Healing the Heart of Learning

... David Wasdell

Towards the Next Generation of Effective Affective Learning

All effective learning involves change: change from one state to another; change from the unknowing to the knowing; movement across a boundary from the familiar to the unfamiliar. New insights from the unlikely field of research into resistance to change look like enabling a major breakthrough into even more effective affective learning.

When faced with a problem the human mind searches previous experience to find a similar problem and then bases the solution to the new situation on lessons learned in the past. Response to change is no exception. The earliest and most emotionally loaded patterns exercise the most influence on us and tend to form blueprints for the way we react. The result of this sense of threat or anxiety involved in the process of change itself is to develop a common pattern of resistance to change, virtually independent of the actual content of the change involved. The more heavily fraught with negative emotion our earliest experiences of change are, the more we react defensively when facing the next transition in our adult life. The fact that all learning involves change inevitably means that resistance to change shows itself also as inhibition of learning. The more threatened a person feels by the change involved in learning, the more blocked is their potential to learn. If we can understand the processes and causes of resistance to change, and even more importantly if we can find ways of overcoming them or transforming them, then not only is the adults' capacity to handle change released but, even more significantly, a whole new area of potential for accelerated learning is unleashed.

Origins of Resistance to Change

Ask someone what is the first big change they can remember, and they may say "moving home when I was 3", "baby brother being born", "the cat died"... We now know that memory reaches way back behind these early infant patterns of recall. We don't necessarily have words for it, sometimes we have images associated with it, more likely we have intense emotions - feelings, body sensations, tension, repetitive patterns of behaviour - which are almost unconscious. The immense amount of research which lies behind the popular book "Babies Remember Birth", by David Chamberlain, makes nonsense of the doctor's claim (as recently as 1984) that "if one was conscious at birth it would be the most shattering experience of one's life". Today we know that babies are conscious at birth and for most of us it is the most stressful transition through which we ever live. How we cope with the emotions involved, the physical pain, the fear, anger, sense of injustice, vulnerability and loss, lays down affective patterns which have a profound influence on all subsequent response to change.

Imprinting is probably a better word than "memory" for our recording of these early experiences. It now appears that imprinting does not depend upon organised brain activity, or even on the existence of a developed brain at all. Experiences early in the life of the foetus are stored in somatic and emotional responses which lay the ground for later mental processing. This "organic imprinting" appears to be a continuous process reaching right back to the first moments of the individual's existence at fertilisation and even storing the cellular and phylogenetic experience of the gametes before conception. What is now becoming clear is that the transitions through which we pass in our development lay down the patterns for the way we handle transitions in later life. Those changes may involve conception, implantation, the baby's experience during its life in the womb, and particularly the birth process itself. So we see that the new-born babe has already learned a lot and reacts to its new environment, and particularly to changes in its new environment, in ways which are associated with powerful emotional responses. The human organism is a continuously active learning system. If it has learned that learning is painful, then it learns not to learn in the future. So when we try to enhance the capacity to learn in later life, we are trying to help people cope with, or even unlearn, negative learning about learning laid down very early indeed.

Effects of Early Learning

It is hardly surprising that emotions and feelings associated with birth are continuously being restimulated in the educational field. People feel "under pressure", learning something feels like "hitting your head on a brick wall", you can't make "any progress" in the subject, you are "stuck", you have to "get through" examinations. You feel like "backing off a bit to get some space to breathe". Parents "push" their children to perform better. Moving from class to class, school to school, or coming out through final examinations can restimulate birth experience in an acute form. The same patterns apply as adults.

There are even more powerful ways in which early imprinting inhibits learning. For instance, one of the ways that the baby copes with the pain, fear and emotion involved is by "splitting off ' from the event. Psychologically the baby dissociates from feelings. Later memory is repressed. Frequently the imprint is associated with one hemisphere of the brain's function and the traumatised child loses access to considerable parts of its mental processor. So placed under a lot of pressure, the later learner tends to close down on the right hemisphere and only uses the intellectual verbal speech centres, or in a smaller percentage of the population, the reverse pattern happens. Under pressure they can only think in pictures and cannot cope with the torrent of words that are being thrown at them. Another early defence is to retreat from the head into the body itself, in which case there is a massive suppression of intellectual activity, whether verbal or visual and responses are coded in body language. Where emotions associated with the transition are too intense to tolerate, access to emotions themselves is cut off and suppressed.

