



What I've Learned About Learning

by Leo Babauta

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□□□'We learn more by looking for the answer to a question and not finding it than we do from learning the answer itself.' ~Lloyd Alexander

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□□I am a teacher and an avid learner, and I'm passionate about both.

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□□I'm a teacher because I help Eva homeschool our kids — OK, she does most of the work, but I do help, mostly with math but with everything else too. I also teach habits, writing/blogging, simplicity and other fun topics in online courses.

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□□I'm a lifelong learner and am always obsessively studying something, whether that's breadmaking or language or wine or chess or writing or fitness.

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□□Here's are two key lessons — both really the same lesson — I've learned about learning, in all my years of study and in trying to teach people: (1) almost everything I've learned, I didn't learn in school; and (2) almost everything my students (and kids) have learned, they learned on their own.

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□□Those two lessons (or one lesson) have a number of reasons and implications for learning. Let's take a look at some of them, in hopes you might find them useful.

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□□Why Learning is Independent

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□□One of the foundations of Unschooling, which Eva and I and the kids do here at home, is that you're not teaching subjects to your kids — in fact, you're not really teaching them at all. They take responsibility for their learning, and do it because they're interested in something, not because you tell them they should learn it.

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□□This is exactly how I learn as an adult, and so I know it works.

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□□When teachers (wonderful people that they were) tried to teach me something in school, I often became bored, and just did what I needed to do to do well on the test. Not because the subject or the teacher was boring, but because it wasn't something I cared about. They wanted me to learn it because they thought I should, but that's not why people learn something. They learn it because they care about it — because they find it incredibly interesting, or because they need it to do something they really want to do.

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□□When teachers succeeded in getting me to learn, it was only because they made

something seem so interesting that I started to care about it. But then I learned on my own, either in class while ignoring everyone else, or more likely after class in the library or at home.

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□□That's because someone walking you through the steps of learning something doesn't work — you aren't learning when you're just listening to someone tell you how something works. You're learning when you try to do that something — putting it into action. That's when the real learning begins and the superficial learning ends — when you try something and fail, and adjust and try again, and solve countless little problems as you do so.

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□□The best teachers know this, and so they inspire, and help you to put the learning into action.

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□□As an adult, I've learned a lot on my own. The stuff I've just read, I've mostly forgotten. But the stuff I've put into action by playing with it, by practicing, by creating and sharing with others — that stuff has stuck with me. I truly learned it.

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□□I learned about blogging when I started blogging, and kept doing it for five years — not by reading blogs about blogging. My students have learned habits and decluttering and meditation and blogging from me not because I told them something brilliant, but because the ones who really learned put it into action. They formed a simple habit, decluttered their homes, did 5 minutes of meditation for 30 days, blogged.

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□□This is where the real learning happens — when the fingers start moving, the feet start dancing, not when you hear or read something.

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□□How to Learn (or Teach)

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□□The teacher's job, really, is to fascinate the student. Fascination is the key to learning. Then help the student put the fascination into action.

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□□It follows then, that if you're teaching yourself, your job is exactly the same.

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□□Here's how to learn:

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□□□Get fascinated. As a teacher, you should fascinate the student by rediscovering with her all the things that originally fascinated you about the topic. If you can't get fascinated, you won't care enough to really learn something. You'll just go through the motions. How do you get fascinated? Often doing something with or for other people helps to motivate me to look more deeply into something, and reading about other people who have been successful/legendary at it also fascinates me.

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□□□Pour yourself into it. I will read every website and book I can get my hands on. Google and the library are my first stops. They're free. The used bookstore will be next. There are always an amazing amount of online resources to learn anything. If there isn't, create one.

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□□□Do it, in small steps. Actually doing whatever you want to do will be scary. You can learn as much Spanish vocabulary as you like, but until you start having conversations, you won't really know it. You can read as much about chess as you like, but you have to put the problems into action, and play games. You can read about how to program, but you won't know it until you actually code. Start with small, non-scary steps, with as little risk

as possible, focusing on fun, easy skills.

