

# An overview of the six 'I' s of real learning

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For more than forty years I have been fascinated by learning. That word is so often used, and I fear so rarely, in truth understood. Every week I see multiple references to people, often I accept, in good faith, claiming to be 'lifelong learners', and less often than was the case, I do still encounter 'learning organisations'.

The word has a high value, it is the key to development and growth, and here I will very briefly summarise six insights from my own deliberate reflections that may help fellow practitioners better understand how learning can be supported to genuinely improve performance.

## First a definition

Before exploring learning I will take a minute to share my preferred definition, from Tim Russell: 'A long term change in behaviour prompted by an experience'. From this I emphasise that learning is behavioural, observable, for instance when I have learned to drive, read, or put up a shelf, this is evidential. I would not want to be in traffic behind someone who feels they have learned to drive after watching YouTube videos, or reading books, without ever holding a steering wheel.

Learning is *not* a fleeting thought that is lost, and that cannot be recalled ten minutes later. Real learning results in long term changes in behaviour, that survives setbacks, barriers and obstacles. It often takes a lot of time, effort, and often support, alas, it is less often seen than may be presumed. Creating learning that is applied long term is tough, we know that very well, and I hope this model helps you to achieve this difficult feat more often.

## The six 'I's

These six help me to understand the true nature of learning. During this series I will focus in more depth on each, so, it's time they got a mention. I believe that real learning has these six elements:

### Individual

All learning is unique, dynamic and contextual. Efforts made to respectfully identify and work on needs at an individual level pay off way beyond most group-based events.

### Incremental

Applied learning that leads directly to sustained enhanced performance typically grows in small, unexciting steps. Over-ambitious unrealistic plans very rarely achieve success.

### Iterative

Learning is not linear, the higher the value of learning the more persistence is required, and with this an acceptance that this can be a frustrating, difficult journey.

### Intrinsic

We learn most not from infrequent, non-needs based 'training courses', but from the continuous experiences of our real lives. So tune in, identify development and exploit.

### Intentional

Far too much learning is random and accidental. Clarity around personal development priorities helps, so too developing the key skills of deliberate and managed development.

## Immersive

Results from learning are rarely immediate, and often require more uninterrupted time than anticipated. Outcomes from superficial learning has low value – dive deeper.

### **Combinations work best**

Each of these 'I's have value in isolation. Often combining two or more enhances the value of learning insight and application. For instance, immersive learning may well involve conscious recognition of the need to work iteratively, *and* incrementally as a deep dive will likely mean barriers to confront and a need to value progress in small significant steps. Another combination could be intentional learning with intrinsic, involving a deliberate plan to seek and exploit informal, unstructured, naturally occurring development opportunities, which may also include of course, one or all of the other four!

### **This is simple, it's also not easy**

This leaning model is deceptively straightforward. It's not particularly technical, it does not require months or years of study, and it is too easily dismissed as 'obvious', as 'common sense'. I am well into my fifth decade in the learning sector, and in my personal experience I rarely see an awareness or even interest in these, fundamental and for me, essential elements of real learning. I encourage my fellow learning practitioners to consider each of these 'I's (which will be explored in more depth in the following weeks), and use them as a means to focus upon, and support the development of each very different person with whom we work.

### **Why this is important**

Since 1982, when people ask me what I do, I use the words of my first Mentor Sandy, that 'I help people to learn'. After years of mindless mimicking, I reflected on this, and came to see the power in this short sentence. Learning is a different path for each of us, and how often do we understand that very specific, so very unique journey such that we can truly support and help what must always be a self-directed and owned experience?

During my decades of helping people to learn, my own learning has been a continuous and very deliberate, tangible effort. I delight in the discovery of for me, new and immediately practical learning models, ideas and frameworks, such as the Dunning Kruger effect; the three forms of reflection, and so much of Nancy Kline's work on the 'Thinking environment'.

Learning about learning is at the very core of what we in broadly the 'Learning and Development' profession are all about.

I offer these six 'I's as a pebble on the beach that makes what we do, when in the right place, of direct and measurable value.

This model I hope, shows clearly that ultimately all development is self-development, that we choose to learn, and that mature, supported learners are capable of genuinely driving their own development.