same event more than once in different contexts and we also would ignore, as Charles Seashore has observed, that “growth and regression just might be intertwined in such a way that one step forward might require several steps backward” (1975).

2) *Learning is molecular*: Our pigeon learned to peck by gradually associating muscular movement with reinforcement. If students were pigeons we would design educational programs on the assumption that a competent graduate of our program had added small bits of knowledge and skill to his or

her knapsack until it was close to being full. It appears to me that, like the public park attendant, students are to walk around with a sharp stick and place each new knowledge or skill on top of all the accumulated units. The smaller these units, and the more precisely we can define them, the better.

Years ago Tolman determined that rats learn cognitive representations or maps of a maze. They did not negotiate the maze by learning to place 35 percent of their weight on their left leg in order to make a right turn. If rats learn maps, what about graduate students?

We probably agree that graduate students learn maps. If so, we are wrong in assuming that small units of knowledge are additive. We ignore the reality that often a map has to be destroyed in total for another one to take its place.

3) *Learning is an individual affair*: The pigeon learns alone in the box. Learning is a rearrangement of neural connections beneath the feathers. If our students were pigeons, we would focus our major attention and energy on the instruction of individuals, ignoring the context of the educational experience. If learning takes place beneath the epidermis, why bother attending to the relationships in the classroom?

We would also assume that “neurons” are more scientifically respectable than “classroom climate.” We would ignore the fact that all of our learnings are interactive, that our mind is located somewhere between us and another person or object. It just could be that the most fruitful exploration of how people learn is in relationships and the educational context, not in glial cells.

4) *Learning is in the hands of the faculty*: Our pigeon is controlled by the person pushing the reinforcement button. Although we can protest strongly, when the light of our projector is organizing our reality, we cannot escape the assumption that we educators are in charge of the learning that takes place in our courses. Students also

protest, but are organized by this belief. That is why we have to protest.

Our discipline determines our curriculum. We assume that students learn because of *our* sound curriculum, solid courses defined by *our* objectives, and excellent evaluation procedures. What they need to know and how they need to learn it is assumed to be under our control. No small wonder why we are surprised. It should not surprise us when we discover over and over again that “none is apathetic except in the pursuit of someone else’s goals.”

This assumption is easily documented by the connotation we give to our language. The words “Human Resource Development” connote that we are turning our people who will develop others. The arrogance is obvious. People develop with or without us, and in many cases in spite of us.

5) *Learning is rigorous and precise, demanding discipline:* Returning to our pigeon once again, precision and long work are the keys to learning. If our students were pigeons we would design precise and rigorous courses and curricula, assuming that the more a student holds his or her nose to the grindstone, the better he/she will be as a practitioner.

We would ignore that learning is like breathing, i.e. one of the most natural processes given to us. Our ignorance would keep us from attending to the possibility that learning may be easy. Unlearning may be the difficulty.

6) *Learning results in predictable, definable, behavioral outcomes:* We can precisely chart the number of misses our pigeon makes in a given unit of time. We can also precisely determine, ahead of time, our criterion of performance when we can say the pigeon has learned. If our students were pigeons, we educators would actually believe that we measure whether and what students learn. Also, to return to the prior principle, we would assume that we measure what is important, ignor-

ing the “covert” curriculum and other trivia that may have more to do with ultimate success than our preconceived outcomes. It is possible that students learn more about *how* they are taught than *what* they are taught, ignoring once again, the interaction and context of learning.

To make the point, I have exaggerated. If the exaggeration compels us to examine the light of our projectors, then it is worthwhile. If there is any truth to the idea that the preceding set the rules, then they deserve attention.

The preceding are not intended to be inclusive. More could be added. They illustrate the major point. Our perspective has been limited. We need to examine and expand our projectors.

The propositions that follow are offered to broaden our perspective. As such, they depart from the assumptions of traditional learning theory.

1) *Learning is human change:* As mentioned in the introduction, effective programs in Human Resource Development enable their students and faculty to develop. Learning in this sense is not a simple matter.

If concepts and skills are truly integrated, they result in personal affective, conceptual and behavioral change. And as those of us who lived long enough know, human change is not easy; it is not merely a matter of accumulating new concepts. To return to Tolman, I know of no studies that emphasized the emotional turmoil a rat has to go through in learning a new map.

2) *Learning is wholistic and transformational:* Cognitive, affective and behavioral maps are like ecological systems. If we pollute the water, we kill the fish, which kills the birds, which affects the insect population and so on. Nothing functions as an island. Students arrive in our programs with elaborate maps about the nature of reality, themselves, others, their skills. We do not change one part without affecting all the other parts

To quote my colleague, John Scherer, “If we tug at the shorts, the whole clothesline jumps.” If our students learn something new, the old has to be reorganized. Reorganization of whole systems is transformational, not incremental change.

