

LEARNING RHYTHMS

BY GORDON L. LIPPITT

Those of us who are consultants, trainers, teachers, professors, or managers know the occasional joys that come to us when a person successfully copes with a problem because of his/her application of a module presented during a training program. Or that he/she did something unusually creative because of ideas he/she innovated after an experience in a class, or improved his/her group productivity as a result of applying methods practiced in a team-building experience we conducted.

You noticed I said *occasional*. Don't accuse me of being unduly optimistic or naive. I know these are the exception and not the norm.

In addition, when rare and uplifting experiences do take place, they occur in a variety of ways, usually many weeks after the consultation, class or training event which stimulated them.

The following are three examples. Perhaps you have had

some experiences which are similar.

The Telephone Call

"Hello, do you remember me? I'm Felix Underwood."

"Oh, yes. Felix Underwood. The name's familiar, but I honestly don't remember the face."

"Oh, I understand that. You must work with hundreds of people. Maybe it would help if I said that I attended your session in Atlanta in 1975."

"Right, I remember Atlanta."

"I thought you might want to know that your session changed my life."

"What?"

"Yes, that seminar gave me the courage to change my career. I quit that dead-end job and went with Consolidated Industries."

"Well, how about that?"

"Just wanted to call and let you know that I'm a lot happier now and that I'm really doing well in the new job."

"Hey, thanks for calling."

To self: "Good heavens, that was four years ago. What kind of a seminar was it? Well, I won't deny

it. I just appreciate the call and feel good that my trip to Atlanta wasn't wasted. About all I can remember is that the rental car broke down on the way to the airport."

Face-to-Face Conversation

"It's good to see you. I'm glad we could meet on such short notice."

"Not at all. What brings you to town?"

"I'm attending a trade-association meeting, but wanted to come and let you know that our Products Group is still functioning as a real team."

"Oh, yes, that was the Pittsburgh Sales Group, wasn't it?"

"No, it was the Cleveland Manufacturing Division."

"Oh, sure — I forgot."

"Don't you remember the team-building session you did in 1976?"

"I do now."

"That three-day session really made a big difference in our lives."

"Great, glad to hear it."

"We sure didn't feel it would come out that way after the first day. We almost packed up and went home."

"Yes, people were a little up-tight, as I recall."

"Up-tight? They were damn antagonistic!"

"Right."

"Well, just wanted to say 'thanks.' I'd stay longer, but I have to get back to the conference."

"Thanks for stopping by."

"See you around."

"Goodbye."

To self: "Come on, Gordon. You should have known he was from the Cleveland Division. Yeah, but how many team-building sessions have you done since? Right, but how many were as successful as this one? I don't know; probably not many."

Former Student to Professor

"Hi, Dr. Lippitt. I'm in town for the Alumni Seminar Series. Remember me?"

"Well... maybe... I remember the face. (Darn it, this time the name eludes me.)"

"Oh, sure, you've had so many students. I'm Alice Miller. I was in the Health Care Program."

"Right."

"Remember how I didn't want to get in the Project Group in the Human Behavior class?"

"Some students do object."

"The group experience in the class was the greatest learning experience I've ever had."

"Really?"

"As the administrator of St. Andrews Hospital, I find that the way I relate to my staff, physicians and nurses has really been affected by that experience."

"Well, what do you know."

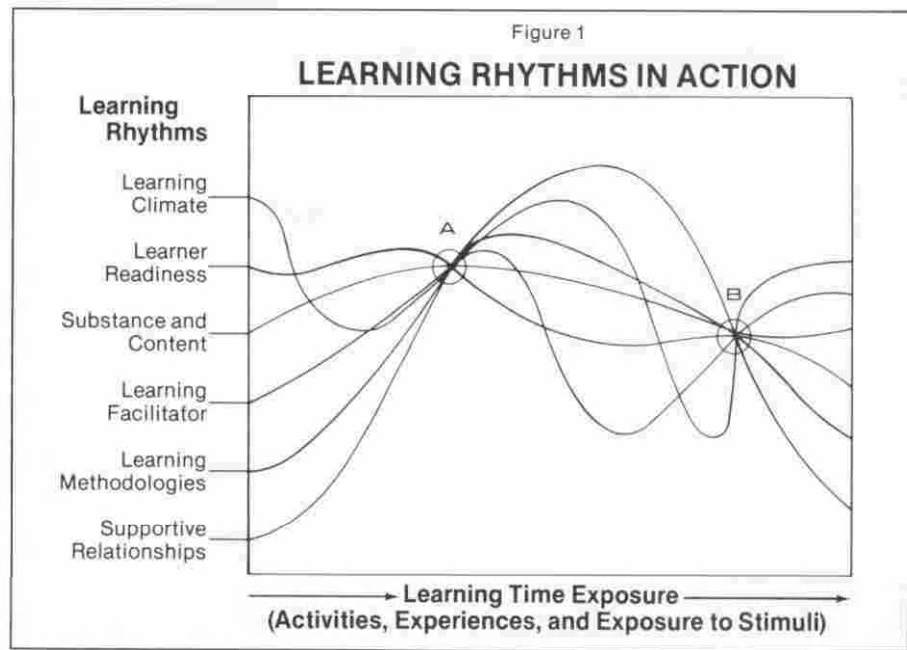
"Just wanted to stop by."

