

# Kluwer Mediation Blog

## Random Training Thoughts – Ensuring Transference

Joel Lee (National University of Singapore, Faculty of Law) · Wednesday, October 12th, 2016

I have recently had the opportunity to conduct a number of training workshops in both Negotiation and Mediation at both the University as well as for corporate clients. One of the benefits of doing this and working with other talented trainers is that it often sparks ideas as to how training can be made more effective. I would like to dedicate this month's entry on ensuring transference in training and explore other random training thoughts in entries in the coming months.

One of the challenges of any kind of education or training is to find ways to ensure that what is learnt and practiced in the classroom or training room is not left there and will be used in the intended contexts in the “real” world. A lot of the time, learners may find great value in the concepts and skills learnt in class, but once the course or workshop ends, they cease to practice the skills. The adage “use it or lose it” comes to mind and as such, educators and trainers have to engage in ways of facilitating transfer of learnings outside of the classroom.

In Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) terms, one way of achieving this is through “future pacing”. This is a process where the learner is asked to imagine applying the skills in future situations and contexts. This is also referred to as “visual rehearsal” and is used in therapy, counseling, theatre and sports. It works on the premise that an imagined event is as real to the brain as an actual event. By vividly imagining where, when and with whom they will apply the skills they had learnt, the brain is “programmed” to think that it has already happened. This then gives a feeling of familiarity to the desired skill set which in turn further reinforces the skill and increase the probability of it being used. Being very specific about the future contexts (the where, when and who) also provides triggers to the brain to remember to engage in the desired skill sets.

It is easier to do than it sounds and there are a number of ways to future pace. The most direct way has already been alluded to. One can simply and directly have the class visually rehearse. However, this isn't always the easiest thing to achieve because the learners' left brain often interferes by over-analyzing the process or they may feel self-conscious in engaging their imagination, in large part because they may think that “imagining is something only children do”. A shame really. If we all continued to engage in some of the things children do, learning may be more effective and fun.

As such, we sometimes have to engage in more indirect forms of future pacing. One way of doing this is via the questions we pose to learners. This can be done verbally within the room or if learners are asked to write reflections (whether as part of an assessment process or not), the questions can be posed as commentary.

What are examples of these future pacing questions? If a desired behavior has been engaged in, one can ask “How will this have changed the way you will negotiate?” If an undesired behavior has been engaged in, one could ask “What are three things you could do differently the next time?” and “How will you have reminded yourself to act differently the next time this happens?” It takes a bit of practice to get the hang of asking the right questions for the purposes of future pacing and in the writer’s experience, well worth it.

While future pacing successes and desired behaviours is important, it is also important to plan for situations in which plans do not work as expected. The concern, of course, is that when something does not go according to plan, learners may simply give up and possibly revert to their former behaviours. It is therefore important to future pace “failure”. The reality is that “failure” is a natural part of the learning process. The path of learning is anything but smooth and there will always be setbacks. The problem is that when encountering “failure”, the learner often sees it as going back to square one rather than seeing it as part of the journey. It is therefore important that they do not consider this slippage to be failure. As the NLPers amongst us would say “There is no failure, only feedback” and the key is to have learners see the slippage as feedback and learn to recover from and build on that feedback.

I would like to end this entry with one type of future pacing that may seem a bit unusual but has been used to good effect in both University as well as corporate settings. It involves having learners write a letter to their future selves. This can be set 3 months into the future or even years. In this letter, they are to remind themselves of the goals they have set, the insights they have gained and the skills they have learnt and will apply. They then seal the letters in an envelope addressed to themselves. The educator or trainer then collects the letters and commits to mailing them at the specified point in the future.

“A letter to yourself” serves as a form of future pacing. The process of writing it “programmes” into the writer’s mind certain things which they wish to remember and apply, thereby increasing the probability of them actually remembering or applying them. Receiving the letter in the future, serves as a reinforcement of the learnings made and the skills acquired.

There is a lovely [video](#) of a high school teacher, Bruce Farrer, who for decades had asked his students to write letters to themselves. He would then track them down 20 years later to send the letters to them. Interested readers can find out more [here](#) or just search for “letter to yourself”. You can even write one online [here](#) and have it emailed to you at a future point.

I’ll end these random training thoughts here. I hope they have sparked some ideas for those of us involved in education and training.

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