

# GWO

## Barriers to Learning

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### 2 Terms and Definitions

Term	Definition
Driving force (to learn)	Driving force to learn emerges when the participants can connect their life-ambitions (The Identity Project) to the competences offered by a certain training or learning activity. Driving force is related to the concept of motivation.
Identity Project	We all have our individual personal Identity projects. We have ambitions for how competent we desire to be in fulfilling our different roles in the different communities we are acting in - for example at work, in schoolboards, Facebook groups, and being a parent.

Intrinsic Motivation	<p>Motivation may be addressed in two dimensions: The <i>intrinsic</i> motivation, that emerges from a heartfelt urge towards a new condition, and an <i>extrinsic</i> motivation created from external influence, such as a salary increase or a direct command or threat.</p> <p>The intrinsic motivation is often associated with the personal Identity Project</p>
Transformative Learning	<p>Often, we learn to adjust and improve our performance, or we develop a deeper understanding of a topic and of it's relations. But sometimes, we obtain knowledge and skills that radically change our former understanding or the way we react or perform. In such cases the learning has transformed our palette of abilities - we now understand and do things differently - in a new way.</p>

### 3 Abstract

In this article, we present the concept of Barriers to learning.

Two important considerations for the instructor in relation to barriers to learning are, that 1) Defence mechanisms are in all of us - as a natural - and often unconscious - response to the overwhelming amount of daily impressions, influences, and quick offers for a better life; and 2) Great learning experiences risk being lost, if we as instructors fail to address learning defence or resistance situations.

The overall most significant action for the instructor is to address situations on resistance and defences against learning through honest and solution-oriented dialog.

This "Small Text" is inspired from the Danish Professor, Adult Learning, Knud Illeris (2007). Further references are listed in Annex 1, Literature.

## 4 Barriers to Learning

### 4.1 Defence against learning

*Learning requires confidence*

*Transformative learning requires overcoming the defences*

*A mental armour*

Defence is probably the psychological mechanism that contributes the most to learning not occurring or being different from what was intended - and it usually requires a high degree of feeling safe and motivated to overcome our defences - because we unconsciously experience the defence as being necessary for us to maintain our self-esteem and our identity.

Overcoming our own defences, on the other hand, will provide great opportunities for meaningful and transformative learning.

We talk about two types of defence mechanisms:

1. *Everyday consciousness*, which is our mental and often unconscious armour against the daily volume of new influences and impressions
2. *The identity defence* that comes into effect when our very identity is challenged or disturbed.

The "risk society" constantly challenges our self-esteem and our experience of feeling competent in the context.

#### 4.1.1 The everyday consciousness

Society's eternal influences, changing offers and constant changes make it necessary for us to develop a defence that can both shield against influences and where we must prioritize specifically which needs, we want to fulfil.

*Mental schemes set the limits*

We call these routines - these mental structures that aim to get us intact through everyday life (but at the same time prevents us from being objective and open to new or different impulses) - *the everyday consciousness*.

The everyday consciousness sets the limits for our mental schemes - "theme-horizon schemas". These theme-horizon schemas determine a filter on which themes we deal with and within which limits we deal with them. Within these limits, everyday impulses will be processed without much conscious attention.

*Forms locks and limits*

And the impulses and impressions that do not fit into the arena of boundaries are either filtered out as "not experienced", or they are adjusted or distorted so that they can then fit within the boundaries.



as

*Breaking routines and schedules open the possibilities of Transformative learning*

*"Try a new pizza"*

*The identity project under attack*

*Intrinsic motivation can break the identity defence*

*The clearer your identity experience, the stronger the defence*

*Helplessness leads to negative attitude*

*We understand that we must, but we don't want to*



On the one hand, our boundaries support and ensure that we are able to live our lives without constantly having to deal with the endless stream of new, divergent and challenging impulses.

And on the other hand, the boundaries may lead to that we get stuck in routines and prejudices, and by that risk not being able to live up to our life commitment and passions.

If the learner decides - and can muster the sufficient energy - to restructure the already embedded schemas, breaking through the filters of the everyday consciousness - and thus transformative learning - actually becomes possible.

In some cases, everyday consciousness alone cannot keep up - the external pressure on the theme horizons and on our self-understanding simply becomes too overwhelming. And in order for us to maintain a tolerable psychological balance, we establish an identity defence that has the task of protecting our inner core of identity and the lifelong development process that we are all involved in in each of our individual identity projects.

Our individual identity project is about the continuous creation and development of our identity. We choose - more or less consciously - in which direction our development should move, so that we can best fit in and act in the (desired) surrounding communities and their practices.

And when we then encounter challenges or disturbances that may seem threatening to our choice of direction and in relation to our theme-horizon schemes, our identity defence reacts.

The identity defence can be characterized as the most general, profound and strongest defence mechanism against learning and change that is "foisted on us and communicated to us".

The clearer and more ingrained the experience of our own identity is, the more massively the identity defence can stand in the way of learning and change processes.



When we are "placed" in a learning process and do not feel that we have any influence on the conditions that have determined that we must participate, the feeling of helplessness can arise. And the defensive reaction will usually be negation directed against any activity in or relation to the learning process.

