Quick off the mark

Krystyna Gadd reveals the five secrets of accelerated learning

What exactly is accelerated learning? Some people say that it’s all about playing music, others that it is about having fiddle-toys for your delegates to play with, while some say it is about having posters on the walls and a stimulating environment. While these are a small part of it, they do not do justice to the huge body of research that contributes to the accumulated wisdom we call accelerated learning.

In this article, I explain the five key components of accelerated learning and how they can be used to decrease trainer preparation time by 30 per cent and improve retention of information by 300 per cent.

Traditional, instructor-led training has had its place in organisations for many years. It has long been the key method for the transfer of knowledge and skills, especially in knowledge-heavy sectors such as IT and finance. But it is questionable as to how much traditional methods have done to promote the credibility of training as an essential function. For instance, is there another way that would have greater impact and influence on the decision makers in times of recession?

I believe there is another way and that is through the application of accelerated learning principles. Particularly for heavy-to-digest learning, accelerated learning can offer a refreshing and engaging experience that is more beneficial and memorable to the learner. It is also more financially rewarding to the organisation with less down time, during which delegates might be struggling to learn new concepts, and more time being productive. More than ever before, with tighter training budgets, businesses today need to gain a greater return on the investment in their training, and accelerated learning will better support this over traditional methods.

To begin with, it is important to understand what accelerated learning is and what it isn’t. Accelerated learning is neither a myth nor a passing fad. Based on a large body of research from a number of experts, it has taken its place as a powerful tool in the delivery of cutting-edge training. The five components of accelerated learning, or ‘secrets’ as I refer to them, are:

* business-focused and learner-centred objectives
* the facilitator
* the learner
* the environment
* brain research.

Business-focused and learner-centred objectives

Of the five secrets, this first one is key. Without business-focused or learner-centred objectives, the rest will just be window dressing and they certainly will not, on their own, unlock the door to the credibility and prestige that training deserves.

If you, as an L&D professional, produce beautifully designed learning, which is both stimulating and exciting but does nothing to improve the way the organisation works, you will not have the credibility within your organisation to negotiate for training budgets or to gain agreement for key stakeholders to invest in their workforce. L&D teams that speak the language of
the stakeholders and can demonstrate the value of the learning they bring to the organisation will be better valued themselves.

Accelerated learning helps demonstrate the true value of investing in learning and training to the organisation. It does this by helping improve the bottom line and visually improving the ability and motivation of the workforce, who are able to apply knowledge more effectively.

In brief, paying special attention to key objectives will help you with:

- gaining buy-in and support from the stakeholders
- demonstrating how the L&D team contributes to achieving organisational objectives
- designing learning that helps learners learn what they need to know or be able to do
- ensuring that your training will achieve what you set out to do
- making the assessment process easy to deliver and track for results
- measuring the return on investment and return on expectation.

Learning objectives should be met during the learning event. Business-focused objectives are ones that overarch the learning objectives and focus the learners, stakeholders and line managers once the learning event has finished. An example of a business objective might be to achieve a customer satisfaction rate of 80 per cent in the three months after the learning. The learning objectives will be around what skills, knowledge and attitudes people need in order to achieve this. For example:

- identify the key elements of customer service excellence
- describe how to create a positive impression on your customers
- choose appropriate behaviours for different customer service situations in a role play.

When writing SMART objectives, make sure you do not fall into the trap of using weak verbs like ‘understand’ or ‘know’!

Having the best business-focused objectives without meeting learners’ expectations can sink a course before it has set sail. Learners that are not engaged will not learn very much. Ideally, before you start a training course, you will also capture what the learners hope to get out of it. This way you can plan to meet both if possible.

If you cannot capture the learner expectations before you start, a quick Post-it exercise first thing...
can help you gauge whether you can meet their objectives or if you will need to address these in another way.

**The facilitator**
I use the term ‘facilitator’ more often than ‘trainer’ now, as I believe more than anything that my role is to inspire people to learn and to help them through the process of learning, rather than doing the ‘training’ to them. I love to find new ways of engaging people in the learning process and making it easier for them to interact with the new material they will encounter.

If you love what you do, the chances are that your enthusiasm will rub off onto your delegates. If you can find the time to be creative in developing new ways to deliver learning, it can help you to stay passionate about learning. Enthusiasm is infectious!

What you say, what you do, what you wear and how you act will all have an impact on the overall effect of the learning experience for a delegate. If you are welcoming and make the delegates feel safe and relaxed, the chances are that you will not trigger the ‘fight or flight’ response, which is controlled by the **reptilian brain**. As a facilitator, you may sometimes engage the reptilian brain inadvertently through the activities you choose, for instance by doing ‘creeping death’ introductions (for those not familiar with this term, it is when you start with introductions at one side of the room and progress to the other side). Once you have engaged this part of the brain, very little learning will take place until it is calmed.

If, however, you engage the **limbic brain**, which is linked to the emotions, your learners will be able to make the most of the learning experience. One way to do this is by telling stories; this could be telling your own, asking people to share theirs or finding relevant stories that fit the subject.

Something magical happens when people listen, and relate, to stories. It is such a deep part of our psyche that it has been incorporated into our everyday language4, ‘crying wolf’ and ‘Pandora’s box’ being just two examples. Because of this, stories can be used to convey moral tales in a very succinct way, much more so sometimes than open-ended questioning or even group discussions.

