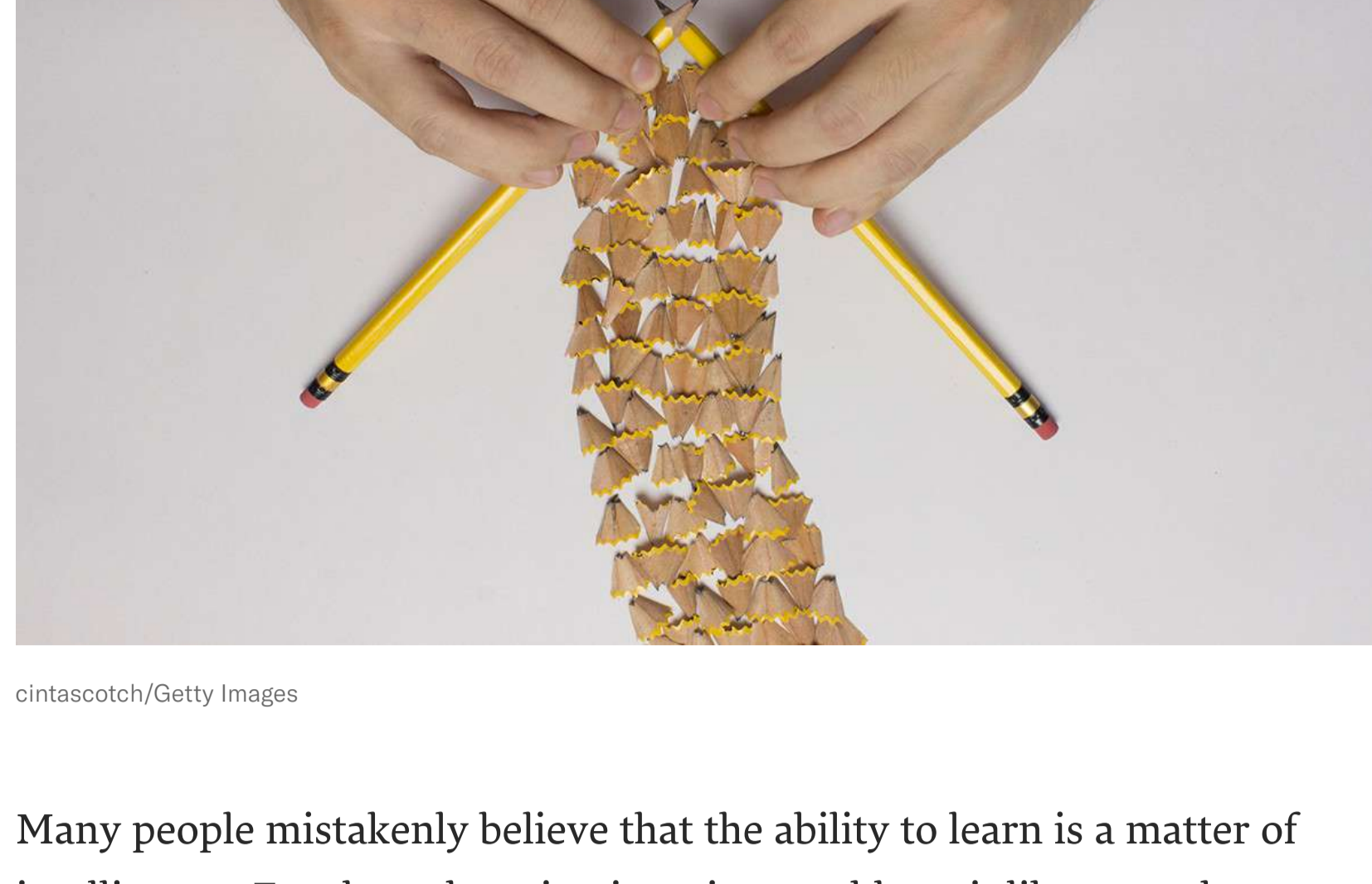


PSYCHOLOGY

Learning Is a Learned Behavior. Here's How to Get Better at It.

by [Ulrich Boser](#)
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Many people mistakenly believe that the ability to learn is a matter of intelligence. For them, learning is an immutable trait like eye color, simply luck of the genetic draw. People are born learners, or they're not, the thinking goes. So why bother getting better at it?

And that's why many people tend to approach the topic of learning without much focus. They don't think much about how they will develop an area of mastery. They use phrases like "practice makes perfect" without really considering the learning strategy at play. It's a remarkably ill-defined expression, after all. Does practice mean repeating the same skill over and over again? Does practice require feedback? Should practice be hard? Or should it be fun?

