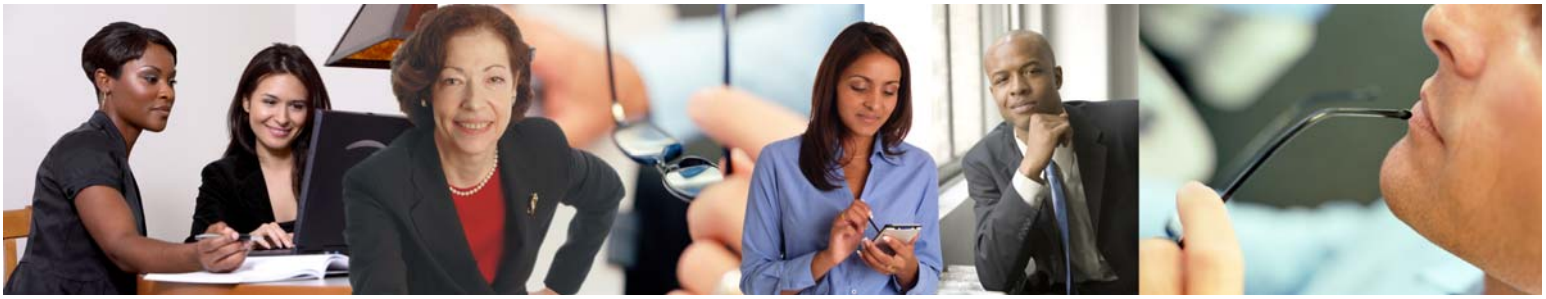
WILSON LEARNING®

APPROACH TO LEARNING

HOW WE ENHANCE HUMAN PERFORMANCE THROUGH LEARNING

POSITION PAPER



Wilson Learning, since our founding more that 40 years ago, has been at the vanguard of advances in human resource development. We were among the first to introduce video modeling, the first to utilize multi-rater feedback instruments, the first to use a group decision support tool in learning, and the first to use interactive video technology in teaching interpersonal skills. Throughout our history, we have employed some of the leading experts in psychology, education, communications, and technology to bring to our clients the best learning and development solutions possible. In this paper we would like to share with you what we have learned about how to deliver effective adult learning.

WILSON LEARNING'S APPROACH TO LEARNING DESIGN AND DEVELOPMENT

Learning—the acquisition of new skills, knowledge, and capabilities—always occurs within the context of human performance improvement! Wilson Learning approaches every client situation from this perspective. That is, we begin with a process of understanding the client's needs, expectations, situation, and problems. We do not assume that learning is the answer to every performance issue. Many performance issues that organizations and individuals face, however, do require the acquisition of new skills, knowledge, and capabilities.

Thus the primary purpose of this paper is to address the question: How does Wilson Learning structure the learning and development process to maximize impact on work performance? Over the years we have developed a comprehensive philosophy and processes for developing effective and meaningful learning and development solutions. We have based this philosophy on our own experiences as well as on our understanding of the research on adult learning—from the early work of scholars such as Knowles, Linderman, Bloom, and Mager to the contemporary research of Swanson, Holton, Rothwell, Mayer, Seligman, Gardner, and others. We also recognize that the field of adult learning is constantly changing, and we adapt as new theories and techniques emerge.

Training – Education – Development

Any discussion of our approach to learning needs to begin with the purpose of the learning process. We deliver learning to support the *Development* of individuals and organizations. We distinguish Development from Training and from Education, and summarize the differences in the following table.

	Training	Development	Education
Focus	Information Discrete skill	Insight Versatility	Knowledge Understanding
Delivery timeframe	Compact: days or weeks	Tied to job/career timeframe; usually months	Extended: many years
Outcomes	Specific learning outcomes	Performance outcomes Competency development Behavior change	Broad knowledge expansion
Process focus	Event	Sequence of activities to a specific development plan	Open-ended exploration
Benefits	Improved action Immediately observable	Improved job performance Observable over time	Career options

Given our focus on performance improvement, Wilson Learning does not create *Training* (or for that matter, *Education)*, but rather individual and organizational *Development* services. Thus, we don't create seminars as discrete events, but create learning processes that involve multiple activities and events. Our programs help people develop a deep understanding of critical competencies that they can generalize in a flexible, versatile way. Finally, our offerings focus on performance improvement, not discrete learning or skill objectives. We have found that true improvement in sales performance, leadership, and interpersonal communication requires that people learn how to think and how to act in unique situations. Processes that focus on teaching discrete skills and actions fail to produce people who can adapt and generalize their learning. Thus, while training may be part of a development solution, it is never the whole solution.