The words you use as a trainer are very important and there are myths surrounding what part they play in communication. Some people incorrectly quote Albert Mehrabian’s theory on the part that words play5. The statistics quoted are:

- 7 per cent of what we communicate is in the words we use.

It should be noted, once and for all, that this is only true in those circumstances in which what an individual says is inconsistent with how he says it. So the words you use are important and, according to NLP researchers, they can positively influence the outcome of an event. Think about the impact of these two phrases:

- “This next part is going to be a bit dry, but we have to get through it.”
- “This next part is very important, so I would urge you all to really take it on board.”

How often have the words you used really prepared learners to take on board dry, boring and heavy-duty materials?

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**References**


5. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Bob8c1M


The learner

Like liquorice allsorts, learners come in all shapes and sizes. Their preferences are varied but, according to Kolb, it is crucial that they experience every part of the learning cycle to be able to learn most effectively. Thus, for the learning designer, there is a natural tension between catering for all learning styles while ensuring that the four stages of the learning cycle are included in the learning.

Variety and order is key when designing learning events such as training workshops. Catering for people with strong interpersonal skills (from Howard Gardner’s multiple intelligences) as well as for those with a linguistic preference can help you find the variety, but so can honouring the NLP intake preferences for visual, auditory and kinaesthetic learners.

David Meier’s four-phase cycle begins prior to the learning, with preparation. During this phase, the inventive facilitator will draw learners in with well-prepared and attractive joining instructions. For example, with a ‘spy’ themed learning event, this could take the form of a short video, briefing the secret agents about the upcoming mission on which they are about to embark, should they choose to rise to the challenge.

Alistair Smith’s accelerated learning cycle outlines what should happen in the learning event, to ensure all the learners can get the most out of it. I have adapted it to make it as easy to remember as your ABC:

• attend to the environment – make it inviting, safe and stimulating
• begin from what they already know – no point going over old ground!
• connect with the big picture – so they understand how this fits into their world
• describe the outcomes – what will they get out of the learning?
• explain new concepts – this is the input part where new materials are introduced
• facilitate the activity – let them experience the learning for themselves
• have a go – at practising the new learning
• help with the review – without it they will probably forget 90 per cent of what they have learned in just a few days.

The environment

As the delegates walk into the classroom, you want them to think ‘wow’, to be excited; there should be an air of anticipation and a feeling that it is a safe environment to learn in. The latter can be achieved by good preparation – joining instructions with positive language and embedded commands as well as an (NLP) inclusive welcome to start off the learning event.

The former requires some creativity and a few well-used resources utilised in a new way. Even flipcharts, which are readily available to most trainers, can be given that ‘wow’ factor.

Many trainers will cite lack of time and budget as an excuse for a classroom without sparkle.
“So how can I, with my non-existent budget, make it a stimulating environment for my learners?” you might ask. Here are a few low-cost ways to make your classroom sparkle:

- **use flipchart paper, taped together, to create a tablecloth (or buy cheap paper tablecloths)** These can be used for reviews or ‘what do you know already?’ sessions
- **put borders (in marker) around your flipcharts and use a variety of colours** It is amazing how effective this is!
- **buy some coloured pipe cleaners (I have found packs for as little as £1.50!) to scatter on the tables – people love to fiddle with them**
- **use some old magazines and get the delegates to find pictures to represent what they already know about the subject** Make these pictures into a collage or posters to brighten up the room
- **make some laminates of processes or diagrams that they can fiddle with** and put them on the tables
- **use some well-chosen, quiet classical music** to create a calm, reflective atmosphere

- **print off or write up on flipchart paper some thought-provoking quotations from famous people** that are relevant to the subject.

**Brain research**

When people have fun, dopamine is released into the bloodstream and it is this chemical that helps learners maintain interest in what they are learning. Too much dopamine and the effect can be likened to what happens when individuals are under the influence of drugs. This means that the ‘fun’ element of the learning has to be pitched at the right level: not enough and the learners lose interest; too much and they have a great ‘experience’ but remember little about the actual learning itself.

When learning something new, the part of the brain that is activated is the **prefrontal cortex**. It is energy-hungry and can only store a limited amount of information. As soon as it is overloaded, information starts to leak out. Trainers and facilitators need to learn how not to overload the prefrontal cortex, but instead pass information into a part of the brain associated with long-term memory and repetitive tasks. This area is called the **basal ganglia** and it deals with routine tasks and things that are familiar.

When learning something for the first time, trying to find a pattern or something that is familiar will help to transfer the information into long-term memory. Relating this to IT training, begin by helping the participants learn some quick tricks, for example some shortcut keys. You can achieve this with some repetition and allowing the participants to use these keys in some practical exercises. Once they have learned something that becomes almost automatic, it frees up the prefrontal cortex and the information moves into the basal ganglia. Moving information into the basal ganglia also releases the prefrontal cortex to begin again with that higher thinking that new concepts and theories will need.

Engaging the **motor cortex** or the **visual cortex** while learning new things can also lighten the load on the prefrontal cortex. This is why having engaging visuals can aid learning. Writing notes engages the motor cortex and will help ease the load on the prefrontal cortex. So having a workbook, in which participants occasionally write down what they have learned, will also help cement the learning.

Above all else, trainers and facilitators who want to ‘wow’ their audiences, while gaining the approval of stakeholders, increasing their credibility and value within the workplace, need to become practitioners of accelerated learning techniques. **TJ**