"Thank you. Have a good seminar."

To self: "The flak we get from students about the group project... it worked for one person. Usually one class out of three doesn't get off the ground, one is fair, and one is great. I wonder why classes differ so much?"

An "Aha" Experience

Such conversations are rare, wonderful and puzzling. What was different about that particular experience for that individual, group or organization? Is it the participant, the teacher, the phase of the moon, the context or just an acci-



dent? I believe it is the culmination of several factors that I am calling *Learning Rhythms*. Just like biorhythms — when certain aspects of a potential learning situation are in juxtaposition, one will have an "aha!" experience, which provides the insight, learning, creative impulse or courage to change. I am talking about not just a learning experience, but about a "peak learning experience." A possible variation of Maslow's "peak experience,"¹ such a learning experience involves the convergence of the right mix of factors to create the PLE (Peak Learning Experience).

In some ways I see learning rhythms derived from the concept of biorhythms. According to biorhythm theory, our physical, emotional and intellectual capabilities fluctuate in regular 23, 28 and 33-day cycles, respectively.² All these start on your date of birth. "Critical" days are at the start, middle and end of each cycle. At these times each faculty is the least reliable and may be dangerous to the individual. During the first half of each cycle one will supposedly find "positive days" when performance should be at its peak. The second half, however, is "negative" and performance will be below average. If all of these cycles peak on the same day, one might expect outstanding performance. On the contrary, if one cycle is at a low point, it is a "critical day." Two

lows mean a "double-critical day." If all three are critical on the same day — watch out!

This concept is not new. The idea was developed by German psychoanalyst Wilhelm Fliess in *Der Ablauf des Lebens* (The Course of Life), published in 1906. Since then it has been dormant until recent applications in the 60s and 70s in Japan, Britain, Canada, Russia and the United States. Most of the studies have related to transportation workers,³ pilots and accident victims, and have examined the consequences of the "low" rather than "high" days of the cycle. However, a few studies on outstanding athletic performance did not confirm that such performance occurred at the time of three peak rhythm periods.

In the same manner that peak days are determined by the juxtaposition of these biorhythms, my theory of convergence of learning rhythms (see Figure 1) states that under optimal conditions such interaction will create a peak learning experience (PLE). I do not think it happens often, but it does happen. We can increase the chances for a PLE, but cannot control or predict the rhythms being optimal at any given point in time. Those of us who teach, lecture, consult, train and create development opportunities realize that learning is an "aha!" experience that may involve letting go,

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forgetting, remembering, analyzing, synthesizing and just "making sense" out of many patterns of stimuli.

"The Mind Has Rhythms"

Jean Houston tells us that the mind has rhythms during conscious and unconscious periods.⁴ Learning must take into account these rhythms to avoid being static, steady, nonrelevant and unresponsive to the inner and outer spaces of the person.

A helpful statement about my theory is stated by Carol Tice: *"Rhythms deeper than those of hand and mind and feet as the generations together, treasuring each other's knowledge and mystery, join the dance of new learning and new life."*⁵

In Figure 1, I have illustrated two situations where the six learning rhythms intersected to provide a PLE. In Figure 1, intersection A, we see that the supportive relationship rhythm being very strong and in concert with appropriate methodologies, relevant learner readiness, and the other rhythms, created a PLE. In intersection B, we see that such an interaction again took place with the learning facilitator and substance being very relevant along with the other four rhythms to create a PLE.

