

Greenaway, R. (2002) "How Transfer Happens" in: Organisation Development: Topical Papers No. 5, February 2002, 39-55, Brathay, Ambleside. [Further details follow this article.]

## How Transfer Happens

In this article, Roger Greenaway explores the concept of transfer, draws on research findings (including his own research in Outdoor Management Development [OMD]) and makes some recommendations for practice.

### The limits of transfer thinking

Transfer is a metaphor for change. It is not a very good one because the everyday meaning of transfer is simply about moving something from here to there - as in moving luggage from one car boot to another. The term 'transfer' doesn't quite capture the myriad ways in which humans learn, grow, change, develop and become high performing workers.

Robert Haskell in *The Transfer of Learning* (2001) identifies six levels of transfer which includes 'near transfer' (transfer to similar situations) and 'far transfer' (transfer to 'quite dissimilar situations'). Much of this article is about 'far transfer' which is associated (by Haskell) with 'deep learning' - the kind of learning that I found in my interviews with managers who had taken part in courses at Brathay (see later).

In discussions about transfer it is important to know whether the topic is 'near transfer' (routine expertise) or 'far transfer' (adaptive expertise and creativity) - or somewhere in between.

Mary Broad's definition of transfer in *Transferring Learning to the Workplace* (1997, p.2) is somewhere between 'near' and 'far' transfer:

*"Transfer of learning is the effective and continuing application by learners - to their performance of jobs or other individual, organizational, or community responsibilities - of knowledge and skills gained in learning activities."*

At the near end of the spectrum 'transfer' is relatively easy concept to grasp and is relatively easy to observe, track and measure. At the far end of the spectrum there are probably more important and powerful things going on, but these tend to be much harder to observe, track and measure because what is being transferred may be part of a continuing process of learning and further change.

The best advice I have found for promoting and tracking transfer is in a two part article by Marguerite Foxon: *A process approach to the transfer of training* (1993-1994) - published in the Australian Journal of Educational Technology (available on the web). She divides transfer into 5 stages:

1. Intention to Transfer
2. Initiation
3. Partial Transfer
4. Conscious Maintenance
5. Unconscious Maintenance

Foxon notes that the risk of failure is greatest in the early stages, and she refers to a survey of management education programmes which reports that "no more than 50% reported any significant attempt to transfer the training to the job environment".

But even Foxon's way of viewing transfer as a process, may not be picking up 'far transfer' and 'deep learning'. I find it difficult to accept that 'unconscious maintenance' is the ultimate goal of transfer, or that it should be seen as 'fix(ing) the strategies in the unconscious mind' (Bacon, 1983) or 'making new learning permanent' (Priest, 1997) or making training 'stick' (Mosel, 1957).

This 'difficulty' I have comes from two sources. The first is my preference for a different view of human development as a continuing, creative and interactive process. Such a view of development is described by Phillida Salmon in *Living in Time* (1985, p.144):

"In the metaphor of *life as a story*, human practices are not fixed, are, potentially, open to infinite variation. It is because we tell ourselves certain kinds of story that we come to do things in particular ways, to give our lives the particular forms they take. ... A change in character in the part that an individual plays in her story, demands that reciprocal changes be made in other characters, other stories."

The second source is my interviews with managers six weeks after their course experience. I was simply asking them to tell me about the experiences that had most impact on their learning and development. And in telling their stories they started making new connections and new learning. My visits had inadvertently boosted their learning from the original experiences and may well have led to even further changes in performance.

These managers were not 'fixed' or 'permanently' changed. They were simply continuing to learn and develop.

Transfer has become an overloaded word. This becomes all too clear when 'near transfer' language (fixed, permanent) is applied to 'far transfer' change (adaptiveness, creativity and new learning). I have attempted to resolve this problem in a practical way by recommending the use of both 'action plans' (useful for 'near transfer') and learning plans (useful for 'far transfer').

I also encourage the use of notebooks in which learners record their experiences on the left hand pages and their (corresponding) learning and ideas on the right hand pages. These notebooks become a useful resource for the development of both kinds of plan.

