

Me as Learner

By

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In the beginning of my quest for formal education, my motivation to learn was strictly monetary. My life as a single parent, working two jobs to take care of myself and my daughter, was difficult at best. But, I believed the ideal of a college degree was the key necessary to open the door of career opportunity and a future of fiscal stability. The question remained as to whether I could actually do this? I was not a motivated learner as a child; I did not excel as a student and at the age of twenty eight the thought of years of study ahead was frightening. So, in essence I had to learn how to learn and the biggest hurdle was deciding what to learn.

My first step toward learning began with informal community programs, such as basic auto mechanics and a beginning German language class. I found these programs to be enlightening in that I discovered I wasn't too old to learn how to study, to ask questions to young students and apply to daily life what I learned. Remembering back to that beginning I realize that learning how to learn through community programs was the right starting path for me as how much I learned didn't determine a grade, or a coveted degree. I simply enjoyed the experience to an extent that I knew I wanted more. This realization of my experience was reinforced by (Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner, 2007) "By far the largest increase in adult education occurred in programs provided by community organizations, where participation rates more than doubled." (pg 60). These community programs became my stepping stone toward more formal education and became my catalyst for love of learning.

Jane Vella (2000) wrote "Learners learn when they are actively engaged—cognitively, emotionally and physically—with the content." (pg 3). I began my college career believing accounting was my key until I found I was not actively engaged. I did not become involved with the content, I actually loathed accounting. Consequently, my first lesson in formal learning was study what you love, not what you believe you should love. Nearly thirty years later, a BS in History, MA in English Literature, a soon to be realized MA in Education, and a plan for a second BA in Psychology, my motivation to learn has changed. I no longer need the education for career opportunity and fiscal stability; I need the education merely for personal growth and mental stimulation. So many people claim I simply have a quest for "racking up degrees", but it is more complicated than that. I have found a love of learning that transcends the end result of a degree. Seeking new arenas of knowledge has now become an extension of who I am as a person.

What I have also found is my approach to learning situations tends to change depending on the content and structure of a given class, whether group centered or individualistic. My

approach to learning as a member of a group is one of complete adherence to a structured path as outlined in the class syllabus. I believe this organized approach works best for me given the varied personalities inevitable in a group learning situation. In a group dynamic each individual can take on a different role, but without organized structure those roles can become confused and disorderly. To reach a final and positive outcome, I believe the best approach to learning must follow one path with each individual branch coming together as one. In an individualistic situation, I tend to approach learning through many paths, whether it be through reading text, or incorporating visual mediums with the syllabus as a guide. In this situation I believe my approach to learning requires a willingness to take chances and be flexible. In other words, I am always cognizant to the possibility of failure and in accepting this possibility I find I am unafraid to think outside the box and explore many paths toward learning. Many of those paths have led me to a variety of learning experiences of which I had previously been unaware. By this route I initiate my own learning pace; from structured learning to self motivated. I am curious about so many things; from astronomy to meteorology; archeology to geology. I believe an adult learner is one who initiates learning through a willingness to take chances and a curiosity for knowledge.

When I first began the study of history I believed simply showing up in class, engaging in dialogue with the professor and students and reading all assignments thoroughly would gain me the knowledge I desired and the success I craved. I found this was short sighted. Simply memorizing the facts did not work for me in understanding the reason why an event occurred and implications of these events. I also needed visual stimulation in order to fully absorb the material. I spent a great deal of time searching out documentaries and films based on historical persons and events melding the visual with the written text and found this to be a successful approach for this type of learning. When I participated in the *Learning Styles Questionnaire* I was not surprised to find that on the visual scale I scored an 11 indicating a strong preference for a visual dimension and scoring the rest as fairly well balanced. On the other hand, many of my classes were based only on written text; no maps or graphs or visual aids of any kind. So I had to find a new approach to learning for these classes and that has not been an easy task. What I found that worked best for me these instances was categorizing the material and organizing my thoughts. I do this by taking the material I have read, isolating the ideas and theories of the authors that most mirror my own beliefs and working around those theories to develop my own path.

I have also found that I work best in an individual setting, such as online, than I do in a group or classroom. If I try and read or write an assignment in one sitting I lose focus and my mind wanders. So another approach to learn for me is to read piecemeal, or write an essay spread out over time. For example, I have been thinking about and writing this short essay for several days. I will read or write a paragraph or page and then walk away. As I clean house, work in the garden, or play an online game, I think about what I have just read or wrote and new ideas or insights pop into my head. That is not something I can do in a group or classroom. By thinking about a topic over time I believe I achieve more comprehension and understanding than I can accomplish in a structured classroom environment.

It is this preference for online learning and the loosely structured experiences that promote my best learning as the flexibility allows me to set my own pace at organizing tasks to meet deadlines. I had never actually thought about my preferences for learning as historically I learned in whatever format or setting was more readily available. When I first started my educational pursuits I utilized the most expedient avenue available toward learning. When I began my college education it was necessary to arrange my class choices around my work schedule, so I took what classes I could get based on that requirement and at that time online classes were unheard of. When I look back at that experience I find my learning was not what I had hoped. I found I was lazy toward classroom learning. It was extremely difficult for me to come home from work and have to go out again to attend class. I played mind games with myself asking do I really have to go to class. Is my presence at this lecture really necessary to understand the material I read? So, more often than I like to admit my laziness won out and it was my own laziness that became an impediment toward learning. However, with the advent of online classes I found my element. The ability to come home from work and sit in my home office online allows me to learn best at my own pace. I can walk away from my computer when my focus wanes and come back with fresh ideas. I believe without online degree programs and classes I would not have pursued continuing my education and this is reflective of an online article stating, "In some instances the inconvenience of maintaining a consistent school schedule prohibits potential students from furthering their education." ("Technical and Vocational School Guide," 2012.) This is reflective of my situation and I suspect is an impediment to many other adult learners as well.

No ideal condition exists to support or promote my best learning. But there is one condition necessary that I require in achieving my best learning and that is the complete involvement of the class instructor. I have come to believe learning is like a game with the

instructor as coach and learner as player. The coach provides the knowledge and tools for success in the game with the understanding it is up to the player to utilize the tools as an individual to the best of their ability. But, if the player does not make the effort and accept the coach's criticism then the effort is doomed. This is a simplistic analogy, but I have often found reducing my learning to an analogy is a helpful learning tool. It gives me real world understanding of what it is I need and what I need varies from one coach to another depending on the type of game. The ability to adapt your learning to your environment and educational requirements is a key to self realization and educational success. For example, I do not like writing essays as I find my thoughts overlapping and rambling so that it is difficult for me to get them on paper in a coherent structure, so I must rely on my coach to keep me on a straight path and it is one condition that is not always available. I had an online class where interaction with the instructor was difficult as he did not often respond to email I sent. I had to beg for review of work I submitted in order for me to know if I was on the correct path and was not always successful in getting that feedback. If I view this experience in the form of a game I realize I may have completed the game, but I learned very little on how I got there.

So, my ideal learning experience would be all online and non-structured with the exception of deadlines. My ideal would be at minimum weekly feedback from the instructor, no group involvement and a wide variety of visual tools i.e. text, graphs, maps and video. Perfect!

References

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