

A NATURAL WAY OF LEARNING

By Jay Cross

Chapter 2 of Informal Learning: Rediscovering the Paths that Inspire Innovation and Performance

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LEARNING IS THAT WHICH enables you to participate successfully in life, at work, and in the groups that matter to you. Informal learning is the unofficial, unscheduled, impromptu way people learn to do their jobs.

When faced with massive, inevitable change, and the hyperinflation of time certainly qualifies, living things adapt or die. Darwinian evolution is one form of adaptation, but natural selection is glacially slow; we don't have eons to wait. Living things also adapt by learning (Figure 2.1). Learning is any non-genetic adaptation one makes to interact more effectively with the ecosystems in which one participates.

Real learning is not what most of us grew up thinking it was.

CHARLES HANDY

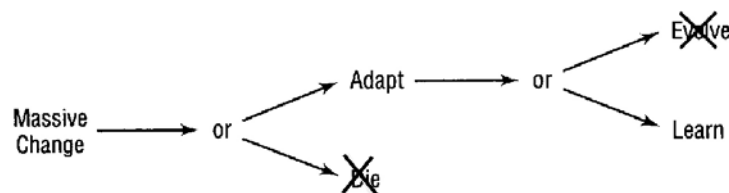


FIGURE 2.1. Learning Is Adaptation

Ask people what comes to mind when they hear the word learning, and many will say school or perhaps training. School is a time-consuming and generally ineffective way to learn; most corporate training is wasted effort.

Corporations would bypass learning altogether were it not politically incorrect to do so. Executives don't want learning; they want execution. They want the job done. They want performance.

To a business manager, learning is a means to an end. If someone were to invent a smart pill that enabled workers to excel at their jobs without training, that person would make a fortune marketing smart pharmaceuticals, and most trainers would be out of work.

Let me reiterate: teaming is adaptation. Taking advantage of the double meaning of the word *network*, "to learn" is to optimize the quality of one's networks.

All learning is self-directed.

DAN TOBIN

INFORMAL LEARNING OR FORMAL?

Some people see the world in terms of dichotomies: yes or no, on or off. To them, everything is black or white and only rarely gray. Real issues contain gradations, maybes, what-ifs, emotions, mitigating factors, and other entanglements. Figure 2.2 illustrates a continuum of yes to no.



FIGURE 2.2. A Continuum of Yes to No

Formal learning and informal learning are both-and, not either-or. This book is focused on informal learning, but when you assess what will work for your organization, consider how informal learning might supplement what you are doing now rather than replace it.

THE SPECTRUM OF LEARNING

Formal and informal learning are ranges along a continuum of learning. Formal learning is accomplished in school, courses, classrooms, and workshops. It's official, it's usually scheduled, and it teaches a curriculum. Most of the time, it's top-down: learners are evaluated and graded on mastering material someone else deems important. Those who have good memories or test well receive gold stars and privileged placement. Graduates receive diplomas, degrees, and certificates.

Informal learning often flies under the official radar. It can happen intentionally or inadvertently. No one takes attendance, for there are no classes. No one assigns grades, for success in life and work is the measure of its effectiveness. No one graduates, because learning never ends. Examples are learning through observing, trial-and-error, calling the help line, asking a neighbor, traveling to a new place, reading a magazine, conversing with others, taking part in a group, composing a story, reflecting on the day's events, burning your finger on a hot stove, awakening with an inspiration, raising a child, visiting a museum, or pursuing a hobby.

Formal and informal learning both have important roles to play. Informal learning is not a cure-all, and were it not for formal learning, I would not be writing this book.

Most learning experiences blend both formal and informal aspects. Sometimes public transit is the best way to get somewhere; other times it's better to take one's own path.

SAP's Etay Gafni helped me conceptualize the split between formal and informal learning by describing the styles of his one-year-old son and four-year old daughter. When his son is hungry, he wants food. Any food that Etay brings will suffice. He trusts Dad to deliver. His daughter is more discriminating. She wants rice, not potatoes, and the ketchup on her plate should never touch the rice. His son is analogous to a formal learner: he accepts what comes. His daughter takes control, as does an informal learner. In an ideal world, everyone will progress from passive, formal learner to creative, informal storyteller.

