GET UP TO SPEED

Krystyna Gadd reveals the five secrets of accelerated learning

I am an enthusiastic advocate of accelerated learning, and here's why: it delivers results; it incorporates the latest thinking about learning in the best way possible (for maximum retention); it incorporates great objectives as part of the process, and it's creative, engaging and fun!

An early frustration with accelerated learning was identifying which approach was best. After much research, I came up with five broad-brush areas which fit in with all the approaches that I came across and neatly summarise what you have to concentrate on to accelerate learning. I call them the five secrets of accelerated learning:[1]

▶ **Business focused and learner centred objectives** – this ensures stakeholder and learner buy-in, essential to the success of learning.
▶ **Be a facilitator not a trainer** – this promotes and inspires learners to learn more and carry on learning beyond the scope of a workshop or programme.
▶ **Look at all the various ways in which learners can learn** – introducing variety means there is more chance that the learners will be engaged for longer.
▶ **Take care of the environment** – for the learners, feed their natural childlike curiosity and encourage them to learn together.
▶ **Learn about the brain to maximise retention** – if you do not maximise how the brain works, learning will not stick.

I also came across two key statistics which convinced me that accelerated learning is valid and worthwhile. Firstly, it has shown to yield a 300 per cent improvement in retention by learners (according to Elliot Masie). And secondly, a 30 per cent cut in trainer preparation time (according to Debbie Meddins, ATOS L&D Manager).

What's in a name?
However, accelerated learning, in my opinion, has always been somewhat of a misnomer because it is not *just* about speed. In comparison to traditional learning, accelerated learning principles, when applied properly, will also make learning more memorable, more engaging and easier to design, because:

▶ Instead of beginning at 9am on day one of a learning workshop, learners start to learn before an event, as part of the preparation phase.
▶ The learning continues after the event, with follow-up and activities to embed the learning (because everyone knows real learning takes time, repetition and review).
▶ Behaviours begin to change, because line managers and other stakeholders are involved in the whole process (as the objectives are business focused, they have a vested interest).
▶ Learners are inspired to learn for themselves, not just spoon-fed and directed what to learn.
▶ Time is given to analysing the real needs, so not just a TNA or LNA, but real probing into what is going on 'under the bonnet'.
▶ The latest neuroscience is applied so that the learning makes the best use of how the brain works (this on its own does not guarantee business results, just as great objectives on their own do not guarantee the learning will be 'sticky').
▶ The learning environment is a balance of a stimulating physical room, where social learning is encouraged, and a place where learners feel safe and supported. The social learning continues across other platforms.

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Accelerated learning principles make learning more memorable, more engaging and easier to design

Keen to get started? Let's look at each secret in turn and see how you can practically apply them.

Business focused and learner centred objectives
Identify the business's key stakeholders before you decide what training or learning needs to be done and when. You need to get these stakeholders behind what you're doing in L&D so that, when it's time to ask for budget, they can see how it will improve the business.[2] These stakeholders can help you identify what the objectives

are and how they will help improve performance within the organisation.

Using the stakeholder analysis grid (Figure 1) can help you identify which of your stakeholders you need to nurture, and those who take up your time for little return.

Figure 1: Stakeholder Analysis Grid
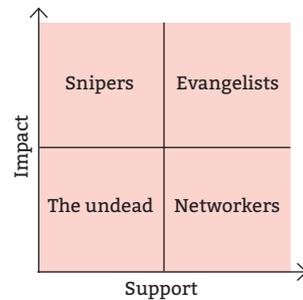
L&D can be very effective if it works in partnership with the stakeholders. You can conduct a stakeholder analysis to uncover interests and how best to influence them. By staying close to the stakeholders, you will also uncover the potential risks and pitfalls in your L&D programmes. Best of all, L&D will be delivering to objectives that are linked to real organisational success.

In short, if you want to engage your stakeholders you have to:
▶ Speak their language.
▶ Work *with* the organisation.
▶ Understand how your organisation works so that you can *infiltrate* it.
▶ Demonstrate value for money and business value.
▶ Manage the 'undead' – don't let them steal your time.

