Context to the nugget conversation

Tom speaks about how we should think about friction when we learn something. He uses the metaphor of travel versus tourism to say that it is easy to get a quick a dirty version of most things but sometimes the immersive slow learning process has its own rewards.

Transcription

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Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): And you also say that we live in a frictionless age where the emphasis is on speed learning and the process is often obscured by results. What does that mean in terms of how we should approach learning, Tom? Have you, with everything available on YouTube, has it made it harder for us to embrace high friction learning? What have you observed?

Tom Vanderbilt (Tom): I think there's a certain messaging out there that that you don't have to look very far online to find promises of learning… learn to speak like a native in six months or something which is almost quite impossible but, I think, like everything we want something to be done quickly and there certainly are realms where it is desirable and even possible to learn things more quickly and there's no reason to artificially delay it. But in my process, because I did not really have discrete goals, you know, I wasn't trying to simply learn let's say a new computer system or something and these were things that were open-ended. So, I quite purposely didn't really set time or achievement goals, I just wanted to sort of see how far I could get and do a very sort of slow purposeful learning where I was really paying attention to the whole process including mistakes and not simply trying to rush to the next thing but kind of savoring those mistakes and taking the time to understand them. So, this sort of approach isn't going to work for everyone or in every condition, but I would urge people to not let the notion of time or goals interfere too much. I sort of compare it to the process of tourism versus travel and you can take a package tour and go somewhere and see an entire city in 48 hours and everything is sort of taken care of for you and don't have to think much and you just sort of consume everything or you could take a much longer trip that you have arranged yourself. You have a loose itinerary, but you mostly are just exploring and seeing what paths you might go down, and that was my sort of process in this. And the French, the root of the word travel is travail from the French which means pain. So, there's a certain amount of struggle that might be involved here but I think it's a very rewarding struggle. There's nothing, I don't want to say there is anything wrong with taking a package tour, but that's just a certain thing and that is one way to consume an experience and I would argue though that the second way might be more ultimately fulfilling and I think we can kind of apply that notion to learning.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: This is in line with what my guitar teacher tells me in the context of learning a new song. If you need to figure out the chords of a song, it is easy to go to the internet and download the chords and play it blindly. But the pleasure of figuring it out from first principles is quite special and the learning that comes from it is of a different level.

Not to paint with a broad brush here, but if the intent is to pursue slow, long-term learning in an area, there is something to be said about the friction and the labour involved in the depth of learning that occurs.

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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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