

How to Learn Best

What is learning? Winston Churchill once remarked, “I am always ready to learn although I do not always like being taught.” It is not uncommon for formal learning events to fall short on delivering a complete learning experience. “Traditional learning, with the teacher or trainer spouting facts and figures and with pupils or participants regurgitating the information without deeper involvement, is a very ineffective form of learning. A much more effective and long-lasting form of learning is to involve the learner by creating a meaningful learning experience” (Beard and Wilson, 2013). Creating experience or connecting to existing experience is the key to successful learning. Perhaps that is why Einstein observed, “Learning is

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Best learning: much has been written about learning styles and aligning oneself with a particular learning style that is fundamental to a learner’s success. Unfortunately, the concept of learning styles is commonly known as a neuromyth. Though each of us has affinities for how one learns best no one is locked into a specific method of learning. Moreover with practice (the essential ingredient to learning anything) one can improve their learning ability in a non-preferred learning approach. What is helpful is employing the following ideas into your learning experience:

- ✓ **Mindset:** is your mindset fixed or ready for growth? Dweck (2006) suggests with a fixed mindset one feels that intelligence is fixed and leads to a desire to look smart. Therefore one avoids challenges, gives up easily, see effort as fruitless, ignores useful feedback, and is threatened by the success of others. However, with a growth mindset one has a desire to learn and has an inclination to embrace challenges, persist in the face of setbacks, see effort as the path to mastery, and is inspired by the success of others.
- ✓ **No fear** - Threats, fear, or high stress can activate excessive metabolic activity in the amygdala that interferes with information entering the brain’s processing, patterning, and memory circuits. Ensure you set a positive emotional climate for yourself and avoid unnecessary stressors. However emotions can work in your favor. Emotion charging of memory connections – conscious memory of personally meaningful and emotional experiences increase memory storage.
- ✓ **Attention** – “The brain doesn’t pay attention to boring things,” writes John Medina in his work *Brain Rules*. “What we pay attention to is profoundly influenced by memory. Our previous experience predicts where we should pay attention.” Therefore, be sure to understand the benefits and practicality of the learning. Multitasking (another neuromyth) further diminishes human attention. Medina writes, “The brain is not capable of multi-tasking. We can talk and breathe, but when it comes to higher level tasks, we just can’t do it.”
- ✓ **Focus** – Begins with mental energy; good fuel that supports one’s ability to focus. The best fuels are: exercise, hydration, fresh fruit (glucose), protein (avoid carbohydrates and sugar – especially sugar). Another key ingredient to maintaining mental focus is adequate sleep: “sleep

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well, think well” (Medina, 2011). With these important criteria in place, practice paying attention to paying attention otherwise known as mindfulness or being aware of your conscious attention.

- ✓ **Motivation** – Is the act or process of giving someone a reason for doing something; the condition of being eager to act or work; a force or influence that causes someone to do something (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/motivation>). Learning motivation rock stars Richard Ryan and Edward Deci (2007) suggest these considerations in planning a learning episode to facilitate motivation:
 - Connect*: work to feel connected with the other learners, the learning and the instructor
 - Useful*: be sure to understand why the learning benefits you and you have a clear sense of the practicality in applying the learning.
 - Agentic*: know you that ultimately you have the capacity to act independently and make your own choices.
 - Self-efficacy*: (Linnenbrink and Pintrich, 2003) ensure you know you can accomplish the learning task (albeit with an appropriate amount of effort).
 - Fun*: having fun speeds learning because dopamine (aka happy juice a neurotransmitter) is secreted when having fun. Sometimes it can be as simple as a smile or a welcoming environment. Be an active partner in facilitating a friendly and supportive learning experience.
- ✓ **Practice** - Practice...is what makes learning happen. “Practice doesn’t make perfect...it makes it permanent” (Sousa, 2011); “Practice style is critical. It takes a special kind of practice (called deliberate practice) to force one’s mind and body into the kind of change necessary to improve. Deliberate practice is the slow, methodical process of getting better” achieved by safely focusing on practicing the concept as close to the real application of the concept as possible. Ordinary practice (or worse, no practice at all!) where one’s current skill level is simply being reinforced, is not enough to get better. Deliberate practice is often "associated with frequent failures and frustrations.” (Schenk, 2010).
- ✓ **Feedback** – “Basically, feedback is information about how we are doing in our efforts to reach a goal. Whether feedback is just there to be grasped or is provided by another person, helpful feedback is goal-referenced; tangible and transparent; actionable; user-friendly (specific and personalized); timely; ongoing; and consistent” (Wiggins). You can develop feedback on your own using the U.S. Army’s After Action Review (AAR) evaluation format, ask yourself: what did I set out to do, what actually happened, why did it happen, what do I need to do to improve my ability to effectively use this concept. Return to the practice section to refine your skills as necessary.
- ✓ **Practice some more** – “If I had six hours to learn anything, I would spend four of it practicing”, Clark Aldrich; “Practice is everything”, Pele. Develop a practice plan to organize and get the most out of your practice sessions.
- ✓ **Be an active partner with your learning by working the subject matter expert to help them help you be successful.**

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A few last thoughts: Nobel laureate Daniel Kahneman observes, “Memory holds the vast repertory of skills we have acquired in a lifetime of practice, which automatically produce adequate solutions to challenges as they arise, from walking around a large stone on the path to averting the incipient outburst of a customer. The acquisition of skills requires a regular environment, an adequate opportunity to practice, and rapid and unequivocal feedback about the correctness of thoughts and actions. When these conditions are fulfilled, skill eventually develops, and the intuitive judgments and choices that quickly come to mind will mostly be accurate.” While Jeff Hawkins suggests, “Human intelligence is measured by the capacity to remember and predict

patterns in the world...the brain receives patterns from the outside world through experience, stores them as memories, and makes predictions by combining what it has seen before to what is happening now.”

Taking Action - An outline for action developed by Dr. Kathryn Linder, Ph.D., Suffolk University

As a result of this review, what will I...

 Start Doing?
 Stop Doing?
 Do Less Of?
 Do More Of?

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