A key conception in my theory of convergence is that each rhythm needs to have optimal attention or intensity to enhance the chance of intersection. If too little attention is given to a particular learning rhythm, it will not facilitate PLE convergence. In a similar manner, if a learning rhythm is stressed too much or given attention out of proportion, it will lessen the chance of convergence.

It is my hypothesis that if any one learning rhythm is neglected or overlooked, the resultant chances for intersecting other rhythms will be low. On the other hand, if too much emphasis is put on one rhythm, it can also result in a low chance for intersection leading to PLE. I have observed this where so much attention was put on an audio-visual show that the medium got in the way of the learning-rhythm intersection and a resultant PLE.

The creative challenge to educators, teachers, consultants, trainers and human resource developers is to attempt the orchestration of those learning rhythms they can influence to optimize the chance of convergence taking place for PLE. A description of each of the learning rhythms and the effects of too little or too much emphasis hopefully should clarify this aspect of the theory.

Learning Climate Rhythm

This is an essential rhythm that is well known to those in the "helping" professions. The climate should be one in which the learner finds challenge, excitement, some stress and respect for the potential for learning. A climate includes physical, psychological and sociological elements of the learning space.

We have all experienced the importance of the total surroundings in which a learning experience takes place.

It is interesting to note that the work of Dr. Georgi Lozanov⁶ in Bulgaria in Suggestology now is reaching the United States, and covers a span of 20 years of his work in both education and medicine. Suggestology, building on the right and left-brain theories, uses relaxation, music and temperature to allow the brain's left-analytical and logical hemisphere to become a bit more passive, and to "turn on" the intuitive and emotional right half. Both halves are needed for learning. Lozanov points out that you must believe you can learn. A supportive climate is essential.

The optimal climate is possible in a large lecture room or in a one-to-one dialogue. The key aspect of intersection potential is to give proper consideration to the learning climate. It can be influenced by those who try to help others discover themselves as well as by new insights.

Learner Readiness Rhythms

Each learner has goals. Whether an individual, group or larger system, each will need to be dissatisfied with the status quo to optimize the readiness rhythms. Goal orientation is the basic need of the organism to make a PLE possible.

The nature of the learner's readiness for entry into the learning experience is well annotated in the research.⁷ In a very real sense the learner's "state of readiness" is a product of prior experience, life stage, expectancies and existential state of the organism at the time of learning.

A PLE is basically a unique experience for that human system at that particular moment. I am not discussing something which is nice or even some educational manipulation. I am discussing the opportunity for humans to learn in their own way. That is a prerequisite for coping, living, loving, giving and maturity.⁸

In G. Sheehy's *Passages*,⁹ D. Levinson's *The Seasons of a Man's Life*,¹⁰ and E. Erikson's *Childhood and Society*,¹¹ we have been brought to an awareness that the lives of adults as well as children go through phases that create key life transitions. These periods of transition create anxiety, stress, challenge, coping needs and the search process.

It has been my experience that during periods of role, life or styles transition, learner readiness rhythm is in an optimal state for many people. The transition provides a "force" for search and learning. Even in complex human systems, such as groups and organizations, learning and change will be affected by the stage of growth as represented in the phase of group or organizational maturity.

We know groups have potential stages of growth moving from polite, power struggle, role differentiation, to the working and finally, esprit stage.¹² At the beginning and end of each phase, the group has a greater readiness to use its process for change or use a team-building experience to learn.

At the organizational level we have had similar experiences with organizational stages of potential growth through the birth, survival, stability, reputation, uniqueness and maturity stages of organization life.¹³ At each stage the ability to mature to the next stage will be heightened if the system is

aware of its potential for growth to the next stage and the need for renewal manifests itself. OD interventions are most valuable at these times of transition. In a similar manner, when an organization is experiencing a "transition" such as a merger, acquisition, strike, decentralization, etc., it will experience a need for learning "how" to get back into equilibrium.¹⁴ Such conditions create a greater readiness for change and learning.

If learners (micro or macro) are forced into learning and do not really know "why" they are involved in the learning or change effort — chances of a PLE occurring are doomed to failure. Learning must be needed, whether voluntary or forced, so it is perceived as relevant and helpful to the challenge and "pain" of transition. Such stress and anxiety will actually increase the probability of a PLE occurring.