3) *Learning is circular:* The process of transformational reorganization requires that we often have to return to what we once “knew” in order to recognize it. Students may be exposed to the same objectively defined experience and have it impact them differently the second, third, fourth or fifth time. In a much larger context, T.S. Eliot said it:

“We shall not cease from exploration and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive at what we started and know the place for the first time.” – The Four Quartets

4) *The context of learning is critical:* Our minds are not contained within our skull, but located between us and another person, object, or event. People learn in relationship. Other students, faculty, and family all impact on learning. The “atmosphere” of the classroom, the mode of instruction, the relationships between students and the student’s relationships with people outside the program all have an impact on learning.

We learned several years ago that we admit a social system into graduate school. To quote Charles Seashore again:

Although such persons may have filled out their applications as individuals, they actually were enrolling their family in a change program that would likely provoke a wild and motley set of weird and delightful -- but sometimes torturous -- assortment of experiences.

And:

Professional development is a big pain in the ass, especially if you are only a relative of the person participating in the program. (Ibid.)

5) *What is learned is dependent on the learner*: Our projector is so powerful in organizing our thoughts that this has to be said. We easily lose sight of the truth that if a student learns anything it is because he/she is open, receptive and ready to learn. People let in as much information as they are capable or receiving. The role of the educator is therefore to manage an environment within which students may allow more information in.

6) *Learning is easy*: Over the years I have come to believe that learning is one of the most natural processes in the world. We do not have to motivate people to learn. Our job as educators is to not *be* a roadblock.

When students truly learn, they change. Changing an ecological system of feelings, thoughts and behaviors results in a death of the old system. For some learnings the transition is easy. For others it is painful and difficult. There is a period of "hanging on" to the old and familiar. Grasping, denial, anger and bargaining finally lead to acceptance. At times students have to let go and "die" before they are open to new learnings. Kubler-Ross (1969) is more relevant here than Skinner.

Process of Human Change

The literature on life transitions and creativity is highly relevant (Levinson, 1978; Sheehy, 1974; Ferguson, 1980). According to my reading, the process of human change follows a very predictable pattern. Although different theories vary considerably in the words used and the complexity of explanation, human change seems to follow these steps:

1) *Disconfirmation or Disequilibrium*: We are simply faced with a situation that we are unable to deal with using our past repertoire of knowledge and skill. Our internal map does not match the external reality. Marilyn Ferguson labels it the entry point. "Entry can be triggered by anything that shakes up the old understanding of the world" (1980, pg. 89).

Typically we continue to try to force the external reality into our internal map. We do what we have done in the past, only louder, faster with more tenacity. Someone once said, "It doesn't help to run faster down the road." Because it is the wrong road, we are inevitably faced with disconfirmation and failure.

2) *Incubation*: Following the disconfirmation, people obsess consciously for a period of time, but the real work begins to take place at an unconscious level. Reorganization is an unconscious process. "This letting permits the inner knowledge to come forward." (*Ibid.*, pg. 92)

3) *Reintegration*: The literature on creativity talks of insight. The answer to the problem appears as a gift. The answer appears as if by Magic. In transitional literature, the individual has a new identity which prepares him or her for the next stage. To quote Ferguson again, "In the third stage, integration, the mystery is inhabited. Although there may be favorite methods or teachers, the individual trusts an inner 'guru'." (*Ibid.*, pg. 92)

4) *Trial*: The new organization is now a better match with external reality. Given our new integration, we proceed to try it out, testing in experience whether it will work (Haefele, 1962).

We now have two projectors with which to explore our cave. If the second projector has any truth, and I strongly believe it does, and depending on the degree we organize our programs on the basis of the first projector, then what is likely to be the effect? It is my belief that a focus only on the principles of learning actually blocks learning and exacerbates the students' problems. If students naturally experience periods of stress and anxiety that block learning, what is the effect of a lock-step curriculum? If students have the experience of disorientation, disconfirmation, periods of inadequacy and low self-esteem, how do we help by expecting a high degree of rationality to pass an examination? If students

inevitably feel lonely, isolated and weird, how do we help by structuring our sessions so they learn only from the faculty? If students naturally experience periods of being "crazy", how do we help by consistently presenting a polished, together, always professional appearance? How does it help to present only answers and not the fundamental questions that we are dealing with? Of course these questions lead to an obvious answer. It does not help to use these more traditional strategies.

Implications for HRD Graduate Training

You might, at this point, assume that this article is an advocacy for a soft, humanistic, "I don't care what you learn," and "I won't hold you accountable for your learning" kind of program. The opposite is true. Unless we attend to the above issues, we actually block the learning and rigor necessary to graduate competent practitioners. The following are a few assumptions I have about programs that would deal with the issues of human change and unlearning.

