

or “how kids learn words.” However, it soon became apparent that this solution couldn’t cover the really important training, and the dilemma remained. How could I lure them in?

Then, I picked up a book that I had just ordered from Amazon, Roger Shank’s “Designing World-Class E-Learning” and a light came on. Shank argues that, classroom education simply doesn’t work. People really learn something by doing something, not by reading about it and being tested on it, and so, he developed training for companies based on simulations and role-playing. Perfect. This was the answer. I then thought up six simulations to which I could link a variety of readings and training modules.

However, the point I really want to make, is that nothing Shank wrote was new to me. I had read the same stuff over and over again during my literature review. In fact, in younger days, I had even written and programmed a simulation game for teachers. Still, none of this superficial “knowing” came out when I had to solve the problem of how to organize elementary school teacher training. The light came on because, and only because, I read these ideas again in Shank's book just as I was wrestling with a real problem itself, in other words, while I was involved in a real experience. Only then did my thinking change.

This realization proved to me that we are only capable of learning something, I mean REALLY learn something (which means not just remembering it, but integrating it into our world view and behavior), when we truly need it. Experience and real life problems create needs (homework assignments don’t). In adult education, this concept is called “learner readiness,” and I don’t think we pay it the dues we should.

If we did, we would change some of our basic pedagogies. For example, we wouldn't have doctoral students do a literature review BEFORE they did the dissertation, we'd have them do it THROUGHOUT. (Nor, in the dissertation report, would we have them separate the lit review from the procedures and results, since the reading of a dissertation is also a learning experience for someone.) And think about tests. We assign, they read, then we test. Were we to truly honor learner readiness, we would allow them to read DURING the test (as some Japanese professors do). Granted, the "exercises" we give them before the test are supposed to create a need, but for many learners, the need to learn does not really click until the test starts.

Some people write about this in language teaching as "language needs." another concept not given its dues. For those of you who have sent students abroad for a month, and noticed how much English they learned, should think about how why this happened. You will probably come to the same conclusion that I did: that they learned because of experiences, and because of real needs. In fact, Natsume Soseki came to this conclusion too, a hundred years ago. Almost everyone knows Soseki as one of Japan’s greatest authors, but not many know that he was also one of Japan’s first study abroad students (he went to Oxford.) Soseki, wrote something to the effect of: ”All learning comes in a journey that starts from myself.” “Experience is my only teacher.”

Welcome to the Ex Generation – Curtis Kelly

(published in Cambridge Connection, 2004)

A couple weeks ago, I had a long talk with soon-to-be graduates from our new university, Heian Jogakuin University, in Shiga, Japan. Heian was just founded four years ago, and the women I talked to were in our first crop of graduates. I asked them, “Tell me one big thing that changed your life in the last four years and why.”

One after another, they told me about how volunteer work (we require it) and experiential education activities, such as teaching English in elementary schools, made them see themselves differently. They told me how these activities made them go from being passive to active, from focusing on themselves to focusing on others, from being irresponsible to being responsible, and especially, from being dependent personalities to non-dependent. They learned how to walk on their own two feet. Not one mentioned a classroom experience.

It was delightful. And once again, I heard their comments as symptoms of a great change in education, a shift from traditional to experiential education (for the other changes, see “Trends in Higher Education in Asia”

http://www.eltnews.com/features/special/2002_12_1.shtml). Whereas we once saw learners as empty vessels to fill with content, advances in the theories of learning have taught us that the brain is not a simple receptacle. It is like a huge bank of multi-processors and learning happens best when a multiplicity of these processors are used at the same time to process the same task. When we watch, hear, smell, emote, and integrate, we learn deeply. In fact, some studies have shown that thinking about difficult problems, whether we solve them or not, not only leads to learning, it makes our brains more intelligent as well. So the age of learning by doing has come upon us.

Experiential education and learning by doing came into my life too, in an unexpected way about a year ago. I was working on a Japan Ministry of Education project to make prototype Web site for Japanese elementary school teachers. The site will allow teachers to train themselves in how to teach English to children. English is being added to the elementary curriculum all over Japan, and since virtually none of the teachers have expertise in this area, they are in a panic. A Web site might help.

I did a lengthy needs assessment to find out what the teachers needed to know, and began planning the site. A problem arose. These teachers are some of the busiest people in the world, so how could I expect them to come to our site and receive training? This wouldn't be a problem if they were college students, but as working professionals, it is unlikely that I could draw them into taking a traditional on-line course. No, life is not so easy. Then, how could I provide training to teachers who do not know what they need, and to some degree, do not even know that they need it (although they do, desperately)?

My first solution was to put downloadable materials (lesson plans, songs, games etc.) right up at the top of the site, and tie some training modules to those: “why games work”