To explain further how this perspective impacts what we do, the remainder of this paper is organized in four principle sections:

- Our core beliefs about adult learning, focusing on the uniqueness of adult learners
- Our instructional design principles, which recognize that creation of effective development activities is both a science and an art
- Learning flow
- Learning methods

CORE BELIEFS

Since Malcolm Knowles' groundbreaking book, *The Adult Learner*, there has been a clear understanding that adults learn differently than children. At Wilson Learning, our beliefs about how today's adults learn best are grounded in the following: in the work of Knowles; in Merriam and Caffarella's expansion on the theory of andragogy; in human performance technology theory, instructional system design theory, action science, organizational learning, and advanced instructional technologies; and in our 40 years of experience.

- **Individuals and organizations learn.** While it is true that all learning, at its root, is individual, organizations also have memory that can either support or hinder new performance. Thus, in designing learning programs, we consider the role the organization's culture and processes play in the application of learning; for example, creating a "critical mass" to support the use of new skills, or focusing on how to overcome cultural predispositions that will hinder the use of new behaviors.
- **Learning should address impact.** Adult learners are motivated to learn when they perceive that the learning will help them perform tasks or deal with problems they confront in their daily lives. Therefore, showing practical and direct links between the learning outcomes and the learners' abilities to do their jobs better is critical to effective learning.
- **Learning occurs through individual insight.** The most significant learning occurs when people see their roles differently. When people see a new purpose or perspective they are more likely to explore options to current forms of thinking and behaving.

> The pleasures that arise from thinking and learning will make us think and learn all the more.
>
> — Aristotle

- **Learning is a process, not an event.** Effective individual development does not occur from isolated training events. We believe that a series of activities, systematically structured to build upon each other, is the only way to develop new skills and to ensure that they are applied in the workplace.
- **Present-oriented, problem-centric.** Adults will be more receptive to new knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes when these are presented in the context of real-life situations. For Wilson Learning, this means that we always build real-life applications into the learning, and have participants bring to the learning environment specific cases or situations that they struggle with.
- **Learners take personal responsibility.** While adults will respond to some external motivation, the motivation to learn is driven mostly from internal desires. At the same time, all normal adults are motivated to keep growing but are often blocked by organizational or personal barriers. Wilson Learning works with organizations to eliminate these barriers, increasing individuals' acquisition and use of skills.
- **Promoting self-efficacy.** Learners, especially adult learners, need a learning environment that supports their value and self-worth. Drawing on research from Mayer and Geher, Goleman, Seligman, and Bandura, we create learning processes that ensure safe zones to practice new skills, lead to self-discovery of hidden talents and abilities, and give people confidence that they can learn and apply these new capabilities.

> People who regard themselves as highly effective act, think, and feel differently from those who perceive themselves as ineffective. They produce their own future, rather than simply foretell it. Self-belief does not necessarily ensure success, but self-disbelief assuredly spawns failure.
>
> — Albert Bandura

- **Work learning is life learning.** Especially for interpersonal communication skills, we have found that the most powerful learning occurs when people see a connection with their whole lives, not just their work lives. Former participants have told us that what they learned has improved their marriages, their relationships with their children, and many other out-of-work contexts. We take pride in that!
- **Multiple-methods to meet multiple-needs.** Today's work environment consists of at least four different generations, and frequently involves people from multiple countries. Generational and cultural differences affect how people learn, and an approach to learning must take that into account.

Larry Wilson, founder of Wilson Learning, was fond of saying: "The research into adult learning has taught us two things. First, adults learn best through experience. Second, we are not very good at it." While clearly an over-generalization, there is an important hint of truth to this statement. That is, while experience-based learning is the most valued form of learning, that learning tends to be tacit. We are not very astute at reflecting on our experiences, drawing parallels between different situations, or applying our learning to new environments. Wilson Learning has long used a model called the Conscious Competence Model to describe this. Briefly, the Conscious Competence Model describes the steps one goes through in the acquisition of new competencies and skills:

1. Unconscious Incompetence:
   They don't know that they don't know.

2. Conscious Incompetence:
   They know that they don't know.

3. Unconscious Competence:
   They know, but don't know why they know.

4. Conscious Competence:
   They know, and know why they know.

Conscious Competence Model

An ancient Greek poem provided the inspiration for our model. Roughly translated:

There are those who don't know and don't know they don't know; avoid them.