A growing body of research is making it clear that learners are made, not born. Through the deliberate use of practice and dedicated strategies to improve our ability to learn, we can all develop expertise faster and more effectively. In short, we can all get better at getting better.

Here's one example of a [study](#) that shows how learning strategies can be more important than raw smarts when it comes to gaining expertise. Marcel Veenman has found that people who closely track their thinking will outscore others who have sky-high IQ levels when it comes to learning something new. His research suggests that in terms of developing mastery, focusing on how we understand is some 15 percentage points more important than innate intelligence.

Here are three practical ways to build your learning skills, based on research.

Organize your goals

Effective learning often boils down to a type of project management. In order to develop an area of expertise, we first have to set achievable goals about what we want to learn. Then we have to develop strategies to help us reach those goals.

A targeted approach to learning helps us cope with all the nagging feelings associated with gaining expertise: *Am I good enough? Will I fail? What if I'm wrong? Isn't there something else that I'd rather be doing?*

While some self-carping is normal, [Stanford psychologist Albert Bandura](#) says these sorts of negative emotions can quickly rob us of our ability to learn something new. Plus, we're more committed if we develop a plan with clear objectives. The research is overwhelming on this point. [Studies](#) consistently show that people with clear goals outperform people with vague aspirations like "do a good job." By setting targets, people can manage their feelings more easily and achieve progress with their learning.

Think about thinking

Metacognition is crucial to the talent of learning. Psychologists define metacognition as "thinking about thinking," and broadly speaking, metacognition is about being more inspective about how you know what you know. It's a matter of asking ourselves questions like: *Do I really get this idea? Could I explain it to a friend? What are my goals? Do I need more background knowledge? Or do I need more practice?*

Metacognition comes easily to many trained experts. When a specialist works through an issue, they'll often think a lot about how the problem is framed. They'll often have a good sense of whether or not their answer seems reasonable.

The key, it turns out, is not to leave this sort of "thinking about thinking" to the experts. When it comes to learning, one of the biggest issues is that people don't engage in metacognition enough. They don't stop to ask themselves if they really get a skill or concept.

The issue, then, is not that something goes in one ear and out the other. The issue is that individuals don't dwell on the dwelling. They don't push themselves to really think about their thinking.

Reflect on your learning

There is something of a contradiction in learning. It turns out that we need to let go of our learning in order to understand our learning. For example, when we step away from a problem, we often learn more about a problem. Get into a discussion with a colleague, for instance, and often your best arguments arrive while you're washing the dishes later. Read a software manual and a good amount of your comprehension can come after you shut the pages.

In short, learning benefits from reflection. This type of reflection requires a moment of calm. Maybe we're quietly writing an essay in a corner — or talking to ourselves as we're in the shower. But it usually takes a bit of cognitive quiet, a moment of silent introspection, for us to engage in any sort of focused deliberation.

Sleep is a fascinating example of this idea. It's possible that we tidy up our knowledge while we're napping or sleeping deeply. One recent [study](#) shows a good evening of shut-eye can reduce practice time by 50%.

The idea of cognitive quiet also helps explain why it's so difficult to gain skills when we're stressed or angry or lonely. When feelings surge through our brain, we can't deliberate and reflect. Sure, in some sort of dramatic, high-stakes situations, we might be able to learn something basic like remember a phone number. But for us to gain any sort of understanding, there needs to be some state of mental ease.

The good news from all of this — for individuals and for companies looking to help their employees be their best — is that learning is a learned behavior. Being a quick study doesn't mean you're the smartest person in the room. It's that you've learned how to learn. By deliberately organizing your learning goals, thinking about your thinking, and reflecting on your learning at opportune times, you can become a better study, too.

[Ulrich Boser](#) is a Senior Fellow at the Center for American Progress, where he also founded and runs the science of learning initiative. He's the author of *Learn Better: Mastering the Skills for Success in Life, Business, and School, or, How to Become an Expert in Just About Anything*.

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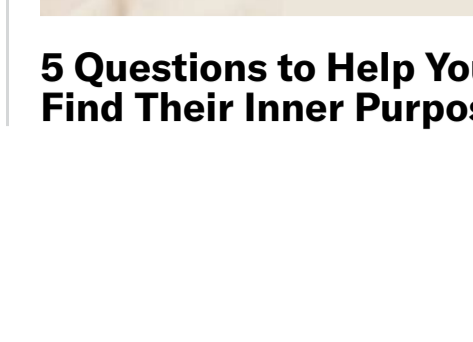
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