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Context to the nugget conversation

Tom speaks about how our approach to learning shifts as we go through the various stages of learning something - Novice, Advanced beginner, Competent, Proficient and Expert. He speaks about how we initially focus on learning the rules involved but as we go up the learning curve, we need to get comfortable with the evolving context around us and that can require a very different approach.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): And moving along you speak about the Dreyfuss model of learning which has five steps: novice, advanced beginner, competent, proficient and expert. I am curious about what has your research or experience shown in terms of how we should adapt a learning approach as we move through these different points in the curve? Are there nuances that you have picked up in terms of how we should adapt our style as we move along?

Tom Vanderbilt (Tom): Well, I mean just to explain to listeners that aren't familiar that the Dreyfuss scales there was a group of brothers that were with University of California and were doing a research actually for the U.S. Air Force back in the 70s and came up with this model of how we move through these different stages novice, advanced beginner, competent, proficient and expert. And first of all, I will say that I found elements of what they said in my own practice I was sort of living them all the time and one point I make for example is that novices really pay very close attention to rules and I don't mean just like actual rules like the rules of chess, but sort of tips and heuristics that are out there and very, I'll say very, very localized problems. A beginner driver tends to look at the front of the car or their hands on the wheel when really what makes for a good driving is to look as far down the road as possible to anticipate what is going to happen, but there's such an overwhelming information load going on for novices that they can only handle a certain flow at one time. So, you sort of stick to these basic rules of thumb that you have been given and so, you know, in chess for example the beginner is simply trying to pay attention to how can I move the knight again, he can go sideways or they might know simple suggestions like don't move your queen too early, don't trade pieces of... certain beginner rules that are given and so you sort of go up the... as you go up the chain you begin to move away from those what are called context free rules and start to actually pay attention to the context around you. And so, the driver you will not simply, they are taught to obey every traffic signal but there may come a time where a traffic signal is malfunctioning or there's a truck parked, stuck in an intersection and you have to go around and do something that is not in the rules. So, the whole process of learning is moving away from those rules, beginning to do your own analysis and then eventually relying on bit more intuition not just rules and analysis, but sort of that gut instinct. And then finally the last step expert would be just simply I mean just knowing something inside and out. And the game of chess, for example, I mean chess a Grandmaster can play blindfolded, they can remember a game from two weeks ago, they can remember the world

championship game from last year probably every move, they have so internalized that thing. Grandmaster Jonathan Rowson gave an interesting example of, you know, definition of this, he said, you know, a chess expert has run out of unfamiliar mistakes to make, so even if an expert makes a mistake or is about to make a mistake, they know them, they sort of know they are whereas the novice is unskilled and unaware of it. So, you know, I am not sure I had any flashes of insight in terms of how to move through these stages or that they even really were discrete stages. I think it is more sort of a continuum and you can sort of... and sometimes you could be inhabiting both worlds and this a point we should point we should probably make about learning is that it is not often linear and if you are trying to learn juggling, for example, you might have done 40 cycles of three-ball pattern one day and then struggled to do six or seven the next day and, you know, so you might have been briefly inhabiting the world of the advanced beginner than going back to beginner and sometimes you just have to again change up your practice, take a break, walk away. So, I think the drivers, you know, it is an interesting way to think about and it is generally sort of correct. It is maybe more sort of a descriptive tool rather than an actual way to approach learning. So, I don't think there's a way for beginners to cheat and skip that stage and you can't simply start as a competent surfer, you sort of have to, you have to be a beginner.

DJ: It's interesting you speak about going away and coming back again. I happened to speak to ex-World No. 1 in chess, a gentleman called Vishwanathan Anand from India on the podcast as well, and he said that, you know, sometimes he would do a puzzle late at night and he would sort of his mind would be confused but he would wake up with a clear mind. You know, when he woke up, he could see the solution in his head and his point was we sometimes underestimate the power of the subconscious, you know, it's back to The Inner Game of Tennis that we spoke about, we sometimes think that we are processing these things but actually the inner work that is happening is often a lot more powerful than the outer work that we put in consciously. So, his point was sometimes just clocking in the hours and then also taking advantage of sleep sometimes can be a great opportunity to sort of come back and fight the battle another day.

Tom: Yes, I mean, that is a fantastic point and that is something that you can find abundant evidence for that the benefit of sleep upon the learning process and or even napping and not of course not trying to cram too much practice into one session, this has sort of been that has come out in the learning literature over the last few decades the idea of distributed practice and doing a little bit each day rather than these huge chunks and when you don't have the time to sleep, there's even little tricks thinking of chess, you know, it has been suggested simply closing your eyes and then opening them again and looking at the board might a quick sort of mental refresh to give yourself actually fresh eyes, the eyes of a beginner perhaps, trying to look at the board in a new way rather than like something gazing more intently at it.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: When I was at London Business School, one of the Professors of Strategy, Freek Vermulen, introduced me to the Term – Diseconomies of Time Compression. We were talking about Sustainable Competitive Advantage and how sometimes, companies accumulate an advantage over years and that can be hard to undo. In that context he spoke about this. The simple way to explain this phenomenon is this. If you learnt Piano for 1 hour, 5 days a week for 4 weeks, that would be 20 hours of Piano playing. This would be far far superior to you learning 10 hours for 2 days or 5 hours for 4 days. I guess we all know this intuitively but the more I read around and research around expertise, I do think there is no substitute to playing the long game and slowly growing up the curve of judgment and capability in a topic. If you are dedicated to the craft and are learning, just drilling in one place for a long period of time is a competitive advantage!

End of nugget transcription

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About Deepak Jayaraman

Deepak seeks to unlock the human potential of senior executive's / leadership teams by working with them as an Executive Coach / Sounding Board / Transition Advisor. You can know more about his work [here](#).

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