There are those who don't know but know they don't know; teach them.

There are those who know but don't know they know; lead them.

There are those who know and know they know; follow them.

Thus, our primary job at Wilson Learning is to facilitate an active process of turning experiences into explicit knowledge and skills (Conscious Competence); to help people organize their experiences; and finally, to reflect on what the experiences mean to their work, jobs, and life—Perspectives, Skills, and Tools.

New Perspectives	WHY	Learning is as much about acquiring new attitudes, or mindsets, about one's job as it is about skills. For example, a salesperson can learn new questioning skills, but until this person believes differently about who he or she is as a salesperson, there will be limits to the value of these skills.
New Skills	WHAT	It is not enough to just convince people that they need to think and act differently. They need to learn specific skills, behaviors, and processes to effect change. If you want improved job performance, both new perspectives and new skills are required.
New Tools	HOW	New skills will not be applied on the job without tools and procedures to support their use. We believe it is critical to support every new skill with tools, job aids, or other capabilities that help people apply these skills.

INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN PRINCIPLES: THE ART AND SCIENCE

It has been our experience that the best learning design is a combination of the Art and the Science of instructional design. What Wilson Learning does best is marry the art and science of individual and organizational development.

This is especially true for interpersonal communication skill development in the work setting. In order for learning to translate to meaningful behavior change on the job, adults need learning that engages, empowers, and informs. The passions of learners must be tapped, and they must be helped to take ownership of the process. To fully engage learners and motivate them to use new approaches and skills, careful consideration must be given to both the learning structure (the science) and the level of emotional engagement (the art).

For Wilson Learning, the science side is the effective utilization of tested instructional design principles and theories. Our development teams are fully versed in Instructional Systems Design (ISD) and we follow the ADDIE approach (Analyze-Design-Develop-Implement-Evaluate) in all of our development efforts. We incorporate skill and task analysis processes (as proposed by Mager and others) to ensure that learning is delivered in the right sequence and at the right level of complexity for the learner. We utilize the Know-Demonstrate-Apply approach (also known as Know-Show-Do), Component Display Theory, and other approaches as appropriate in our learning design. We incorporate the recent research on learning style differences across the generations and across cultures as well as the science of multiple modalities (Auditory, Visual, Kinesthetic) when choosing instructional methods.

We do not, however, forsake the art for the science. In our experience, adhering to the science of instructional design alone will not ensure effective adult learning. The art of instructional design is the process of engaging learners, capturing their imagination, and maintaining their attention. Since the 1980s, Wilson Learning has used an instructional approach that parallels what some call Accelerated Learning today. In fact, before the term Accelerated Learning, Wilson Learning coined the phrase Inside-Out Learning to capture the same intent.

Inside-Out and Outside-In Learning Approaches

Wilson Learning has long referred to this marriage of art and science as a balance of Inside-Out and Outside-In learning approaches.

Outside-In learning is probably what most of us are familiar with from our formal education. Information and knowledge are imparted from outside of you, for you to incorporate inside you. There is no question that some Outside-In learning is necessary; a person cannot acquire new skills or information without some presentation of new content, models, or procedures.

However, for adults to truly incorporate new skills and mindsets into their lives requires, as Northrop Frye stated, “recreating the subject in the student’s mind.” This is Inside-Out learning. Development begins by recognizing that learners have existing knowledge and cognitive frameworks. If you build on those frameworks, rather than just try to create new frameworks, you connect to something deeper.

Inside-Out and Outside-In learning approaches each have their strengths and weaknesses, as the following table indicates.

	Outside-In Learning	Inside-Out Learning
Pros	■ Controllable ■ Efficient ■ Predictable	■ Fosters insight ■ Engagement ■ Personalization
Cons	■ Inflexible ■ Tell-oriented ■ Predictable	■ Unpredictable ■ Takes time
Value	Know It	Live It

At Wilson Learning, we use Inside-Out learning to help people recognize what they already know, and challenge that as the most effective way to think and behave. Then we use Outside-In learning to provide them with a new way of thinking about their actions and behavior. Thus, we bring together Inside-Out and Outside-In learning to break down barriers to change and growth.