THE SPENDING-OUTCOMES PARADOX

People learn informally most of what they need to do their jobs. Although every situation is different, a common assertion is that 80 percent of learning in organizations is informal. The number is backed up by the Institute for Research on Learning, the Bureau of Labor and Statistics, the Education Development Center of Massachusetts, Capitalworks, the eLearning Guild, and Canada's National Research Network on New Approaches to Lifelong Learning. (See Appendix B for details.)

Ironically, 80 percent of corporate spending goes to formal learning and only 20 percent to informal. To tell you the truth, I pulled this figure out of

thin air; it feels right. I'm aware of how much corporations spend on teaming management systems, instructional design, tuition reimbursement, instructor salaries, classrooms, and courseware. I don't know the tab for meetings, conference attendance, professional dues, pool tables, beer busts, expertise locator software, water-cooler meetings, and other informal teaming investments.

DELUSIONS OF CONTROL

A core business belief is that people are manageable. This is a comfort to managers. It implies that to get things done, all you have to do is tell people to do them. The real world doesn't work that way. To extract optimal performance from workers, managers must inspire them rather than command them.

Antoine de Saint-Exupery put it nicely: "If you want to build a boat, do not instruct the men to saw wood, stitch the sails, prepare the tools and organize the work, but make them long for setting sail and travel to distant lands."

Today's free-range learners are knowledge workers. They expect the freedom to connect the dots for themselves. Imagine the difference between a free-range (informal) learner and a (formal) high school student. The high school student is not allowed to take notes, books, or a cell phone into the room for the final exam. Happily for us all, life is unlike high school.

It is no longer useful to define learning as what someone is able to do all on his or her lonesome. This is not .Survivor. Knowledge workers of the future will have instant, ubiquitous access to the Net. The measure of their learning is an open-book exam. "What can you do?" has been replaced with, "What can you and your network connections do?" Knowledge itself is moving from the individual to the individual and his contacts.

High school also assumed that the curriculum was stable. One edition of a textbook would be in service for five years or maybe more. At work, the curriculum changes all the time. Nothing stands still. Learning new things requires unlearning old ones.

Learning is social, and social networks interconnect workers with families, circles of friends, neighborhood groups, professional associations, task teams, business webs, value nets, user groups, flash mobs, gangs, political groups, scout troops, bridge clubs, twelve-step groups, and alumni associations. In one sense, our worker is defined by who he knows. Our definition of learning must embrace the people the worker interacts with and the learning that comes from their interacting with one another.

GRAVITY ATTRACTS

As much as I favor letting things take their natural course, I don't mind rigging the situation for the best odds of success. Learners need to be attracted to learning experiences, or not much is going to happen.

IBM's Steve Rae posits three gravitational forces for informal learning. The first force *is access*. The learner has to know the opportunity exists, the *everything else in* costs are reasonable, and it fits her requirements. The second force is *quality*: Achilles heel of an informal learning initiative 80 percent of the time (personal communication, 2005).

ENGINEERING THE INDIVIDUAL'S LEARNING NETWORK

Learning originally meant finding the right path. Paths are connectors; people are nodes. The world is constructed of networks. We're back where we started.

In networks, connections are the only thing that matters. We network with people; we use networks to

*Knowledge
itself is moving
from the individual
to the net.*

JAY CROSS

gather information and to learn things; we have neural networks in our heads.

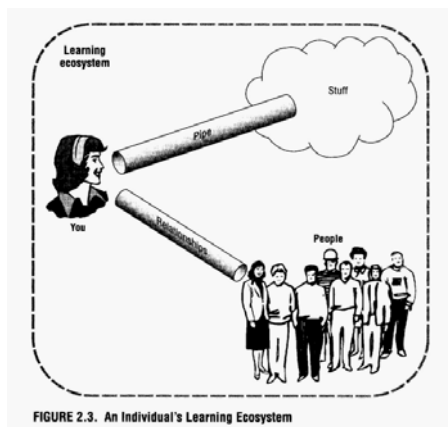
Learning is optimizing our connections to the networks that matter to us. This satisfies both the community concept of learning (social networking) and the knowledge aspect (gaining access to information and fitting it into the patterns in one's head).

