



The missing link

Anchor the training to the learning, say **Carolyn May** and **Andy Radka**

Training is all about learning and learning has moved on. It has moved on so dramatically that the resulting paradigm shift is the equivalent of discovering the world is round rather than flat. However, many directors, HR and training managers are not aware of this. How could they be? They haven't got time in their frantically busy working lives to constantly update themselves with the latest developments in academic educational research.

But if they could somehow utilise that relevant, up-to-date research and apply it to their company training programmes, what difference would it make?

Well, it would make the world of difference. It could result in all training courses delivered within a company being more effective and much better value for money. Then once the new learning is applied, improvements could be seen in, for example, strategic planning, systems and processes, better relationships with clients and, ultimately, business expansion and return on investment.

So how can learning research be translated into dynamic training courses and greater economic savings?

The answer lies in the forging of a missing link.

Scientific scrutiny is driving forward discoveries about how the brain learns. The pace of change is rapid. Two examples are sufficient to illustrate this.

Currently many trainers, and indeed many schoolteachers, nurture a fond belief in learning styles. That is, people have a preferred way of

learning and, if trainers can only identify that preference and mesh their training methods with it, success will follow. The plethora of learning styles questionnaires available on the Internet, not to mention the profits being made from them, bear testament to the extent of this belief.

Yet, according to both existing and new research, the holy grail of learning styles is at best urban myth and at worst total absurdity.

An article, documenting recent findings in the USA, in *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* concluded that there was no evidence to suggest that learners have specific learning styles. The researchers' view is that "the contrast between the enormous popularity of the learning styles approach and the lack of credible evidence for its utility is, in our opinion, striking and disturbing". This echoes the findings of the Coffield Report, published in 2004, which found that there was "unwarranted faith placed in simple inventories" and that there was the potential for "the allocation of a learning style to turn into a learning handicap"¹.

Yet learning style questionnaires promise much. Their great attraction is that they offer trainers a simple solution to the complex problem of differentiation. However, common sense dictates that applying stereotypical bandings to the intricacies of individual learner brains is like trying to reach Mars on a bicycle. As the leading neuroscientist Baroness Susan Greenfield points out, from a neuroscientific point of view, VAK (visual, auditory, kinaesthetic) is total "nonsense"².

Research is pointing us to one conclusion: individuals are capable of learning in all of many different ways and *the way to create effective learners is to increase the number of ways in which they learn, not narrow down methods to solely preferences*.

To explode a second myth, ie that learning must be pleasurable for it to be effective, Dr Peter Honey wrote recently that learning does not have to be fun, saying that: "If it's not so enjoyable, you may have to put more effort in and ultimately learn more as a result."³ So much for the 'happy' sheets distributed at the end of the day.

To extend the logic, this means that, even if learners did have preferences, to teach to those preferences would result in *less* effective learning. Therefore, at times, it would be better to challenge the learners by using their least preferred methods. Or to put it another way, 'no pain: no gain'.

So where do these educational U-turns leave training courses and, indeed, trainers?

Well, the good news is that a reassuring constant remains amidst the progressive

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destruction of sacred cows: researchers agree that, though labelling learners does not work and indeed can be positively harmful, discussing learning with learners has a truly positive effect. For example, Sadler Smith writes of the potential of self-awareness "enabling individuals to see and to question their long-held habitual behaviours"⁴.

Thus it is valuable to include an innovative preparatory course that focuses directly not only on *what* is going to be learned but *how* it is going to be learned. Dialogue with their tutor ensures that learners have the opportunity to understand how they can learn effectively with trainers who are experts in making the mass of complexity surrounding learning both clear and accessible.

The trainers have the opportunity to explain the *rationale* for prepared resources, planned learning tasks and a varied spectrum of methods designed to attain the set objectives while the learners learn how to help themselves. High-quality course planning involves high expectations and real challenge but employing this preparatory approach means that individuals will understand exactly *why* a trainer may choose to use a method that they may not personally prefer or enjoy. Consulting with learners not only overcomes possible resistance but harnesses together tutor and learners into a motivated team determined to achieve the desired results.

However, isn't there a danger that such a session could degenerate into superficial summary, unfocused debate and anecdotal ramblings?

This is where using a carefully-selected instrument that helps learners focus on the learning comes into its own. However, Coffield writes that, to create a useful dialogue between learners and facilitator, it matters fundamentally which instrument is chosen. Of the five recommended by the report, the Herrmann Brain Dominance Instrument is ideal since, more



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than any other model reviewed, "it encourages flexibility, adaptation and change, rather than an avoidance of less preferred activities"⁵.

Employing an entirely different profiling approach from most learning style questionnaires, the validated HBDI is designed to identify the thinking skills of an individual, drilling down to 27 modes of thinking that help determine not only past and present learning successes but also learning challenges. It therefore provides a tangible and useful focus for a discussion on learning that involves both preferred and less-preferred methods and how both can be of significant value to individual learners. Unlocking realisation and motivation, it explains why certain instructional strategies appeal to particular types of thinkers and illustrates to learners why they should stretch the parameters of their learning methods rather than restrict them. In essence, it facilitates precisely what educational researchers are saying should happen in order to create an effective learning environment.

During this pedagogic dialogue, while the missing link is being forged, the HBDI confirms this connection by operating in addition as a learning design tool so that the delivery of the course to follow can be underpinned with methods selected to directly address the needs of the widely disparate group of individuals involved in the discussion.

The logic underpinning the course is thus revealed to the participants, as is the planning of outcomes, content and delivery. This, in turn, allows for continuing invaluable dialogue between tutor and tutees as well as informed evaluation. Such transparency creates a powerful bond between trainer and learner that can only result in a transformation of corporate training. **TJ**



References

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