

Hugh Greenway muses on the art of learning through trying and failing

If at first you don't succeed... remove all evidence of having tried in the first place.

I am a conflicted and hypocritical individual at the best of times. I can often be heard exclaiming: "Do I HAVE to do EVERYTHING around here?!" This is then followed by me fixing what needs to be fixed and grumbling about it.

The trouble with this is, beyond the hypocrisy I have already admitted, that, by showing my exasperation, I am holding back other people's development. If I get angry because you can't do something, what incentive is there for you to try and perhaps fail? If I look hard in the mirror, this is particularly galling as I am supposed to be someone who is passionate and supportive of learning. My actions directly contradict my oft-repeated belief that, in order to learn, you have to try and fail, which is the subject of my musings this month.

How can we make trying and failing easier and less painful for everyone?

Trouble comes in three phases. First, accepting that we can be better at something. For many of us the idea that we can be a lot better at something is not an exciting or inspiring thing. It is a depressing thing. As such, we try to hide our shortcomings from others and don't even admit them to ourselves.

Second, and scarier, is the admission of this inability. Admitting that we aren't very good at something is difficult, especially when the thing concerned might be considered to be a key part of the job we perform. There is a huge risk attached to the admission, which is coupled to the fact that, if we've got away with it for this long, maybe it doesn't matter that much.

The upside of how much better we will be or how much easier our job will become is tiny in comparison to the expected shame of being found out. It's a lot like nuclear disarmament: fine in principle but you go first.

The third phase, and most frightening, is trying something new that we're not entirely sure of, and risking failure. This is

where inertia is much easier. If we don't try, we can't be blamed for failure. But without people taking risks, no advance can be made.

These three issues are all covered in well-facilitated classroom learning. Indeed, an understanding of them is essential to a good teacher, for he must create a safe environment in which small risks can be taken.

And yet, with us yet to really feel the teeth of the recession, it is already clear that there will be a lot less classroom learning going on over the next couple of years for those in and out of work. So how can we try to create this supportive environment around our workstation or PC?

I have two conflicting beliefs here:

- 1) I am convinced that social networking, collaborative working, informal learning tools, blogging and everything that falls under the title 'Learning 2.0' will revolutionise the way the world learns. They will enable each individual to shape his learning environment to meet his preferences and thus have a more positive and engaged learning experience.
- 2) I am equally convinced that, despite the above being self-evident, it will take a monumental amount of energy to convince people who are not aware of these things or disengaged with learning to change their behaviour. "There isn't time... I don't understand it..." or variations on the theme: "I'm too busy chopping down trees to sharpen my axe."

So how do we get the ball rolling?

The first answer is just to lurk anonymously on the edges of the pool. You can download a clip from YouTube without shouting to everyone: "My name is Simon, I'm a managing director of 13 years' experience and I don't know how pivot tables really work. I'm just looking it up now."

You can sit on the edges of chat rooms and piggy back off other people's questions. You can download articles from the web or look up the blogs of people who have specialist expertise.

But, all the while you are doing this, try to take note of how supportive most people are to those who ask questions. Look at the threads in forums or postings on blogs. People don't tend to get humiliated for asking what turns out to be an easy question. Because once you've got the confidence, you will realise that it's worth jumping in. ■



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