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Dear Reader,

Have you ever thought how our daily experiences are shaping our opinions and attitudes, how we are constantly taking in information, making sense of it and acting? Does this mean we are constantly learning? Well, learning may require some more conscious processing to be fully capitalized. This month, Ernie Turner addresses the topic of "Incidental Learning", what it is, how we can design for it in order to capture the gold nuggets from daily learning opportunities.

Enjoy the reading!

Isabel Rimanoczy
Editor

Quote of the Month
"Experience is not what happens to you, *it's what you do with what happens to you."* *Aldous Huxley, Author*

LIM NEWS

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WAYS TO DESIGN FOR AND MINE
INCIDENTAL LEARNING
by Ernie Turner

Vast resources - time, money and human energy - go into designing and implementing learning and

development programs. And almost invariably the program evaluations indicate that what participants valued most were the networking opportunities - the coffee breaks, the cocktail hours, the dinners and the other times 'in between' all those carefully planned activities we took so much effort to design and organize. These in-between times are the favorite haunts for incidental learning.

Why is this? What happens during these 'in between' times? Does this mean we should re-consider the amount of time and energy we put into more formal learning activities? How can we encourage, design for and capture what we term incidental learning - this 'in between' learning in our current development programs?

These are the questions I would like to explore in this article.

Why is 'networking' so important and what does it look like?

We all know that the most effective way to really get things done in an organization depends much more on *who* we know and the degree of trust and credibility we have in them than on *what* we know. What we know gets us to the party but it is who we know that will determine what kind of party we are going to have. So it stands to reason that getting to know our peers is vital to our organizational and business success. Getting to know people for who they are, where they have been, what they value, what they think, and what they have learned are all aspects of 'networking'. Often these networking opportunities turn into lasting relationships.

So what can we learn from our peers? The list is long but includes: who can do what and who can't; corporate heroes and villains; preferences and styles of formal and informal leaders; dos and taboos around here; the values in practice (the real corporate culture) versus those espoused 'in print'; sacred cows; where resources are and how to get them; best and worst practices - what worked, what didn't and why; what's in and what's out; who's in and who's out; who to avoid at all costs; how to solve a current challenge; where to go for help; getting straight feedback; sorting out work/life/family challenges, etc. Normally these important topics are not covered in the learning and development curriculum so the only way to find out about them is during the 'in between' moments. Some of this 'in between' networking could be called gossip but a great deal of the learning that transpires during these networking 'meetings' is often more important to an individual's career than the learning that comes out of the 'formal' parts of a development program.

We call this type of learning, ***incidental learning***. Webster defines 'incidental' as something that 'occurs merely by chance or without intention or calculation'. Marsick and Watkins[1] define incidental learning as "a byproduct of some other activity, such as task accomplishment, interpersonal interaction, sensing the organizational culture, trial-and-error experimentation, or even formal learning". Learning and Development designers usually don't spend much time thinking or designing for incidental learning. But we should! There are untold opportunities for designing and mining incidental learning.

Five Ways to design for incidental learning

Here are five ideas that we in LIM have used over the years with teams and groups in a variety of learning interventions, and that have made a big difference in capturing and sharing incidental learning as well as supporting everyone in finding their voice and helping it to be heard.

1. Memorable Moments. During the course of a day we all have moments where something special happened - we had a meaningful conversation with someone; we witnessed something extraordinary; we read something that had an impact on our thinking; we did something that caused us to reflect and see something that we hadn't seen before; someone did something to us that had a profound effect; etc. Often these moments are like crumbs that get swept off the table without any examination or reflection. So usually at the beginning of a day or the end of a day we will give everyone a few moments to reflect, extract and exchange two or three memorable moments that stood out for them and say why those moments were memorable. We try to create a 'coffee break' type of conversation for this kind of exchange because this is what often happens over a cup of coffee. Almost always this turns into a very rich and meaningful dialogue full of incidental learning. This conversational concept can also turn a family meal into a rich evening event.

2. The Fika Paus. The opportunity for incidental learning has almost been institutionalized in the Swedish corporate life with the Fika Paus or Fika. It is simply a corporate coffee break that occurs in most Swedish companies around 10 a.m. This is the time to find out and share what is going on. Work stops; the coffee gets poured and the learning exchange begins. No wonder the Swedish culture is so good at coming to consensus; they build it during Fika over some very good coffee and pastry (the two critical ingredients for an effective Fika). Of course, they are not the only ones who take this time to relax and exchange ideas but they have perfected the process. So after a coffee break we add a brief 'extension' and invite anyone to share with the larger group an insight or idea that the rest of the group might enjoy hearing that came out of the coffee break conversations. We factor in some time for this exchange so that it becomes part of learning process.

3. Reflection and Dialogue. The late David Bohm, a former professor of Theoretical Physics at Birkbeck College, University of London, over his lifetime studied and wrote about the essence of a good conversation which he called a 'dialogue'. Bohm's book, ***On Dialogue,***[2] describes how dialogue can kindle a new mode of paying attention to and perceiving assumptions we often take for granted, as well as appreciating differing opinions by using explicit 'norms' for acceptable dialogue.

