7 *Principles of Accelerated Learning*
How to design training that speeds up the learning process and gets results fast!

The Future of Learning

In the world of science fiction, there has always been the hope that some machine or magic pill would lead to instant learning. In the 1999 movie "The Matrix," Neo awakes and says, "I know karate" and he is an instant expert. With the advent of MRIs, scientists have begun to study the human brain to see how people learn and apply knowledge. What's been surprising is the flexibility or plasticity of the brain. This means that people can learn at any age and in a wide range of different ways.

There is a lot of promise in brain research, but it's still in its infancy. Most of the research is still focused on knowledge acquisition and children, which doesn't always easily translate to a business environment where performance is more important than knowledge. Therefore, it's important to look at other ways to accelerate learning that can easily be incorporated in training designs and curriculums.

Why Speed Is Important?

The benefits of speeding up the learning process are significant both for the organization and the individual. Every minute an employee is less than fully up-to-speed has a significant and measurable financial impact in terms of lost productivity, errors, customer satisfaction and more. Take the example of a manufacturing worker who has not yet learned how to operate safely. Each day there is a high risk of injury which can be very expensive. Imagine the cost of a customer service rep who hasn't yet mastered relating to customers and answering their questions. There is a high risk of losing customers and reputation.

On an individual basis, no one benefits from learning slowly. The longer it takes, the more frustrated the individuals get and the more likely they will simply give up or try to learn on their own. In addition, as the learning process drags out, the more likely it is that individuals start to forget what they were taught days, weeks or months earlier.

What's Good Speed?

When working on accelerating the learning process, it's critical to look at speed in the right way. Speed is not careless, rushed action. It's also not just cutting time in the classroom. Speed comes from doing things right and doing them right the first time. Anything that requires a lot of trial and error learning or a lot of retraining is actually very slow. In addition, if an employee never gets fully up-to-speed, the real training time is very long.

What Are Learning Principles?

To truly speed up the learning process, it's useful to set out a set of learning principles to follow. A learning principle is defined as anything you believe is absolutely true about how people learn. It's something you don't decide every time you build a training program, but rather something that creates direction, consistency and quality in every program you build. We've identified 7 Principles of Accelerated Learning, that will take time out of the learning process. Here is a quick overview of each principle.

Principle 1: Speed Signals Proficiency

Have you ever watched someone in a call center who has been identified as a top performer. You notice that they move quickly and with confidence. They move from screen to screen without hesitation to find and record information.

They are doing this while they are talking on the phone and interacting with customers who may be frustrated and impatient. They are fast, but not careless. They have higher productivity with fewer errors and higher customer satisfaction rating. With this picture in mind, it makes it possible to design learning activities that will build this speed. It also might mean putting the stop watch to these activities as well.

Principle 2: Performance Is Always the Goal

There is a huge difference between knowing and doing. Most education focuses on the knowing or cognitive side. Knowing how to play tennis is very different than actually playing tennis. During the lecture, students don't have to return 100 mile per hour serves. There is a big difference between knowing how making an effective presentation and standing in front of an audience of 300 with a spell binding speech. Knowing how to land a plane is very different than being at the controls at 10,000 ft.

Therefore, to speed up learning, training designs need to focus on what students will be able to do and not what is in their heads. This means specifying a level of performance and then teaching to that level. The training ends when the student reaches that level and not when the eLearning program is done.

Principle 3: Good Isn't Good Enough

What should be the passing grade on a test? Is 75% okay? How about 85%? Consider this. Is it okay for a technician to do 75% of repairs correctly? Is it okay for salespeople to answer 85% of customer questions? Is it okay for a pilot to land 95% of the time? These may be good results, but they are not good enough. If a level of performance is the goal, 100% is the only passing grade.

Most traditional paper and pencil tests (multiple choice, fill in the blanks, true-false) are really testing knowledge and perhaps some analytical skills especially if they are not on the clock. They are not a good measure of on-the-job performance. Replacing these tests with direct observation by an expert will tell you what students are really learning and how far they have to go.

