

Enhancing Learning Power: Effective Lifelong Learning.

As facilitators we are all familiar with the concept of 'facilitating a process'. We provide a challenging but supportive structure to enable group members to work together effectively, in order to make a decision or achieve a goal that is significant to them.

However, we may not be quite so familiar with the idea that almost every time we find ourselves in a facilitation role, we are also facilitating a learning process. Sometimes there is an overt 'learning purpose' in what we do: we facilitate groups sharing knowledge, expertise and experience in order to learn more about their organisation's current situation and future strategy. Perhaps we facilitate team development, in which we aim to engage team members in active learning about themselves, each other, individual and team needs and their 'fit' in a bigger organisational, community or social environment.

At other times the learning is less about content and more about process: learning how to be more effective decision-makers, active listeners of influential communicators.

My interest in how we learn, and how our ability to learn effectively and continually impacts upon personal satisfaction and success, led me to explore a wide range of models and theories about 'learning to learn'. 21st Century technologies and organisations demand rapid learning: the ability to adapt, change and demonstrate behavioural flexibility has been recognised as perhaps the most important modern survival skill.

So, what are the qualities and characteristics of really effective learners?
How can we develop assessment strategies that strengthen these qualities?
How do we help learners to engage their life stories, life-worlds and communities in their learning?

These three questions were asked in 2002 by Professors Patricia Broadfoot and Guy Claxton at the University of Bristol and led to them initiating a research project, led by Ruth Deakin Crick and funded to the tune of £250,000 by the Lifelong Learning Foundation.

Through an exhaustive investigation of literature on learning and what impacts upon it, followed by extensive consultation with academic experts, learners and practitioners, the research team generated a huge amount of verbal data on what factors affect an individual's 'Learning Power'. These factors embraced not only the psychology of the learner, but also external factors such as social psychology, the management of the learning environment, how the learning is delivered and an individual's past history of learning. What emerged from the research were seven dimensions, the development of which seemed to be fundamental in becoming an effective learner. These seven dimensions include thinking and behavioural capabilities, as well as particular 'attitudes' that support

learning. The seven dimensions, (Changing and Learning, Critical Curiosity, Meaning Making, Creativity, Strategic Awareness, Resilience and Learning Relationships) in combination, create 'Learning Power'. Ruth Deakin Crick likens these dimensions to the 'DNA' of learning, saying, "If there was anything else to find out about how effective learners learn, we would have found it!"

Since then, the project has developed and has led to the creation of ELLI: The Effective Lifelong Learning Inventory. ELLI is a self-scored measure of Learning Power, based around the 'Seven Dimensions of Learning'. The instrument has been developed and tested extensively with school populations, although the original research through which the inventory was theorised and created was applicable to and specifically focused on lifelong learning (hence its title). The research database now contains between 45,000 and 50,000 cases, of which a significant proportion are aged 18 and above and represent a range up to age 70.

We are now in the interesting process of exploring how to use ELLI in facilitating adult learning in business and organizational settings. There are some fascinating questions around using ELLI in Performance and Talent Management, Management Coaching, Team Development and in supporting learners in tracking their own development through blended learning and self-managed learning programmes.

It is going to be a fascinating study to establish whether there are, in fact, patterns that link learning power and management approaches. For example:

Do managers with a high level of 'critical curiosity' and 'creativity' in relation to their own learning encourage more risk-taking and innovation from those they manage?

Do managers with strength in 'learning relationships' engage their teams more effectively in team-based learning projects?

Do managers who score themselves high on 'meaning making' do a better job of offering their employees access to wider strategic thinking and the 'big picture' and are they more successful in making cross-functional and cross-departmental connections?

Further, on the assumption that better learning leads to better performance, developing learning power could improve performance in any or all of the main categories of management or leadership behaviour:

How well you think - analysis, judgment, decision etc...

How broadly you think - breadth, perspective etc...

How well you take others with you - influence, persuasion, leadership etc...

How much you achieve - results, delivery, outcome achievement etc...

How bold you are - courage, confidence etc...

Shifting attention from the manager's own behaviour to how they manage others, knowing your learning profile could improve the way managers:

1. Identify future leaders. Separate research suggests that 'the willingness and ability to learn from experience' correlates most strongly with 'leadership potential'. Managers could use their knowledge of learning power to help them identify and develop future leaders.
2. Assign people to projects. Knowing the value of the 7 dimensions for themselves, managers might tune in to evidence of those dimensions in their teams and assign people to tasks by matching learning abilities to task requirements for either performance or development reasons.
3. Enable sustainable performance. One way or another, managers are faced with the daily task of constant adaptation and improvement. Like them, their teams are also navigating an emergent landscape in which they are expected to perform well. Managers who know their own learning profile might use that knowledge to help their teams acquire the all round learning capability required for sustainable high performance in an ever changing world.

If we believe in the idea that improving your ability to learn improves your ability to perform, knowing your profile and working on it could help anyone to simply do their job better, whatever it happens to be.

If you are interested in finding out more about 'learning to Learn', please feel free to contact me and get involved as we test these ideas and establish how we can use this new knowledge about learning to support our broader facilitation skills.