Make peer learning a culture

by Kuno Roth* ([German original column](#))

Almost $200 billions a year are spent in the United States on continuing professional development (FORBES 2016) and — as European example — around 6 billion Swiss francs* in Switzerland. This high willingness of companies to invest in the corporate training of their employees is impressive and in principle commendable. What is less commendable — as various studies suggest — is that these investments often do not produce the desired results. For example, a study from Germany (according to Psychologie Heute, 2013) and a further study from the USA (Harvard Business Review 2017) show that about two-thirds of these investments do not achieve the intended effect; namely, to actually apply part of what has been learned later in the company. While the studies were conducted with pro-profit enterprises, this is probably similar in the non-profit sector.

One reason for this is presumably the widespread mentality of wanting to solve a company problem with a course, e.g. if deficiencies in the feedback culture are found, put people through a course and think that this will solve the problem. But it is mostly not successful.

The second reason — and what we're talking about here — explains why courses often do not have the desired effect: After a training course, the necessary support in the company to transfer what has been learned into practice is often lacking; therefore, not much actually changes in practice. This may be because the company, or its supervisors, do not really want to change anything; the hectic everyday life prevents trying out what has been learned, or because the graduate is left alone with what she or he has learned.

Transfer with peers

Investing in staff training is good, but it is even better to ensure that the transfer from classroom theory to everyday practice is happening sustainably. To put simple: no course without a transfer plan. And the easiest measure for transfer is peer learning or peer support. In the first case, two course graduates are "paired" for a weekly exchange for a few months after graduation, for example; in peer support, the graduate is given a sparring partner in the company.

Like training for sports: Practising together is one of the most effective and cheapest learning methods, i.e. "learning from and with one's peers". In principle, this can be done in two ways. The first: learning from the experiences of others in similar situations; you don't have to fully invent every wheel yourself — you can benefit from wheels invented elsewhere.

The second type of peer learning became known to a wide audience during the pandemic in a sub-form, namely "peer review". This review means that the results of a research group are anonymously and critically examined by several researchers from the same field before publication. In this way, mutual learning takes place from the experiences of the other peers: the critical reviewers learn from new results, the researchers learn from what their colleagues think of them. This review process improves the quality of research.

Establishing peer learning as a culture

This second type of "learning from and with one's peers" is called "peer review", "peer support" or "peer learning", depending on

the form. Of course, such forms are not only effective among researchers. If health policy-makers, teachers or campaigners exchange information about successes, mistakes and challenges, they can improve each other's practice.

And if the peer pairs (or trios) can be arranged with little effort, peer learning is cost-effective and often the first choice. Just as it is easy for children to learn from their schoolmates and in the clique by imitating or copying (for better or for worse, of course; but here it is only about the effectiveness of the learning, not about the content).

Arranged learning from and with peers should therefore become a natural basis of professional and other further training in order to make the transfer from theory to everyday practice more likely. After all, that's what it's all about.

And furthermore, peer learning helps us not to get lost in an increasingly volatile, uncertain and fragile world. Because learning with one's peers is also emotional support. I suspect that this emotional component is what makes peer learning so effective; among peers, one can talk (more) openly about difficulties and learn (more) directly from the successful practice of others.

Now the question remains: How do you determine whether and to what extent learning is transferred from theory to practice? That's the subject of [this column](#).

PS: NGOs intervene socially with their campaigns and thus want to bring about change. They want someone to change so that something changes. That someone can be an individual, a group, a village or the majority of those who vote. Every change in behaviour is based on a conscious or unconscious learning process — something new is learned and/or something old is unlearned. Learning processes are therefore central to social change. In this sense, campaigns are social learning interventions. And thus it is somewhat surprising that learning processes and learning methods in NGOs are rather marginal in my perception. Sport is further along in this respect. Every 4th league team is trained, practices twice a week and tries to translate what they have learned into an improved game: Could also be done in campaigns and projects.

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