Playful Exploration

Learning something new seems to be more difficult than it should as an adult. Fortunately, while it seems to be a big problem, there is a solution: Playful Exploration.

One of the great things about using playful exploration as you learn is that it is something we all know how to do. It is normal. All children use play and exploration to practice and learn almost everything. We all know how to do it. As a matter of fact, many people prefer to explore the available tools in suites like OpenOffice.org so that they only learn what they need as they go along developing their set of skills, one project at a time. Children build skills routinely. They add new steps into what they already know. That's the big idea.

To a child, failure isn't seen as a terminal event. It is just a way to find out you need more practice. All you need is motivation. That is usually built into play. Children use play while learning anything.

I often hear adults say computers are “easy” for children. Children expect to make mistakes. They are used to it. They don't normally get stuck or give up because of every little failure. Children try again.

They change their approach and improve their skill. Eventually they get good enough. Some even relish the challenge and compete to be better than everybody else. Children naturally see skill development as an ongoing process with no obvious end. They work to keep up with the fastest, strongest, smartest friend they have. They don't even seem to get very disturbed that they are not, themselves, best at everything.

When I teach, I try to use progressive challenges to get my students to develop skills, letting them ask questions as they get stuck along the way. I attempt to keep my answers from being too direct or complete. While I don't often answer their questions with another question, that “spirit” is in my mind as I try to point students in the right direction to find the answer they need. I also try to let other students be the source of an answer. Giving an answer reinforces two things. First, the student needs to know the answer well enough to be able to demonstrate the skill to another student. That reinforces the learning of the “teacher”. Second, the student who gets the answer from a peer is encouraged to know that someone like him can “do this”.

The ability to find an answer is a more important skill than knowing the answer.

The reality is, there is just too much detail to teach for most computer programs, no matter how good a teacher is. Getting students to memorize ordered steps in a list seems good but ultimately fails. It makes much better sense to learn the logic pathways of a program, following from one menu option to another until you recognize what you are looking for. Eventually, using a program over and over you do memorize how a task works, but it is a result of practice.

Stuff we do over and over becomes habit. That's the goal. Knowing an answer is important so that it pops in automatically when we need it. This is what we expect when we learn to do many skills. Common examples of habit-knowledge include riding a bicycle, driving a car, typing and calculating basic math problems, even basic grammar in our native language. Most adults recognize that they didn't learn any of these skills quickly. Learning new skills as adults need the same investment of time for practice and play.

One problem is “productivity”. We set expectations for ourselves or are given them by bosses. We don't have or make time to practice. We are expecting to be productive. “I should know how do this. Shouldn't it be easier for me?”

The biggest problem is: We become adults. After some age, people get the idea that making a mistake is just plain bad. We don't want to sound stupid so we stop asking questions. We stop playing at the edge of our skills so we won't be seen making a mistake. We stop growing and stop learning.

Encourage adults to use “Playful Exploration” when they use computers. Relax. Have some fun. Be child-like. Make mistakes. Try bunches of things. Save fouled up experiments and try again. Throw stuff away. Look around. Ask questions. Show somebody what you found out.

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