

100 things I've learned about learning and learners...

Summarised by Andrew Gibbons

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1. Learning is a skilled process, requiring conscious effort.

Having pondered this at great length, I feel skilled learners do this:

Anticipate opportunities for learning.

Recognise developmental situations.

Are interpersonally skilled.

Seek and accept (selectively) advice and feedback.

Filter potential learning and make connections between apparently unrelated experiences.

Innovate and take risks.

Seek out new learning.

Are constructively self critical.

Overcome barriers to learning.

2. Insufficient attention to, and knowledge of learning is given by trainers, managers, and for that matter all individuals.
3. Learning involves a long term change in behaviour that requires the use of new knowledge and/or skills. The application of learning is for me therefore, more important even than its acquisition.
4. As learning is a voluntary process (except in rare cases where it is coerced), all development is self development.
5. Our everyday lives are rich in potential learning experiences, yet these are eclipsed in significance by infrequent, less learner-specific, and unnaturally structured formal events - typically courses.
6. What has not been personally experienced cannot be understood with the same power as s/he who had the primary insight. That said, we are very dependent upon the third party, vicarious learning of others.
7. Learning is normally, and most usefully, an incremental process, yet there is for me, too little value seen in this, suggesting an unhealthy preference for major, unsustainable, short term attempts to make major changes.
8. Most learning is not the result of deliberate action or reflection, but is the natural, unplanned result of everyday work, and life in general.
9. It seems to be easier to criticise others than to be self-critical. The need to be self critical is an essential element of efforts to develop. Problems with accepting the need to develop and learn suggests that for many, learning may be a self-esteem, and/or ego issue. Those who feel it in way diminishes their status or sense of well-being may be severely inhibited learners.
10. I find it very difficult to attribute learning to specific experiences. I feel it is easy to inappropriately attribute learning and, thus to be in ignorance of those experiences that truly contribute to our

development.

11. Learning is a unique and personal journey, as are the barriers to development. Thus two or more people can and do learn different things from the same event or experience.
12. Our development is a portable resource - and many organisations appear not to have grasped this.
13. Many more opportunities to learn and develop exist than are taken.
14. Learning and development is very hard to achieve without sustained support - this may be needed at home as well as at work.
15. The benefits that result from a lasting commitment to our development to our own development may take a long time to show, and it seems both individuals and organisations prefer short term fixes.
16. Much learning lies dormant, waiting for recall and application. It may take years for this to take place, and when it does, it is often hard to trace changed behaviour to its roots.
17. Self-development targets must be specific, measurable, attainable, relevant and time-based. Vague commitments to improved future behaviour, particularly if unrealistic will de-motivate.
18. Learners themselves are not always the best judges of whether or not learning has happened.
19. Too few incentives exist to encourage genuine learning and development.
20. Past experiences, for instance in employment and of academic study may significantly influence our willingness or reluctance to take such responsibility for managing our own development to make any efforts a success.
21. We fail to meet our (self) development targets due to...
 - a. Unattainable objectives
 - b. A belief that we cannot meet **attainable** objectives
 - c. Not making enough effort to achieve attainable targets.
22. There is at least as much to learn from critically observing negative, or unhelpful behaviour and events as from (what we perceive as) the more positive.
23. Confidence encourages self-belief and risk taking, which in turn makes development more likely. This suggests we learn best when we feel good. Thus the motivation to learn and develop is a direct function of our general and work-based motivation.
24. A lot of course-based training and development would benefit from some form of learning-to-learn session to warm learners up and discuss issues such as 'whose learning is it anyway?'
25. Assessing and judging other's learning is a difficult process, and may even seem arrogant. After all, who knows best whether or not learning and development has happened?
26. Our skills and abilities are often not recognised or are taken for granted. This is hardly surprising when their acquisition may have taken years of probably accidental effort to attain.
27. Practice doesn't make perfect, but opportunities to use and develop skills are needed for learning to be of real value.
28. Whether or not an employing organisation encourages and actively supports (self) development will be a major factor in determining how much learning goes on. Much learning is of more value to the learner than an employing organisation, and vice versa. A massive grey area exists where there is shared, but unequal value. At extremes, only the individual or only the organisation benefits.
29. We need to become active learners if we are to optimise the opportunities to develop that occur constantly. Have we become conditioned to be too passively dependent, preferring to be taught?
30. People learn in different ways and at different paces. Other key variables including learning styles and learner motivation. A motivated learner will somehow overcome barriers and problems others

find insurmountable.