1) *Flexibility with realistic, high standards of competence*: Ironically, because it comes from our first projector, competency education can provide the necessary freedom of individual learning styles. If we can define rigorous goals for a program, and have clear ways of assessing them, then we can grant degrees with integrity. At least in theory, the student is then free to learn in any mode and at any time he/she is able and motivated.

For example, there are a number of ways available to our students to learn statistics and research design. We have lectures that cover the highlights. We have videotapes of lectures available for viewing. Students who have learned statistics from undergraduate work help other students. In a very few cases, students attend a full course at the college. As a last resort, some students even use a textbook.

2) *Support systems*: Students going through the inevitable difficulties of unlearning need support from many sources. A program can address this issue by facilitating student-to-student contact, enabling group building, providing access to selected parts of the program to spouses.

3) *Appreciation for and legitimation of the unlearning process*: Faculty need to be aware of what students go through and appreciate its value. If they do know, they will probably be more likely to have the necessary flexibility and support in their curriculum. Students and faculty alike need to be tolerant and even appreciative of periods of craziness. "Crazy" behavior of individuals going through the unlearning transitions is normal. There are times when it is crazy not to be crazy.

"To be able somehow to separate the occasional from the chronic, the development from the stunting, the funny from the destructive is a critical challenge to those in power, who generally have low tolerance for the crazy behavior of those with less clout." (Seashore, *Ibid.*)

4) *Student Self-Assessment*: We have already determined that major learnings are not necessarily determined by the course objectives or the competencies. Students learn what they will, regardless of our objectives. Even though they may meet our criteria of performance they also will encounter significant personal learnings. The self-assessment process is a way of tracking these serendipitous learnings.

Also, when we use only our first projector as the organizing guide, we design programs that teach our students *about* issues, concepts and methods as though they reside outside the self of the student. They learn *about* training-design, human relations, management procedures, economics, job and career development and so on. The curriculum comes to be viewed as separate from the self, as though students were learning mechanics,

physics, or carpentry. An organizing assumption appears to be that if students learn how to turn the right bolt, solve the correct equation, build a house, or design a training event, they will be effective practitioners.

This subject/object assumption may be applicable when learning about the world around us, but is inadequate for training practitioners. Our graduates need to know how to design and conduct training events, but in addition need to know how they, with their particular amalgam of strengths and weaknesses, will conduct training events. A student should not only learn *about* human relations, but how he/she relates to others.

In Human Resource Development the subject matter is not removed from the self. A specialist is a part of, not separate from, the social context within which he/she works. The idiosyncratic skills, values, attitudes and personality of a practitioner has a much or more to do with success as does technical knowledge.

Also our graduates need to be self-correcting. They have to have a high degree of self-awareness, flexibility and be able to receive feedback realistically. The subtle, complex social world that we have to deal with in this business is big enough to humble the most expert of us. Training events fail. The best designed programs can be very helpful in one context and disastrous in others. Our best graduates will have to deal with being ineffective at times, having their best efforts fail.

Although the above issues need to be addressed in several other ways, *some mode of self-assessment is essential*. The process itself, regardless of what students write, helps shift the responsibility from the faculty to the student. And the skill of assessing one's self is no minor element in the practice of helping others to develop.

5) *Evaluation of the educational context*: If we take the second projector seriously, we are

forced to examine the context of our learning environment. We need ways of being able to influence the faculty and the program in general.

In our program we used to have regular organization development times involving an outside consultant. We now have organized the students into linkage committees that interview other students, prepare a list of the issues and present them before the faculty for action. The problems are assigned to appropriate groups for work with timelines built in for accountability.

In general, the context of an effective graduate program needs to balance challenge and confrontation with support. In order to achieve a climate of "supportive disharmony" there needs to be a climate which facilitates openness between students and other students, and between students and the faculty. These fragile, precarious qualities require on-going vigilance and assessment.

There are other dimensions that undoubtedly should be added to the preceding. Perhaps the reason there are not more is because we know so little about unlearning in education. Perhaps our "Learning" projector has organized our profession so thoroughly that we have not thought, much less researched, the complexities mentioned previously.

It does occur to me that if we are training practitioners, they need to understand the difficulties of unlearning and reorganization. Our graduates are entering the field of dealing with people in transition. They will be significant parties and even instigators of placing others in positions that require unlearning. If our students do not learn this in graduate school, where are they to learn it? If they themselves do not participate in intense explorations of their own development, what kind of appreciation are they likely to have of their future clients' difficulties?

Of course, educators are not immune. Human unlearning and change is not easy for us either. Some of the implications in this article will call for serious examination, reorganization and learning on our parts. We will have to unlearn before we are open to new learnings. It will be much easier to retreat to the known than to venture into the unknown. We will have to require of ourselves what we require of our students.

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