What is Learning that LASTS?

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Sticky notes, posters, skits, and songs... Are these the things that make teaching effective? Maybe you’d be surprised to hear that my answer would be, “No, not in themselves.” The study and practice of adult learning has been taught world-wide in a course originally developed by Dr. Jane Vella, and adapted for use by Christian organizations by Dr. Roland Walker. While it is true that our classrooms are often littered with tiny colored papers and wallpapered with newsprint, these features do not explain the heart of good adult teaching. Catchy techniques and creative seating arrangements do contribute at times to increased learning, but the reasons are much deeper.

Let’s briefly look at teaching theory through a linguist’s lens. There are a number of universals that are true for any human language. Each one has a vocabulary, a grammar, a sound system, and other “surface” features that can be used uniquely to express a full range of human experience.

Similarly, there are underlying core principles relating to adult learning behavior. These are universal in the same way that there are also language universals. Universally adults learn best when shown respect by teachers and fellow learners. They thrive in an environment where they feel safe enough to share their own ideas and hear what others share. They need a balance of action (learning by doing) and reflection tasks (learning by thinking about what they’ve experienced). They profit from context-appropriate visual, auditory, and kinesthetic aids.

Additionally, what adult learners themselves choose to learn and what they discover for themselves will be retained most meaningfully. Being part of a social group generally increases quality and quantity of skills, knowledge, and attitudes gained. Adults bring their own experiences and perceptions to the learning process. Therefore, the teacher is well advised to tailor the type of learning activities as well as the actual content to be learned to the particular learners s/he is teaching. This requires extensive research and preparation by the teacher, not only of the subject matter, but of the learners, before and during the teaching.

Timely feedback and ongoing discussion between learners and teachers is essential for effective adult learning. This critical component in an adult education program is often overlooked or even rejected by some teachers. Often teachers fear that they will offend culturally by initiating discussion of this kind between the teacher, who is viewed as the expert, and the learners, who must take a more humble position in some cultural contexts. However the opposite is actually true. Giving and receiving feedback are a skill set that can be taught. When I asked how one group of village learners had responded in their feedback in a newly established training program, the lead teacher told me that they hadn’t come up with much. This same group of village learners was later led in a lesson on feedback skills by an experienced facilitator at the beginning of a second workshop. Throughout that course they became increasingly adept at both appreciating what they were learning and at figuring out ways that they could learn even better by interacting with the course facilitators in daily afternoon feedback sessions. Their written course feedback were also typical of what I have experienced in courses where dialog is promoted, “We have learned from you,” many of them wrote, “and you have learned from us.” Frequent feedback sessions seem to be one of the main ingredients for successful learning.

The expectations we teachers have of learners play a large role in what the learners accomplish. I’ve heard many times that certain groups of learners have no critical thinking skills. It may be true that their thought processes are more concrete than abstract, but it does not generally mean that they are unable to solve problems. It is the challenge to the teaching staff then to devise more concrete learning tasks that fit the style of the learners as well as addressing the desired content. During reflection exercises following the concrete activities, the learners can be led into verbalizing what they have newly experienced and into deriving more abstract principles that lead to a wider range of critical thinking skills. If a teacher believes, however, that a group of learners is simply incapable of critical
thinking, it limits the teacher’s ability to create the tasks that would enable learners’ development in this direction.

Sometimes there are groups who hold beliefs that they are not able learn nor to succeed in new ventures. This may well be a spiritual problem that requires prayer and a great deal of encouragement. Normally we request learners in a course to share with us information about themselves and their motivations before starting the course together. This input influences how we set up the course and alerts us to their special learning hurdles. Of one recent group I worked with, nearly every one listed “lack of self-confidence” as their biggest hindrance to learning the skills they desired. Being able to admit this was their first step in overcoming it. In addition, the teaching team held the conviction that the learners could accomplish their goals. This conviction and steady coaching by the teachers increased the group’s ability to learn the skills they were hoping for and radically changed how they viewed themselves.

In the LtL course we try to model becoming a teacher like the Lord Jesus Himself. We spend several days leading up to the workshop as a teaching team in practical preparations of lessons as well as in prayer for ourselves and the participants. We read and reflect on how Jesus taught his twelve disciples by sharing his ministry with them. In the Great Commission Jesus commanded us as his followers to teach new believers to observe all the things He Himself has taught. We do this in fellowship with Him and other of His present-day followers. In an LtL workshop we limit the number of participants to twelve so that each one can get personal attention and coaching. I have gained a new appreciation for the way Jesus worked with his own twelve followers through this. Building into people’s lives intensively, even for a week, requires significant energy, but the fruit that grows in that process can truly turn the world upside down! LtLs normally have three teachers to share the teaching load of those twelve participants. Intensive mentoring for one-on-twelve was indeed a divine undertaking.

The “surface” methods and techniques used for any given group of learners will vary widely, depending on the culture, technical sophistication, and material resources. In remote rural areas of Africa or Asia slate chalkboards and woven mats may well be appropriate while paper, markers, and round tables would be used in a city. Partnership Development or Public Relations specialists in a sophisticated environment find low-tech notebooks, flip charts, and some “home-made” activities unappealing in their specific realms of influence. In our LtL workshops we struggle to model a wide variety of possible techniques, but the core always remains: know your learners, provide safety, promote teamwork, learn by doing and reflection, let the learners set direction and discover answers for themselves, respect and love one another as Christ loves us.

There is one major problem for people who have participated successfully in an LtL or other workshops on adult learning. They don’t want to turn back. Other styles of teaching become frustrating. They become more demanding of themselves and of others in how they create and present lessons. They become spoiled with the joys of lively dialog and building deep learning relationships. And they learn ever more that to be a good teacher they have to keep learning themselves.