

Foreword

*The most undeveloped piece of property
with the greatest potential is between the ears.*

Anonymous

Most of what we know today about how the human brain functions has been learned only recently. In just the past few years, the amount of brain research in the world has increased tremendously. The sheer number of neuroscientists now devoting their considerable time, energy and resources to the study of the inner workings of the brain is remarkable.

This ongoing research along with the phenomenal technological advances in the field have led to startling discoveries, turning conventional wisdom about how we use our heads practically upside down. It's time for us now to take this new-found knowledge and apply it to how we think, learn, read, write, solve problems, advertise products, market and deliver services.

To be honest with you, I have to admit that, as a professional speaker, I've been as guilty as anyone of having perpetrated ineffective learning methods. As a corporate trainer, I've committed the same offenses. As an educator, too, I know I've made many mistakes.

For that, I'm sorry. I guess that, at the time, I just didn't know any better. Because I used to think that everyone probably learned pretty well the same way — the way I learned when I was in school. The way I learned when trying to master a new job or a new skill.

As a student, I was pretty good at being successful with as minimum an effort as I could get away with and was actually kind of proud of myself for having what I figured were enough smarts to operate that way. After all, I was able to stay awake through lectures, take scant notes, and stay right out of most group discussions. Left to my own devices, I could usually cram information into my head well enough to not only pass tests, but even score well on them.

My ‘system’, based mostly on the concept of rote learning taught in elementary school (paring down information into point-form notes, reading and rereading them, copying them out over and over, repeating the information aloud), was time-consuming and boring — but it seemed to work.

It was only natural, then, that I’d take this successful strategy into adulthood with me later on. So it came to pass that, at work, I’d listen to supervisors explain things to me (without asking questions or writing anything down, of course), browse through some manuals later on, make some mistakes when first attempting new assignments and, eventually, through trial and error, I achieved a measure of competence. Good enough for me, I thought!

When I began my career as an educator, I applied those very same principles at the front of the classroom, believing that my students, too, should be capable of learning exactly the same way I did.

I figured that, if they took the time and made the effort, they’d do well. If they didn’t, they wouldn’t. I mean, it had worked for me, so it was bound to work just as well for them too, right?

Later on, as an instructor involved in the training of business managers, administrative support staff and industrial line-workers, I continued to use similar methods. Again, why wouldn't I?

*And now the brain researchers come along
and blow this theory right out of the water.*

According to their findings, the way I studied and taught and trained was not only inefficient, it was actually an approach that made learning practically as difficult as it could possibly be.

What scientists began to discover many years ago, and have been reinforcing ever since, is the idea that most of us are using our brains in ways that are, in fact, almost opposite to the ways they actually work best. But we're all quite capable, they say, of learning better and faster by following simple principles that harness the brain's enormous natural potential.

So why have we been learning so inefficiently for such a long time? How could it be possible that we've been so misled for all these years? Surely, the education system must have taught us how to learn properly! Ah, there's the rub. In fact, it seems that the school classroom might just have been, in many ways, the *origin* of many of our learning problems.

For instance, I remember when my teachers first started saying things like: "Read Chapter 4. We'll be having a test next week." Now, most of the time, that's all the information they gave us. There was no follow-up, no "... and now I'll show you exactly what to do so you'll achieve a decent mark on the test."

Just: “Read Chapter 4. We’ll be having a test next week.” Apparently, it was up to us to figure out the best way to handle this problem on our own — in spite of our youth and inexperience. So we went home with our books to prepare for this new challenge. And how did most of us do this? We read the chapter over a couple of times, that’s how.

And, if this strategy got us a passing mark on that first test, we continued ‘studying’ this way for future tests. If, on the other hand, our initial grade was too low, we changed the strategy slightly for the next test, and perhaps again for the next test, continuing to make adjustments until we eventually reached what we considered an acceptable level of success.

Our teachers did their best, of course, to lead by example. They encouraged us to title, underline and date all our work — just as they did with their work on the board. They reminded us to review our notes once a week so that the information would stay fresh in our minds. They often suggested that we do the optional exercises in the textbook for extra practice. Later, in the corporate and industrial worlds many of us worked in, supervisors continued on exactly the same course.

But no one actually showed us what to do or how to do it (and so we didn’t understand why we *should* do it). No one really explained how our brains work, how we learn, how we remember. Because, unfortunately, they honestly didn’t know themselves.

But that excuse can’t be used any more. We know plenty now! And so it’s time for us to begin using our brains in a way that will help them operate at the kind of peak capacity that they’re perfectly capable of.

So that's what this book is all about. Just as we know what kinds of food and exercise can help us perform better physically, we also now know what kinds of ideas and principles we need to help us perform better mentally.

When you're finished *The Big Learn*, I trust you'll have made the happy discovery that your brain is capable of much, much more than you ever thought possible.