### **The diversity of transfer in practice**

When I visited these managers six weeks after their outdoor management development courses, I was shown various 'visual aids' that appeared to be assisting transfer. One was a photograph display on the office wall, including a photograph of this manager taken by a fellow participant while she was performing a daring jump on the ropes course. Another manager had a flipchart souvenir on the outside of his office door - a flow chart showing how he would like his team to operate. Another manager showed me his action plan that he kept in the top draw of his desk. He also walked around hunched (his old way) and more upright (his new way) to demonstrate to me how the weight on his shoulders (resistance to change) had lifted. Another told me about a finger painting he made during a reflective session at the end of his course - partly to show his wife and children how he wanted to keep things in balance in his life.

Transfer was not the main focus of my research, but I could see evidence of many different learning styles assisting the process of transfer. The four examples below can be represented as a spectrum from least processed (photographs) to most processed (action plan).

**PHOTO > PAINTING > CHART > PLAN**

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#### **1. PHOTO DISPLAY**

##### *drawing on vivid images*

"Before I went on the course I hoped that I'd be able to *make a leap* between the physical challenge bit to the work setting. I've got this *visual picture* ... of something which I overcame and achieved despite all sorts of things. It's almost like a sort of *talisman*."

She seemed to be learning on a number of different levels from the same event, and learning in different ways. She was also *transferring* her learning in different ways, but especially through 'carrying' and 'drawing' on vivid images from the course. Souvenirs of the course were displayed on the wall: a collage representing her course experience and some photos taken during the course.

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## 2. FINGER PAINTING

### *How I'd like it to be ... I'd like things to flow*

"I just dipped my hands in a load of paint and was splashing about making things that were 3D, that were textural and that flowed... There was an overlap and one thing ran into another. I was mixing paints up and mixing mediums up and didn't put any straight lines in this thing at all which was symbolic to me ... symbolic to me about how I'd like to be really. *I'd like things to flow around and for there to be peaks and troughs.* I don't particularly want to work on an even plane, nor do I want to compartmentalise things in straight lines. *I would like to think there's some purpose to everything I do that relates to something else ...*"

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## 3. FLOW CHART

### *working relationships and change*

"The theme was '*working relationships and change*'. So we were thinking about *chaos into harmony*. Percussion and wind instruments - discord, trees, panic and fear and harmony and we brought together the rhythms, and with the harmony and the tune at the end and that was *very powerful* because it *wasn't constrained* by jargon or language or anything ... That was why it was *powerful* ... because it was a *totally different setting* and yet we were asked to produce a drama on working relationships and change and [triumphantly] we did! ... *We should be using everybody's creativity and experience. The course actually reinforced that.*"

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## 4. ACTION PLAN

### *making that uncomfortable first step*

"There was *really quite a powerful link* between the experience at Brathay of *hanging onto a solid tree stump, and making that step out into a situation that was uncomfortable, risky and [where I might] fall off. And that was really quite a good learning experience.*"

[Did anything useful come from making that connection?]

"Yes. There were *a number of things*. I suppose first of all - some *confidence that if I get myself started I can nearly always do it*, and very often I can do it as well as, if not better than, many other people."

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The woman with the photograph display spoke of "carrying" the experience with her and of "drawing" on the experience. She mentioned a conversation with a colleague from the course, when back at work, in which they said to each other "remember the posture" (a confident posture from the ropes course experience) before going into a difficult meeting. Although she had reviewed these incidents in great detail during the course, it was the raw and relatively unprocessed state of the original experience that she was using (through photographs and "the posture") to make connections from the course to the workplace.

In contrast, at the more 'processed' end of this spectrum, the man with the plan was referring to his checklist of goals in order to transfer his learning. These goals did not refer to his original experiences from which they came. His goals were focused on what he needed to do

in the workplace. Such a plan represents "fully processed learning". On the plus side, such a plan gives clear guidance for future action. On the minus side, there is a risk that such plans can get separated so far from the original experiences that the connection is weak.

In between the 'photo' and the plan are more intermediate stages of processing. The painting and the chart are full of meaning, and they provide an aid to transfer. But they are not expressed as 'SMART' goals. Nor is it clear (from these visual aids on their own) just how closely they connect with the original experiences. In this middle area of 'partly processed' learning there seems to be plenty of scope for assisting 'far transfer'. It is a stage of processing that might still tap into the power of the original experience, but without being arranged into a plan for action. It is as if the creators of the painting and the flowchart are saying "these are the ideas I want to keep alive" - not in the form of something to cross off a list, but as a continuing source of inspiration - a continuing challenge to live up to the expectations represented in their images.

