

Discussion Starter: Is Reading a Skill or a Habit?

What is something that you have learned to do well? What is something that you enjoy doing? What is something you have learned to do well that you will probably enjoy throughout your life?

It may be a craft, sport, recreational activity, or academic pursuit. Now consider what has happened in your life to cause you to learn and embrace this endeavor? In answering those questions, we can begin to identify a number of contributing factors common across individual talents.

First, were you immersed in an environment in which you were surrounded by the activity? Did you have easy access to the materials necessary to carry out your activity? Did you have easy access to a place conducive for conducting your activity? Were you surrounded by others who engaged in the activity and provided you with the language, directions and techniques you needed to become successful with the activity? Immersion in an environment with easy access to human and material resources seems to be a significant factor in contributing to one's embrace of an activity. But immersion in a conducive environment in and of itself probably won't be enough to insure success and result in enjoyment.

Second, did any of those human resources in that environment directly share their expertise and enthusiasm with you? Did at least one expert take the time to demonstrate directly, overtly and intentionally techniques and strategies which helped you to move from becoming a novice to someone who began to show some expertise with the activity? With almost any activity, a novice reaches a point where the direct instruction of an expert is needed to help them move beyond a level performance which is acquired through self-study and/or peer interaction.

Third, did the people who surrounded you as you engaged in this activity believe in you? Did they regularly convey to you their expectations that you could be successful and you would value the outcome? Did they help you see yourself as an active member within this specific community? These kinds of high expectations reflect both a commitment to your development and contribute to you seeing yourself in a way that causes you to stay committed to this endeavor.

Fourth, did the people who worked with you allow you to learn the activity initially without demanding conventional behavior from the beginning? Were you provided special tools, adapted resources, loosened guidelines, and greater support? Did they remove constraints which would have prevented you from having a go at the activity without the risk of failure? Were less than conventional behaviors accepted and celebrated when they indicated movement toward more conventional behaviors? It is important that novices be encouraged to make approximations as they learn to become experts capable of conventional behaviors.

Fifth, did the people who worked with you provide you with feedback which was

based on your actions and questions? Was the feedback constructive providing you with meaningful suggestions that were functional and relevant to your needs? Response from an expert is critical when it praises novices specifically for what they are doing right as individuals and provides additional specific suggestions to novices for improving their individual performance. It seems to help build a bridge between what the novice is able to do and what the novice needs to do learn to do next to do become an expert at the activity.

Sixth, were you provided plenty of time to practice your activity? Was your practice time focused exclusively on the mastery of skills and strategies or was it balanced with opportunities to try out the activity in its entirety? Let's face it. Very few of us get good at doing something by never doing it. Very few of us get good at doing something by only practicing parts of it. Competency depends on having many opportunities available to actually practice the activity in a meaningful way.

Seventh, were you provided choices in deciding to embrace this activity? Did you get to have any say in when and where you would practice and perform? With whom you would practice? For whom you would perform? Taking responsibility for learning the activity ultimately is up to the individual practicing and performing. Building in choice seems to contribute to one's willingness to take on that responsibility.

Eighth, did you pay attention when experts were providing you with demonstrations and response?

Is your goal teaching someone to learn to read or teaching someone to become a reader? The first of these views sees reading as a specific skill that needs to be taught. The second view sees reading as a disposition or habit -- a relatively enduring tendency to act in a certain way. It is not taught so much as it is learned. It is something about which we are always learning. And the conditions for learning to become a reader mirror the conditions we have identified as significant contributors to learning about any activity.