

# BRAIN MIND Bulletin

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## Gelb: freeing the body to free the mind for learning

What is the basis of optimal performance? What are the laws that link how the brain learns with how the body learns? What are the tools needed to enable corporations to learn and so to change?

A synthesis of recent models of brain function with current insights into the body/mind relationship may hold clues to "high performance learning."

Michael Gelb, author of *Body Learning*, has examined generic principles that apply to everything from how the brain recalls information to how people behave with one another. A teacher of the Alexander Technique, he has extended to peak performance the concepts of self-observation and appropriate body use developed by F. Matthias Alexander.

"Many people are now familiar with right/left models of the brain or with various kinds of body work, but this knowledge is generally not integrated into their behavior," he told B/MB. "They don't yet take full advantage of what they know to solve problems or operate their businesses more profitably."

Gelb asks: How can we create learning environments in companies and classrooms that reflect these new ways of thinking about how we function: How can we reorganize ourselves to take in more information with less stress?

Gelb uses "brain friendly" strategies for improving reading, notetaking, memory and physical coordination, but he believes the key to all learning is the state of the learner.

While working in British schools, he observed that youngsters doing difficult math problems would tighten and pull down their bodies, restricting their breathing. Teachers would confront the difficulty, pushing harder for answers.

"But the solution was not available in the student's habitual mode," Gelb said. He would ask the youngsters to observe what they were doing to themselves, to notice their breathing and posture. When they would begin to open and expand, he said, they frequently would discover the answers they needed.

*-Inhibition.* Gelb noted that the first step in learning often is *unlearning* what we know. "We need to stop doing habitual things so that a natural mind/body coordination can emerge."

This holds true whether we are riding a bike or sitting at a desk to read. "We need to create the conditions necessary for natural functioning."

The same principle holds true in business. Gelb works with the learning resources group at DuPont in Wilmington, Del. Tom Jenkins, manager of the department, said business people bring their poor conditioning from school into the meeting room. "Schools program us to process information for control and interrogation, but in the business world we need performance, not the ability to get passing grades."

This division of DuPont has created learning environments that reflect the new attitude: "By focusing on the process of learning, we are getting better results."

*-Models of excellence.* People also need to observe others with masterly skill. "When learning anything new, begin with an

internal picture of what you want to do," Gelb said. This does not mean visualizing a result, but sensing a process.

"Images of excellence should have a quality of ease. Experts always make what they do look easy." The same visual rehearsal used by athletes can be applied to running a meeting.

*-Debauched kinesthesia.* Use affects functioning, Gelb said. The longterm effects of faulty body use cause wrong habits to feel right. "Everyone wants to be right," Alexander once said, "but no one stops to consider if his idea of 'right' is right."

So when learning a new skill, we need to get accurate feedback on our performance, Gelb said. "We need to refine our kinesthetic sense - to learn with our bodies. See how it *feels* to do the task, allowing each attempt to be more like your model of excellence.

*-Appropriate effort.* "Catch yourself doing something right. But when it's not quite right, pause."

Tension begins with the *thought* of doing something. "This is the crucial moment. If you pause here and think differently, you will break deep habits."

Ask yourself what could be easier, he said, and let your body answer. "In this way, you'll naturally realign with gravity, regaining poise."

Gelb has taught "high performance learning" to executives at IBM, teachers from Virginia to California, black schoolchildren in South Africa, managers of the largest Swedish shipping company and members of the U.S. Army. "More than anything else, fear blocks learning," he said. "It stops people from using the brain as a trial and error mechanism."

Learning is an endless process. "It urges us to stretch to the unfamiliar." The essence of the spiritual quest is in becoming a more effective learner, he said.

## Gelb: Technology for optimal performance...

Juggling can be a metaphor for the lessons of life. According to Michael Gelb, director of High Performance Learning, the playful skill not only teaches people to catch the ball, it teaches them to let it go.

"The more you struggle and strain to catch the ball, the more it eludes you," he said, adding that the individual pattern of misuse one applies to juggling can be applied to any situation - restricted breathing and tension in the neck, shoulders and arms. "This grasping consciousness is the same one that drives us always to be right - to catch the ball."

Gelb uses juggling to teach the principles of psycho-physiological poise to educators and business people. He maintains that juggling, like life, involves a balance between a sharp focus and letting go of the unnecessary. "If we center ourselves, directing our attention with appropriate effort, then simply let go, allowing the process to complete itself, we just may catch the ball."

It is like the athlete who *knows* when he is on target, Gelb said. He creates a visual image in the mind, his body follows effortlessly, then releases. The goal is achieved through this alignment.

"Attention to the process of learning is more important than grabbing for results. Freedom from the fear of failure may be even *more* important."