

Learning Skills for the Professional

The success of a modern professional is dependent upon acquiring new knowledge and learning and perfecting new skills. Most of this knowledge is new and different from what was learned in full-time education, or is a significant enhancement of existing knowledge by fitting it within their changing context at work.



If we consider how this learning occurs, we find that the process is very different from how we learned (and were taught) throughout our education. Sometimes learning in the workplace happens “just by being there”, by “osmosis” without deliberate effort. This is of course the oldest form of learning and clearly works to an extent. Perhaps some people hope, or kid themselves, that this “accidental learning” is enough. I would suggest that it isn’t.

So how do you improve your learning or make it more efficient? Many people decide to go on a course or programme. Of course, attending an intelligently designed course can work for many. However, even on a well designed programme, little is learned “in the classroom”; more is learned in independent study or when applying what you have been taught in the workplace.

Unfortunately, many of the study skills perfected at school and in higher education are not really suited for helping a modern professional study independently. So, if they are not, what new learning skills do you need to develop and perfect? Based upon its experience and research, The Centre for Networked Learning helps people develop useful skills including:

- Identifying their own learning objectives (and continually assessing whether they are being met effectively).
- Learning through communication with peers.
- Drawing support from experts.
- Mixing learning with work and life (maintaining the balance).
- Effective asynchronous communication.
- Reflective learning (including the use of learning journals).
- Effective experimentation.
- Using learning outcomes for career progression.

In this article I will explain one of these skills in more detail, explain its relevance and give you some ideas for developing the particular skill.

Skill 1 - Identifying your own Learning Objectives (and continually assessing whether you are meeting them effectively).

In effective formal education and training courses an expert in both pedagogy and the subject matter has chosen what you need to learn, to what level, and the best method of achieving it. These are reflected in curricula, learning objectives and lesson plans. Of course, all too often, what they have selected might not be what is actually relevant to you and the planned lesson may not fit with your individual learning style.

If you adopt the “accidental learning” approach, you will find that you learn plenty in areas you enjoy and which are assisted by your preferred learning style. You are very likely, however, to be left with large critical gaps in your skills and knowledge.

If you follow this logic, you will see that you need to take some, or complete responsibility for what you need to learn, and indeed how you approach your learning.

Step 1 – Identify your Learning Objective

There are many ways to identify your learning objective. These include:

- Personal honest critical reflection
- Seeking the opinion or advice of friends or peers
- Seeking the advice of a mentor, coach or line manager (possibly from an annual review)
- 360 degree or other collaborative assessment tool
- Training needs or gap analysis
- Diagnostic tests

Example – Simple 360 Degree Assessment

To illustrate one method and give you a tool / approach you may wish to use I will suggest you try a simple, self-driven, 360 degree assessment.

First frame a question. If you struggle to come up with your own you could use good general question(s) like:

- “What are the biggest barriers to my professional progress”?
and / or
- “What 3 improvements (preferably in priority order) would have the biggest possible impact on my professional performance”?

Next, ask yourself your question(s) and write down your answers and if possible, put them in priority order. Then do the same with one or two peers or friends who know you quite well. Finally, find a mentor or line manager and ask them the same questions.

Once you have your answers, pick a single thing to improve – preferably one that was identified by everybody. This will be your learning objective.

Step 2 – Break down your Learning Objective

Often your learning objective will be too big and ill defined to help you plan. You therefore probably need to break your objective down into separate distinct aspects. So, for example, if you identify “improving your formal presentations” as a learning objective, you could break it down into the following aspects:

- Planning / writing your presentation
- Using presentation software
- Remembering content or prompting yourself during a presentation
- Combating nerves
- Improving delivery style

What you often find, like in the above example, is that you would need to tackle different aspects in very different ways. To put it another way, how you approach learning will depend as much on what you need to learn as on your preferred learning style.

For the sake of this exercise I would like you to pick your highest priority aspect. We can then talk about how to plan and carry out your learning.

Step 3 – Plan your Learning

It is likely that the learning objective and aspect you have identified will be a bit daunting, or something you have previously avoided. This is no accident. Those things to which you are attracted, and find easy, are likely to be on the list of things you have already picked up “accidentally”.

So, to plan your learning I recommend you write down your plan and also the output from your personal reviews (either in a specific learning notebook or journal or a computer version of the same). The process I recommend is:

- Write down your chosen learning objective / aspect
- Define your success criteria
- Decide how to judge your success (and whether you will ask someone else to help you judge)
- Determine how best to achieve the learning
- Set yourself a deadline or timeline
- Break the time between now and your deadline and select some regular review dates. This could be weekly, or a different frequency, depending upon the duration of the task

Step 4 – Review Your Learning

At your regular reviews you should ask yourself 2 questions:

- “Have I achieved my objective”?
- “Am I getting there – and is this working”?

If the answer to the first question is “yes”, then you should probably stop, in order to create time to achieve your next objective.

If the answer to the second question is “no”, then seriously consider changing your plan. This new plan could involve trying a different approach to the subject. Of course you could decide to set yourself a lesser, more achievable, objective. If you do, you need to be sure you are doing so for the right reasons.

To Conclude

We have looked at one approach for setting and reviewing your learning objectives. This may or may not work for you. You may need to try out several approaches before you find one that works best for you.

I also hope that you can see the importance and merit of taking your learning more seriously and approaching it in a more systematic way.



More?

If you found this useful, or wish to find out more about Learning Skills, please contact Matt Dower at Centre for Networked Learning at matt@cfnl.co.uk.