Substance and Content Rhythm

This rhythm is related to the relevance and flow of the message

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received by the learner. A lecture given on a subject of great concern to the learner may be very timely. A presentation on the "meaning of death" may strike a responsive chord the day after an historical figure or loved one has died. An older employee facing the transition to retirement may be "ready" for information on hobbies, social security and volunteer services. A youth or adult groping for the meaning of life may be profoundly influenced by the presentation of a messianic idea. The learner is usually goal and problem-solving oriented.

David Kolb presents a four-stage cycle of learning.¹⁵ Immediate experience becomes the basis for observation and reflection; these observations become assimilated into the form of abstract concepts and cognition that serve as guides to testing the implications of those concepts in new situations. The substance/content needs to have both practical meaning to the learner as well as abstract to pro-

vide guidelines for further experiences and reflective internalization.

The second key dimension is the "flow" of substance to the learner's past experiences. Each learner comes to a new learning experience with a history of prior development and learning. The degree of prior success or failure will have an effect on the readiness to "hear" the new substance/content. Research by Bloom suggests that learning achievement is to a large extent determined by cognitive entry behavior that makes the new learning meaningful.¹⁶ He asserts that the quality of entry is one-fourth the learning success and that quality of instruction is one-fourth of the variance on subsequent learning achievement.

This concept of flow is related to Kurt Lewin's defining behavior as a function of the person and environment ($B=fPE$).¹⁷ This definition conceives of a dynamic unbroken field where behavior is a continuous process. It never stops, but is always in flux. This is true in both the conscious and unconscious, as pointed out by Henri Bergson's concept of *duree* (duration) which he defines in terms of past-future relationship, and a moving present.¹⁸ The emphasis is on continuous process. The substance or content of the learning experience needs to be relevant to the moment and added to the flow of experience of the learner.

Learning Facilitator Rhythm

A fourth factor in the mix of learning rhythms is the learning facilitator. Whether this is a counselor, trainer, OD specialist, TV commentator, friend, teacher, HRD professional, we are describing a person who is a key stimulus for learning. While this role is essential, it is frequently seen as the only force for PLE. I do not believe this to be true. The role of the learning facilitator is to support the organizing of the learner's experience and to help expand the learner's experience. The learning facilitator can contribute to those goals by doing the following:¹⁹

1. Help identify and relate to real problems and concerns of the learner.

2. Help set a climate related to the learner's readiness.

3. Create conditions for making experiences (past and present) explicit.

4. Clarify goals and their relevance from the facilitator's point of view and attempt to relate to the learner's goals.

5. Put the facilitator's experience in perspective as it relates to the learner's experience.

6. Describe the process the facilitator is using for learning.

7. Provide new data and concepts for possible use by the learner.

8. Help learners generate relevance and application from their past experiences.

9. Allow people to learn in their way at their own pace.

10. Be competent so as to "do your own thing" with interest, enthusiasm and perspective.

Such a list has the danger of sounding like a series of platitudes. Each of us, acting as learning facilitators, should know ourselves well enough that we help rather than hinder learning. Put the learning process in perspective so it is seen as fun, frustrating, difficult, varied, challenging and not always successful.

In one sense I am talking about the value system of the learning facilitator. If you take yourself too seriously, overplan, overdirect, and assume you have control of the learning, the chance for convergence for PLE will be lessened. Incidentally, I want to state that when I use the words learning facilitator, I do not mean only the full-time teacher, professor or trainer, but also a speaker, consultant or even a line manager.

Learning Methodologies Rhythm

The fifth learning rhythm is the relevance of the learning methodology at that particular moment. At some point a challenging lecture may be relevant. In another a visual stimulus is most valued. In some situations a chance to talk about issues and concerns with others provides appropriate learning. At other times a confrontation of one's lack of skill; in other situations the use of reflection time, a

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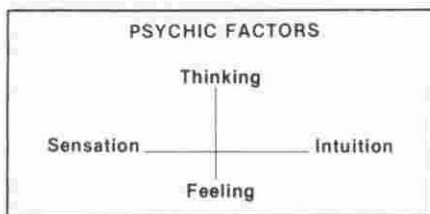
case, an instrument, field trip, laboratory group or problem-solving clinic might be the relevant method.

