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How Does One Learn? Is There a Method?

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Abstract

The definition of learning is to gain or acquire knowledge of or skill in (something) by study, experience, or being taught. We discuss here the different methods of learning in traditional and modern societies. We conclude that what we have learned to date is negligible compare to what remains to learn.

Keywords: knowledge, learning, rationality, reflection, intuition, reasoning

The definition of learning is to gain or acquire knowledge of or skill in (something) by study, experience, or being taught.

How does one learn?

From birth, the new born learns. He learns to feed himself. He has to learn to communicate, express himself, ask for food. As an infant, learning comes from the outside. He learns how the surrounding world works.

English philosopher Locke (1689) believed that knowledge is derived through experience of the senses. Through the senses, we learn what is cold, sweet or bitter. The second source of knowledge is reflection, called inner sense: to think, to doubt, to believe, to reason.

The teenager learns who he is. This learning is difficult: he has to find himself, oppose himself, understand the possible choices, learn to say no, understand his limitations.

For Coehlo (1988), teenagers see everything in black and white. They are not afraid to dream and to wish everything they want to do with their life. How-

ever, as time goes by, a mysterious strength demonstrates that it is impossible to realize all your wishes.

Therefore, at adulthood, humans have to learn to know themselves, to choose between dream and reality and to act according to their own personalities and to their environment.

Is there a method to learn?

For Bacon (1620), man can only discover the natural order of things. He understands quickly that nature can only be conquered by obeying it. It is the principle of experimental science.

Descartes (1637) suggested for learning a method based on different notions: doubt, intuition, reasoning.

For the French Philosopher Comte (1844), human knowledge passes through three stages: theological, metaphysical and positive stages.

- **Theological stage:** the human mind directs his searches towards the inner nature of the beings; towards the origin of everything that it registers, in another world towards the supreme knowledge. The mind represents each phenomenon as a result of the direct action of supernatural factors and it helps to explain all apparent abnormalities of the universe.

- **Metaphysical stage:** the supernatural factors are replaced by abstract forces capable of recording all phenomena observed.

- **Positive stage:** the human mind, realizing the impossibility to ever get the supreme knowledge, stops to look for the origin and destination of the universe, or the origin of phenomena to concentrate only on learning through reasoning and observation of their physical laws.

We should never stop learning. Acquired knowledge allows progression while relearning what has been forgotten leads to stagnation.

We learn through experience

Confucius says experience is a lantern attached on our back that shines only on our past. The past feeds the present and gives references and benchmarks. But the present feeds also the past by adapting old legends to the present time.

Our life is made of successes and mistakes. Our learning is richer from the analysis of our failures than that of our successes. Experience feeds our life.

We have to dedicate our life to this continuous learning.

Learning in traditional and modern societies

In traditional societies, knowledge is transferred through initiatic rituals. These rituals happen usually at important stages of life, the most important one certainly being the transition between childhood and adolescence where one needs to part from their parents. The ritual is carried out by the elders. The

pain of this separation is compensated by the benefit of being part of a new social group.

In modern societies, learning is conducted towards knowledge rather than the know-how. Rationality drives the mind of the modern man, imposing barriers to access the irrational world. Man has overcome his superstitions but has lost contact with the sacred world. Man has succeeded in conquering nature, but has failed to conquer himself.

I will conclude by quoting Platon: “when mankind would have learned a great lot, they will think they are knowledgeable but in fact they will mostly be ignorant and unwise in the purpose of life”.

What you have learned to date is negligible compare to what remains to learn.

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