31. If the above is true, then any single way of implementing a 'formal', typically, group-based learning event will not suit everyone involved. Often learners themselves do not recognise this. Far too often, those who design and lead the event do not even consider this.
32. "Why?" is the most useful single word to prompt learning.
32. Actions planned in pursuit of learning plans should not be so far in the future as to lose urgency.
33. Those who need to learn the most very often show the most resistance when invited to learn. Many senior managers are particularly bad at giving a positive lead by their example, giving the impression that training and development activities are beneath them.
34. An obvious and genuine desire to learn can be a useful thing to show when under threat of redundancy. Equally, when your job is threatened, it's a bad time to show little or no interest in your own development.
35. Generally, questions are of more value to learners than answers.
36. Contrived learning experiences, although normally easier to deliver, are far less valuable than those that are high in terms of reality.
37. Learners can find development events high in reality an uncomfortable, and unfamiliar experience.
38. Far too few learning/training events result in sufficient application of learning to justify their costs.
39. I find that thinking in 'real time', consciously, as if speaking silently helps me to reflect and thus to learn.
40. Genuine and sustained interest in another's reality-based development can be hard to grasp, and in particular to maintain.
41. Central to the development of learning skills is the need to seek, and selectively to take, advice - our own and others. Ironically, personal success can inhibit the willingness to do this.
42. Only when the need for and the ability to change behaviour has been accepted can learning take place. 'Yes but' is the one of the most significant barrier to learning and development.
43. Single specific incidents rarely have sufficient impact to create long-term, sustained learning. Thus prolonged exposure to a series of reinforcing related experiences is more likely to result in true learning.
44. One way to create and sustain an organisational climate that encourages and rewards learning is to deliberately seek people during the critical recruitment process that can demonstrate convincingly a real interest in their own development, and who are prepared to take considerable responsibility for managing their own learning.
45. If more effort was put into the thorough evaluation of formal, structured, group-based events, this would show how cost ineffective these are at generating and applying learning.
46. Reflection is a key learning skill, yet our preference for activity, and to be seen to be busy inhibits the value of potentially significant learning experiences. Thinking hurts it seems.
47. Learning is a more direct and powerful term than training, yet the emphasis seems almost universally to be on the former, and little or no concern is shown towards creating and using the latter.
48. Too much emphasis is put upon what is convenient and comfortable for the deliverers of training, and nothing like enough consideration given to the needs and issues of individual learners.
49. For all the talk, beyond the surface, there is very little evidence of genuinely learner-led development. Surely 'learning from' is more valuable than 'teaching to'. Years of learner-conditioning to seek, and find comfort in unhealthy dependency for their development does not help.

50. No individuals' true reality can be recreated within a training room, yet surely the value of any event is at least to a significant degree a function of its learner-perceived relevance and reality.
51. Willing, motivated learners learn far more than press-ganged cynics. Perhaps scarce development resources need to be targeted on those who make the greatest effort to *apply* their learning.
52. I find it helpful to think of the demand and the supply side of learning. The supply side is massively congested, and much needs to be done to stimulate demand if the congested would-be suppliers are find enough to occupy themselves. Thus stimulating demand for, and interest in learning is a major challenge, and one I see precious little progress towards this.
53. For too many people, learning equals pain, and they just aren't prepared to make any effort beyond passive dependence on others, whilst reserving the right to complain about irrelevance, and deny all responsibility for their own development, or opportunity to apply what has been learned.
54. The variables that determine the parameters of our potential to develop are unique and personal, and are worthy of considerable attention.
55. Learning is far more cost effective than training. Going on training courses and then doing nothing as a result is wasteful of scarce resources and plain bad business. Encouraging people to genuinely manage their own development, and providing the support they need to do this well will directly enhance competence at a personal level, and will lead most directly to commercial pay-offs.
56. There are real equality of access issues related to learning opportunities. Apart from the more obvious aspects of inequality, I have seen many instances of disinterested or obstructive managers preventing the development and learning of people with strong potential and personal commitment.
57. Those most motivated to learn may not be as obvious as we think. The most keen to develop may well be avoiding structured training courses, as they recognise that their personal learning needs are unlikely to be focused upon; in addition, their well-structured personal learning strategies might be known only to themselves, and thirdly, the most competent people are often those most eager to further develop already strong competencies.
58. Linked to the above point, it is possible to be 'taken in' by the apparent enthusiasm to learn of serial training course attenders, many 'though not all of whom, see attendance, and at best participation as the purpose of such events, and all too often lack the motivation or desire to even attempt conscious application of any learning from those courses.
59. I like the link Warren Bennis makes between learning and leadership. He says 'the basis for leadership is learning, and principally learning from experience'. For him, leading is synonymous with learning, in that leaders by definition are innovating, taking risks, and constantly actively seeking to find new ways to stay ahead of those who follow.
60. What is learned is I believe, a function of motivation, and supported opportunity. Those with sufficient of each will learn where others find insurmountable barriers.
61. I am disappointed with the lack of interest in; personal enthusiasm for, and knowledge of learning amongst developers.
62. Gaining information and/or knowledge is not learning, nor is skills acquisition without application, nor reflective analysis or deliberate observation that is not put to use.

