

LIFE-ON-LIFE...
LIFE-LONG...
LIFE-LEARNING...

LEARNING & LIFE

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According to George Carlin, vuja dé means looking at something familiar, but in a way you've never seen it before...Unfortunately, watching the world with fresh eyes doesn't come as naturally to most grown-ups as it does to children...We may have unique perspectives and creative ideas when we begin our careers. But after a while, we simply buy into the prevailing orthodoxy...and start filtering our observations through the lens of common practices, accepted processes and conventional wisdom.

We begin to suffer from a type of functional fixation, what psychologists describe as seeing just an object with a name instead of seeing what it can do. Thus, we only define a mop as a device for cleaning the floor, not a limbo stick or a dancing partner for Fred Astaire...

What does learning look like in your organization? Is it déjà vu, or are you tapping into the vuja dé ... from the fresh perspective of fully engaged employees? Are you using their different viewpoints and diverse backgrounds to discover new ways of doing things? You should be.¹

Ouch! Norm Kamikow is pretty straightforward with his comments, but as the old saying goes, if the shoe fits, wear it. I wonder how much we're doing to realize the power of "vuja dé" as we create learning opportunities for our students? Back when I was teaching math, I would often tell a student who was baffled by an equation to turn the paper upside down. Sometimes a new perspective can make all the difference in finding the next step to take.

This quarter's briefing will look at some ideas from a new perspective, followed by some implications for our organization's learning culture.

A New Epistemology

e·pis·te·mol·o·gy [i-pis-tuh-mol-uh-jee] *–noun a branch of philosophy that investigates the origin, nature, methods, and limits of human knowledge.²*

"It is imperative that someone studying this generation realize that we have the world at our fingertips—and the world has been at our fingertips for our entire lives."³ This comment comes from one of the 400 students on 34 campuses that Tim Clydesdale, professor of sociology at the College of New Jersey, interviewed for a book on students. Speaking to educators, he writes that we must respect our students as thinkers, "meeting students where they are...We need to teach as if our students were colleagues from another department. That means determining what [they] may already know, building from that shared knowledge, adapting pre-existing analytic skills, then connecting those...skills and knowledge to a deeper understanding" of what we are trying to teach. Good teaching is "the product of instructors who respect, understand, and creatively engage their students."⁴

Brain Functions Revisited⁵

In the previous briefing we saw that rather than being like a computer, the human brain is more like a railroad system with a series of switches.

Let's drill down further. The brain is composed of about 100 billion neurons, with about one fourth of those in the cerebral cortex. That's where most of the action takes place. The neurons are the "switches." They don't talk to each other or convey meaning. They just activate the next switch in the sequence. A fundamental principle of learning called Hebb's Law can be paraphrased, "Neurons that fire together, wire together" forming a pattern. Each basic pattern is called a *holon*, and as we learn more, more holons are created and layered over each other.

Suppose you were creating a face from plastic cling pieces (like a 2-D Mr. Potato Head). First you would choose the shape of the face and put it on the background—that's the first holon. Next you might choose the eyes—that would be the second holon, layered on top of the first one. Next comes the nose with a particular shape and size—holon number 3. And so on. It takes many holons layered together in a split second for us to recognize each other. Maybe that's why it takes longer when we age.

Learning is a process of improvisation. In a new situation, the brain takes existing holons and combines them in new ways to fit the new scenario. Then, using trial-and-error comparisons, the connections are either strengthened or changed.

The process of remembering is *not* retrieval from memory (like that old idea of file cabinets in our brains) but rather *reconstruction*! What we reconstruct is very much influenced by what we were thinking and feeling at the time. As a result, ***learners need to practice remembering (reconstructing!) knowledge items in the same or similar situations in which they will apply them.***

Sleep⁶

Whether it's a time issue or insomnia, most of us are sleep-deprived to some extent. This can have serious implications for learners. A study by University of Chicago professor Howard Nussbaum and his colleagues shows that sleep aids in learning new skills, even to the point of retaining the skills 24 hours after training with no further practice when there is a night of rest. "Sleep restores what was forgotten by the end of the day, and it makes learning resistant to subsequent forgetting," he says.

Emotions

Do emotions affect learning? The guy who stomps into class late after a difficult commute and the young person "in love" will both have trouble concentrating on what you're trying to get across. And considering the information above regarding remembering/reconstructing, it might be that every time our commuter thinks about what you are discussing in class today he will get angry. What can we do to ensure positive emotional impact on the learning process?

As trainers and educators we have to create the right environment for learning. We need to understand the learner as a person, with emotions and needs beyond the classroom. This understanding requires developing a relationship with the learner in order to engage with the whole person based on empathy and mutuality. Lack of confidence, fear of failure, fear of others' responses, grief over change, previous negative experiences, and the learner's emotional state can all get in the way of learning.⁷

One of the most difficult emotional obstacles to learning we face is stress. "Stress results from a perception of a threat. When you view an impediment to goal attainment as daunting, you suffer a number of

psychological symptoms—from irritability and sleeplessness to weight gain and rashes. Nothing is, de facto, stressful. It's how you view it."⁸

Social Media

As promised in earlier briefings, this topic is appearing again, and it likely will be with us for a while. Nearly every day there is an upgrade to the myriad tools for social networking. Even as we become more familiar with SharePoint and begin to use its networking aspects, there are ever more functions to consider.

