

What Is This Thing Called Accelerated Learning?

BY KEVIN J. McKEON

Almost 3,000 years ago, the Greek biographer and essayist Plutarch said, "The mind is not a vessel to be filled but a fire to be ignited." One could say that those words were the seeds of accelerated learning.

But accelerated learning really began in the early 1960s when a Bulgarian psychiatrist, Georgi Lozanov, developed the theory of "suggestology"—the interweaving of various techniques designed to get left-brain and right-brain abilities to work together to help people learn faster and better.

Lozanov was particularly intrigued by some people's ability to recall past experiences vividly and completely. Many of his experiments dealt with the mastery of foreign languages. Lozanov believed that through suggestology, people could learn words and phrases faster, recall them more easily, and retain them longer.

The somewhat unorthodox accelerated-learning method of instruction has made its way from Bulgaria to the wider territory of training.

Here's how it works.

In English lessons for Bulgarian students, Lozanov played Baroque music as students entered the classroom. He assured them that the imminent task would be easy, and he explained how he would conduct the session. Lozanov believed that this approach lessened stress and broke down barriers to learning. Then he distributed some English text with the

Bulgarian translation. Lozanov read aloud in English while the students followed the text silently. Then he told them to begin reading parts of the text in English.

He also asked students periodically to lean back in their chairs, close their eyes, breathe deeply, and concentrate on the music while he read the text aloud—an approach Lozanov called the passive concert. During the final part of the session—the active concert—Lozanov read the English text three times, using normal, soft, and loud tones. A class of 60 students learned, on average, 80 new words a day. In two different sessions, students learned 500 new words in eight hours.

Years later, Lozanov's work caught the attention of David Meier, a specialist in applying instructional methods to business training. In 1981, Meier—intrigued by Lozanov's

theories—founded the Center for Accelerated Learning in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin.

Is and isn't

Before explaining what accelerated learning is, it might be useful to discuss what it is not. Despite its terminology, accelerated learning is not an acceleration of the learning process. Either learning happens, or it doesn't.

Accelerated learning is a multisensory, brain-compatible teaching and learning methodology. It uses information from brain research to ensure that less time is wasted than in more traditional learning processes. Accelerated learning involves both the packaging of the content and the conditioning of the learners so that students can absorb and retain material faster through overcoming traditional barriers to learning. Accelerated learning is a multidimensional approach in which the learner is the focal point of the experience. The learners are in control of the learning.

In accelerated learning, the setting

THE LEARNERS ARE IN CONTROL OF THE LEARNING

should be comfortable and colorful. The activities should be designed to appeal to as many learning styles as possible to ensure that each learner will benefit. Activities should be fun and enjoyable—almost as if they were designed for children.

Accelerated learning incorporates some of the same elements found in many elementary schools. Elementary-school classrooms are decorated with bright posters and mobiles. The children play show-and-tell, paint, and sing songs. The environment is designed to send a message: Learning

is fun and nonthreatening. Accelerated learning incorporates the same techniques for the same reasons.

One accelerated-learning technique is the use of humor. "The relationship between humor and learning is only beginning to be understood," says Charles Gruner, a professor of speech and communication at the University of Georgia.

Gruner gives this example: Two groups of students were measured for recall soon after listening to lectures, one humorous and one not. Researchers found no difference in recall in the first measurement. Six weeks later, the students were tested again. This time, they recalled the humor-related lectures more clearly. Gruner concedes that the experiment is hardly scientific, but he does find it intriguing.

A major premise of accelerated learning is that learning must be collaborative. Accelerated learning treats the acquisition of knowledge as a collaborative effort of equals—trainers and trainees. Trainees tend to feel less

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pressure to learn when they're in partnership with the trainer and when the responsibility for learning is shared. When trainees feel less stressed, they're more likely to learn. In accelerated learning, the trainer gets involved with trainees in the learning activities.

How does it work?

Accelerated learning is a four-phase process: preparation, acquisition, integration, and application.

Preparation. In this first phase, the trainer conditions trainees for learning by creating a soothing, nonthreatening environment. The classroom should contain colorful pictures, posters, or other wall hangings. These peripherals can be related to course content or not. The visuals can even be drawn by hand. They should show that the trainer cares enough to invest a little bit of him- or herself. The trainer can also play soothing music.

Overall, the classroom should convey serenity; it should make trainees feel safe and secure. The trainer should explain what trainees can expect to learn, how they'll benefit, and that the training content will be easy to understand. Actually, the learning process starts before the trainer disseminates a shred of information.

Acquisition. This phase involves the course content. The keys are trainee interaction and activity. Trainees may create information graphs or mind maps to visualize, capture, and connect relationships between ideas. And the trainer can help trainees understand complex concepts through the use of such association techniques as metaphors, mnemonics, and imagery.

Here's an example of multisensory imagery: The trainer describes the principles of resistance in an electrical circuit and then tells trainees to imagine that they're electrons running along wires on their way to the giant electronic scoreboard at Yankee Stadium. En route, they meet several obstacles. To overcome the obstacles, trainees must conjure a multisensory image in which they imagine themselves zigzagging along the path while the walls collapse.

Through that exercise, trainees invent a vivid, memorable experience that will help them learn circuitry better than if the information had been

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presented through traditional lectures.

Through such imagery—also known as multimodal learning—the trainer directs trainees to use as many learning modes as possible. Trainees try to see, feel, hear, touch, taste, and smell the lesson in their mind's eye. In effect, the learning experience becomes real.

Integration. This phase might be better described as playtime. The trainer tries to get trainees physically and emotionally involved through active participation, articulation, and practice. One way to achieve that is with games using accelerated-learning techniques.

The integration phase allows as much creativity as the trainer desires. If the focus of the training is problem solving, the trainer might want to bring some children to the session. Because they tend not to have preconceived ideas, they may inspire trainees to think in different ways.

Storytelling also encourages creativity. Lozanov used storytelling during his initial experiments in suggestology.

"Whatever else a story is, it is also a powerful teacher. Advertisers know it. Socrates knew it. So did Aesop, Jesus, Muhammad, Confucius, and Mark Twain," says author Ron Zemke.

According to Zemke, stories with a lot of visual imagery increase long-term retention better than repetition, rote, and drill. The most effective stories are simple and direct, use colorful imagery and natural dialogue, and contain some repeated elements. A story creates a visual space in which people organize their thoughts. But it

doesn't tell them what to think.

Other accelerated-learning methods used in the integration phase include debate and drama.

Articulation. This phase involves exercises, question-and-answer sessions, discussion, and reiterative-type games such as Jeopardy and Round Robin. The idea is to go over what one has learned. This is also called distributed practice.

Application. In this final phase, participants apply the learning in simulations that mimic real situations. The trainer might ask trainees to engage in role play or to take part in Lozanov's passive concert by relaxing, breathing deeply, and listening to soothing music while the trainer reads a prepared story that addresses the concepts covered in the session.

Reaping the benefits

If the use of accelerated learning were to cut training time by just one-third, the savings would be substantial. Trainees would be back at work faster, and training costs would be lower. The time saved could be used in cross-training, making employees more flexible and valuable to the organization. And less time and money would be spent on retraining.

Many of us of a certain generation may have attended schools where we were told we were there to learn, not play. Many employee-training programs espouse the same philosophy. But now, more educators and trainers are realizing that some of the old, accepted methods aren't always effective.

Try adding accelerated-learning techniques to your training. Lozanov's pioneering efforts of more than 30 years ago may benefit you, your trainees, and your organization today. ■

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