

The New Theory of Learning

A few people actually read [my bio](#), in which I refer to the New Theory of Learning. Some people asked, "What is the New Theory of Learning?" Well, here it is.

This is not really a "rant." In fact, it's one of the few topics that I think I actually know something about. And it's not really new. The problem is that it's so old we seem to have forgotten it and been caught up in so-called "modern" methods of teaching.

The theory derives from many years of teaching experience. Nearly all of this teaching has been to MBA candidates. But, since I wrote this (about a year ago) I've been noticing how even little kids learn, and I'm more and more convinced that the New Theory may apply at ALL levels of learning. Let me know what you think.

Premise I: THE LITTLE RED SCHOOLHOUSE THEORY

I was a college professor for decades, during which time I became convinced that education had not progressed much beyond the Little Red Schoolhouse theory of learning. We put an expert in a roomful of people and the expert proceeds to tell them everything he knows.

A major problem with this approach is that we ask people to sit and listen for long periods of time. Studies indicate that under such circumstances, we have an attention span of 20-30 minutes, and we retain about 20 percent of what we hear. This so-called "teaching" doesn't result in much learning. It results in, maybe, someone remembering enough to pass a test. It's not learning. It's passing a test. You walk away from the test and the valve in your brain opens and P00F-out goes the information to make room for the subject of the next test. An old Chinese proverb offers some guidance here.

Tell me and I will surely forget.
Show me and I might remember.

But make me *do it*, and I will certainly understand.

Listening does not lead to understanding; *doing* does lead to understanding. Does the cobbler teach his son how to cobble by telling him about it? Does the doctor learn to perform appendectomies by reading about them? No. They DO IT.

From my own personal experiences, doing something does lead to more learning. Perhaps your experience bears this out as well.

So, the first element of the New Theory is that students must “do” as opposed to sitting and listening.

Premise II: ONLY REAL REALITY IS REALITY

Of course, there are various teaching methods that allow “doing” (for example, in MBA programs we use cases and term projects).

A word about cases (which I have used for nearly all my years of teaching). The MBA case is an attempt to make the student “do it.” But it’s a somewhat feeble attempt. First of all, because the student very soon learns how to analyze cases and to feed back to the instructor what s/he knows the instructor wants to hear. Secondly, cases very soon get boring. Cases are dead, flat pieces of paper. They are an attempt to bring reality into the classroom, but they fail because they are very poor substitutes for real reality. The medical intern may spend some time on cadavers, but would you want a doctor trained on cadavers to operate on your heart? Me either.

The second element of the New Theory, then, is this: If you’re going to DO it, you must do it with real people in real situations.

Some may argue against this part of the theory on the following grounds. “What happens to the syllabus?” “How can one predict that the real situation will offer all the opportunities for subject matter that the expert deems necessary for this course?” The answer is that you can’t predict that it will. In fact, you can be pretty damned sure it won’t. It will offer far more! One of the benefits of REAL reality teaching is that it becomes—of necessity—multidisciplinary. You don’t encounter issues that all “fit” into one course. In MBA programs, for example, nearly all problems involve everything: marketing, finance, organizational

behavior, operations research. You CAN'T isolate anything. Everything depends on everything else.

Premise III: THE BACKWARDS LEARNING THEORY

Here's a critical issue. People in the Little Red Schoolhouse environment have little (or no) idea of *why* they should want to know what the expert knows. In essence, we give them answers before they can really understand what the questions are. Sometimes, we tell them what the questions are. But mostly, they have no real understanding of the relevance of the questions to their lives. Example: "Now I'm going to teach you how to read financial statements." They ask, "Why would I want to know that?" No matter how we answer, they interpret it as, "Because you will then be able to get a higher-paying job." This is supposed to motivate people to want to learn. It doesn't. Motivation literature is very clear on this point. It tells us that real motivation doesn't derive from external rewards (like money or grades) but from intrinsic rewards (wanting to know and deriving satisfaction from, for example, solving a problem). Our current techniques motivate students to struggle to remember enough to pass an exam.

Question: Why are we trying to teach people who don't *really* want to learn? Motivation is the key. Of course, we know that some people are self-motivated. They have a desire to learn everything and anything. We don't have to worry about them. But others need to know *why* they should listen to you or me. Most of the problem here is that people are in colleges who don't belong in colleges. How the heck can an 18-year-old kid know anything about anything—or more importantly, care about anything, besides the opposite sex? We fill up schools with kids wasting their parent's money and looking for a place to socialize. There are better, less expensive, and more productive ways to do that. But I digress.

Here's what I've noticed about the relationship between learning and motivation. Maybe you've noticed it, too. Have you ever been faced with a problem like any of the following? Maybe you're trying to decide how to deal with a particularly difficult person. Or maybe you're staring at a pile of numbers and you don't know what the hell it all means. Or, you're trying to decide whether to invest some money in a company and you can't make sense of the financials. Or—whatever. It's a problem for which you WANT an answer.

Let's take the first example—a difficult person—just to follow through on what you might do. You simply don't understand why the person is behaving the way she is behaving. If you understood why, you might be able to figure out what to do. Faced with such a problem you might seek out an expert—someone who understands people's behavior. He might give you some insights. He might suggest that the problem really isn't unique. Lots of people act this way under certain circumstances. YOU MIGHT NOTICE THAT IN SUCH A SITUATION YOU ARE LISTENING VERY INTENTLY. QUITE UNLIKE THE WAY YOU LISTEN IN A CLASSROOM. He, the expert, might even suggest some things you might read to find out more. You can't wait to get to the library. You find books, articles. You read.

Think about HOW you're reading in this situation. Is it the same as the way you read textbooks when you were a student? It sure as hell isn't. The difference is that you're INTERESTED in finding the answer.

Think about it some more. What do you actually do under these situations? Do you read everything? No. You're looking for answers to specific questions. What happens is this. You look at a lot of books and articles until you find something that seems relevant. You read it. Something strikes a chord: maybe a word, maybe a theory, maybe a description of a certain personality type that matches the one you're dealing with. Now you go in search of more info on that personality type. You find more books. They lead you to more. And pretty soon, you know what to do and how to do it.

While all this was happening, how might you have felt? Were you saying to yourself, "God, I wish I didn't have to read all this?" Did you yawn a lot? Did you ask, "Why am I reading this?" Hell no. You probably wished you had more to read. More people to answer your questions. You were—LEARNING!

Notice what happened. You worked backwards. You started with the problem. A problem that you had a need or desire to solve. You started somewhere—either with an expert or a book—and you went wherever it took you. And you went more than willingly; not with someone dragging you, kicking and screaming. You went because you wanted to go. Because you knew it was taking you where you wanted to go.

So here's the third element of the New Theory: Work backwards.

Start with the problem and go wherever it takes you.

That's the theory that's been evolving for me over all my years of teaching. Don't let an "expert" stand in front of people and tell them everything s/he knows. This is mostly just an ego trip for the expert, and a very boring experience for the victims. The overhead projector has done more to destroy learning than any other thing I can think of.