We Don’t Know What We Know: Adult Learning and Tacit Knowledge

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Systems of the Brain

- **Database System** “records” information
- **Social System** enables “empathy” and “fairness”
- **Error Detection System** notes deviations in “patterns”
- **Executive System** “extends” consciousness

Many learning programs focus on Executive System often to the exclusion of the other systems.

Error Detection System & Tacit Knowledge

- Error detection system “records” tacit knowledge
  - Tacit knowledge is non-conscious—it exists below conscious awareness.
  - As such it is often referred to as “intuition”—a “sense” or “feel” for a situation
- Researchers suggest that most of our knowledge involving complex knowledge and skills is tacit
- Tacit knowledge cannot be “taught”—It is learned implicitly from patterns tangled within experience
- Dilemma: How to help adults learn information that cannot be taught?

A Perspective on Developing Tacit Knowledge

- **Grasping:** Explicit knowledge :: **Transforming:** Tacit Knowledge

- **Point A:** Low point on the learning path (limited tacit knowledge developed)

- **Point B:** Tacit knowledge is developed by facing challenges to transform ideas into practice

- **Point C:** Without continued challenges, an individual’s development plateaus

- **Point D:** High point on the learning path (maximal tacit knowledge developed)

Recommendations

1. **Strive for point “B”—couple grasping with opportunities to transform knowledge**
   - For every hour in a classroom have learners spend at least 1 hour in a challenging internship-type setting
   - Place learners in authentic situations that challenge their current skill level. In internships or job setting assign learners new and unfamiliar responsibilities that require them to transform information

2. **Strive for point “D”—involve learners in unfettered inquiry**
   - In internships or job settings, challenge learners to figure out ways to address nettlesome problems of practice
   - Enrich this experience with feedback about the link between their work and related research on effective practices