Learned Empowerment

Richard Fabend

Abstract

Learned empowerment, as opposed to learned helplessness, is explored in this article in the context of disability. Guidelines for finding alternative solutions and adaptations to challenges faced everyday by people with disabilities are provided, as well as links to adapted equipment, and two videos that illustrate learned empowerment in action.

*Keywords:* learned empowerment, adaptations, adapted equipment, attitude

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I sat in the chair looking at the piece of paper I had just dropped on the floor. I needed the paper for what I was doing so I had to pick it up. No big deal. Right? WRONG, it was going to be a problem. I couldn't bend over to get it, and I couldn't get out of my chair and walk over to pick it up. You see, the chair I was sitting in was a power wheelchair. Many of the simple reflex actions I used before my quadriplegia still came to me rapidly when I needed to solve a problem. Today was different and I knew it. My wife and my nurse were both gone at the time and so was the option that they could pick it up for me. I didn't know it at the time but I had a major challenge before me, the resolution of which would affect me the rest of my life.

As a teacher I had been working with students for over 34 years and was involved with some unique adventure based activities which tried to teach students to find alternative ways of problem solving. Mostly as a result of these experiences I truly believed there was a simple way to pick up that piece of paper. The real challenge I faced was to figure out how to do it. The solution finally came to me although it was not that day. Like most of my problem-solving creations, the answer was the result of hard work, frustration, failure, modifications and persistence. The ultimate success of my solution encouraged me to move on and find other simple methods of adapting ways I could solve other everyday challenges.

I believe the key lies in one’s attitude. It is human nature to rely on methods and solutions which have been successful in the past. This often encourages us to use only limited means to accomplish a given task. When speaking to a group I might use an example of building a fire under emergency conditions to drive home a point. If I chose ten people in the audience and asked them to build a fire under duress, chances are the majority would head outside, grab some sticks and a match or lighter, and try to start a fire. When initially dealing with the challenges placed on those of us living with a disability, I think we often try to solve problems using the same skills we used before our impairment. This approach can create extreme frustration and an acute awareness of the limitations placed on us by our condition.

Now suppose I presented this same challenge to an audience of survivalists. There is a real possibility we would see a variety of methods which could include flint and steel, a lens (from a camera or binoculars) and the sun, a knife and magnesium strip, steel wool and a battery, a hand drill, even a soda can and chocolate, as well as many additional ways. There are also many sources that can be used as tinder: dead pine needles, fallen leaves, birch bark, feathers, dead grass, and dried moss are just a handful of items that can be used. So in reality, if we think about it, there are usually many ways to solve a particular problem. The first attitudinal change must be the understanding that more than likely there is a solution for what you are trying to do. Begin by freeing ourselves of cultural restraints. At times such limitations are really in our own minds. Learn to think outside the box and experiment with different approaches.
I have become convinced over the last thirteen years that attitude is much more important than ability for individuals who are physically challenged. Looking at a new situation not as a problem, but as a challenge needing to be met, may actually set one’s mind free of the mental restraints which prevent finding a solution. This initial attempt at finding a solution, I believe, is of critical importance because it will establish a lasting mindset; I can or I can’t. Which will have greater significance for the future? If we give up or allow failure to deter us from continuing, the implications are obvious.

Failure, if approached with the right attitude, provides opportunity for learning and hence for growth, which eventually can lead to success. If a young child decided there is no reason to continually struggle to get up after falling down time after time, he or she would never learn to walk. I had a graduate student in a workshop sum up my supposition in an e-mail she sent me: “I was particularly struck by your juxtaposition of self-created learned helplessness (I can't do that, so how can I do this) with what I might call learned empowerment (I can do that, so why can't I do this?)” The road to success takes many different routes. Find the one that takes you to your destination.

**Some suggestions I would make in regards to finding alternative solutions:**

- Know there is a way.
- Keep things simple.
- Don’t get discouraged and give up.

Professor Randy Pausch in his book *The Last Lecture* wrote, ”The brick walls are there to give us a chance to show how badly we want something.”

- Think of failure as an opportunity for learning and growth.
- Observe with an active mind.

After noticing hockey and lacrosse players placed continuous wrapping of tape on their sticks to prevent their hand from sliding past a spot, I decided to do the same. The placement of these “stops” allows tool manipulation without a strong grip.

- Think outside the box.
□ When possible make tools multi-functional.

□ Try to create tools that can be used for different purposes.

□ Make tools interactional.

Any one of my tools can be used to pick up a different one if I should I drop it.

□ Be willing to modify.

I am constantly revisiting the tools and ideas I have already come up with to try and improve them or make them more functional.

□ Be open to the suggestions and ideas of others.

□ Remember success builds success.

Oh! Are you wondering how I picked up the piece of paper? Find out by viewing the videos linked below (and see the photo below for a preview).

□ Learned Empowerment Video (abridged version)

□ Learned Empowerment Video (uncut version) – This video provides a more realistic view of learned empowerment. According to Rich, “It's good for people to see me struggle and be unsuccessful. As you well know, these things don't work all the time.”

![Magnet Tool and Accessories](image)

1) Telescoping magnet with added Velcro handle
2) Pick up pan
3) Large flat washer
4) Hook
5) Magnetic mirror
6) Flat washer with Velcro added
7) Flat washer the sticky electro added
8) Metal flashlight