#### 4.1.2 Ambivalence

There is in all of us, on the one hand, a motivation to develop ourselves, and on the other hand, a psychological defence against change. These

*A certain amount of energy must be mobilized*

*The instructor can ....*

*Active resistance  
"want something else"*

*Passive resistance "just don't want"*

*Resistance can be addressed directly*

two often – but not always – oppositely directed forces create ambivalence.

As with transformative learning, the development of ambivalence-tolerance requires the will and energy to search-out the possibilities and see the bigger picture in a larger context.

This can be done on the basis of a reality test, where the factors of ambivalence are put into both emotional and rational perspective - can this really be necessary for me?

If we cannot muster the sufficient energy and the necessary courage, we risk rejecting learning opportunities through our ambivalence.

#### 4.1.3 How can the instructor support?

The instructor can guide and coach the participants, and the most effective way to support a participant is through dialog to find out, what challenges are in play and discuss options

### 4.2 Resistance to Learning

While our defence against learning is a more or less unconscious preparedness, we have available to face challenges, resistance is mobilized in the present – in situations where we are faced with conditions that we cannot or will not accept.

Freud believes that psychic energy originates from various drives, in particular the drive to maintain one's life and unfold one's potentials.

In general, the potential for resistance is biologically embedded in man as part of his potential to cope in the species' struggle for survival.

#### 4.2.1 Why resistance?

We may mobilise resistance against learning if we are participating in a more or less undesirable course or training (how often did you as an instructor hear: "I am attending, because my boss told me to"? ) - or maybe in an annoying lesson or exercise. Maybe it is a certain teacher that sparks the our resistance or the social situation in the class that is just not right.

It can also happen in situations that go against our ethics or political or religious beliefs. Or if we believe that what is being taught is not correct – when we believe, that we know better.

We can then choose to leave the classroom or the exercise - but with the expectedly prohibitive and unwanted consequences that would entail, we might instead choose just to stay and mentally "drop out" and be indifferent. We may choose to show our opposition by doing something completely different, such as texting on the mobile phone or interfere with annoying remarks and unrest demonstratively.

Resistance is a conscious response - and therefore the instructor can address it and work with the participant to understand and mitigate the resistance.

Active resistance is mobilised when we "want something else" as opposed to the passive resistance, which "just doesn't want to".

If the resistant participant enjoys a reflected and well-defined identity project and therein the driving force to obtain the desired skills and abilities, then the resistance can be a very strong enabler for a constructive process that unites the ambitions of the identity project and a life development potential in an effort to find alternatives to the conditions that are presently found unacceptable.

If the teacher can mobilize the necessary energy to address the resistance for learning and the reasons behind it, there is a great potential for experiencing transformative learning.

From a pedagogical point of view, it is partly about creating learning spaces and situations that challenge the participant and in that to open for the possibility of the participants' resistance, and partly about recognizing resistance as a legitimate form of expression.

#### 4.3 Some reasons for barriers

- External motivation: For example, the participant is sent on the course because it is a requirement from a manager, or because it will pay more having the certification.
- It is simply too difficult to see what the new thing is to be used for.
- The teaching style is different from what you are familiar with – perhaps more responsibility for the learning process is placed on the participant's shoulders or there is a lot of theoretical presentations.
- Defense works by the everyday consciousness increase with age. The challenges to existence are increasing – and thus the need for structured theme-horizon schemes is also increasing. And this lead to an increase in filters and defenses.
- Fear of change – fear of learning – what you have and master today has worked ok until now, and the potential new ability challenges what you have clung to so far.

#### 4.4 What can we do as instructors?

- Accept that low motivation can be real and normal in the learning space. And that it is okay for the instructor to address the issue.
- Show the participants that it is OK not to be top-motivated all the time. Barriers to learning is a life-premise and it can be experienced as a defeat by the participant, if one's lack of motivation becomes a specific topic of conversation.

*External or internal motivation – whip or carrot – push/pull*

*Is the new stuff a criticism of what I can do today?*

*A life-premise that applies to all of us*

*Community and Safe  
learning space*

*Praise and recognition*

*The participant's  
learning is in focus*

- Find out where the defense or resistance is at play, investigate the reasons and intervene. Ask honest probing questions – reflect on the answers and options, and decide realistic and achievable goals with some degree of balanced challenge.
- Create confidence within the participants to break the everyday consciousness and to dare to expand their theme-horizon schemes. An enabler could be: “what would you be able to accomplish if you had these skills...?”
- Create a sense of community in a safe learning space where you can ask questions and fail and wonder. And where the participants can get both support and challenges.
- For some, expressing dissatisfaction is as much a matter of marking one's freedom and right to express one's critical situation in a democratic consumer society as it is an expression of actual dissatisfaction. And only very rarely is the resistance directed at you as the instructor.
- Recognition and praise and formative constructive feedback often lead to the student doing more of what is recognized. Critical feedback alone will usually strengthen resistance and defense.
- Be humble about your topics – we cannot expect all participants per automaticity will think that precisely the subject you are passionate about is the most important and interesting to them and to their individual identity projects.
- Focus on the participant's learning rather than on your delivery – the teaching. Enthusiasm is contagious – knowledge is not.
- Spend more time on developing the participants' attention to how they learn. And on why they learn.
- The better we as instructors become at facilitating participants to see and recognize their own competences, the more motivated they become to improve these competences, or to develop new competences

