

Go to School on What You Don't Know

Donald Mitchell

When I was growing up, most people around me would recite the benefits of going to school in similar ways, frequently sharing observations such as:

- "They can never take away from you whatever you learn."
- "You can never lose by learning more."
- "You have to know more than the 'next guy' to get ahead."
- "Knowledge is more valuable than gold because it can always earn you more."

I was always struck by noticing that those who would recite such sayings seldom had much formal education. Clearly, they felt that lacking schooling was a drawback in their lives.

When such people were confronted with a new problem that puzzled them, they often commented: "I'm going to have to go to school on that." That sentence didn't mean that they were going to attend classes, but rather that they would seek a solution by looking for help from someone who knew the answer.

The first question they would seek to answer was always: "Who might know the answer?"

In those days, knowledge didn't seem to change very often. Master the relevant facts and how to apply them, and you would have expertise that everyone else would respect and seek to benefit from. From that point, your life was secure.

Since then, knowledge has become elusive. Much of what I learned in school has since become obsolete or has been shown to be wrong. I need to "go to school" every day if I am to have any hope of knowing anything useful in the fields where I operate.

By contrast, I have always been struck by how impractical most of the true knowledge was that I learned in school. Anyone who simply spent some time asking others how to do practical things could accomplish a lot more than I could. Spending more time in school wasn't going to close that learning gap for me. I also needed to take charge of "what," "where," and "how often" I was learning to gain the practical edge I was missing.

I was recently reminded of that important lesson while corresponding with one of my former students, Mr. Ismail Iswan, a Singapore native who earned an MBA degree from Rushmore University. He had a bumpy start in school that turned out to be a blessing in disguise by encouraging him to learn independently in practical ways.

Here's what happened. At age six, his father unexpectedly died leaving his young housewife mother with six children to support as a washerwoman. As the oldest child, Mr. Iswan's educational prospects were immediately affected when his grieving mother forgot to register him for primary school.

Upon realizing the mistake, his mother pleaded with the principal of a nearby Chinese school to enroll him, which the principal kindly did . . . taking a special interest in his education and treating Mr. Iswan as though he were a son. It was good to have such support because he was the only Malay student in the school where all classes were conducted in Chinese, a language he didn't know.

With Herculean effort and a willing attitude, he learned enough Chinese over six years to be able to scrape by and graduate. This experience provided an important first lesson in the value of becoming independent and developing the moral courage to strive hard for a better life.

Four years of secondary school followed. Lacking advanced language skills in his native tongue and in English, the doors to further formal education were closed at the time.

Mr. Iswan enrolled in an apprenticeship program designed to prepare him for a career as a master craftsman. It was a great blessing to be in the apprenticeship because he received an allowance as an incentive to complete the course, a valuable source of income for his struggling family.

He was blessed in another way: He did so well in the program that he was selected to become a training officer for other apprentices. After a year-and-a-half in this training role, he was advised to upgrade his knowledge by going back to school as a student.

Enrolling in the German-Singapore Institute, Mr. Iswan earned a two-year diploma in production technology. Armed with that credential and knowledge, he began designing production machinery as a project engineer for a local engineering firm. In this role, he was expected to work alone, further improving his ability to accomplish practical results independently.

Based on that success, he obtained an engineering job with a multinational manufacturer of automotive air conditioning equipment where he worked on in-house projects to improve productivity and apply more automation. He was soon sent to Japan for three years of more advanced work, a very exciting way to learn on the job.

Mr. Iswan advanced very rapidly in engineering roles from there, soon gaining the opportunity to head production engineering, projects, facilities, and maintenance for his employer. As part of this work, he became very active in the organization gaining three ISO certifications that added still another source of practical knowledge.

After nine years with the new firm, he was promoted to assistant general manager, adding responsibilities for administering various programs, including quality circles and productivity improvement. Because of his familiarity with advanced production methods, he was assigned as the team leader to start up a new joint-venture manufacturing operation in the Middle East.

Due to unforeseen circumstances, Mr. Iswan then gained the opportunity to run the plant he had inaugurated. After succeeding in that role, his company gave him marketing responsibilities for expanding the distribution network in the Middle East.

He was pleased to find that he relished the new challenges, something that made him appreciate that he had untapped potential that could best be fulfilled by continually learning in new areas of management where he had no experience.

Online MBA studies focused on applying new knowledge to his day-to-day responsibilities next helped Mr. Iswan to accelerate his performance improvements and career progress.

Having spent so much time and effort gaining practical knowledge, I was curious about his view of formal education. He commented that “education is not about obtaining a piece of paper. It is about applying/ sharing what one has learnt and learning from others to make a meaningful and useful contribution to one’s work or personal life.”

After returning to Singapore from the Middle East, Mr. Iswan applied his new knowledge of management methods to lead a group of highly talented people involved in his firm’s R&D activities. Although he is by nature an optimistic person who is excited by opportunities that others often shy away from, having more theoretical and practical knowledge about management made the latest transition easier than his past career shifts.

As you can see, Mr. Iswan has successfully combined two ways to go to school on what he doesn’t yet know: by learning on the job and by seeking knowledge-expanding formal education just in time to help him succeed in challenging new roles.

In doing so, I believe that he has gone well beyond that advice that I used to hear about the benefits of spending more time in school . . . to knowing how to best school himself to expand and to live up to his untapped potential as a leader and as a doer.

Are you fully using both learning methods to help you go to school on what you do not yet know? If not, stick your neck out to gain some more challenging assignments and start looking for great ways to add the knowledge that you are missing to turn those assignments into career-advancing stepping stones.

I look forward to cheering on your efforts and celebrating your eventual success!

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