

The Art of Learning

Based upon years of observation of adult learners in both our face-to-face classroom courses and using our Mentored Email™¹ distance learning methodology, it is fascinating to see how the rate of information absorption (ie, learning) varies from person to person. The rate of learning does not seem to be correlated to a person's IQ, industry or role in the workforce. If anything, people who absorb the learning more slowly seem to retain the information longer.

It would appear the ability to learn is a skill that is exercised naturally by younger people, but as one grows older this natural ability seems to fade with only some adults maintaining their innate capability to learn, frequently linked to active practice via a recently completed university course, etc.

Assimilating new information

When presented with a large volume of new information (eg, a PMP course) the rest of us need to learn how to learn! Some of the easier ways to absorb, make sense of, and retain information include:

Using analogies and metaphors

You can learn abstract processes by creating metaphors for more common events. So whenever you learn a fact, ask yourself what the idea is similar to in the tangible world; eg, a data store in a software program may be a cupboard with different things on each shelf.

Build mental pictures

If you break apart a complex mathematical formula into components, you can try to imagine what it would be like as a graph or how each component influences each other in a railway switchyard.

Build on the basics

Do a bit of extra research on your most difficult topics focusing on their foundations. You might not understand the more complex theories perfectly, but it makes understanding your testable material much easier.

Become the teacher

The act of explanation creates connections. Ask yourself how would you explain what you're learning to someone else? Teaching forces you to simplify and break down complex ideas and then re-connect them to build the overall picture.

Stop writing transcripts

Try to free yourself from rigid note taking (the course handouts fulfil his need), instead write down ideas in branches and connections. Add your own thoughts, diagrams and arrows linking ideas so you have a web of information. 'Mind mapping' tools are great for this but pencil and paper work just as well.

Draw Diagrams

Most people think in pictures and maps. Research suggests drawing will increase your concentration and help develop the connections between ideas. A picture may not be worth a thousand words, but it can often illuminate the connections that lead to a greater understanding.

There are many more sophisticated memory techniques available in a range of books on the subject but certainly in our areas of teaching, the ability to link ideas and understand the flow of both ideas and information seem to be the key to real understanding.

¹ For more on Mentored Email™ see: <http://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/Training-Mentored.html>

Making the most of a training course

The second part of this white Paper highlights some simple ideas that can help you to get the most from your training course.

Before the training course

- Have a clear picture of what you hope to get from the training course expressed in terms of the benefits to you: a pay rise and promotion is more motivating than a PMP credential.
- Do any pre-course reading and make a note of any questions to bring along and ask the trainer. You won't pay extra if you make the trainer work hard.....

At the training course

- Arrive prepared.
- Be open to learning new concepts, even if these challenge your previous understanding.
- Don't be afraid to ask the trainer to clarify points; remember that if you don't understand something, it is likely that you are not the only one.
- Share experiences when they are relevant and learn from others in the group, they are likely to be from different industries and have different experiences; take advantage of the fact that you're surrounded by people with diverse work backgrounds.
- Dedicate time each evening to completing your homework activities, or reviewing the work covered during the day (our training courses cover a great deal of content in a condensed fashion – reviewing the material each day helps to cement the ideas in your mind).

After the training course

- Use the resources provided during the training course to help you integrate the concepts into your every day work life (the first 24 hrs after the course are a critical period for reinforcing learning by practice).
- Make the effort to change if you have discovered better ways of approaching your work, but remember you will need to explain the benefits of the change to people who did not attend your training sessions.
- Recommend the training to any colleagues that you believe will benefit from it, being part of a group of people helps retain and reinforce your learning.

Learning new things should be an enjoyable process at all stages of life and career, and is becoming increasingly important to stay competitive in a rapidly changing world. Learning how to learn effectively is the first step along the journey.