



## Becoming an Expert Learner Part 2: Understanding Your Disposition to Learning

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“All managers spend time thinking about events that have occurred, why they have occurred and what they might do the next time — but they have not usually been shown how to do this in relation to their learning. Similarly, all managers plan ahead for their managerial work, but they have rarely received any guidance on how to associate more effective learning with their managerial planning.”

— Mike Pedler, *Action Learning for Managers* (1996)

Managers and teams in the workplace are continuously buffeted by complexity, uncertainty, time pressures, and erupting crises. Is it any wonder that managers and teams find little time to reflect on their experience, in order to learn from it? Most managers and teams believe that they are far too busy to reflect, and there are seldom any systems in

organizations that support reflective activities.

The best that most managers and teams can do is to learn from their experience, using established ways of learning. However, in her article, *Action Learning and Reflection in the Workplace* (1990), Victoria Marsick observes, “Unfortunately, learning from experience can lead to repetition of mistakes.” What managers and teams need to do is to learn how to reflect on their experience in a way that increases their ability to make informed decisions, to take effective actions, and to learn from their decisions and actions. To do this, managers and teams must first become aware of their dispositions towards reflection, action, and learning, and the impact of their dispositions on their ability to make informed decisions, to take effective actions, and to learn. Then, they can gain a deeper understanding of how they bias and shortcut important parts of problem solving, decision making, and learning processes.

According to David Perkins (1995), the most important part of reflective intelligence is disposition, because everything we think and do is shaped by our disposition towards what we do. Perkins draws on Professor Richard Paul’s concept of *strong-sense* and *weak-sense* critical thinking to explain how dispositions work, arguing that “If you are a strong-sense critical thinker, you show a genuine commitment to broad-mindedness and thinking across multiple frames of reference. A weak-sense critical thinker displays high technical skill with the mechanics of reasoning, but lacks

the commitment.” A lack of commitment to thinking deeply about complex situations is a sign of a low disposition to thinking and learning. When faced with a complex problem, a weak-sense critical thinker will work on a problem only if it is easy to solve. If the problem is not easy to solve, the weak-sense critical thinker will make it easy by looking at the problem in a superficial way, and not bothering to inquire into his or her thinking, thus being a nonexpert learner. The strong-sense critical thinker will see an easy solution as a possible problem, and will be committed to exploring what underlies his or her thinking.

When we are weak-sense critical thinkers, we perform *low road transfer* or, at best, *far low road transfer*. According to Perkins, “Low road transfer occurs when perceptual similarities of one situation to another trigger the making of a connection. ... Low road transfer is pattern driven. ... It is a phenomenon of experiential intelligence. ... Far low road transfer can occur when the same skill gets practiced over a variety of circumstances, gradually stretching from one context to another until it achieves high generality.”

For example, I am currently working with several teams in a major oil company in a long-term team development program. I meet with these teams every month for a training session that focuses on developing high-performing teams and individuals. The sessions train the participants in the concepts of effective thinking and learning in the workplace. During these sessions, I use a variety of activities to illustrate how the concepts can be applied in

complex situations. When participants are able to apply the concepts to the activities, they are displaying low road transfer. This means that they can see the direct connection between the concepts and the activity. To stretch participants, I ask them to think about how the concepts can be applied across a variety of activities that they have experienced throughout the training program. When participants are able to connect the concepts to many different activities in the training program, they are displaying far low road transfer. However, for this training program to be effective, the concepts need to go beyond the classroom into the workplace for change to occur. For this, the training program needs to engage participants in using high road transfer.

When we are strong-sense critical thinkers, we perform *high road transfer*. According to Perkins, high road transfer requires a conscious transfer of concepts from one situation to another situation that is not directly related. For example, in the training sessions, I ask participants to explore connections between the thinking and learning concepts, what they have learned in applying these concepts in a variety of training activities, and their work. To reinforce high road transfer, I assign participants homework that will cause them to draw these connections to every situation that they encounter at work. One month later, at the next session, participants report on their connections to their work. When participants make the connection between the learning and thinking concepts and their daily work, they are displaying high road transfer. When this happens, the training is a success, because they have transferred the training directly

to their work, and are able to make their own connections.

It takes a long time to develop skills in high road transfer. In my experience, it takes a minimum of six months of intense training, in order for participants to see how useful high road transfer is for increasing high performance. The participants who struggle the most with this long-term program are those who display a low disposition to thinking and learning. These participants do not lack the intellectual capacity to learn; they lack the discipline and desire to work hard, in order to learn. Often, these participants cannot see how the program will help them in their day-to-day work. Because of their inability to perform high road transfer, they may resist learning. Resistance often takes the form of negativity. However, if these participants can stick with the program for the first six months, they begin to experience the benefits of high road transfer. They begin to develop a disposition towards thinking and learning.

During each session I have with the teams, I ask participants to assess their dispositions to a variety of situations and activities. Participants discover which situations and activities engage them, and which situations and activities distance them. Most importantly, participants discover how their dispositions change as they go through various situations and activities.

For example, an individual may have a low disposition to work on an action item at work. When the individual embarks on this action item, he or she records a low disposition to this activity. Halfway through the action item, the individual checks his or her disposition. At this point, the disposition has usually changed to either a neutral or high disposition to

performing this action item. At the end of the action item, the individual assesses his or her disposition for the last time. This record of disposition shows the individual how his or her disposition changes, why it changes, and what he or she does to change his or her disposition. All of this information becomes helpful in increasing this individual's ability to become a high performing individual (i.e., expert learner). This activity also works if, at the beginning of the action item, the individual has a high disposition to performing the action item.

All of us experience shifts in our dispositions, even those people who have a general disposition to thinking and learning. Our lives are so complex that it is often difficult to maintain a high disposition all of the time. It is when we are experiencing low disposition that we become less effective in making decisions, taking actions, and learning.

*“Learning is a consequence of thinking. Retention, understanding, and the active use of knowledge can be brought about only by learning experiences in which learners think about and think with what they are learning. ... As we think about and with the content that we are learning, we truly learn it.”*

— David Perkins, **Outsmarting IQ: The Science of Learnable Intelligence** (1995)

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