### **The outdoors - a special case for transfer?**

Over recent years, the worlds of training and education have been waking up to the benefits of holistic approaches to learning including: accelerated learning, active learning, emotional intelligence, multiple intelligences, learning style preferences, mind mapping, and brain friendly learning. Many of these advances have inspired educators and trainers to invest in a whole range of learning aids to stimulate all the senses and intelligences. Working in a stimulating outdoor environment can also bring many of these benefits. The natural world is exceptionally brain friendly! Not only does working in such an environment help to stimulate learning in the first place, it also provides a whole smorgasbord of opportunities for assisting transfer.

It is often said that outdoor courses suit the activist learning style - and by implication are less suited to other learning styles. This is nonsense! It is *people* who design courses, not the mountains or the equipment or the weather. The outdoors is full of rich opportunities for *all* styles of learning. Indoors or outdoors, it is up to the people involved to create suitably stimulating, holistic and balanced experiences.

But people do have understandable concerns about transfer when the learning environment is so different to the workplace. Some providers and clients work hard to narrow the gap by providing simulations of the work environment or by preceding every exercise with an elaborate metaphor containing ready-made connections. In fact, this approach is so popular that many authors refer almost exclusively to metaphoric transfer when explaining how to transfer learning from the outdoors. But I have found many other kinds of transfer taking place - especially people learning about themselves through feedback. If the course is well designed and facilitated people will be discovering strengths and qualities in themselves and each other that will be valuable back in the workplace. In fact the outdoors is no more 'unworklike' than a training room. Think of the outdoors as a training room with no walls or ceiling, with infinitely more facilities available and as capable of generating levels of intensity and reality that create a particularly transferable kind of learning.

People's concerns about the relevance of the outdoors to the workplace can rebound in a paradoxical way. On in-house courses, participants are less likely to be asking "What's this got to do with my work?" If and when people do find answers to this question, the connections they make are often quite profound - simply because there are no obvious or ready-made connections to hand.

A similar rebound often happens with concerns about risk and discomfort in the outdoors, typically resulting in everyone working much harder to support each other. This support is of value in itself and it has a habit of surviving beyond the critical moment when support was

clearly needed. Many of the senior managers I interviewed were highly impressed by the quality of support from their colleagues. If such support is strong enough to continue back in the workplace, it can also be harnessed in various ways to support further risks associated with transfer.

The geographical distance of an outdoor venue adds to the cost of travel and may require some creative thinking about appropriate transfer strategies to implement before and after the course. However, the psychological distance is exactly the same as any other training event. Powerful learning experiences make the journey worthwhile - especially if it is a kind of power that is not readily found in the training room next door. It is easy for outdoor experiences to be memorable. If transferable learning is integrated with these memories, then two key elements for transfer are in place.

The outdoors has many winning cards that favour the transfer of learning - if played well.

### **What the research says about transfer**

A 3x3 matrix created by Mary Broad and John Newstrom in *Transfer of Training* (1992) emphasises the importance of *partnership*. The vertical dimension of the matrix shows the three main characters in the transfer partnership: '*manager*', '*trainer*' and '*trainee*'. The horizontal dimension is a time scale representing the periods '*before*', '*during*' and '*following*' the training course. This matrix serves as an index to their 79 "strategies for managing transfer of training". Their recommendations are their response to research that finds very low transfer rates and poor support for transfer in the workplace.

#### **THE TRANSFER MATRIX**

Manager Before	Trainer Before	Trainee Before
Manager During	Trainer During	Trainee During
Manager After	Trainer After	Trainee After

**Transfer of Training, Mary L. Broad and John W. Newstrom (1992) Perseus Books**

More optimistic is Mary Broad's *Transferring Learning to the Workplace* (1997) in which several case studies demonstrate the success of partnership strategies such as those described in *Transfer of Training*. D. and J. Robinson in *Training for Impact* (1989) argue for even more thorough work before and after a training course to ensure that the transferred learning has a measurable impact on business needs.

Toby Rhodes (2001) studied the "perceived barriers" to transfer from outdoor management development (OMD) programmes. His main recommendations are similar to those outlined above: jointly agree strategies to promote transfer, and brief learners about how the course will help meet business objectives. He also recommends that learners continue experiential learning back at work, suggesting that "transferring the ability to learn from experience is perhaps the highest form of learning transfer".