In other words, no one learning method will trigger a PLE. The learning facilitator in conjunction with those wanting learning and/or change need to carefully and professionally design the experience to be relevant to the amount of time, number of participants, nature of the content, type of process, expectation of learning and goals or need for learning and change. I do not feel that lengthy debate on what methods are best is very productive.

It is the relevance or appropriateness issue that is paramount, based on the design of the experience. The need is for an organic blending of purpose, time, size, skill, expectation and resources in the situation.

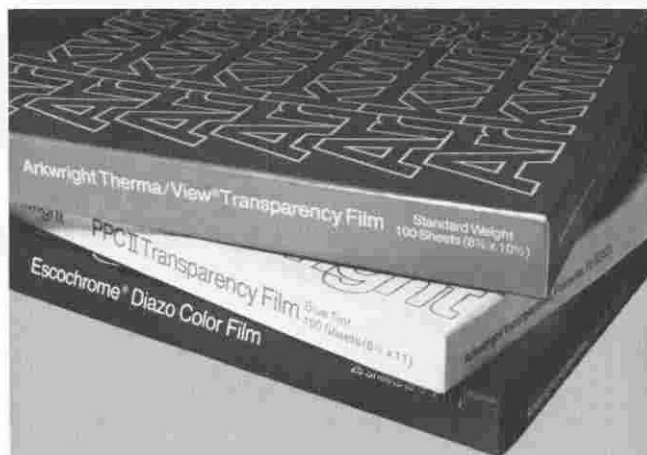
While the concept of multiple stimuli for learning is well recognized, it is infrequently practiced. Those of us involved with learning and change tend to have our "pet" methods because of our reinforced comfort from frequent use of a particular method.

It might be helpful to remind ourselves of the classification of psychic factors proposed by Carl Jung:²⁰



While it might be ideal to fully utilize each of these functions and apply them to life coping, Jung feels that they are differentiated in the developed individual. For the sensation type of person, intuition may be the inferior function. In the thinking type, the inferior function is feeling. While it is possible to determine a person's preferred way of perceiving reality by the Keegan Management Type Indication (KMTI),²¹ in most learning situations all four functions should be present so as to strike a chord with that particular learner.

It also is helpful to be aware of recent research on the two hemis-



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pheres of the brain. We have long known that the left hemisphere controls many of the mind's most important functions, such as speech and language skills. However, the often neglected right hemisphere also plays a vital role in the way people think. Recent research suggests that our right hemisphere responds to imagery and helps us to know things "intuitively" and to see things as a totality. As indicated by Dr. Joseph Bogen, a neurosurgeon in Los Angeles: "There is a clear inference that there are two quite different and parallel ways for the brain to process data and solve problems. When you're really doing well, you're using everything you've got."²²

What we need is a balanced approach to Jung's four types and the hemispheres of the brain so that the learner's own preferences are given a chance. This is a strong argument for a varied approach to learning methodologies depending on content to be learned, time, size

of group and other relevant factors in the learning situation. Whatever the methods, they should help further self-concept and a feeling of success/accomplishment in the learning situation. Both are essential for learning to take place.²³

Supportive Relationships Rhythm

The final key learning rhythm is the degree of support that is present in the learning/change situation. Some of the support systems to give one resources to realize a PLE are as follows:

Support of fellow learners (others in the situation): The importance of peer support is well known. To know that a colleague in the group, class or situation is helping one to learn and to analyze experience is a valued element.

Support of spouse, family and friends: To know that those who love you support your educational adventures is essential. One should not feel "guilty" about learning. If a manager attending an executive-development program for two

weeks feels he/she is neglecting his/her family, it could affect negatively the learning potential.

Financial or technological support to help implement the PLE: Whether you volunteer or are told to participate in a learning experience and are financially supported in total or part, it makes you feel that someone else wants you to learn. This also is true if you are provided with the technological support of a tape recorder, books, library resources, etc., to provide resource assistance for learning.

Support of reinforcement materials and role models: Learning is sustained more effectively with follow-up and reinforcement. Continuing to receive materials related to the learning is helpful. It also is valuable to link with others, peers or others, who have experienced related learnings and in their behavior reinforce the learned concepts, skills and attitudes.

