

Meaningful Learning Is Just-in-Time, Not Just-in-Case

I'm going to describe three types of people. I call them average, elite, and ascendant. One of the differences between the three is how they approach learning.

Pain, Prestige, or Purpose?

Average people learn what they need to avoid pain. Elite people learn what they need to get the grade, ace the test, win the award, gain certification, impress people, and obtain honors. Ascendant people don't care about accolades or awards or tests or stickers or stars. They learn exactly what's needed to solve a problem that matters to them, exactly when it's needed. No more, no less. No sooner, no later.

If you want to be average, avoid pain and learn like a lab rat. If you want to be elite, bulk up on tons of just-in-case knowledge so you'll never look dumb and you can chase prestige and external validation. If you want to be ascendant – the best of the best creators, dreamers, doers, and rebels – find meaningful challenges and projects, pursue them, and learn what you need to complete them.

Tasks vs. Tests

Mitchell Earl built a horrible website. He got an 'A' for it.

The website sucked because Mitchell didn't particularly want or need a website at the time. It also sucked for the same reasons it helped him ace the computer class in which he built it. He spent the semester on it. It met all of the specific course requirements – hyperlinks, number of pages, content, layout – and followed the recommended steps. It was meant to be a digital resume of sorts, but it was ugly and useless in the real world. In fact, Mitchell didn't use it after the class, as it would have lowered rather than raised his professional value.

Oh, and he didn't remember any of the techniques he used to build the site once the class was over.

A few years later Mitchell was in Praxis and eager to improve his writing, build an audience, signal his value, and discover meaningful work for his entrepreneurial tendencies. He wanted a good website. So he built one in a few weeks. He took some tips from the Praxis community, ignored others, picked up a few new skills via YouTube, and put together a great site. To this day he can tell you how to integrate WordPress with opt-in forms, customize themes, improve SEO, get hosting setup, and a lot more. (He used those skills to

build a new website for his business partner, where he now works.)

When he had a specific task that was meaningful to him based on his own desires, Mitchell built a vastly superior product in far less time and retained specific skills that he had to pick up to do it. He only learned exactly what the task demanded, not what the test required. This made the learning faster, more intense, more fun, and more useful.

Just-in-Time vs. Just-in-Case

My son is really into video games, art, design, and entertainment media. He's a creator. Having learned myself the slow, hard way how important marketing and sales skills are to creators, I'm always trying to impart bits of wisdom to him. He might need it when he decides to sell his creations some day!

He ignores me.

There's nothing in his daily experience that demands the advice I supply. It's just an old guy giving him insight without any current context. That's exactly how I felt in college marketing classes. There were all these words and charts and concepts and case studies that really didn't mean anything for me. Sure, someday when I'm trying to promote a product, "Target Market" will be important. Yet when that day actually came, the classroom cramming did nothing for me anyway. I aced my classes but had to learn from scratch how to market *when* I needed it to survive. Any sooner and the info was worse than useless. I developed a bias against what would later be important concepts because I despised being forced to chase grades by memorizing stuff that didn't help me achieve my goals.

When it Matters, Once is Enough

The entire modern education apparatus is built on just-in-case learning. Better know how to multiply fractions, just in case you find yourself tasked with preparing a report on some data someday. Better know when the Treaty of Versailles was signed, just in case...well I'm not really sure there even is a case for that one unless you want to be a guest on Jeopardy. Otherwise Google it.

I talked to a bright young guy (an executive at a growing startup) who sent me a financial report to proof a few months ago. I noticed a mistake. He calculated the percentage increase from month to month incorrectly. I pointed it out and sent a four-step explanation I found on Google, he laughed about forgetting, said thanks, fixed it and never had that problem again.

Yet how many hours had he been forced to sit in a classroom doing a unit on percentages? And for what? When he needed the knowledge – prior to an important board meeting – he

found it fast.

Oh, and my son learned more about marketing in one evening of playing Mario Maker than I did from all those classes.

Real Learning Is Hard but Sneaky

I played a lot of LEGO as a kid. My kids do now. It's a pastime full of pain, anguish, and maniacal, "Just one more minute I'm almost done"'s late into the night.

When you have a vision for a build and you must – must – find a way to solve it with imperfect pieces, your brain is stretched and your creativity awakened. It's hard work that can even take a physical toll (ever bent over digging through a bin of plastic blocks for an hour?). It's frustrating. But it's deeply meaningful and fun. You're on nobody else's timeline. If I asked my kids if they were learning anything while playing they would laugh.

Yet I'm totally convinced, just like me, they're learning more from LEGO than they would if I made them do algebra instead.

Real learning happens when you're absorbed in solving a real problem, one that matters to you. It took a complete abandonment of lessons and a deep personal interest in Calvin & Hobbes for my son to learn to read. The same pattern can be spotted in all real learning.

Knowledge is Overrated

Knowing a bunch of stuff isn't that valuable. Knowing what you *need* to know to solve a problem, reach a goal, or become a better version of yourself is hugely valuable. Often this requires first figuring out what's non-essential and ignoring it. Conscious ignorance is hugely valuable. What you don't waste time or energy worrying about — what you don't memorize just for prestige or fear of embarrassment — are what determine how much room you have left to learn what does matter. (This is also why I advocate completely ignoring the news.)

Don't be Prepared, Be Hungry

It's not about what you know, or even who you know. It's about what will improve your life, *how* to learn it, *how much* of it to learn, and *when*.

Goals and dreams are better than grades and information. Meaningful tasks and challenges are better than memorized facts and textbooks. Go do some cool stuff and go be what you want to be. When you need to learn to take the next step, you will. And it will be better than any arbitrary data-cram for any class.

Average people can learn the basics when shoved. Elite people can learn that plus a bunch

of other stuff that's meaningful to others, not them. Ascendant people discover who they are, who they want to be, and learn what it takes to close the gap between the two.