Ask the learners what they want to get out of the learning. If you can do this before you start the programme, it gives you time to balance their needs with the organisational needs. Asking them also increases their buy-in and, if time is short, you can always do this as a Post-it exercise as they come into the classroom.

Be a facilitator not a trainer
Make the learners your focus and not how much you know about a particular subject. Use your skills and experience to design activities that will engage the learners and draw out what is already there. Find ways to add in your expertise, which does not involve standing up at the front and telling them about it. Arouse their curiosity on the subject →

with teasers in the welcome email and some pre-work.

Contract with the learners and take joint responsibility for the learning. At the start of a long programme, it is important to set expectations. I do not spoon-feed my learners and so these three questions are great for the start of a programme:

▸ In order for this programme to be of value to you, it has to be like what?
▸ In order for it to be like that, you have to be like what?
▸ In order for you to be like that, others have to be like what?

Use the 70:30 rule for your design. According to David Meier,[3] 70 per cent of the learning should be learner led and the remaining 30 per cent trainer led. Get them to make meaning and apply the learning to their real world situations.

So many trainers shoot themselves in the foot by saying things like "This is a bit boring but we need to get through it." Instead, speak to their subconscious and prepare them for a difficult subject using something like "You will to need to focus for this next bit, because it will really help you in your role."

Look at all the various ways in which learners can learn

Knowing about learners' preferences can help you design training and learning which has great variety. This variety or

Identify which of your stakeholders you need to nurture, and those who take up your time for little return

a change in pitch, pace or tone every 20 minutes or so[4] will keep learners engaged. Do not mistakenly use these preferences to design for a specific group of people. Research[5] has shown that designing training specifically to meet individuals' learning preferences (or styles) is no more effective than not doing it.

Help your learners to become better at learning. Involve them in the learning process and help them understand about the whole of the experiential learning cycle, as prescribed by David Kolb.[6]

Help them through the whole learning cycle, not just their preference. Build in time for being active, reflecting on the activity, making sense of it though theories and models then also allow time to plan how they will practically apply it to their own role.

Take care of the environment

The environment can be classified into three distinct areas: the physical, the emotional and the social. Each plays a part in providing the right conditions to support memorable and productive learning. Let us look at each area in turn to see how we can maximise its affect:

1 The physical environment – arouse people's curiosity by thinking about how to dress your room. Curiosity "activates the caudate, a part of the brain associated with reward".[7] I may sometimes have a box on my table, beautifully wrapped, containing either games or rewards just to arouse learners' curiosity.

In answer to the question "What has had the biggest impact on you?", one participant on a two-day programme said "the classroom… how it was set up". Another participant said it made them feel "valued". This statement had quite an impact on me and convinced me that the effort that goes into dressing a room is never wasted. Other practical tips could include reusing posters from previous sessions to reinforce prior learning; considering the layout and allowing for movement; have different areas of the room for different types of activities; using the vertical space in a room, and having toys and other objects the learners can fiddle with.

2 Create a social environment before and during the learning workshop. People like to feel connected and "social isolation has been shown to have the same effects on our brain as physical pain".[7] Get them to connect on social media or collaborate on an activity beforehand.

3 Create a safe space in which they can learn by reassuring them in any pre-workshop communications; getting them to work collaboratively (it always feels safer) and, if necessary, state your rules on confidentiality.

Learn about the brain to maximise retention

The more we know about the quirky ways in which the brain works, the more likely the learning will stick. Here are some tips on how to make learning more 'sticky'.

▸ Provide opportunities to use the learning as soon as possible. This moves the learning to the energy hungry and very limited prefrontal cortex into the basal ganglia and makes learners proficient quickly.
▸ Design variety into your workshops using Sharon Bowman's principles.[4] Variety will keep the learners interested and engaged.
▸ Don't be afraid to use repetition to make learning stick. Don't be afraid to use repetition to make learning stick. Don't be afraid to… OK labouring my point now!
▸ Chunk information into manageable pieces so as not to overwhelm your learners. **TJ**

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