

Learn Selfishly to Grow

Idea In Short

Take charge of your own learning agenda. Treat every opportunity as a transaction in your favor and decide what payoff you want before investing your time.

Own Your Learning Agenda

Learning is not about someone else. It is about you. Whether you are nineteen or fifty-nine, the question stays the same: what is in this for me? What is the real takeaway? Will I remember this in five years? In life there is no syllabus. You are the boss of you. Learning selfishly means you choose what matters and you invest your energy where the return is highest.

School gives you structure, a cohort and a teacher who curates key ideas. Classrooms are safe places to disagree, question and be wrong. They remain hallowed ground. Yet that structured environment ends at graduation. Thinking that learning stops after twenty years of formal education is a mistake. A two-year Master of Business Administration (MBA) is not a magical portal where you collect every potion. If you doubt that Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) will transform how we work, you are not paying attention. We all learn for the long haul whether we want to or not.

Write Your Own Syllabus

Digital evolution moves faster than organic evolution. Yuval Noah Harari noted that artificial intelligence (AI) sits at its amoeba stage today, yet it may reach the dinosaur stage in twenty years because digital change outpaces biological change. ¹ If GenAI is currently a single-celled organism, imagine what it becomes as a fish. Professionals who wait for a curriculum will find none. You must design your own.

Learning does not confine itself to classrooms. The anachronistic model of buying a textbook and plodding from introduction to glossary no longer serves busy executives. Be

picky about what you learn and why you learn it. Find things that are accretive to your career and your unfair advantage. Random trivia has its place, yet there is too much junk in our minds already. Choose material that compounds.

Discover How You Learn

We all learn differently. Our backgrounds, thought processes, interests and quantitative wiring vary. What works for your colleague may fail for you. Ask yourself honest questions. Do you study best alone or with others? Can you create a memory palace to store facts? Do you absorb more in three-hour blocks or in twenty-five-minute focused sprints? 2 Are you faster on an iPad marking up documents or with a fountain pen on paper?

Be intentional about your method. Your brain is roughly three percent of your body weight yet consumes twenty percent of your energy. It is a calorie monster. It does not want to spend energy learning things it deems unnecessary. Your brain is lazy, and so is mine. The challenge is to train, coax and trick it into absorbing what you choose. As one managing director quipped, "Is it worth the calories?" Curiosity is fuel for your career. Ambition helps for the first fifteen years, yet longer-term you need purpose.

Make Time on Purpose

Many generous people give their time to kids, parents, neighbors and jobs. That is noble, and it is also time to learn selfishly. One hour a day for a year equals 365 hours. Divide that by a forty-hour work week and you have nine weeks of dedicated learning. What would you learn, what craft would you hone, what business would you start? Be selective with your time, relationships and interests. You cannot be a hundred percent people-pleaser and a hundred percent strategic at once. Learning and practice both demand time.

Reverse-Engineer the Answer

Start with your audience. What is the purpose of the meeting, presentation or pitch? How do you want them to feel at the end? Relieved, informed, concerned or excited? Once you know the objective, learn enough to achieve it. Studying for an exam? Watch what the teacher repeats in class, on practice tests and in emails. Repetition is a signal. Writing a proposal in client services? Focus on the client. Reread your meeting minutes from the last three sessions and listen. The old consulting quip holds: tell the client what they said to you and

they will think you are a genius.

Learn Frameworks as Basic Recipes

Strategy classes teach many frameworks because they are simple and useful. They occupy little space in your brain yet give you a setup to which you add ingredients and data later. Break problems into buckets. Use the 3C model of customer, competitor and company. Apply the 4P mix of product, price, place and promotion. Leverage segmentation, targeting and positioning (STP). Map the purchase funnel from awareness through repurchase. Keep selling in the short term as long as marginal revenue exceeds marginal cost. Feed the bottleneck. Design the organization around the jobs, not the people. Track the industry lifecycle and the technology adoption lifecycle. Apply VRIO to assess whether resources are valuable, rare, hard to imitate and owned. Use discounted cash flow (DCF) for valuation. These mental models compress complexity into decision-ready structure.

Use Tools and Experts

Tools like ChatGPT serve as endlessly helpful tutors. They explain things in structured ways and they never tire. Using such tools daily accelerates comprehension and synthesis. Yet tools complement human experts rather than replace them. Three hours in front of a computer can rarely match fifteen minutes with someone who knows the content. Find those people and ask them ten good questions. You might save yourself enormous time.

Informational interviews are gold. Reach out to someone you want to learn from. Be respectful, flexible and worthy of apprenticing. Do one or two hours of research before the call. Be an informed student. Ask thoughtful questions and get your money's worth from a twenty-minute conversation. The preparation itself teaches you, and the conversation sharpens what you already gathered.

Apply It or Lose It

Adult learning cannot remain head knowledge. Why study Spanish if you never plan to use it? You should be watching telenovelas, reading *Cien años de soledad* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez or chatting with friends in Spanish. Do something with what you learned. Build, advise, help, decide, reflect, analyze, correct, teach, simulate, sell and explore. Ask what is in it for you. Learning because you "should" is a terrible reason. Find clever ways to use the

material and make it relevant to your life.

Seth Godin urges creators to "ship art," meaning put your work into the world. 3 You can only sell something that adds value. If it falls flat, nobody pays for it because too much free, good material exists. Learn something well, hone your craft and create a product. Write five proposals and you will learn a great deal about your content, your clients and yourself.

Journal and Teach

Writing things down forces clarity. One healthcare strategy course asked students to journal across fourteen weeks of three-hour sessions, forty-plus pre-class videos and a full book. Each entry captured the key takeaway, the student's point of view, open questions and whether the content would make sense five years later. Create a Google Doc for yourself. Catalog both the important and the frivolous. Blogging serves the same purpose: it hones thinking, shares knowledge, stores ideas and builds a personal library.

Take a topic and melt it down into a single PowerPoint page. Fewer words, more insight. That is structured thinking. A clear title that says something and data that persuades. This takes rigor, and it is very doable. One slide a day builds the muscle. Then teach it. You do not learn something until you try to teach it. After you build the slide, explain it to a friend. Could they turn around and teach it to their mother tomorrow? If so, you were clear.

Embrace Discomfort and Stay Curious

The United States Marines have an ethos around doing things that are un-fun yet necessary. Complaining is rarely useful. Instead, lean into the pain and unpleasantness. Embrace the suck. Many professionals learned this during the MBA crucible. The discipline, the culture of inquiry, the dialectic and debate, the stress, the exams, the deliverables and the teamwork all forge resilience. Some things you only learn through trial. No amount of studying prepares you for difficult conversations with tenants about late rent. Practice in a safe environment, get feedback and try again. School is the safest place to experiment. Try things on professors and classmates, not on managers and clients.

We do not know ourselves perfectly. Walt Whitman said we contain multitudes. We are dynamic, changing and interested. Life is nonlinear and we must learn many things. Areas of our lives converge, evolve, shift, grow and atrophy. Hubris is a bad look. We can all think of

people in political office or the corner office who mistakenly believe they have all the answers. The unwillingness to listen and sync new information with existing beliefs becomes deafening. Give yourself grace when you drift. Nobody only watches educational videos. We all lose hours to distractions. We are human. Make good choices, keep it simple and find pleasure in the process.

- 1Harari on AI as an amoeba of evolution
- 2The Pomodoro Technique for focused learning
- 3Seth Godin on shipping creative work

Summary

Learning is a lifelong, self-directed craft. Curate your syllabus, choose methods that fit your wiring and apply what you learn. Stay curious and give yourself grace when you drift.