

Mastering Learning as a Process Skill

Posted At : September 29, 2014 1:19 PM | Posted By : [Tim Brunson, PhD](#)

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by Tim Brunson, PhD

Whether part of our formal education, professional development, or the improvement of skills related to a hobby, in order to more efficiently acquire information we seldom focus on the need to improve our learning skill. Yes, we focus on content and pretty much ignore the need to improve our learning processes. However, our ability to master the tasks related to an endeavor depends almost entirely on our improving our ability to acquire knowledge.

Learning is a process skill that was established first at the infant and young child period of our lives. Our methods were habituated at a time when our immature brains were rapidly developing. Some of the ways that we encoded procedural and declarative memories are as valid in our adult life as they were in those early years. Nevertheless, as a mature human with several decades of knowledge acquisition under our hats, we now have numerous additional learning advantages that are ignored should we continue to use methods that were appropriate prior to our brain fully developing.

One case in point is an adult's persistent need to sub-vocalize when reading. As a child, I was taught to point to the words in a sentence as I carefully pronounced them. At that point I was translating rapidly acquired visual stimuli and slowing it down so that words can be vocally expressed. What I was doing is slowly building up my child-level databank of meanings and improving the proficiency of my linguistic neural substrates, which include my Wernicke and Broca areas. Although most adults no longer use their finger as part of their reading experience, like a phobia pattern that is first acquired during adolescence, these inefficient patterns persist into adulthood. As adults, the tremendous repertoire of processed mental patterns, which have received meaning and achieved understanding, are substantially developed in our minds. This is true for any literate person. The bimodal neurons in our temporal and parietal lobes are fully capable of facilitating new understanding without requiring the retarding influence of certain linguistic processes. By establishing new reading habits it is quite reasonable for a bad habit reader, who can reasonably comprehend written text at 120 - 180 words per minute, to rapidly attain speeds well over 1,000 words per minute.

Learning needs to be viewed as a process skill waiting to be mastered. I have often said that mastery involves three fundamental steps. These are: installing into your brain the knowledge and skills related the endeavor, deeply encoding and habituating these into the parietal and temporal lobes, and developing a wide range of techniques that can instantly trigger masterful performance. This holds true both for the content as well as the process.

Like golf, violin playing, and chess, the act of learning likewise has specific behavioral patterns. Some are typical of a poor performer, others that of a master. Once those skills are identified -like in the reading example above - it is important that bad habits be eliminated and the new ones installed. This can come from instruction or - thanks to the existence of mirror neurons - can be acquired in part by observing the masters in action. Once these behavioral patterns are installed, the goal is to continually reinforce the depth of the programming through continued stimulating and challenging exposure. And then finally, it is important to find ways that the programmed masterful performance can be triggered. I do this through the use of post hypnotic suggestions during a somnambulistic trance or through the use of affirmations or pre-performance mantras.

Mastering a process skill such as learning is therefore not much different from content skills like surgery, backgammon, and tiddlywinks. Nevertheless, becoming a master learner allows a person to acquire a plethora of various specialties. For instance, once you learn to play one instrument, it is often much easier to competently perform with a second, third, or fourth. The same is true of learning languages. As you develop the ability to speak one foreign language, adding additional ones is much easier. What such people have accomplished is the development of the ability to acquire and master knowledge.

So how do you become a master learner? Of course, by spending many years constantly being educated and pursuing knowledge, inevitably you will develop a propensity to learn. However, this does not protect you from establishing bad learning habits. Unfortunately, I know too many Phd's, including professional educators, who practice and teach inefficient learning skills. On the other hand, it is possible for a person - regardless of their age - to improve their learning skills.

The first step is to overcome your bad habits. This includes replacing chronic stress and excessive multi-tasking with relaxation techniques - such as meditation and self hypnosis - planning your future activities, and setting aside periods that you can focus on your work and play. Making a commitment of being mindful of your activities is a vital step to improving mastery in any area.

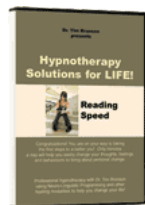
Next you need to acquire the vocabulary and syntax of your desired new talent. This means collecting the best methods for rapidly learning visually, auditory, and kinesthetically. Since 70% of your brain is dedicated to visual processing, which is also the fastest way to acquire input, your emphasis should be on that modality - without forgetting the importance of learning through all three primary channels. Although experience helps, research and expert instruction will accelerate the rate at which you install more efficient methods.

While you progress with the previous step you begin enhancing the encoding in your brain. The more input, the faster your brain encodes the skill. The more emphasis that you place on this encoding step the thicker the associated neural networks become. The use of self-hypnosis, to include guided imagery and suggestion, and intense periods of training with experts or viewing them performing their skills will promote your rapid progress. Although practice always helps, these other ideas are

accelerated techniques. What you will find is that the advancement of your abilities will become exponential. This is affected by how the bimodal and mirror neurons of your brain operate. The more previously installed and processed data, the faster the acquisition of new knowledge becomes.

Lastly, as you simultaneously continue with the previous methods you should also start developing ways to trigger your peak learning abilities. During hypnosis, see yourself rapidly reading and comprehending written material. Then establish a post-hypnotic trigger such as "When I say the word 'relax' my brain becomes a calm open channel for new information." Using an affirmation helps. For instance, before reading say "My mind is calm and open. Information flows rapidly into my mind and body." These are no different than the mantras used by master golfers before the tee off.

By developing a mind that can process your environment five times faster than the average person, you begin to see the richness of the world around you. The truth is that it has always been there waiting for you. Once you become a master learner, as you open your eyes, ears, and feelings you begin to feel as if you have become awake for the first time in your life.



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