It is crucial that we genuinely understand the major differences between enhancing knowledge that may lie dormant for a long time, and real learning that is applied and that results in improved performance.

63. Critical learning insights are often not the result of deliberate effort, they often come completely 'out of the blue', apparently due to either subconscious reflection, or genuinely out of nowhere.
64. Very often evidence of real, embedded, learning requires more than one-off application. If a long-term behaviour change has truly occurred, this may require need many applications to prove competence development.

65. Learning can be enmeshed with, and significantly influenced by self-esteem issues. For too many, to accept the need to learn is ironically, and perversely, to feel less of a person. Wherever this is the case, the facilitation of others' learning must be managed with great sensitivity.
66. The motivation to learn can sometimes be encouraged by emphasising that evidence of real learning, and competence development is a portable resource, that a 'good' employer will always value more than someone with a record of doing no more than attending lots of training courses.
67. Learning is too often seen as a remedial activity, and is even used to insult and belittle - 'you've got a lot to learn' is used deliberately to establish superiority and to belittle. This does not help put learning as a concept or more especially a practice in a positive light.
68. It seems a disappointingly obvious thing to point out, but is worth highlighting that for the vast majority of people, their own learning and development is not a priority. Ask people to list the ten most important things in their life, and their development is unlikely to feature. We typically spend far more on holidays than our own learning and development. For that matter, most of us spend more on our hair than we do on efforts to develop and learn.
69. I find it helpful to think of, and share with others a 'learners' domain' - a territory or bounded area that should in my view at least, be owned and directed by the learner, and where more intervention than is of long-term value would be 'over-helping'. That said, conscious and deliberate over-helping may be appropriate for a time, and 'under-helping' can be just as inhibiting to a learners' development.
70. John Sculley, whilst Chief Executive at Apple said 'If you're not making mistakes, you're not trying hard enough'. Those who really do encourage and reward learning recognise the value of a risk taking innovator that is seeking to extend and use experience and competence.

Far too few organisations have a sufficiently grown up attitude to encouraging innovation, and accepting that a natural and inevitable outcome to this will be errors and setbacks. What is the alternative? To stay within our corporate and personal comfort zones, and inhibit learning and development via a fear of any mistake being penalised? Hardly a description of those that claim to be a learning organisation!

71. Deliberate, conscious efforts to apply learning can seem awkward, even unnatural, and contrived. If this obstacle is not overcome, our ability to use learning will be significantly cramped. There is an obvious role here for the developmental line manager to support and reward efforts to apply learning.
72. Some of the most powerful, direct, and sustainable interventions that result in high-value development is also the most cost effective vis a vis expensive (particularly expensive residential) training courses. The trouble often is, that unless the true value interventions are all too often dismissed due to not carrying a high price tag.
73. Those that leave organisations 'early' on what some euphemistically call 'maturity leave' take with them a vast amount of learning and competence. The value of this loss is rarely even considered.
74. Although the perception that age inhibits the capacity to learn, is strong amongst many, this is clearly not true for many, and the young can be disappointingly totally disinterested in their own development.
75. Most learning has a 'shelf life', and requires regular updating. The consequences of not doing this may in some professions literally be a matter of life or death.
76. No-one is likely to show more sustained interest in your development than you.
77. The success of any effort to develop any individual or group is dependent upon learners, not those who are facilitating learning. No matter how much interest in another's development is felt and shown, or what skills are used, the 'developer' can have little effect if the 'learner' doesn't want to learn.
78. Learners, particularly within structured, group, training events have more power than the trainer-figure. Some learners react very unhelpfully when for instance their disinclination to take a real interest in their own or others' learning is exposed, and sometimes behave in a childish fashion, and may maliciously disrupt others. Such people have been known to get their retaliation in first by making

- negative comments on the evaluation forms they, and rarely the facilitator are issued for feedback.
79. I have started to work on a four stage model as a strategy for developing people. This is appeasement; accommodation; challenge and confrontation. Thus the range is from 'okay, we'll do whatever you want - and not anything you don't' to 'too bad, I know you want to do this, or not/to do it this way, but tough, you're going to get this'.