To learn is to adapt to fit with one's ecosystems. We can look at learning as making and maintaining good connections in a network. Cultivators of learning environments can borrow from network engineers, focusing on such things as:

- Improving signal-to-noise ratio
- Installing fat pipes for backbone connections
- Pruning worthless, unproductive branches
- Promoting standards for interoperability
- Balancing the load
- Seeking continuous improvement

Unfortunately, there are very few learning network engineers. No corporate function owns learning. Corporate learning involves information flows, corporate communication, customer relations, knowledge management, training, induction, debriefing, performance support, mentors and coaches, architecture and interior design, corporate culture, information technology, professional communities, social network optimization, rapid prototyping, storytelling, collaboration, meaningful meetings, and more. I raised this issue on my blog (<http://intemettime.com>), specifically: "Learning Ecosystem Question, February 24, 2006."

A learner interacts with stuff through what I'll call *pipes* and with people through relationships. A net connection is one form of pipe; web pages and other information are *stuff*. Interactions with people and stuff lead to learning.



The first draft of this book described how people can communicate effectively, calm their emotions, and be happy. My review team found these topics irrelevant. I am perplexed. I don't understand how building the worker's learning capacity can be excluded from the equation. Have I been drinking too much holistic, systems-theory Kool-Aid? Is it okay for a Chief

Learning Officer to blow this one off with "That's not my department"? Send me an email or leave a comment below. I just don't get this.

Among the responses was this one:

CLOs will always blow it off; it is not part of their worldview It is seen as part of the personal, not the public, and however much mumbo jumbo is spouted, however much we can tout the benefits, if it doesn't clearly translate to shareholder value, it won't be bought You are talking about treating people as people. This is very radical.

Boundaries define formal learning, but informal learning is unbounded. We'll look at the payback of informal learning in the next chapter and address governance in the last chapter.

UNIVERSALS

Informal does not mean lackadaisical. Formal, informal, or in between, people learn best when they:

- Know what's in it for them and deem it relevant
- Understand what's expected of them
- Connect with other people
- Are challenged to make choices
- Feel safe about showing what they do and do not know
- Receive information in small packets
- Get frequent progress reports
- Learn things close to the time they need them
- Are encouraged by coaches or mentors
- Learn from a variety of modalities (for example, discussion followed by a simulation)
- Confront maybes instead of certainties
- Teach others
- Get positive reinforcement for small victories
- Make and correct mistakes
- **Try, try, and try** again
- Reflect on their learning and apply its lessons

HUMAN POTENTIAL

George Leonard, one of my heroes, coined the term Human Potential Movement. He has studied aikido for nearly thirty years and is the author of four inspiring books: *Ecstasy and Education*, *Mastery*, *The Way of Aikido*, and *The Life We Are Given*. He is a past president of the Association of Humanistic Psychology and of Esalen Institute. "We all have the potential for genius within us," he told me. "Learning has been my whole life," he said, eyes gleaming. Encouraged by his parents, George collected reptiles, became a ham radio enthusiast, had a lab for his zany chemistry projects, studied modern American literature, played the clarinet (after hearing Benny Goodman on

the radio), and formed his own swing band, all before turning eighteen years old. None of this took place in a classroom.

When I asked George what advice he would offer people who want to improve their learning, everything he mentioned involved informal learning:

- Stay open to possibilities. The world is feeding you opportunities all the time. Keep your eyes open and you will see them.
- You need instruction to get the basics, but after that, watch closely and see what works. Don't try to change everything at once-that doesn't work.
- Learn from accidents. Learn from mistakes. Capitalize on them. Celebrate the unexpected.

NEXT UP

The former Monty Python comedian John Cleese has said that in the faster, faster, faster culture of business today, stopping to reflect on a situation almost feels like laziness. Research has found that creative people aren't particularly smarter than others; they simply spend more time mulling things over. Discovering one's true feelings and sleeping on it take time. Short-cuts are false economies.

Someone asked Cleese where he got his ideas, and he replied that the ideas arrive every Monday morning on a postcard from a little old man in Skelton. Why can't people use common sense instead of following mindless rules?

My postcard this morning said that you are intrigued by informal learning but you aren't buying it until you understand how you will benefit from it. That's the topic of our next chapter.