

New teaching techniques build on the different ways that people learn



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When Michael Kentschke, a financial controller with [Bayer](#), in Germany, is preparing for a meeting he looks for an empty office with good soundproofing. Then, with the door shut firmly behind him, he rehearses what he will say, speaking the most salient points out loud.

Mr Kentschke overcame worries over how others see him by turning self-management techniques, learnt on a leadership course, into habits. He was helped by a trainer who coached him by phone after he returned to his day job, offering encouragement when needed as well as the occasional prod. “The calls reassured me that I was on the right lines and motivated me,” he says.

“Workforce training has evolved and is no longer based on traditional lessons,” says Andy Lancaster, head of learning at CIPD, the London-based personnel development body. He says the new approaches harness people’s instincts to share discoveries and to trust lessons that we learn for ourselves over lessons that others teach us.

Putting learning into action typically requires replacing old, unhelpful habits with new reactions, which is where learners often fall down. Lara Carty, a head of learning and leadership development at the Bank of America Merrill Lynch, takes inspiration from nudge psychology.



Michael Kentschke of Bayer

“Though it may sound a bit overengineered, some of our managers use diary prompts as reminders to practise behaviours that they want to improve, until the behaviours become automatic,” she says.

However, the adage that practice makes perfect may fall short of the mark. [According to research](#), the best learners do not merely practise, they also reflect on what they learn.

In a study at Wipro, the Indian business process outsourcer, Francesca Gino, a behavioural scientist at Harvard Business School, divided trainees into groups that either spent the last 15 minutes of the day writing about what they had learnt or doing practical tasks.

In the final assessment, the learners that reflected achieved average scores 23 per cent above those of the learners who practised.

“By getting people to ask: ‘What did I do to accomplish that task?’ reflection helps people to codify knowledge and feel confident that they will perform well in the future,” Professor Gino observes. Yet, paradoxically, the study found that when offered the option of reflecting or practising more, people choose extra practice — to the detriment of their learning.

Reflecting in writing by keeping a learning log, as advocated by trainers at the insurer Allianz Worldwide Care, appears to be particularly beneficial. The act of writing stops our thoughts wandering, and “makes knowledge stick for longer”, says Prof Gino.

But what if people do not enjoy quiet reflection? That may be where engaging the social brain comes in.

At Bayer, many courses require participants to teach classmates subject matter that they have recently learnt themselves. The thinking is that teaching improves learners’ confidence and competence.

Prof Gino considers the principle — which she is researching among trainee chefs — well founded. As an educator, she notes that teaching can be a shortcut to discovering where our own knowledge gaps lie.

And the thought that we might be put on the spot reminds us to pay careful attention. As Prof Brindley puts it, quoting [the Yerkes-Dodson law](#) that holds that moderate stress can improve

performance: “If you don’t stress people at all, they won’t fully engage in learning but if you stress them too much you cause cognitive overload and they learn nothing at all.”

Peer-to-peer coaching, in which learners pair off after formal training, bridges the gap between the classroom and the workplace, believes Nick Seneca Jankel, founder of [Switch On Worldwide](#), a consultancy. “When you’re working on your own, it’s easy to kid yourself that you’re making changes when you aren’t.”

It may even be that formal instruction takes a back seat in tomorrow’s corporate classrooms. Less a “teacher upfront”, Ms Carty spends a lot of time searching out the most engrossing educational materials on topics — TED talks, videos, business journal readings — for employees to peruse privately and debate in peer discussions, which she and her team facilitate.

“If your teaching method is too much in ‘tell’ mode, people look for loopholes. It’s way more powerful if people feel they’ve discovered something for themselves,” she says.

Mr Kentschke believes seeking his own solutions, with occasional prompts from his telephone coach, help him achieve his goal.

“I came to the conclusion that really I didn’t need to fear meetings, I just needed to prepare.”

Borrowing from psychology

Often criticised as divorced from the world of work, the best contemporary training embraces new methods to make itself more useful to business.

Informed by brain science, these methods seek to bridge the gap between the classroom and the workplace. Here are some of the tips for making learning stick:

Allow time to reflect Learners who recap on how they accomplished a task improve faster than learners who practise more but do not reflect.

Rehearse Simulations that allow learners to practise and make mistakes can teach valuable lessons, without harming colleagues and customers. Including sensory cues helps to prime reflex responses for when the task is repeated for real.

Teach back The prospect of teaching something we have learnt is a motivation to pay attention, and often a shortcut to discovering the gaps in our knowledge.

Cater for different learning styles Some people are naturally hands-on while others want the underlying theory.

Make learning social Knowledge that we discover, usually through discussion and debate, is more rewarding than knowledge that is taught to us — increasing the chances that we might then act on it.