Often people talk at one other in meetings and get into heated discussions. The conversation becomes a verbal "ping- pong" game with each party waiting for their turn to hit the ball back. There is not much time given for reflection, active listening or seeking to understand the meaning behind the words. The atmosphere is one of impatience and those who speak louder and faster - often the extraverts and Americans in multi-cultural meetings - tend to dominate. People interrupt each other, responding and reacting to fragments of what is said – many times only to a word or to an expression. Judging is common because it is about being "right or wrong". Active listening is rare. Real values and feelings often do not get raised because the atmosphere is more judgmental than supportive. Assumptions are never expressed as such; they take the shape of certainties and facts. Positions are polarized. Because of time pressures to make decisions or find solutions decisions get made that later unravel. Haste makes waste!

When working with a team or group we periodically introduce a variation of dialogue that we call **Reflection and Dialogue (R&D)** where dialogue follows several minutes of quiet reflection on a focus question that captures the mood of the group at that particular time. This reflection time slows the group down and gives introverts and non-native speakers the time they need to get their thoughts together; it also forces the extraverts to edit their thoughts. Then when the dialogue begins everyone is ready to speak up as well as prepared to listen. Everyone is encouraged to use the ground rules of dialogue: voice their thoughts as well as their feelings, opinions and assumptions about a topic; avoid interruptions or ping pong conversations between two individuals; suspend judgment; listen actively;

and build in an appreciative way on what someone else has said. This is not the time to resolve differences, make decisions or solve problems. As a consequence individuals are heard and a collective meaning and spirit emerges. Often unresolved problems either disappear or solutions naturally emerge.

The incidental learning coming out of these R&D sessions is amazing. For the first time some individuals get 'air time' and the appreciation and common sense that emerges is well worth the allocation of 'non-decision' time in a meeting. I was once working with an OD team in a major corporation and at the end of the time we had allocated for R&D I said that we needed to bring the session to a close. One of the individuals said, "Ernie, we've never had a conversation among us like this; we can't stop now!" Everyone wanted to continue. We did.

4. Open Space. Harrison Owen[3], a well-known meeting organizer, has formulated another coffee break-type of meeting called Open Space where people work on topics and questions that are important to them. Open Space is an organizing principle or means of establishing a system for people to engage others in areas of common interest, and to develop deepened understanding of issues. Owen defined four principles and one law for this process:

1. Whoever comes are the right people;

2. Whatever happens is the only thing that could have;

3. Whenever it starts is the right time;

4. When it is over it is over.

The additional law is the *Law of the Two Feet*: If during the course of the gathering any person "finds him or herself in a situation where they are neither learning nor contributing, they can use their two feet and go to some more productive place" (p.72). This allows an individual to move from one sub-group to another without offering an apology or feeling guilty. This is what normally happens in a coffee break anyway. Participants are encouraged to write down the topics and focus questions that they would like to work on with their peers. Then very quickly people divide themselves into interest groups on the topics/questions of their choice and begin the work. The question owner becomes the sub-group facilitator. Variations on this simple theme can be introduced. According to Owen, this process has been successfully used with groups from 5 to 500.

The incidental learning that comes out of these sessions is rich as it truly is an 'organized coffee break'. We often assign a Learning Coach to a sub-group to help them become aware of all the incidental learning nuggets. One nugget that almost always comes out of these meetings is the power of a relaxed setting since most of these meetings are in hotel lobbies, the bar, out-doors by the pool, walking along the beach or in the woods. These more natural meeting environments provide an entirely different kind of conversation. This is something that we as designers can easily control rather than leave room settings up to the Catering Department.

5. Debrief. If we take a few minutes at the end of the day or after each session, we can discover more incidental lessons. In addition to asking for what worked well and what could be improved, we can also ask, "What came up during the day that you were not expecting?" By taking a minute to reflect and write down our thoughts we constantly surprise ourselves at all the rich data we have stored away.

So what are the consequences of these different approaches for mining incidental learning?

The focus becomes more learner-centered rather than teacher-centered. The design is more organic and dynamic and less structured. Participants take on greater responsibility and share the ownership for the learning content as well as the learning process. Knowledge sharing is encouraged. The atmosphere is more informal. Networking opportunities are built in to the 'formal' design. **Incidental learning is no longer fully accidental.**

Ernie Turner is a co-founder and President of LIM, LLC (ernie.turner@LIMglobal.net).

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[1] Marsick, Victoria J. and Watkins, Karen E. (2001) Informal and Incidental Learning. In: Merriam, Sharan B. Ed., The New Update on Adult Learning Theory, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Number 89, Spring 2001.

[2] Bohm, D. (1996) On Dialogue. New York: Routledge.

[3] Owen, Harrison.(1992). Open Space Technology. A User's Guide. Potomac MD: Abbott Publishing.