

Learning How To Learn

by

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We go to school to learn; but, did we ever learn how to learn? Have you ever wondered how we learned to speak or to read and write? How do we learn to drive a car, fly an airplane or, for that matter, walk and run? How do we learn arithmetic? How do we learn to communicate? How do we learn to respect, trust and love? How do we learn anything?

Learning how to learn is important because if we don't or can't learn, we're in big trouble! Obviously, we did learn. We learned many behaviors and a fair amount of knowledge. Just by the fact that you are reading and understanding these words suggest not only that you did learn, but that you can learn. Yet, the question is how did you do it? Because if you know how you did it, you can apply that knowledge to just about anything that needs to be learned.

Simply stated, learning is a process of creating, arranging and re-arranging neural interactions and neural program structures within the brain. We're actually pre-programmed and hard wired for learning and we really don't have to learn how to learn. But, we can learn how to enhance and magnify our capacity to learn. All learning is in the brain. Even if we are learning a physical dance movement with our feet, the learning is taking place in the brain where neurological "magic" is happening. From there, nerves and muscles are coordinated in an extraordinarily complex process of bioelectrochemical signals.

Before the brain can begin it's creating, arranging and re-arranging of neural interactions, i.e., before there can be learning, there must be input. Input comes in the form of raw sensory data. Depending on how that data comes in can greatly accelerate, or impede, learning. Raw sensory data is received through the eyes (sight), the ears (sound), the skin (touch), the nose (smell), the tongue (taste) and the musculoskeletal system (movement). Of course, our nervous system is at the base of all these sensory systems, sometimes referred to as the "Sensorium." Also, a process called "synaesthesia" is often referred to in learning theory. Synaesthesia is the ability to mix up the senses; for example, you can hear the color blue or see the sound of wind. This kind of imaginative shifting of sensory modalities can often be helpful in working with learning disabilities.

In the 1970's a Bulgarian psychologist by the name of Georgi Lozanov revolutionized the field of learning with his ideas of "superlearning" and "suggestology." His premise was that various environmental stimuli, when regulated properly, can accelerate learning. Specifically, an environment that induces relaxation was optimal for learning. Another key factor in superlearning was rhythm. The proper rhythms used alternatively, either from background music or sound, is also highly conducive to accelerated learning. Basically, what Lozanov, and others who have followed appear to be saying is that learning is best accomplished in a very relaxed almost hypnotic state of mind. This is very interesting because our schools are anything but relaxing and trance inducing.

Imagine a classroom that is not brightly lit, that is spacious enough for 25 children to lie on the clean, carpeted floor. Imagine soft background sounds, perhaps that of a waterfall or a babbling brook. Imagine then hearing, either from an audio tape or a live person, the singing of the multiplication tables, beginning with the 2's. Each run through the table is sung at a different rate, rhythm, tone, cadence and volume. Following this exercise, imagine the children then sitting at desks and writing out the multiplication tables they just heard with different colored crayons. Then imagine them singing them out aloud themselves. Imagine any number of games that can then be played using the multiplication tables. How long and how difficult do you think it will be for students to learn the tables this way? Will it be torturous or enjoyable? Gee, kids might even like coming to school to learn! Now, that would be a revolution in education!

Want to learn to ski, or sail, or dance, or surf, or fly an airplane? Well, just about anything can be learned in a very similar method as described above. The only difference is that in the case of physical activities, visualization replaces physical activity. So, let's say you want to learn to.....play a musical instrument, play the guitar. You can greatly enhance your learning capacity by taking a piece of the skill, say a simple chord, and, in a very relaxed and calm state of mind, you practice that chord in your mind. You visualize every single detail of your hand and fingers. You feel the pressure of the strings on your fingers; you hear the sound of the chord being strummed. Want to learn to fly an airplane? Well, you don't necessarily need to relax and visualize it. Today, with the advent of modern computer technology, you can enter a flight simulator, which is just inner visualization materialized outward via technology. Even home computers now have flight training programs. Want to improve your athletic performance? There is no question that relaxed visualization is a key component. Top athletes from all over the world and their coaches will attest to the fact that inner visualization has a tremendous impact on improving performance.

The gist of the matter is simple: learning takes place in the brain and the most conducive environment for the brain to learn in is one which allows neural connections to be formed easily, quickly and without resistance or distractions. Subdued lighting, soft background, trance inducing music and relaxation are a highly effective environment for learning and visualization.

Ever wonder why it's so hard to learn new behaviors? Generally it's because there is so much stress and anxiety about it. If you really want to learn new behaviors (as opposed to being coerced into it), then use relaxation and visualization. Practice seeing in your mind's eye the new behavior. As you repeat this process you are creating new neural pathways which are the basis of the behavior you want to generate. Give it a try. You'll be surprised at how quickly and easily you can learn a new behavior and how well your brain can work when given the proper environment.