

## Let's turn on the light bulb of learning!

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14 August 2006

**It's an old joke, but it's my favourite: how many psychologists does it take to change a light bulb? Only one, but the light bulb has to really want to change!**



This joke encapsulates the challenge of any teaching. You can't teach anyone anything they don't want to learn. I once tried to teach a group of fellow trainers the principles of behaviourism by putting them on a strict reward scheme for asking certain kinds of questions: they received a chocolate for each "appropriately" phrased question.

My idea was to let them experience education according to behaviourist principles, but they were so annoyed at being "manipulated" that they learnt many things - including how to "beat the system" - but certainly not what I had intended!

Unintentionally, I had placed an obstacle in the way of my colleagues' learning. They felt disrespected, and that meant they were motivated to avoid learning what I wanted to teach them (and what they would otherwise have been interested in learning).

Feelings often block learning in this way. Not only are people unlikely to learn from someone who disrespects them, they are unlikely to learn from someone they don't respect either. People also find it hard to learn when they are angry or upset.

In the reflective calm that may follow such feelings, people can learn a great deal; but when the feelings are raging, the desire to be heard takes priority over the desire to learn.



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Those of us who want to help people learn must address a whole bunch of what we can call the "hygiene factors" of learning before we start to work on the content of our message. We must clear obstacles out of the way by ensuring learners feel safe, understood and respected. And when someone isn't learning, the first question to ask ourselves is not: "What am I doing wrong?" but: "Why are they feeling wrong?" It is human nature to want to acquire new knowledge and skills, and if people aren't doing it, they will have good reason.

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