Some of the key considerations in incorporating the art and science of instructional design include:

- **Creating and resolving tension:** Many of our activities are designed to use tension as a way to engage the learner. First we create tension, then we show how a new mindset and skill-sets can help in resolving the tension. For example, we ask managers to describe times when they were dealing with employee dissatisfaction, then show them how versatility skills can help in resolving such problems.
- **Dealing with learner emotions:** There are two aspects to dealing with the emotions of adult learners. First, research has shown that learners' confidence in their ability to learn is critical to their successful use of skills on the job. Second, many adults are risk averse and need a safe environment in which to practice new skills. We incorporate many approaches to building learners' self-efficacy, and provide safe simulations and role-plays to lower risk in practicing new interpersonal skills.
- **Challenging people to think:** Earlier we distinguished between Training and Development. Development requires you to engage learners cognitively, to dig deeper into the topic and extract new meaning. If you are "training" discrete skills you don't need to challenge people to think, but for Wilson Learning, this challenge is essential to the development of individual performance.
- **Role of fun:** Humor and games can make learning fun and lead to greater engagement. However, fun alone isn't enough; it is important that the humor or game be closely tied to the content. Doing a physical game or showing a funny video may get a laugh, but if it does not lead learners to think more deeply about the topic, it will not be effective. Humor that is closely tied to the objective helps create and resolve tension, and keeps interest and attention high.
- **Collaborative learning:** Especially when it comes to interpersonal skills, learning from each other is a critical component. Wilson Learning designs collaborative learning processes into every solution to ensure that learners are exposed to the informal and incidental learning that comes from contact with others.
- **Learning styles:** Just as the Science addresses differences in learning modality (Auditory, Visual, Kinesthetic), the Art addresses differences in cognitive style. Integrating research from David Kolb, Bernice McCarthy, and Howard Gardner, Wilson Learning has adopted a model for creating a design flow to ensure that the learning meets the needs of all cognitive and learning styles, including cultural and generational style differences.

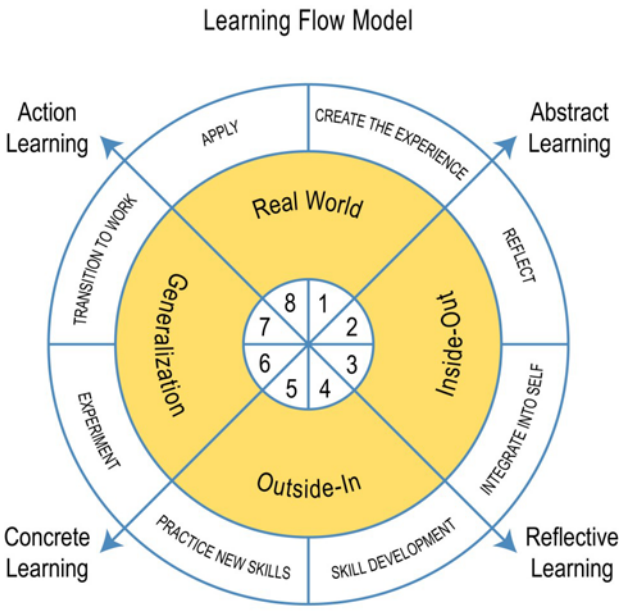
It is the marriage of the art and science of instructional design that makes our learning solutions powerful.

HOW OUR METHODS INCORPORATE ART AND SCIENCE

There are two critical toolkits needed to ensure the effective integration of the art and science of learning design—Learning Flow and Learning Methods.

Learning Flow

Individual learning methods and techniques would be ineffective if not organized into an effective instructional flow. Flow is not just a list of activities, ordered in a logical sequence. While that is important, flow is also about the "rhythm" of the learning. Where are the areas of high and low energy? Where are the learners overloaded with information? Where are they lost and in need of an organizing principle?