Any activity (like learning) in later life that tends to restimulate these early imprinted patterns threatens to flood consciousness with intolerable feelings. Under these conditions the person ends it hard to take in anything, goes numb, closes down, blocks out the threatening information. One of the important things that is coming out of this research is that these defences, as they are called, are common to some extent to all of us. For a long time they were thought of as "instinctive" not learned at all, just part of what it was to be human. Now we know better. We understand them as learned responses, although learned very early, and as such open to transformation and reworking, just as much as any later learned experiences.

New Frontiers of Affective Learning

Up till now advances in Effective Affective Learning have concentrated on taking up the slack in the system. The underlying patterns of defence have been accepted as a starting point and ways and means have been found to optimise the potential for learning in spite of these early difficulties. In a sense the various skills could be described as coping mechanisms, making the best of a bad job.

Today, however, we no longer have to treat early learned imprints as the unchangeable ground of human behaviour. It is possible to re-engage those early learning experiences, to unfreeze the blocked emotional responses and to transform the defensive patterns which have been laid down. This brings into play the whole range of emotionality, body language and mental ability, integrating both left and right hemispheres, visual and verbal, and opening up the possibility for uninhibited holistic learning.

In a sense what we are doing is stepping into the world of "meta-learning" - relearning how to learn. As that proceeds, so the whole field of affective learning is liberated to become even more effective. As resistance to change decreases, so potential for learning is released. The focus is not so much on how to push the system in the positive direction, but how to release those constraints that are preventing progress. Skills involved have less to do with the world of education (even effective affective education!) and more to do with areas of therapy, primal integration, personal transformation, and the dynamics of integration.

Catch 22!

The problem is that changing the way we learn to learn raises resistance to change, which is based on how we learned to learn in the first place. So inevitably, some of the most intense resistance in the whole field of education is focused around any attempt to deal with resistance to change in education. It is a sort of double-bind. If most of us have repressed traumatic memories of some of our first experiences of change, then changing the way we respond to change involves re-entering that area of repressed traumatic memory and against that we are heavily defended. In fact, we resist this breakthrough whatever its positive potential, as if we are being threatened by the very trauma which laid down the defence in the first place.

The Way Ahead

So how can we go about it? We are now able to see a series of fairly clear steps by which we can break through these constraints and get the ball rolling. The first important things is **understanding what is going on** - creating a map of the territory, seeing how experience of early transition sets up defensive behaviour which is then experienced in later life.

The second is another level of understanding, namely an **understanding of how it is possible to transform those early learned experiences** and rework them so that they no longer have power to inhibit present performance.

Then comes the **practical task of dealing with the early imprinting itself**. Here if you try to get straight into the experience of the transition in all its raw brutality you find yourself flooded with uncontrollable emotion and very quickly close down the whole procedure. The most powerful point of access is to **engage with what it was like before the transition started**. Then step by step, almost frame by frame, take the process forward so that the emotionality is tolerable at each point. If things get a bit rough, let the process back off and cool down, deal with what is happening, draw it, cry about it, release the emotion and then come back and go a bit further. Slowly the experience is resolved from the inside outwards, moving forwards in time through the transition. Typically there is significant release of emotion, discharge of pent-up body tension and a recognition of the powerful imprinting which has had such an effect on all subsequent life experience.

Outcome

Over time as the integration proceeds, the person finds that they have greater access to previously repressed emotion, their range of affect is brought back on stream. Both hemispheres of the brain tend to be brought back into active collaboration, integrating both visual and verbal, multidimensional intuition and linear analysis. Kinaesthetic learning is brought into play for those whose somatic material has been deeply repressed. Conversely, intellectual learning is enhanced for those whose cerebral activity has been repressed. The result is a creative development of the capacity for holistic learning: verbal, visual, somatic and affective. The person's learning rate begins to accelerate and all those skills with which we are now familiar through the work of SEAL can be brought to bear in a new way, so opening up the potential for effective affective learning to become far more effective than we had ever dared to dream.

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