Chapter 13
Addressing the "Commitment Problem":
Driving Long–Term Persistent Focus in Self–Discovery Learning (A Thought Experiment)

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ABSTRACT

Self-discovery learning, theoretically, can apply to the extreme ends of human endeavor—the acquisition and maintenance of in-depth expertise over long periods of time. Long-term persistence and focus have always been difficult challenges, even with the enabling structures of educational and career tracks. The inherent unstructuredness and informal aspects of self-discovery learning may make it harder for people to maintain long-term focused interests and investments in their learning. However, the creation of social collaborative work spaces for communities (and networks) of practice and the wide accessibility of various data sets online may be the nascent elements of more elite enabling spaces that may address the "commitment problem" for long-term persistent attention. This chapter proposes a draft survey based on the research to learn more about long-term informal discovery learning online.

INTRODUCTION

The world has crossed the Rubicon: the affordances of the Internet and Web have radically changed how people learn and acquire skill sets. These technologies have become indispensable in human learning. The enormous informational-access affordances and broad social connectivity of the persistent and pervasive information and communication technologies (ICT) substructure theoretically enable long-term self-discovery learning. Self-driven learning may lead to the creation and evolution of expertise in some fields

that may be complementary to work interests or engaging lives. The current structure of the Internet and World Wide Web (WWW) may not offer sufficient structured guidance for self-discovery learners.

Web-based learning, per se, is not inherently student-centered in nature. Rather, it may be externally-directed, student-directed, free-choice, or combinations of each" (Berge & Mrozowski 2001; Bernard, et al. 2004, as cited in Hannafin, Hannafin, & Gabbitas, 2009, p. 768).

The development of human expertise requires plenty of societal resources—in terms of educational systems and career paths. Yet, even with these societal structures supporting human endeavors, long-term focus and persistence has been a difficult challenge. High schools and universities face student retention challenges; work places also have a number of their employees moving on to other positions, in other fields. Specific nurturing environments have to exist for people to express their inherent tendency to autonomously seek out and pursue novelty and challenges. Because self-discovery learning is self-driven and often informal, this type of learning may be harder to create in a persistent way over the long-term. Self-discovery and inquiry-based learning refer to independent learners who acquire learning based on their own motivations. In the Web environment, such learners have to take important responsibilities to direct their own learning.

During student-centered learning, the individual assumes responsibility for determining learning goals, monitoring progress toward meeting goals, adjusting or adapting approaches as warranted, and determining when individual goals have been adequately addressed. This can be particularly challenging while learning from the World-Wide Web, where billions of resources address a variety of needs. The individual must identify which tools and resources are available and appropriate, how

to assemble them, and how to manage and support their unique learning goals (Hannafin, Hannafin, & Gabbitas, 2009, p. 767).

In the present day, people develop expertise based on the support of their formal education—with access to plenty of information resources and human expert-guidance. There are workplace supports for expert skill-set development, with formalized training systems, required training, and hands-on assigned work. In addition, some idiosyncratic job descriptions (created for individuals) enable individuals to pursue even more idiosyncratic skill sets on a regular basis. These trainings are set in place to deal with the varying risk levels of critical skills losses in professional organizations given employee turnover and the growing complexity of difficult problems (Carley, 1992). In addition to higher education programs and work places, another generally untapped social engine of expertise development involves informal self-discovery learning. Given the criticality of connecting higher education with professional work lives, informal self-discovery acquisition of complex skill sets may be an important middle ground to enhance human capabilities. The informal learning may augment the formal learning structures. Figure 1, "Informal and Formal Learning Tracks for Life-long Learning," shows informal learning as one track in learning, but with more solid predominance of formal learning tracks—from higher education and work-based learning and acquisition of expertise.

Figure 1 shows a circuitous, interrupted, semi-linear, non-linear approach to informal acquisition of expertise. In fact, it may be interpreted that people may be unconsciously acquiring learning that forms a skill set potentially even without pre-planning.

Using informal learning for the building of a complex skill set is no easy feat, with so much information that is competing for people's attention in the present day. Henry James is reported to have cited the saying that "genius is nothing

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