This final point would be supported by my own OMD research which showed some managers becoming fascinated with the learning process itself. In outdoor courses, managers frequently find themselves in the position of being novice learners in some activities - and often in quite dramatic situations that make the learning process highly visible. By making the experiential learning processes of an OMD course more explicit, by including sessions on learning to learn, and by giving participants some experience of facilitating reviews, they should be more capable of further learning on their return to work. Not only would this allow the transfer of 'learning about learning', it would also assist in the 'far transfer' of other learning.

In *Transfer of Learning* (2001) Robert Haskell reviews 100 years of research about transfer and summarises his findings in these "11 Principles of Transfer":

"For significant learning and transfer to occur, the following 11 principles are required:

1. Acquire a large primary knowledge base in the area in which transfer is required
2. Acquire some level of knowledge base in subjects outside the primary area.
3. Understand what transfer of learning is and how it works
4. Understand the history in the area(s) that transfer is wanted
5. Acquire motivation, or more specifically, a "spirit of transfer"
6. Develop an orientation to think and encode learning in transfer terms
7. Create cultures of transfer or support systems
8. Understand the theory underlying the area(s) in which we want to transfer
9. Engage in hours of practice and drill
10. Allow time for the learning to incubate
11. Finally, and most importantly, learners must observe and read the works of people who are exemplars of transfer thinking. This means reading systems thinkers, accounts of scientific discoveries, of invention and innovation; it means reading the great poets. Poets are masters of transfer."

The "most important" point in Haskell's general theory of transfer (Number 11) is a fascinating one: "*Poets are masters of transfer*". It has inspired me to set up debates within trainer-training events on the question of whether a poem or a plan is a better vehicle for the transfer of learning. Here are some of the ideas that have been stated during these debates:

### **POEMS VS. PLANS**

You discard even the best plans when they are finished.

You keep the best poems - they last forever and can inspire many plans.

Poems capture the essence of the experience.

Plans capture what you can use and do with it.

A poem is a reminder of good times - it inspires.

A plan is a pathway to better times - it inspires.

Poems convert an ordinary experience into something special.

Plans convert an ordinary experience into something special.

Poems create something that was not there before.

Plans create something that was not there before.

You need imagination, creativity, rhythm and timing and a careful choice of words to be a poet.

You need imagination, creativity, rhythm and timing and a careful choice of words to make a plan.

Plans know when to stop - they have deadlines.

Poems don't - they are lifelines.

Poems can be fun, profound, entertaining.

Plans can create anything you want.

So can poems.

### **Tools for transfer during a training course**

Here are three basic strategies for promoting transfer through reviewing.

#### **Variety**

*Don't put all your eggs in one basket.* A variety of reviewing methods that engage all learning styles increases the chances of each person being able to transfer something of value.

#### **Quantity**

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*Don't save transfer to the end.* Reviewing throughout a course develops people's abilities to learn and 'connect' at many different levels.

### **Flashbacks**

*Train learners to use reviewing skills.* By taking improved reviewing skills back to the workplace participants can more easily connect back to their course experience whenever they need to.

These basic strategies can be augmented by more precise and powerful transfer tools. All reviewing tools assist transfer, but some do so more than others. Most of the tools described below belong in the centre of the *Transfer of Training* matrix. In other words they describe what tools the trainer can use during a training course to promote transfer of learning to the workplace.

### **Raising expectations**

Tell participants about how similar courses provided by you have resulted in effective transfer for people like them. Better still - find someone from their workplace to tell the story. Be open to questions. This raises expectations that the training course could make a real difference.

### **Demonstration of support**

Messages of support from key people at work are read out, including statements from line managers of those present - preferably including mention of special arrangements for supporting transfer after the course.

### **Goal setting**

Explain that goal setting for the course and for their return to work is an important way of assisting transfer, but not the only way.

For this goal setting exercise, participants set goals for the next activity. Ask each person to set three individual goals by completing these sentences:

*'I will be disappointed if...'*

*'I will be pleased if...'*

*'I will be delighted if...'*

Review this goal setting exercise after the activity, and ask each person to set three goals for the course and three goals for their return to work using the same sentence beginnings.

### **Goal Keepers**

Create two groups A and B. Ask the A's to write down 3 individual goals for the next activity, one goal per index card. Each A chooses a B and gives them their 3 cards. B's now work as observers and 'goal keepers' while A's do a group activity. B's quietly indicate progress with each goal by showing their partner a card whenever they make progress with the goal (thumbs up) or appear to forget it (thumbs down).