Principle 4: Great Training Is Just-In-Time

Learning is a process and not a single event. It involves both formal and informal training. It includes practice and experience. Like any other process, getting the order right can make a big difference. The closer any training is to when it will actually be used on the job increases retention and proficiency. For example, most companies do safety training in the first few days and then spend a lot of time retraining and reinforcing. Respirators are used with employees go into confined spaces.

Consider what happens when you teach how to use a respirator on day 1 and the employee doesn't go into a confined space for six weeks. The employee has already forgotten how to use the respirator and if it isn't retrained it can be a dangerous situation. Moving the respirator training to just before the employee goes into the confined space makes it just-in-time and more useful. It also eliminates wasting time on day 1.

Principle 5: Customize for Your Audience

People are the same and different. No one learns to master a skill without a lot of practice. All adults want to immediately apply what they have learned. On the other hand people have differences by learning style, generations, background and experience. In fact, brain science says that every brain is unique and different. The key is to learn your audience and customize your training to account for these differences. Using multiple methods and approaches and using blended learning will help motivate and speed up learning for any audience.

Principle 6: Experts Know What and How

A lot has been written about allowing students to design their own training, pick and choose what they want and in what order. This has been facilitated by eLearning which makes this easy. However, students at the start of training aren't really the ones who know what and how they should be learning. This method guarantees that they will make all the same predictable mistakes others have made and they will waste a lot of time wandering around figuring out what to do next.

A better and faster approach is to rely on the experts. During a needs analysis, it's critical to ask two key questions:
   1. How did you learn to become good at this?
   2. If you had to do it again, how could you do it faster?

Principle 7: Do It Right the First Time

Starting with a blank sheet of paper is the slowest and most frustrating way to design training. An important part of using learning principles is to provide clear direction at the start of any design process. There are a lot of other things that can streamline and speed up the development process. Start with defining the design process and identifying all the deliverables. There should be a standard method for doing a needs analysis, creating a design, pilot testing and implementation. Then there should be standard templates for everything from design documents to facilitator guides to web pages.

Conclusion

This speeds up the learning process because students know what to expect, where to find things and how they will be measured. Making everything unique and different every time slows things down and is extremely expensive. Following these seven principles has the potential of driving days, weeks and months out of the learning process. These principles make training easier to build, more repeatable and less expensive. There are many other design theories that can fit within these principles are used to design specific learning activities. These principles should be the framework in which to put these theories and methods.

About Learning Paths

Learning Paths International is a training and development consulting firm that focuses on improving results while cutting the time and cost of training. Our work is based on the Learning Paths methodology which reduces time to proficiency by applying the best of quality improvement and accelerated learning techniques.

Since 1993, the Learning Paths Methodology has been extensively tested and proven with hundreds of functions and thousands of employees in call center, sales, health care, finance, leadership and manufacturing settings. In every case, time to proficiency has been reduced by more than 30%. Reducing time to proficiency is critical because every day employees aren't fully productive has a direct financial impact on the business. The impact can be quantified in terms of productivity, errors, safety, turnover and morale.
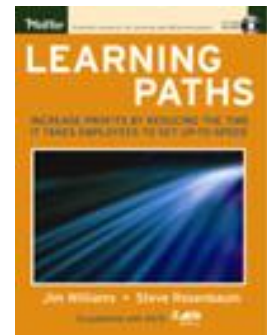
After more than 10 years of research and development, the results were published in the book "Learning Paths: Increase profits by reducing the time it takes to get employees up-to-speed" (Pfeiffer and ASTD Press 2004). The book has achieved critical acclaim by major human resources, organizational development and training associations. Since 2004, thousands of people have read the Learning Paths book and hundreds of companies have applied Learning Paths concepts and principles within their organizations.

Today, Learning Paths International has successful partners in the U.S., Canada, China, Europe, India, Malaysia and Africa.

Learn more about the
7 Principles of Accelerated Learning Workshop
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