It takes a lot of experience and confidence to judge accurately which of these will maximise learning without creating problems. The bottom line is 'what will result in sustained application of learning for those prepared to seek, and find learning of value.

80. Insecurity of employment can be both an inhibitor and a facilitator of interest in our own learning. In one type of organisation to make a need for, or an interest in your further development may put you at the top of the 'risk of redundancy' list...we only want the most already super-competent here at this time, so don't expect expensive training to help you get your next job. In other, more positive organisational climates, even, or especially the best people are keen to develop in any way possible, to gain competitive advantage in troubled times via the optimising of personal potential, and because it is legitimate to gain competence and qualifications to assist future employability.
81. When so many organisations have fewer people than is widely acknowledged they should, it makes sense to utilise every ounce of learning and potential from those that are there.
82. Few organisations make explicit the quite proper expectations they have of individuals and line managers in respect of responsibilities for their own development, and appropriately of those they manage.
83. There seems to be a general preference for lazy learning strategies. The conference will be passively attended, often at considerable cost, with little or no forethought as to the learning anticipated or subsequently to be applied, but the book covering the same ground that requires more effort won't be read, even 'though this may cost a tiny fraction of the conference costs.
84. Few people seem capable of showing a sustained interest in the development of others, and the specific personal issues and needs of learners - even (especially?), those whose job or role it is to do so.
85. All too often those who promote, even with absolute sincerity the value of development and learning lose credibility as they are seen not to practice what they preach.
86. The standard recruitment paperwork of all but a handful of organisations suggest a greater interest in where prospective employees went to school say twenty years ago, and training courses attended, and not for instance, achievements, applied learning from formal training, or current priority development needs. This is too often a missed opportunity to make positive signals to those most interested in their own development and learning, and stand out from the rest.
87. The 'learning' word crops up all over the place, and in a wide variety of contexts. All sorts of people talk all the time about 'lessons learned' and 'steep learning curves'.
88. The need to *unlearn* can be a prerequisite in order to make room for something new.
89. Preparing learners in advance of an event from which they can learn makes successful learning outcomes more likely than if catching them with the need to react 'cold'. This can be done in many ways.
90. A lot of learning is reinforcement of existing competence. For many people, new learning is like layers of onion skin - nothing dramatic, but significant as it can lead to sustainable development.
91. The ability to make connections between apparently unrelated experiences or knowledge, and apply these in different, unassociated contexts distinguishes those that learn well from those that do not.
92. Everything can be done even a little better than it is being done now, and that even the very best, most currently competent people can develop further - no matter what their role, age, experience or remuneration!
93. If those that lead organisations are seen to take their own learning and development seriously, others

are far more likely to do the same than if those leaders played the 'I know it all by now' silly game.

94. The clearer we are about our personal priority learning needs, the more likely it will be that we will do what it takes to work on these. Donald Kirkpatrick has said that 'people will support what they helped to create, and it is surely true of efforts to develop people and transfer learning to the workplace.
95. Many organisations that have 'downsized' and 'delayed' have fewer opportunities for career progression. Some of these promote learning and development as an alternative to hierarchical ascendance, and financial reward. This is not always easy to get across positively to people who see money as having more value than developing their competence.
96. If pushed, I take the view that as a generality, women have a stronger commitment to their own development than men.
97. The organisational company we keep can have a tremendous influence on our development. There is an awful lot to learn about team learning.
98. I find that interactive discussion leads to strengthened insights and clarity through probing and positive challenge. If thoughts, ideas and reflections are kept to ourselves, they may lose out on this strengthening process.
99. Not all learning is fun, and some of our most powerful developmental experiences are anything but.
100. Before rushing to gain learning from others, a little 'original thinking' is a very useful activity, in order to establish your own views and opinions on an issue prior to the inevitable 'contamination' of others.

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