New Monday, Old You

Mike Thomas · Founder & Director

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What happens to the learning when the experience ends?

I was sitting at the top of an abseil site one November, watching rather than running the session. One of the students — a boy near the back of the queue, almost last to go — ended up sitting with me. We started talking. Within a few minutes the conversation had gone somewhere I hadn't expected.

He told me how much he loved doing this kind of thing. Wished he could do it with his father. But his father was always busy. Their daily interaction consisted of a "good morning" at the breakfast table before his dad grabbed a piece of toast and walked out the door, and then a "goodnight" when his dad came home after he was already in bed. On weekdays, that was it. Weekends weren't much different — Saturday his father worked, Sunday they'd all go out together, but they'd meet other families, and the adults would sit at one table and the children at another.

I asked him one question: have you told your father how you feel?

He hadn't.

I worked with that school again in January, about three months later. As the group got off the bus, the same boy ran across to say hello. He'd gone home and talked to his father. His father — shocked and anguished by what his son had said — had listened. They now had a day. Saturday. Father and son. They'd been going to the climbing walls around Hong Kong. That was their day.

Not a three-week programme. Not a residential course. One question. One honest answer. And a life — two lives, a whole family — shifted.

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The Boy Who Went Back

Five or six years before that, on a different programme, there was another young man. Three weeks residential. Large for his age — the kind of kid who looked like he'd eventually be enormous, but hadn't grown into himself yet, and knew it. Low confidence. Low in the pecking order in his group.

Over the course of those three weeks, something changed. He found things he was good at. Things he enjoyed. He stopped waiting to be invited into the group and started taking his place in it — sometimes leading, sometimes supporting, always present. You could see the confidence building every day. Not performed confidence, not the brittle kind that collapses under pressure. The real kind, earned through repeated experience.

And then the programme ended.

He went home. Back to his parents, his school, his friends — none of whom had seen any of it. To them, he was exactly who he'd always been. They treated him accordingly. And from what the school and the programme organisers reported back: he went straight back to how he was before.

Everything he'd gained. Everything he'd proved to himself he could do. It wasn't sticky enough. It wasn't embedded enough to withstand the weight of returning to a world that hadn't changed while he had.

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The Problem With Monday Morning

These two stories sit at opposite ends of the same question: what happens to the learning when the programme ends?

In one case, a single honest conversation unlocked something that the environment could hold and reinforce. In the other, a sustained transformation couldn't survive contact with an environment that had no memory of it and no interest in accommodating it.

This is the transfer problem. And it's one the outdoor education sector — and the wider learning and development world — has been grappling with for decades without fully solving it.

The research is humbling. Studies on behaviour change after training and development programmes consistently show that without structured follow-through, the majority of learning does not transfer into sustained changes in behaviour. The specific numbers vary by study and context, but the pattern is consistent: short-term change is common; long-term change is hard. A few weeks after returning to the normal environment, old behaviours tend to reassert themselves — not because the learning wasn't real, but because the environment is stronger than the intervention.

We know this. And yet the way most programmes are designed, measured, and sold doesn't fully account for it.

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What We Measure, and Why

Ask most providers — including, at times, myself — how they know a programme worked, and the honest answer is: because people said so afterwards.

End-of-programme evaluations. Happy sheets. Confidence ratings before and after. A colleague of mine once shared that close to 40% of students on a canyoning camp reported higher confidence at the end of the programme than at the start. Zero reported lower. That sounds impressive. But his own instinct was immediately to ask: will that confidence continue after the programme? And how can they use it when they're not on programme?

Those are the right questions. And they're not the ones the evaluation was designed to answer.

There's a compounding problem underneath this, and it's one that practitioners need to be honest about. When you ask a group of young people — in front of their teachers, their peers, their facilitators — whether they've had a positive experience and whether they've learnt something, you are not creating neutral conditions for an honest answer. You are creating social conditions. And in social conditions, people say what they think is expected of them.

Which raises a harder question: how much of it do they believe themselves?

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What Is Good, and What Is Good Enough

I want to turn this on practitioners for a moment, because we are not exempt from this.

We talk a great deal about creating psychologically safe spaces where people can be honest. About asking good questions. About not leading the group to the answer we want. And then we run a debrief at the end of a long day, with a bus to catch and a teacher standing at the edge of the circle, and someone says something that sounds close enough to what we were hoping for — and we take it.