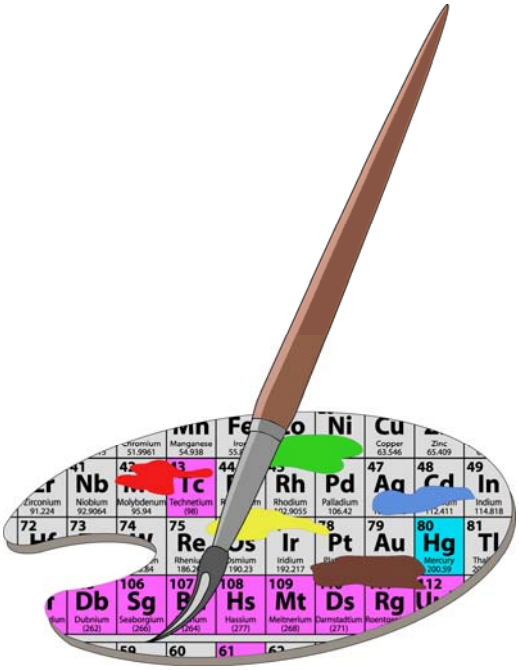
Equally important is making sure that the learning is adapted to all of the cognitive learning styles and multiple intelligences that learners bring to the experience. That is why Wilson Learning has developed a process for creating learning flow. Drawing on the work of Howard Gardner, David Kolb, Bernice McCarthy, Malcolm Nicholl, and others, we have created a learning flow that addresses ideas and knowledge from both a concrete and abstract perspective, and requires both active engagement and reflection.

Learning starts with bringing the real world to the learning environment (step 1). Then, with guidance, the learner reflects upon that experience (2) and extracts personal meaning (3). At this point, the learner is open to new concepts and skills (4). Once new knowledge or skills have been presented, the learner practices these skills in the safety of the learning environment (5), and is given an opportunity to experiment or "tinker" with these skills (6). The learning process continues with help transitioning the skills into day-to-day habits (7) and support for ongoing application and reinforcement on the job (8).

Each step is not necessarily given the same amount of time. Nor is this just reflective of what happens in a classroom, but also what happens back in the work environment. Wilson Learning utilizes this framework to ensure that all learners have a valuable experience, that all learning styles (Abstract, Reflective, Concrete, and Action-oriented) are addressed, that ultimately learning changes behavior in the "real world," and that the rhythm of the learning experience maintains learners' excitement, engagement, and energy.

LEARNING METHODS

All of the instructional methods we incorporate into our learning processes are based on the principles of the art and science of instructional design described above, and are in support of an effective learning flow. It is impossible to enumerate in this paper all of the methods we use. In fact, we are continuously adding new methods as we grow and learn ourselves. However, describing some of our primary methods may help you understand why Wilson Learning solutions work the way they do.



Discovery Learning

Discovery learning is the method most closely tied to Inside-Out learning. We have found that it is critical, as Bettelheim stated, to "bring the learner to the knowledge, not the knowledge to the learner." Inside-Out learning, at its best, helps people discover and make sense of what they already know, bring competence to the conscious mind, see ways to improve on their skills, and pass these skills on to others. Discovery learning is about connecting to learners' values, experiences, and sense of self-worth.

Interactive/Experiential Learning

To fully engage learners, they need to be engaged physically as well as cognitively. Games and other physical activities are valuable to this engagement, as long as these activities remain relevant to the skills being learned. Adding activities where participants throw foam balls around without any clear connection to the learning objectives is not effective learning. When we include interactive learning experiences, we make sure they are closely tied to learning outcomes.

Behavioral Feedback

One central fact of human nature is that we cannot effectively observe our own behavior. Most of us don't recognize ourselves when we first hear our voice recorded, and the same is true with our work behaviors. Wilson Learning uses a number of methods for giving people honest and reliable feedback from others: multi-rater (360) feedback tools, videotaped behavior, or behavioral observations from the instructor. Wilson Learning helps individuals see themselves as others see them.

Cognitive Models

At the core of most of Wilson Learning's solutions are our cognitive models, visual "maps," or, as Ausubel referred to them, Advanced Organizers. Good cognitive models help participants in a number of ways: They create mind-hooks to help them remember key concepts; they can make complex ideas simple and meaningful; and they can provoke discussion and thought. What makes for a good model? Drawing on work by Ausubel, Bettalheim, Tufte, and others, at Wilson Learning we approach model development with the following three principles in mind:

1. They are flexible: You can manipulate them mentally, finding new meaning as you do.
2. They are expandable: You can dig deeper and deeper and the model makes sense.
3. They are elegant, in the classical sense, with no unnecessary parts.

Analogies and Metaphors

One way to create Inside-Out learning is by connecting key concepts to familiar ideas and examples. Analogies and metaphors are effective ways to accomplish this. Analogies and metaphors are also helpful at challenging people to think about the new behaviors and practices they are exposed to. Metaphors allow people to play with and manipulate ideas, and ask "what-if" questions more easily.