Support of opportunities to take risks and innovate: It is helpful when parents, teachers, bosses and colleagues will permit the learner to try out new skills, enlarge one's responsibilities and change one's old approach to a job/career/life. Too frequently we are stereotyped by others in light of past behavior and not "allowed" to be different as a result of a learning experience. If this support is not present we may remain in collusion for continued mediocrity or "going to Abilene."²⁴

In his classic article J. Harvey points out that people in organizations frequently take action in contradiction to what they want to do because they cannot level, confront, or "face up" to their common desires or beliefs so as to manage their agreement.

Opportunities to be rewarded and to support the learner's PLE: In the latter context, it is valuable to "celebrate" those PLE's that help make meaningful transition possible for individuals, groups and organizations. Celebrations can be a dinner with colleagues, wine and cheese with fellow learners, a new suit you always wanted to buy, a trip to see your favorite Broadway plays or other meaningful celebrations. These celebra-

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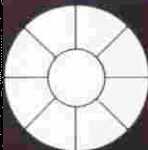
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tions can support the PLE as well as minor or major implementation successes which follow.

It is a well-known fact that a feeling of loneliness and alienation can create frustration, hostility and resistance to change. Therefore, attention to the supportive relationships rhythm of learning is essential to encourage a PLE.

Theory of Learning Rhythms Convergence

The underlying assumptions of this concept permit the proposing of a theory of learning-rhythms convergence. Basic elements of the theory are as follows:

1. Learning rhythms are processes in a continuous "flow" that are experienced by the learner.

2. When learning rhythms intersect or converge for a person, group, or organization, a Peak Learning Experience will occur.

3. Rhythms will converge in various patterns with different strengths, but will produce a synergistic effect.

4. Although it is not possible to

tell which rhythm contributed most to the synergistic convergence, it is possible to determine when the convergence occurs.

5. While it is not possible to predict convergence of the rhythms, it is possible to increase the chances of convergence.

6. Transition periods in the lives of the learners will increase the likelihood of convergence.

7. If too little or too much attention is given to any one rhythm, the chance for convergence is lessened.

While other elements in this theory will emerge as it is tested and revised by others, it provides a basis for testing out in practice by colleagues. At the same time I do not present this theory as scientific, but speculatively descriptive. I recognize that my concept of biorhythms will be controversial as with many intuitive pieces of work.

Closing Thoughts

This way of looking at my role and life as a trainer/consultant/

teacher helps me understand the fragile and complex nature of creating and implementing significant learning experiences in those lives with which I interact. It helps me to realize that factors over which I have no control can affect a PLE for learners. However, this is not a fatalistic or irresponsible state of mind. Just the contrary. Involved is my competence in designing and executing learning experiences as part of learning rhythms. This is an exciting challenge.

In this role I see my functions as:²⁵

- *Conveyor of knowledge* (to arrange for information and methods to get information to the person who needs it)

- *Bridge builder* (to bring the learner's experience together with the experience of the learning facilitator and others)

- *Designer of creative learning experiences* (attempting to orchestrate those learning rhythms which one can influence)

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In one sense, while we cannot control the occurrence of PLE we can influence it as well as increase the chance of a PLE occurring earlier and more frequently than leaving it up to chance. Stimulating the learner readiness to "surface," to come into consciousness, and to be confronted, can be encouraged by the learning facilitator in the following ways:

1. To initiate need and readiness assessment without waiting for a "crisis" or to be asked to create a learning experience.

2. To enter into the learning situation with good preparation, professional competence and enthusiasm for the joint learning experience.

3. To develop clear and measurable objectives and goals for the learning experience, the learning situation and learning facilitator.

4. To select and develop a range of learning experience that meets the objective of the learning/change goals.

5. To become innovative and professional in orchestrating a "de-

sign for learning" that creates optimum stimulus, excitement and insight potential that will encourage the chance of PLE occurring.

Such orchestration of learning rhythms requires commitment and competence. Achieving a PLE is difficult for all of us. Those of us who still suffer with our own intensity and perfectionism in training and teaching know the frustration of our limited results. I recall once trying to console my friend and colleague when he was having trouble coping with a class. "You can't win every time," I said soothingly, whereupon he whirled about and exclaimed, "Well, you can damn well try!"

Right. As professionals we need to always try to orchestrate learning rhythms. Perhaps not as the conductor, but frequently as the first violinist. We know that in many of our classes, seminars, speeches, consultations and interventions that very few of our students, participants or clients will have a PLE. The excitement is that learning rhythms exist and that PLE's do occur. Enjoy them when they happen, celebrate the reality and hope you can increase their frequency.

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