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BRAIN-FRIENDLY TEACHING:

HOW TO HELP YOUR AUDIENCE REALLY LEARN?

Stowarzyszenie Trenerów Organizacji Pozarządowych (NGO Trainers' Association)

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We all remember boring lessons at schools, don't we?

Those in which the teacher would start a long monologue and the only thing a student was allowed to do was to take notes. After 15 minutes of listening (or 2 minutes, in some cases) the boredom was creeping in, and the monotonous voice of the teacher would make you begin day-dreaming... or fall asleep.

While hoping that such experiences were rather rare in your school days, let's underline: this teaching-preaching approach is something we do not want in non-formal education!

If we want our learners to change their knowledge, skills, or attitudes on certain issues, let's choose another style of training or teaching!

This article will help you to assess the level of brain-friendliness of your educational activities.

THE MAGIC WITHIN OUR BRAINS

The change we want is happening in the brains of the learners - the most mysterious part of the human body: the size of a small box (approximately 14×16×9 cm), weighing only around 1.4 kg, consisting of mostly water with merely 150 grams of lipids, 110 grams of protein, and a teaspoon of carbohydrates.

However, this "little box" holds 86 billion neurons and uses 20% of the energy produced within the body¹. **The brain is the place where the thinking takes place, memories are stored, and emotions and attitudes are created.**

Fortunately, thanks to the developments in modern science, we have improved our knowledge of how the brain works – and changes.



Neuroscience has made great progress in the past 20 years, and though not every teacher or educator might be ready to explore the details behind notions such as functional magnetic resonance imaging, the connectome, or brainbow, all educators can and should remember several factors that make the brain learn.

¹ For more facts and figures on human brain, visit the University of Washington Centre of Neurotechnology page at <https://faculty.washington.edu/chudler/facts.html>

WHEN DOES A HUMAN BRAIN LEARN THE BEST?

Follow the below list to **check what is needed to make our training participants learn best**. While reading, reflect on each item and ask yourself: how can this knowledge influence my work as an educator? What changes may it entail?

Let's start with the fundamentals!

In order to learn with its full capacity, the brain needs you to:

- ▶ **HAVE ENOUGH OXYGEN** - It supports the learning processes – a stuffy room won't do!
- ▶ **BE NEITHER HUNGRY NOR THIRSTY** - Do you remember the previous chapter? The brain consumes 20% of our body energy and needs plenty of water to maintain its structure!
- ▶ **BE RELAXED** - Cortisol, the stress hormone, puts us into the fight or flight mode – and if you fight for survival there is no space for learning!
- ▶ **BE ABLE TO CONCENTRATE** - If you are cooking with one hand, texting on your phone with another, and all this while listening to the neighbours shouting at each other... the information from that online webinar that you are attending won't be something your mind will memorise!
- ▶ **HAVE TIME** - You need time to create the right mindset and openness for learning – otherwise, the hurry-worry attitude creeps in, with our infamous cortisol, adrenaline, and a few other stress hormones as villains.



Ready for the next step?

Let's look at what type of information has the most chances to be memorised!

The brain learns best when the information is:

- ▶ interesting
- ▶ easy to understand
- ▶ visual
- ▶ colourful
- ▶ presented through symbols
- ▶ uncommon
- ▶ surprising
- ▶ funny
- ▶ repeated many times
- ▶ at the opening and closing (of a speech, workshop, lecture...)
- ▶ the message is passionate.

Here, it is worthwhile to pause and reflect

How can I ensure that my training course or workshop will include information with as many of these elements as possible?

Some of the ideas may be:

- ▶ incorporating visual facilitation into my training courses or e.g. graphics and photos in online presentations, using symbols (e.g. from the Bikablo² visual dictionaries designed specifically for trainers),
- ▶ welcoming humour during the training sessions (e.g. through the usage of memes and funny games),
- ▶ repeating information and wrapping up the session with a summary of the key points, presenting information that is relevant for the learners and explaining why it can be beneficial.

Before you continue reading, **FIND 3 MORE EXAMPLES** of what else to include in an educational activity to make the information/knowledge that you convey easier to learn!



Last but not least

The teaching will have a far greater impact on the recipients if it allows for:

- ▶ engagement
- ▶ movement
- ▶ practising

² To know more watch the video: What does Bikablo® mean? - <https://youtu.be/IOJIWxc30aU>

- ▶ integration of both hemispheres
- ▶ clarity about the aim and benefits of the learning process.

If you are not a greenhorn in the training field, the above probably comes as no surprise to you.

Yet, take a while to reflect: **DO MY PRACTICES FOLLOW THE THEORY?**

Or do I always find excuses (no time, no mood...) to come into the training room with another monologue instead of an exciting learning adventure?



THE TAKEAWAYS... AND HOMEWORK!

The brain is a fascinating organ and thanks to modern neuroscience technologies we start to understand its processes better year by year.

The research confirms that certain conditions enhance the learning processes. They include both physiological preconditions (e.g. proper hydration of the body and access to oxygen) and psychological and external factors that have a tangible impact on our bodies (e.g. hurry that releases stress hormones which block learning).

To make your training participants learn the best, you need to design teaching processes in line with neuroscience developments – and with attention to the factors which enhance learning.

Before your next training activity, sit down with your notebook and reflect:

**As an educator, how will I ensure that my next training/workshop is brain-friendly?
How will I make it best learning experience ever?**

Grab a pen and jot down a few action points for yourself... Writing also helps to memorise! :)



Note on the author

Gośka Tur combines her MA in sociology with almost 25 years' experience of working as a trainer. As a fan of neuroscience, she likes to look for methods and approaches that make the biggest impact on her learners and support their growth.