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Introduction: Learning for Life

Ravi and Ben are twenty-one months old, born in the same week. They are in an unfamiliar room at the university, taking part, with their mothers, in an experiment on learning. Though the boys have not met before, Ravi is keen to make contact, approaching Ben, smiling at him and holding out a toy he has been playing with. Ben, however, shrinks away nervously and clings to his mother's leg. Ravi looks at his mother occasionally to make sure all is well, and continues to explore the room. A man dressed as a clown enters and talks to the children. Ben starts to whimper and hides his face in his mother's skirt. Ravi smiles at the clown and is soon chatting. When he reaches for a toy, the clown says something sternly. Ravi stops, looks first towards his mother, then intently at the clown. He reaches for the toy again, keeping an eye on the clown. Ben has burst into tears and is being comforted on his mother's lap. These responses are typical of the children.¹

People in general, just like Ravi and Ben, differ enormously in how, and how well, they learn. And these differences in style and effectiveness start to develop early. Already Ravi is generally able to handle more strangeness than Ben. He is a more *resilient* learner: more willing to have a go. He is more able to detect, and more willing to trust, his mother's assessment of the situation. From her positive expression he borrows the courage to explore. The ability to 'read' learning situations correctly, to know when to explore and when to withdraw, and the willingness to tolerate the feelings that go along with learning, lay the foundations of this essential resilience.

But these early differences are not set in stone. Depending on what happens to them over the rest of their lives, Ben and Ravi will either consolidate their initial robust, or fragile, response to the feeling of learning, or they will change. In an uncertain world, resilience is a vital quality which needs to be fostered in children and adults alike. We now know what resilience is, what undermines it and how it can be developed: how to help Ben become better at hanging in with uncertainty. This book is about what it means to be a good learner, and how the growth of good learning can be fostered. The development of resilience in the face of uncertainty and difficulty is one of its major themes.

Emmi and Eliza are fourteen, both thought of as 'bright', both in the top group in their school for mathematics. They are working their way through a booklet of problems that includes, by mistake, a few questions that are too difficult for them to solve. On the early, manageable problems the girls work equally effectively and successfully, but on the hard ones Eliza quickly goes to pieces. She looks furtively across at Emmi to see how she is coping, and begins to fidget and look upset. She whispers to her friend: 'These sums are stupid!' Emmi, meanwhile, is giving it her best shot. She tries starting the problem from the end and working back. She says to herself: 'Well, suppose x is 1: what happens then?' She tries various guesses before she eventually calls the teacher over and confesses that she is stuck. The teacher quickly realizes the mistake and tells the class to ignore problems 7 to 10 and skip to number 11. Emmi does so, working with determination, trying out some of the strategies which she has discovered in the course of grappling with the hard problems, to see if they work on the easier ones. Eliza, however, is still upset. She looks at problem 11 and cannot think how to tackle it, even though number 6, which she solved successfully only a few minutes previously, was exactly the same type.²

Resilience is not just a concern of little kids, or of those who find learning generally hard. Both Emmi and Eliza are 'good students', but Eliza's confidence in her ability to solve her mathematical problems is brittle. Like Ben she has a low tolerance for frustration, and quickly gets upset when things are not going her way. Instead of focusing on trying to solve

the problem, her priority becomes saving face. Emmi experiences her difficulty as a challenge; Eliza perceives her failure as a threat. Where Ben felt frightened, Eliza has learnt to feel ashamed of her difficulty. Another of the themes of this book is the relationship between learning and defending. How do we know when it is right to hang on in there, and when it is smart to quit? What happened to Eliza to make her see the world the way she does? And can we help her distinguish between challenges and threats more accurately?