Twitter (www.twitter.com), the free micro-blogging service, is making an impact on training. Jane Hart, a social media and learning consultant, says, "The point of social media is to turn learning into a more participatory activity." Learners use social media tools to ask and answer each other's questions, both inside and outside the classroom. "Micro-blogs can support collaboration and understanding."⁹

In addition to students interacting with other students, "Teachers post tips of the day, questions, writing assignments, and other prompts to keep learning going."¹⁰

"Social media tools are here to stay," says Kristin Tillquist, author of *Capitalizing on Kindness: Why 21st Century Professionals Need to Be Nice*. "As senior executives in companies, we simply must adapt. We have to realize that technology is the way learning is being conducted, the way relationships are being established [and] developed, [and] the way global commerce is being conducted." Tillquist suggests, "Look at posting instructional training on YouTube...look at some of these tools as a way to do very inexpensive, streamlined training."¹¹

Implications

- 1. Respect the learners and the experience they bring.** In any instructional setting we could have representatives of four different generations with experience in nearly every occupation. Be intentional about recognizing these possibilities and plan to use the variety creatively. For help with that, consider *Retiring the Generation Gap*, by Jennifer J. Deal (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007).
- 2. Build background knowledge.** Rather than diving into a subject head-first, take a few minutes to help the learners situate the knowledge. For example, at the beginning of a session on teamwork, explore their past. Perhaps they have some experience working with a team that is not obvious to them, such as playing in a band or working on a yearbook staff. Help them make the connections so they have a frame of reference. Be creative as you consider the possibilities. Let them discuss with others who can help find the connections.
- 3. Recognize that many of our learners have been "connected" all their lives** and allow them to continue this practice. Let them help less connected folks get connected, too. Millennials are used to being in touch 24/7. They find great value and validation in comparing notes with peers, multitasking all the way. Tech-savvy folks may be flattered to be mentors to others who are less familiar with digital communication tools. Collaboration is key.
- 4. Provide realistic opportunities for rehearsing/reconstructing knowledge.** Simulations, role-plays, and immersive learning situations all will help with accurate reconstruction. One great example of this in practice is the FPO trip to Washington, DC. Learners are tasked with finding and engaging their assigned people group, accompanied by their children, using public transportation, and sampling ethnic food and culture. It's likely this experience comes to

mind as they begin their tasks on the field. What if we have our learners do preparation work before they come to class and then use the class time for rehearsing and refining what they've learned?

5. **Encourage good sleep habits.** Try to build in time for recreation and processing during multiple-day sessions. Help learners see the importance of adequate sleep with regards to health **and** learning.
6. **Recognize emotions and spiritual needs.** Be transparent with your own emotions. Teach appropriate ways of handling stress. Encourage good relationships for the purpose of sharing each others' burdens. Model mature ways of dealing with emotional issues. And be sure to emphasize the ways we seek the Lord's guidance in everything.
7. **Figure out ways to use social media.** Twitter is available through text message, and nearly all younger learners text. It's an instant way to offer encouragement, to answer questions, and to provide just-in-time training. I've found some helpful information on www.willatworklearning.com, a blog written by Will Thalhimer about workplace learning. Search the blog for "twitter" to see everything he has written about it. Search YouTube for useful videos that may already be there, and post your own videos. Set up a FaceBook presence. Certainly security is a factor, but you can plan and design for that. As we all get access to SharePoint, make use of the tools there. Don't assume that learners who are texting or Googling during class are disengaged. It could be exactly the opposite!

The best recommendation I have is to make "vuja dé" a regular part of your life. Try to see the world God created through His eyes. Surely He knows all the different combinations and possibilities and the best ways for us to approach the topics. "Now if any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives to all generously and without criticizing, and it will be given to him." James 1:5 (HCSB) And share with each other. Let's break down those silos!

Endnotes

- 1 Norm Kamikow, Chief Learning Officer, February 2009, 4. www.clomedia.com
- 2 Dictionary.com, "epistemology," in Dictionary.com Unabridged (v 1.1). Source location: Random House, Inc. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/epistemology>. Available: <http://dictionary.reference.com>. Accessed: March 31, 2009.
- 3 Tim Clydesdale, "Wake Up and Smell the New Epistemology," The Chronicle Review, January 23, 2009, B8.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Paul G. Whitmore, "A New Mindset for a New Mind," T+D, January 2009, 60-65.
- 6 Aparna Nacherla, "You Snooze, You Learn," T+D, February 2009, 18.
- 7 Laura L. Bierema, "Adult Learning in the Workplace: Emotion Work or Emotion Learning?" New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, no. 120, Winter 2008, 55-64.
- 8 Steven Berglas, "The Most Costly Oversight," Chief Learning Officer, February 2009, 50.
- 9 Pat Galagan, "Twitter as a Learning Tool. Really." T+D, March 2009, 28-31.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Lindsay Edmonds Wickham, "Changing with the Times," Chief Learning Officer, February 2009. www.clomedia.com.