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☐☐☐Play. Learning isn't work. It's fun. If you're learning because you think you should, not because you're having fun with it, you will not really stick with it for long, or you'll hate it and not care about it. So make it play. Make games out of it. Sing and dance while you do it. Show off your new skills to people, with a smile on your face.

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☐☐☐Do it with others. I believe most learning is done on your own, but doing it with others makes it fun. I like to work out with my friends and with Eva. I like to bake bread for my family. I like to play chess with my kids. That motivates me to learn, because I want to do well when I do it with others.

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☐☐☐Feel free to move around. I will dive into something for a couple weeks, and then move on to something else. That's OK. That's how passion for a topic often works. Sometimes it will last for a long time, sometimes it's a short intense burst. You can't control it. Allow yourself to wander if that's where things lead you.

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☐☐☐But deep learning takes months or years. You can learn a lot about something in 2-4 weeks, but you really become an expert at something only after months and years of doing it. I knew a lot about blogging after 6 months, but I waited a couple years before I was comfortable teaching others about it. Even now, after 5+ years of blogging, I'm still learning. The same applies to habits — I've learned a lot after 7 years of successfully creating habits, and now can actually teach it with some confidence. So how do you allow yourself to wander, but stick with something for long enough to get deep learning? By wandering around within the topic. You can learn a lot about wine in a month, for example, but what if after that you focused on cabernet sauvignon for a month, then zinfandel, then pinot noir? What if then you decided to learn about Oregon pinot noirs, then Sonoma pinots, then (the wonderful) pinots from Burgundy? You'd be wandering around, but going deeper and deeper. You can also move away from a topic, then get fascinated with it again and come back to it.

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☐☐☐Test yourself. You can learn a lot of information quickly by studying something, testing yourself, studying again to fill in the holes in your knowledge, testing again, and repeating until you have it by heart. That's not always the most fun way to learn, but it can work well. Alternatively, you can learn by playing, and when you play, allow that to be your test.

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☐☐☐Disagree. Don't just agree that everything you're reading or hearing from others on a topic is correct, even if they are foremost experts. First, experts are often wrong, and it's not until they are challenged that new knowledge is found. Second, even if they are right and you are wrong by disagreeing, you learn by disagreeing. By disagreeing, you have already not only considered what you've been given, but formulated an alternative theory. Then you have to try to test to see which is right, and even if you find that the first information or theory was right and you were wrong, now you know that much better than if you just agreed. I'm not saying to disagree with everything, but the more you do, the better you'll learn. Don't disagree in a disagreeable way, and don't hold onto your theories too tightly and be defensive about them.

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☐☐☐Teach it. There is no better way to cement your knowledge than to teach it to others. It's OK if you don't really know it that well — as long as you're honest about that when you're teaching it to someone. For example, I'm a beginner at chess, but I will learn something about it and teach it to my kids — they know I'm not a tournament contender, let alone a master, and yet I'm still teaching them something they don't know. And when I do, I begin

to really understand it, because to teach you have to take what you've absorbed, reflect upon it, find a way to organize it so that you can communicate it to someone else clearly enough for them to understand it, see their mistakes and help correct them, see where the holes in your knowledge are, and more.

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□□□ Learning can be subliminal. We think we're in control of our minds and we're like programmers telling our minds what to learn, how to learn, and what data to retain. No. Our minds work in mysterious ways, and cannot be tightly controlled. They wander, latch onto the weirdest things, and soak up more than we know. Later, you can come back to what you've absorbed, and test yourself, and find you knew something you didn't realize you knew. The lesson is to expose yourself to as much as possible on a topic, and allow yourself to absorb it. Sometimes your mind will pick up patterns you didn't consciously realize were there, but then can use those patterns later when you put the learning into action.

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□□□ Reflect on your learning by blogging. You soak up a ton of information and patterns, and you can put that into action, but when you sit down and reflect on what you've learned, and try to share that with others (as I'm doing right now), you force yourself to think deeply, to synthesize the knowledge and to organize it, much as you do when you teach it to others. Blogging is a great tool for reflection and sharing what you've learned, even if you don't hope to make a living at it. And it's free.

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