When Emmi encounters difficulty, she is not only more resilient but a more *resourceful* learner than Eliza, ingeniously searching for new ways to beat the problem. She has several strings to her bow, and if her first approach is not successful she is not stumped. When she doesn't know exactly what to do, she has things she can try. She has more than one tool in her learning toolkit: a greater range and variety of learning and problem-solving strategies. Her resilience and her resourcefulness positively reinforce each other. Because she has greater learning capacity, she feels more confident. Because she feels more confident, she tries longer, harder and with more ingenuity than does Eliza – and is therefore more likely to discover a new way to crack the problem, a new learning tool. As she learns, so she is becoming a more powerful learner. Her 'learning to learn' is on an upward spiral, whereas Eliza's is becalmed. Another theme of this book is: how can we describe this learning toolkit; what are its main compartments? And how can we help people engage with learning challenges in such a way that their general *learning power* is progressively expanded?

Patrick and Polly are the managers of different departments at a large town hall. They are in a meeting to discuss the apportionment of next year's budget. Patrick tentatively questions the prevailing wisdom that each department which has spent its full quota in the current year gets the same again plus a small percentage increase; while departments that have underspent have their budget reduced. The logic, naturally, is that those who don't spend it don't need it. But Patrick points out that this often leads to departments rushing to use up their budgets before the end of the financial year, wasting money for fear of losing it next year. The meeting circles

round the issue without getting anywhere. Polly gets impatient and moves that they carry on as usual. Patrick suggests they take a ten-minute break to clear their minds, and then give it another five minutes. During the break, he muses over different ways of encouraging people to save. When they reconvene, he suggests that they try a different scheme whereby next year's departmental budgets are computed as 95 per cent of the current year, plus 50 per cent of any savings achieved. To maintain their current budget, a department would effectively have to save 10 per cent. If they save 20 per cent their budget increases by 5 per cent; and so on. This way frugality is rewarded, and both individual departments and the central treasury are happy. The meeting thanks Patrick for his innovative suggestion and agrees to try it the following year. Polly is quietly envious of Patrick's ability to reflect creatively.³

It may be that Patrick has learnt better than Polly how to use this softer, more ruminative approach to learning. She may not have realized yet that creative inspiration often strikes when the mind is in a state of playful relaxation, or, if she has, is not able to induce that state at will. Or it may equally be that she possesses the tool, but it did not come to mind. The difference between Patrick and Polly could be that he has developed a more *reflective* attitude towards his own learning. He is better able to stop and take stock of the situation, to ask himself: 'Now what kind of learning approach would work best here?' He has the same tools as Polly, but is able to manage them better. Another theme of this book is the development of this reflective ability to monitor one's own learning and take a strategic overview. What does that kind of self-awareness involve, and how does it grow?

At home, work and play, learning continues throughout life. For Polly and Patrick, 'what to do about the budget?' is not so very different, in essence, from Ben and Ravi's 'what to do about the clown?', or Eliza and Emmi's 'what to do about these (impossible) sums?' At root, the experience of staying engaged with something that is not yet understood or mastered demands a similar attitude. Clearly, however, the problems are of different kinds, and they succumb to different kinds of learning. For Ravi, the key lies in being willing to try

things out – to make small, judicious, practical experiments – and see what happens. He learns by cautiously immersing himself in the experience. For Emmi, the learning required is of a more deliberate, analytical kind. She is thinking hard. While for Patrick, it is a much more ruminative state of mind that does the trick. Not all learning, by any means, requires conscious deliberation. Learning is not a homogeneous activity: it comes in many different shapes and sizes. And these start to kick in at different stages of development. Another theme of this book is the idea that learning is a much wider, richer concept than is captured within current models of education and training. And learning to learn is likewise a much more interesting and pervasive possibility than a concern with study skills.

Debbie and Kelvin, a young married couple, both have difficulty reading. They have mastered a variety of tricks for concealing the fact: Debbie often claims to have left her spectacles at home; Kelvin challenges their bright eight-year-old daughter Helen to read things out loud that he thinks might be important. One day Debbie comes home and tells Kel that she and a friend have signed up for an adult literacy course at the local college. Kel's immediate reaction is to worry about the stigma when their friends find out. Debbie says: 'If Helen can do it, so can I. I'm not going to spend the rest of my life pretending to be blind.'