Stories

A story is a narrative, incident, or case history. True stories tend to be the most powerful. For many years, we used a true story to support one of our primary sales skills—the Ben Duffy Technique. Once, to meet the desires of a client to shorten the program, we took the story out, and just taught the skill. The result was a disaster and we vowed to never do that again. The story is powerful and teaches not only the technique, but the strength and value of the Ben Duffy Technique. Without the story, it is only a set of steps. With the story, it is one of the most valuable lessons salespeople learn.

Outside-In (Knowledge Transfer)

While Wilson Learning focuses on Inside-Out learning approaches, we recognize that at least some Outside-In learning is essential. People need new knowledge and concepts in order to grow. However, we have learned through experience that too much straight knowledge transfer does not lead to more learning, just more forgetting.

Behavioral Modeling

In *Training,* you show behavioral models to learners so they can later duplicate those behaviors. But in *Development*, you need to build flexibility and adaptability of behavior, not duplication. Wilson Learning uses behavioral modeling to show real-life challenges and to promote critical analysis and interpretation. Thus, though sometimes criticized by people who do training, we often incorporate both right-way and wrong-way modeling. This helps create the tension that sparks discussion and new learning. The result is the learning of a set of flexible skills that learners can adapt to the different types of challenges they will face.

Group Discussions

Another form of interactive learning, and closely tied to Inside-Out, is engaging learners in group discussions. Discussions provide participants the opportunity to learn from others' experiences and share stories, challenges, and ideas. But effective discussions do not just happen, which is why Wilson Learning utilizes the Focus-Explore-Invite-Check process for structuring discussions. We have always used a discussion process that fosters positive relationships, assumes the basic positive intent of people, and supports individual self-esteem, similar to what David Cooperrider refers to as Appreciative Inquiry.

Application-Based Learning

The primary outcome of development efforts is performance improvement. Thus, it is critical that our learning offerings include opportunities for learners to apply their learning to real work experiences. All of Wilson Learning's solutions include some instructional activities that draw on the participants' real-life experiences and individual cases. Often these individual cases are used to introduce a tool or worksheet that the learners can use when they are dealing with similar situations in their work setting.

Learning Transfer Technology

Research has confirmed that the majority of skill training in businesses does show up in work practices. Wilson Learning incorporates a wide range of Learning Transfer Technologies (LTT) to ensure that skills are used. These techniques might include planners and other worksheet tools, reminders and reinforcement learning, assessments, job aids, action plans, communities of practice, and case-study practices.

Coaching

Supporting learning in the workplace is a critical element for ensuring that learning results in development and transfers into work performance. Whether developing managers into coaches and mentors, or providing access to live or virtual professional coaches, Wilson Learning takes steps to ensure that support for application and use is provided.

Blended Learning

At Wilson Learning, we do not specifically use the term "blended learning," because, as you can probably already tell, we believe that all learning should be blended. It is just good design to incorporate multiple methods and multiple delivery approaches to learning for development. In addition, we go beyond what some consider blended learning. For some, the simple combination of e-learning and classroom is blended, but at Wilson Learning, we recognize the need to blend four delivery methods to meet the needs of learners:

1. Classroom-facilitated learning
2. Webcast-facilitated learning
3. Electronically delivered learning
4. On-the-job application-based learning

A FINAL NOTE

Several years ago, a senior design consultant at Wilson Learning, Harry Woodward, described Wilson Learning's learning process in terms of a dream in which you discover a secret room:

> *You wander around your home and first discover a door you had not seen before, then through that door, a room, then an entire wing of the house that you never knew existed before… yet you recognize, at some level, that you always suspected that wing was present.*

Wilson Learning helps people discover new rooms in their own houses—not ones we build for them, but ones that were always there. An immediate sense of comfort and belonging results as learners realize that they are not just visitors, but owners of their learning.

Accomplishing this level of comfort requires the use of both art and science—getting learners to recognize what they already know, breaking up obstacles to self-examination, and creating an openness to new ideas and concepts. Our models and exercises are designed not only to reveal and validate, but also to confront and challenge learners' beliefs, fears, experiences, and current practices.

The use of these seemingly simple, but often complex, techniques is by no means totally predictable, but the risks—and the rewards—are worth it. This is the great beauty and power of Wilson Learning's Inside-Out approach to learning.

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