I've done this. Most facilitators I respect have done this.

Sometimes it's time. You hear something in a debrief that you want to go deeper on, but the session ends in ten minutes and thirty people need to be on a bus in twenty. You tell yourself you'll come back to it. You don't, or can't, and the moment passes.

Sometimes it's comfort — yours, the group's, the teacher's. If an answer is uncomfortable, if it doesn't align with the stated objectives and outcomes, if it's too personal and you can see people shifting in their seats — how often do we gently steer the conversation somewhere easier? How often do we take a superficial answer and decide it's good enough, because the alternative is a conversation we don't have time for, or aren't sure we can hold?

There is a version of this that is professionally defensible — reading the room, protecting the group, knowing when to hold and when to let go. But there is another version that is self-deception. And the gap between them is often smaller than we'd like to admit.

What is good, and what is good enough? That question follows me.

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Why Old Patterns Win

The reason learning doesn't always survive the weekend isn't primarily a programme design problem, though design matters. It isn't primarily a measurement problem, though measurement matters too.

It's an environment problem.

When someone goes through a meaningful experience and returns to an unchanged context, the context wins. Not because people are weak, but because habits are efficient, social expectations are powerful, and identity is largely constructed by the people around us. We become who we are treated as being.

The boy on the abseil site could change because his father responded. The environment shifted. The Saturday climbing day didn't just reinforce a feeling — it rebuilt the relationship that the feeling had emerged from. The learning had somewhere to live.

The boy on the three-week programme went home to a world that had no record of who he'd become over those three weeks. There was no one on the other side pulling the thread. The environment had no reason to change, so it didn't, and neither could he.

This is also true in adult learning and development. The research on corporate training consistently shows that manager involvement before and after a programme has more influence on transfer than almost anything that happens during it. The line manager who doesn't know what someone did on a course, doesn't ask about it, and doesn't create any space to practise new behaviours is not being neglectful. They're just being normal. And normal is the enemy of change.

It's also — and this is harder to say out loud — sometimes the people closest to us. Partners, families, friends: the people who know us well tend to hold us in place. Not maliciously. Often lovingly. But the expectations of the people around us, the roles we play in their lives, the version of us they're used to — these are not neutral forces. They are the gravity we have to escape to change, and most programmes don't give people enough velocity to break orbit.

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Practical Takeaways

1. **Design for transfer from the start.** The question "how will participants use this when they go back?" should be part of the programme design, not a footnote. That means building in structures — an individual commitment, a letter to themselves, a conversation they're going to have — that create a bridge between the experience and the environment they're returning to.

2. **Involve the environment.** Schools: what do teachers know about what a student did and experienced? What's their brief, not just logistically but developmentally? Organisations: is the line manager part of the process? Have they had a conversation with the participant before the programme about what they're trying to work on, and will they have one after?

3. **Measure at a delay.** If you measure only at the end of the programme, you're measuring the experience, not the learning. A follow-up — even a simple one, four to six weeks later — tells you something about transfer that no end-of-day evaluation can.

4. **Ask the harder questions in the debrief.** Not just "what did you learn?" but "what will get in the way of you using this when you're home?" Not just "how do you feel?" but "who in your life needs to know what you just figured out?" The facilitator who asks those questions is doing harder work, and the group may resist it. But it's the work that earns the change.

5. **Be honest about what we don't know.** We often don't know whether our programmes worked in the ways that matter. Admitting that — to clients, to ourselves — isn't failure. It's the beginning of designing something better.

The boy on the abseil site is, in my head, climbing with his father right now. Somewhere in Hong Kong on a Saturday, on a route they both know, talking about something neither of them would have talked about before.

That happened because one question got an honest answer, and the answer found its way home.

Most of what we do is more complicated than that. The environments are less responsive, the changes are subtler, the follow-through is harder to arrange. But that story tells me what's possible when the learning has somewhere to go.

The question we need to keep asking — of our programmes, of our measurements, of ourselves — is not whether the learning happened. It's whether it survived Monday morning.

> *And if it didn't: what would have had to be different for it to?*

Mike Thomas

Founder of Outside-In, a Hong Kong-based experiential education company. With over 25 years of experience across outdoor education, emotional intelligence coaching, and organisational development, Mike writes about practice, professionalism, and the conditions that help people and teams grow.

mike@outside-in.online · www.outside-in.online · +852 9709 9504

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