As we saw with Eliza, the art of good learning involves making sure the brakes are off, just as much as it does learning ways of accelerating learning. How people behave as learners is as much to do with what they believe as it is with the skills they have mastered. Kelvin is perfectly able to learn how to read. He has all the necessary equipment. But his learning is blocked by a lack of self-belief. To him the risks of failure loom large, and the risks of humiliation even larger. He fears he will not be able to do it. He assumes that the fact that he did not learn to read at the 'right' time reflects badly on his character, his intelligence or his self-worth. Debbie has jumped the shame barrier and is willing to risk being a learner. Kelvin stays stuck behind it. Another theme of the book is the extent to which it is people's often unconscious beliefs about themselves, and even about the nature of learning itself, that limit

their learning power; not any intrinsic differences in ability or intelligence. The focus in Europe and the USA on intelligence as a – perhaps the – major determinant of people's learning has been an enormous hindrance to the development of a genuine learning culture. Too many people believe that, if they find something difficult, it means they are lacking in intelligence, rather than simply that they haven't yet developed, or retrieved, the right learning tool.

The main themes

I have used these vignettes, each of them based on research which will be discussed later, to introduce the broad scope and some of the main themes of this book – in particular what we might call the three Rs of learning power: resilience, resourcefulness and reflectiveness. Let me now stake out the territory rather more systematically, and offer a preview of the main conclusions.

Living is learning

To be alive is to be learning. Learning is not something we do sometimes, in special places or at certain periods of our lives. It is part of our nature. We are born learners. Indeed, it is arguably our most distinctive human characteristic. As the eleventh-century Sufi philosopher El-Ghazali put it: 'A camel is stronger than a man; an elephant is larger; a lion has greater valour; cattle can eat more; birds are more virile. ~~Man was made for the purpose of learning.~~' And modern cognitive science concurs.

Everyone is born with a starter-kit of reflexes that tell them, innately, what to do when cold or hungry, or when an object suddenly looms up in front of them. You shiver; you cry; you duck. We come into the world with a rudimentary map, and a crude set of responses. But more than any other animal, we human beings arrive unfinished, waiting to attune ourselves to the peculiarities of the terrain into which we have emerged. Human beings serve the longest apprenticeship of any creature, because we come with the capacity – and the necessity –

to mould our own minds and habits to fit the contours of the world in which we find ourselves. How we do that is learning. Learning enables us to anticipate what goes with what, what happens next, what is likely to follow if we do this rather than that; and thus to intervene in the flow of events to our own advantage, in ever more sophisticated and confident ways.

On this view, learning is not primarily intellectual. What happens in schools and colleges, through the instruction of teachers, books or computer programs, is just one kind of learning – and a culturally local, historically recent, and generally rather odd kind at that. There is an abundance of evidence now to show that conscious understanding is not only unnecessary for many learning tasks, but may substantially interfere with learning. The brain, it turns out, is built to perform certain kinds of learning with a subtle brilliance that can be easily disturbed by thinking too much and trying too hard. The relationship between conscious knowledge and practical know-how is much more problematic than current attitudes admit. Of course intellect provides us with a set of very refined tools that have an important role in learning, but you do not throw away your spade just because you have bought a scalpel. Even brain surgeons still have to dig the garden from time to time. And a lot of lifelong learning is more like gardening than surgery.

We learn many different kinds of things

We do accumulate facts and information as we read a manual or watch the news, certainly. And we digest this *knowledge* into opinions. But we also continue throughout life to develop *know-how*: how to use new technology, how to ride a bike, how to make a soufflé, how to tell a good story, how to write, how to play the trumpet. We learn to make new *discriminations*: to tell a new friend's mood from their voice on the phone, to tell a bordeaux from a burgundy, to tell Brahms from Mendelssohn. We learn new *preferences*: our likes and dislikes change as we grow up and keep different company. A drink that at one time seemed peculiar or unpleasant becomes an acquired taste. We develop new *dispositions*: the tendency no longer to laugh at jokes that once were funny but now