Review, swap roles and review again, focusing on what they had learned about goal setting and goal achievement.

### **Linking games**

Purposeful energisers that generate connections and encourage imaginative leaps. E.g. word association games, creative thinking exercises, using random pictures to generate ideas, physical linking games, 'three things': tell a story that links these three random objects.

### **Transfer Plans**

These are a combination of action plans and learning plans. By combining the two together it will be easier for participants to learn to sustain continuing development. If they are prepared

to expect some disappointments, and to see these as learning opportunities, they are more likely to continue their attempts to transfer their learning. Although they should be capable of learning without support, ideally their plan should include regular meetings with a mentor they have chosen.

### **Feedback**

My favourite method is Warm Seat because it places each learner in control of the feedback they want.

### **Buddy Systems**

Practice any support systems that learners may be using back in the workplace. Explore how buddies can effectively support each other in developing the skills they are learning.

### **Practice and Rehearsal**

If using drama based reviewing techniques such as Action Replay, it is relatively easy to set up role plays in which ideas can be tried out in relative safety. Use buddies for extra support (see above).

### **Force Field Analysis**

Force Field Analysis can be brought to life by having people representing the various forces while the learner walks into the future and meets the supporting and opposing forces. This tends to be easier and more focused than role play. Use buddies for extra support (see above).

### **Debates: optimist vs. pessimist**

Everyone has an optimist and pessimist inside (don't they?). During a training event, the optimist will be looking forward to applying their learning successfully back in the workplace and the pessimist will be expecting things to be much the same as before. These debates can be carried out in pairs, with person A declaring one of their goals and person B playing the pessimist (or Devil's Advocate) and questioning whether the person will achieve their goal. The debate can also be set up in a whole group using 'Revolver'. This and many of the above techniques are described in more detail on my website at <http://reviewing.co.uk>

### **Conclusion**

Concerns about transfer should not undermine the essential value of inspirational experiential training. Transfer arguments tend to be linear logical traceable threads. If you start with an empty programme and think about transfer you might never encounter some of the crazier, wilder more imaginative ideas that really do unlock something that is worth transferring. A nourishing, stimulating and surprising contrast to norms helps to awaken people and lift them to new levels. The best programmes are a magical mixture of contrasts - in which a careful overall design links together the more creative and adventurous aspects of a programme.

### **A transfer exercise**

The following questions are designed to help you transfer what you have learned from this article!

If you want to apply something of what you learned in this article, how will you go about applying it? Will you re-read the article and mark it in some way? Will you instantly try out one of the ideas? Will you note down a list of questions this article has provoked? Will you create your personal mind map based on the article? Will you instantly add new items to your 'to do' list? Will you talk about it with others? Will you copy and circulate the article to colleagues (complete with copyright information!)? Will you carry out a thorough review of your own organisation's approach to the transfer of learning? Will you contact the author with your feedback or questions? Or will you just let the ideas swim around in your mind and hope

that they will re-emerge in some useful form as and when you need them? Or will you be a 'master of transfer' and convert this article into a poem?

The above list is neither complete nor objective. It will have reminded you of some of the key points in the article. It might also have tempted you to do something about transferring your learning into action!

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 Dr. Roger Greenaway is a training consultant who provides trainer-training in reviewing skills in the UK and around the world. He worked at Brathay from 1981-1986 in youth development, manager development and trainer development. He returned to Brathay as a visiting researcher to complete his doctorate "Powerful Learning Experiences in Management Learning and Development" (1995) - which was part of the inspiration for this article. Roger is the author of several articles and books about reviewing. He also publishes the email newsletter Active Reviewing Tips. Roger's comprehensive website (including his thesis) is at <http://reviewing.co.uk> email: [roger@reviewing.co.uk](mailto:roger@reviewing.co.uk)

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 See: <http://reviewing.co.uk/transfer/index.htm> for a regularly updated list of links and descriptions of **the best websites about the transfer of learning**.

### **How Transfer Happens**

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Please let me know if you have any! In fact, any comments you may have about this list of links, about the attached article, or questions or ideas you may have about reviewing or transfer are always welcome. Thank you for your enquiry. I hope this information helps to develop your own thinking about how transfer happens.

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