

Learning how to learn

Talk from Bill Lucas

Have you ever stopped to think about what is actually happening when you are learning? A child tentatively takes a short, wobbly step forward but in a few days has begun to walk confidently. A teenager learns how to drive a car. An adult discovers how to empathise with someone who is distressed. A grandparent works out how to send an e-mail for the first time at the age of 80. In each of these examples, learning is clearly taking place.

But what's going on? Is a child learning to walk the same as learning to empathise with a mother who is distressed? Is learning the names of new medication and products the same as mastering a new programme on your computer? Do we all learn in the same way? For several thousand years, people have been trying to work out what is going on when you are learning. And in the last hundred years there have been many different theories put forward.

Recently it is becoming clearer that, just as you can learn how to walk, use the computer, or work with families with complex needs, so you can also learn how to learn.

The 5Rs

If you want to get physically fitter you take exercise. So what do you do if you want to get better at learning? Answer – you exercise your learning “muscles”. Let me introduce you to the five muscles which I believe are most important. I call them the 5Rs, today's version of the old 3Rs of wRiting, Reading and aRithmetic! They are:

- **Resourcefulness:** Knowing what to do when you don't know what to do!
- **Remembering:** This involves getting better at recalling processes and techniques that have helped you in the past and applying them in the present.
- **Resilience:** Developing staying power so that you can deal with the uncomfortable feelings you will get when you really stretch yourself.
- **Reflectiveness:** This involves harvesting the meaning from your learning so that you are continuously improving.
- **Responsiveness:** This involves adapting and changing as you put what you have learned into practice.

Let me give you an example of what I mean in practice. The TV show *Who wants to be a millionaire* is now seen all over the world. In the show contestants are asked questions of increasing complexity and each time they answer the money they win doubles until they win a million pounds – or dollars in Australia.

At each stage contestants have four choices as to how they answer a question:

- They can answer it on their own.
- They can ask the audience, in the hope that someone will know the answer.
- They can phone a friend, an expert on the subject.
- They can opt to go 50:50, narrowing the odds by being offered two answers, one of which is the correct one.

Each of these is a smart learning strategy for a quiz show. And resourceful learners will not just have four strategies for any situation they find themselves in. Resourceful learners have many strategies they will use throughout their lives. Maternal and Child Health Nurses deal with many different families and family situations. What strategies do you call on when dealing with, for example, a teenage single parent? Are these the same strategies you would use with an adult single parent? Different strategies might include things like:

- Sleeping on it
 - Analysing options using, for example, a strengths, weakness, opportunities or threats SWOT analysis or any similar tool
 - Using a mind map
 - Making a list
 - Searching on the web
 - Coming up with a set of challenging questions
 - Using a reference book
 - Developing a small problem solving group with peers
 - Keep a diary
- and so on.

Think about your approach to learning at work as a Maternal and Child Health Nurse.

When choosing a method, effective learners tend to consider these questions:

- What kind of a learner am I? For example an activist tends to prefer trial and error, while reflective and theoretical learners will go to read a manual first!
- What kind of learning activity is it? If it is a matter of acquiring a new skill, demonstration or imitation followed by regular practice may work. If the learning is more complex, it may be helpful to have someone to advise you and give you helpful feedback.
- Where is it taking place? If at home, certain methods may be more appropriate. If at work, these may be different.

The good news is that learning is learnable!

You just need to be *Ready, Go, Steady*:

- Emotionally **ready** and determined to stay motivated,
- Able to **go** at it creatively using your first 3 learning muscles (resourcefulness, remembering and resilience), and
- **Steady**, (able to reflect and respond, adapting what you have to do in the light of what you have learned. These are the last two learning muscles.).

Are you ready?? Go. And don't forget... Steady!