Worksheet for Scott Young | Ultralearning Your Way to Skill Mastery (Episode 241)

If you're already a listener of this show, it's probably a fair bet that your love of learning hasn't been systematically squeezed out of you from years of institutional education. Not everyone is so lucky. But if you've come this far, you have some idea of what helps you learn new things, and a heap of ideas of what definitely won't. Beyond that, what if you could tap into what made intellectual heavyweights like Benjamin Franklin and Richard Feynman such prolific learners? What if you could harness the power of Ultralearning?

In this episode we talk to *Ultralearning: Master Hard Skills, Outsmart the Competition, and Accelerate Your Career* author Scott Young, who shares the techniques that allowed him to soak up the entire four-year MIT computer science curriculum in 12 months and learn four languages in one year. We'll smash some common myths about learning, dig into the way the human brain picks up new languages (and why apps like Duolingo might not be ideal for this purpose), and outline the biggest mistakes people commit when studying or strategizing something new.

The MIT Challenge

"In 2011 I did a project I called The MIT Challenge," says Scott, "which was to learn MIT's four-year computer science curriculum, but instead of going to MIT and taking classes and doing it the usual way, I decided to use all the free resources they put online. A lot of people don't know this, but MIT puts a lot of classes online for free. And so around that time, I was thinking, 'Why has no one tried to replicate a degree or try to get that knowledge without having to go to MIT and spending a bunch of money on tuition and spending four years of your life.' So the process of the challenge was to try to pass the final exams and do the programming projects and I did that over 12 months."

While he didn't get the degree because he didn't go through the official channels, he did gain the knowledge while saving tens of thousands of dollars. And even though the post-experiment feedback from HR people said the degree was essential for a job in that field, actual hiring managers and programmers were impressed and said they absolutely would hire him. **What curriculum might you pursue in this way to further your own opportunities?**

You're Not Half Bad

There are many ways someone can get turned off to a subject and consider themselves subpar in its related skills (math is a popularly unpopular one), but a bad experience in a bad class with a bad teacher in a bad school (or any combination of the above) is the most common.

“In some cases, it’s being ranked unfairly against other students. You were near the bottom of the class and you feel like you’re bad at this, even though there’s nothing wrong with your brain. There’s no reason you can’t learn it. Maybe there’s someone who’s learning it a bit faster than you, but why does that matter?”

If you consider yourself “bad” in a particular subject, can you identify the turning point when it seemed that progress in skills related to that subject would be forever beyond your understanding? Remember, if you’re reading this sentence, you’ve already learned something the populace of past centuries believed impossible but for the very few among the elite: literacy.

Better Language Learning

If you're learning a new language, immersion is ideal, but not always possible. Going to school in Germany was how I learned German, and Scott and his friend agreed to eschew English over a year when they traveled to Spain, Brazil, China, and South Korea, and they became fluent in the most prominent languages there. But what if you've only got access to apps or programs for learning a new language?

In Scott's experience, a gamified app like Duolingo isn't really ideal for someone trying to become conversational in a chosen language. "It gives you a sentence in, say, Italian, and then it's got a word bank in English, and you have to tap the words in the right order to make the sentence. And the problem is that actually speaking a language is, from a cognitive perspective, very unlike this."

In Scott's opinion, a better option is Pimsleur — which he uses to prepare ahead of time he'll be spending in immersion. Using this system, you're exposed to a new language in bits and pieces, recalling and reciting it for evaluation and feedback that ensures you're learning the language accurately.

What apps or programs have you tried in pursuit of learning a new language? Which ones have proven effective, and which ones have been duds? Do you agree or disagree with Scott's conclusions? Have you had the opportunity to give immersion a try?

Conquering Problem of Transfer

When you learn something in one context (like a classroom), and then you want to apply it to another context (real life), there can be what educators have known for more than a century: a problem of transfer.

“As a learner, there’s an easy way to fix it,” says Scott. “Learn what you actually want to get good at. Start by asking yourself, before you learn anything, ‘Where do I want to use this? What’s the situation?’ Just by asking yourself those questions, you’re going to start guiding your learning efforts toward using it in situations that resemble that. If you want to learn something like computer programming, the question is not ‘What class should I take?’ but ‘What do I want to make?’”

What do you want to make?

The Feynman Technique

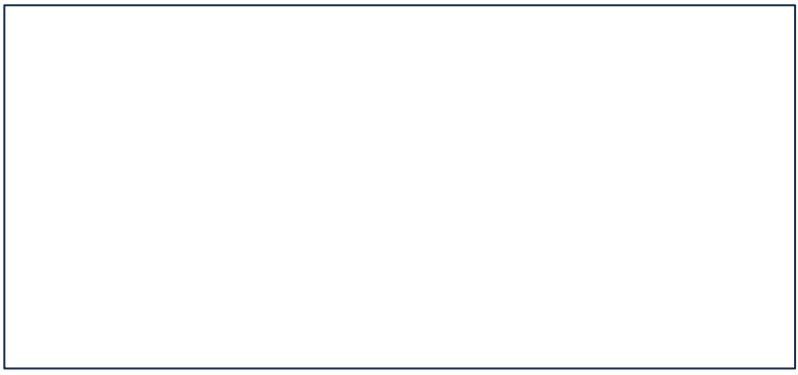
In reading his hero Richard Feynman's autobiography and understanding how he saw things in his mind's eye in a way that allowed him to uniquely solve problems, Scott came up with what he calls the Feynman Technique.

"Whenever you encounter something you don't fully understand — this could be a problem in a math textbook, it could be a business concept, it could be some idea that you can't quite wrap your head around — **you start with a blank piece of paper and you write at the top: Understanding X (X being whatever it is you're trying to understand). And then you try to explain the concept to someone else as if you were teaching it to them. You write down an explanation as if you were going to teach someone else this concept.** This does two things: first, it gets all of your thoughts out onto the paper, so that helps you because your working memory is like the workbench of your memory. It's quite limited in size, so it's very easy for things to get lost. The second benefit is that when you do get stuck and you're not sure how to proceed, you have a much more specific question. Then, when you get the answer, you'll remember it much better."

How to Learn Something New

While Scott and I pretty much agree that immersion is best for learning just about anything, you can prepare for immersion with these steps — or substitute them when immersion's not possible.

1. **Metalearning Research:** Spend an hour or two searching Google for "How do other people learn this?" You'll likely find blog posts, videos, tutorials, and forums dedicated to it.
2. **Expert Interview Method:** "Find someone who's either accomplished the goal you want to accomplish or learned the thing you want to learn," says Scott, "and just ask them how they would approach it."
3. **Direct Approach:** Start with something simple and concrete so you'll be rewarded with a tangible sense of accomplishment that will encourage you to then try something a little harder. "It starts that positive feedback loop," says Scott.



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