



Coming to Grips with Self Managed Learning

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Experience is a powerful and rich source, some would say the only, source of learning. Life is all about experience but we can play a substantial part in managing that experience for pleasure, satisfaction and fulfillment. Learning implies using that experience consciously to engage in new behaviours that in turn enrich our enhanced daily quotient of experience. In the world of work we are, most of us, uniquely placed to manage that experience and learning to enhance both our work performance and our personal levels of satisfaction.

Leo took the job offered to him in and I'm now discussing with him how he is settling in after the orientation programme.

Me: Well, Leo, you've had your orientation and I gather you've been out with several of the consultants. How are you getting on?

Leo: Quite OK so far. It's much as I expected and ties in quite well with what I was doing before. Running seminars especially.

Me: Are you managing to take notes as you go along to remind you in the future?

Leo: I keep it in my head mostly. If I write it down I either lose the piece of paper or file it away and never refer to it again. Even if I do refer to it what usually happens is that it is irrelevant or something I already have assimilated. I just absorb things and store the information away till I come to need it.

Me: Could you be wasting an opportunity here? Maybe too much is left to chance if we rely on memory. You see, Leo, our living depends on how well we as a group of consultants learn and that means enlarging our experience all day and every day. It means squeezing that experience to see what it tells us. If we don't manage that experience intuition, memory, random recall may mean a lot is lost and original thoughts remain just as that.

Structuring learning input

Learning can be theoretical derived from books and structured education. It can also be informal and opportunistic derived from planned or unplanned experience. We would not argue for one or the other but for both. The one informs the other. Learning from books and CDs is largely programmed we are signing on to the experiences and ideas of other people and the writers and designers with people before them.

Learning from our own experience is un-programmed, it is new and unique. No one has probably experienced it in quite the same way as we have at that particular point in time and in quite that way. Obviously some of it is planned and contrived. I choose to go to a meeting to put forward some ideas off my own bat. I want to test the water to see what reaction I get. Some is not planned. I meet an old acquaintance by chance at a party who gives me a germ of an idea for differentiating our product.

Another way of looking at it is that material from books is largely theory. Material from our own experience is largely practical. It concerns a reality quite different than the symbolic representation of life on a video screen or on the printed page.

However the whole point about learning derived from books is that the input has been *organized* into a pattern so that it is easier to make sense of as a prelude to adding to our experience. Learning potentially derived from our experience is not organized. Would it not help to categorize it in some way to facilitate planned learning rather the more remote possibility of memory and application?

Learning means reflecting on experience and applying the results

Leo gets a lift home that night with Kim, a colleague who has been a consultant for 7 years with us.

Leo: I felt Mike was going on a bit this afternoon. I know in this sort of job, with the competition in Singapore, we have to learn fast and be constantly ahead of the game. We have to dream up new ideas, ways of delivering the product, re-fashioning the old to make it look new and so on, but does that mean I have to write all that down. I'd be spending all my time on that rather than generating revenue.....

Kim: I hear what you say. This comes up at the weekly review meeting from time to time. The trouble is we all are bouncing with ideas but without a bit more system that would be as far as they would get.

Leo: So Mike wants ideas but also our actions on those ideas not just as proposals or recommendations but things we have actually tried out personally?

Kim: Got it in one. We have to take responsibility for our own learning. And that doesn't just mean getting ourselves on to courses and taking evening classes. It means showing how we use opportunities actively to widen our experience. Formal and informal. Planned and unplanned. This means recognizing the potential contribution of different sorts of experience and making connections (Mike's favourite phrase) with other things that have been identified as key issues, business development, promoting the company or market focusing. Whatever.

Leo: As simple as that then.

Kim: Certainly not otherwise everybody would be doing it. It's managing the whole process that's difficult. Spotting opportunities, making connections, engaging in new behaviour, and reviewing the results. At school and college, the teacher or tutor does this for you acting as a mediator for you so that you see the connection. Here we have to learn to be both student and tutor at the same time. Of course we pair up for that, we call it co-learning pairs. But you still have to develop the skill on a personal basis.

Sources of learning

The many "brokers" of experiential learning such as Mike Pedlar, Peter Honey, John Burgoyne, Alan Mumford, Ronnie Lessem and Robin Snell all stress the need to be imaginative and entrepreneurial in using learning sources. Our world is rich with material. Sources are all pervasive within and outside work but we should also include home family



and social life experiences, foreign travel. Even dreams have been an inspiration to some. Patented approaches to problem solving stress the importance of refining mental processes when comparing like and unlike things to derive new solutions. In refining your learning abilities the same imaginative activity applies.

Kim goes on:

Let me give you an example, Leo. We had a client with an Open Learning Centre that they had spent a few million bucks fitting out with all the usual CD Roms, supposedly to get people spending time on self learning activities. Virtually nil result.

People were too busy in front of their desktops all day to want more of the same thing in the evening. And that despite the incentives given them. The challenge was to link work and learning without losing out on either. A seamless match of the two if you like. So we linked up the embedded messages of our own Intranet with the idea of the Just-in-Time Learning delivery of one of the Virtual University systems. In this way a data bank of real time local problem solving is built up and accessed and renewed as a vital working/learning tool operated from the desk top. Simple huh? Result people are motivated by practice to go to theory ie the Open Learning Centre rather than the other way round contrary to the way senior management thought people would react.