

LEARNING AND LEARNING LOGS

To help yourself to learn, completing a learning log is a valuable learning tool to use. Learning takes place in a spiral, and by examining the learning spiral steps (doing, reflecting, reconsidering / reconstructing, revising and (new) doing); then, we can expose how learning logs will reinforce your learning.

Doing is the start of learning. It is the action time of experiencing, exploring, performing and trying. You are developing your awareness about something. After this stage the following questions can be answered - "what did you do, what was involved?"

Reflecting is getting feedback, from others or from yourself, then reviewing, evaluating, reasoning, and thinking about what happened. After this stage, the questions- "what facts have we got now, where does this take us, or, have I now arrived?" may be answered.

Reconsidering and reconstructing is where you develop understanding, by answering the questions, "what does it mean, what conclusions could we draw, how did I learn, where really do I want to be?" You realise things and rearrange ideas. You connect them and make new forms and ways, you maybe choose and conclude between options; you come to a result.

Revising is the taking forward of the decision of what to do, by refining, planning and determining how to do it. It answers the questions, "what will you do as a result, how will you get there, and how will you change what you do?"

The importance of the reflecting step

An essential part in this spiral, is the reflecting step. This step takes us into two important feedback areas on aspects of:

- how we have learnt,
- what we have learnt.

Now the former is the most important, as we are then able to look at improving and changing, how we learn. This must surely be more important and precede the "what" we have learned about!

Meanwhile, in the reflecting on what we have learnt this enables us to decide, "have we arrived, are we at the end of our current learning?" This can therefore stop us aimlessly "looping" forward unconsciously into the learning spiral.

Reflecting helps to slow you down. Reflecting helps you to become an observer of your own thinking and learning. As Socrates noted 500 years before the birth of Christ, "the life which is unexamined is not worth living."

Clearly, reflecting is one way to enable us to question and conduct an examination of what we do.

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Use of a learning log

How can you capitalise on this essential reflecting step? A tried and proven way is by the simple process of giving you feedback through a learning log. A learning log helps you to evaluate learning experiences at your own level. The log essentially asks, "what will you do now that you couldn't do before?" This is at the heart of being self-analytical and self-improving. It is something we can do ourselves without having to rely on others. It is a conscious activity, as, you cannot improve and change something that you are not aware of! As has been said- "they who write-think twice". Writing things down, therefore makes us think.

This thinking is, not only about what we have learnt, but more importantly, about how we have learnt in practise. Thinking and theory alone is only a partial picture, but how we put it into practice completes the picture. This brings self-monitoring and enables self-improvement. It is at the heart of being a self-motivated learner.

(Meanwhile another way to capitalise on this reflecting step is to get feedback from another person, such as a mentor. This can certainly compliment the learning log process and is also an effective help in all the steps of the learning spiral).

Difficulties in completing learning logs

Now all this is perhaps easy to see and maybe something that appears as "nice to do". But why is it difficult to do?

I believe there are many reasons and some intended positive challenges are coming your way now! One reason is because completing learning logs has to be done consciously and those that believe learning is automatic and unconscious will just not think it is important, as they don't think about learning anyway. As has been said, "As a person thinks, then so they are", so if thinking is involved in learning, then it follows that the quality of our learning will be determined by the quality of how we think.

Learning logs also involve being positively self critical, and this is not easy for some of us. But completing learning logs will help you to learn and improve yourself. So, be positively challenged – do complete learning logs and help yourself to learn!

So, as it is never too late to start to make learning logs a "must to do", then lets continue by looking further into how to complete them and to see some practical benefits.

Completing learning logs

A learning log details experiences such as activities, meetings, and incidents. These experiences may be anywhere such as at work, at home, at school, at university, in other organisations or in self-study. Each learning event is recorded

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separately. The following information may be recorded:

- § What happened?
- § Why did it happen?
- § What went well?
- § What did not go well?
- § What was involved?
- § Who was involved?
- § What roles did they play?
- § What were your conclusions?
- § What did you learn?
- § What useful learning methods did you use?
- § What will you do better next time?
- § What action are you going to take?

The learning log can take various formats, from a full and complete personal development plan, which includes reviews with mentors, manager's etc., to a simple personal notebook. The latter complies with the KISS rule-keep it short and simple. An efficient KISS example, which we will see later is effective, follows:

LEARNING LOG	DATE :	NUMBER:
SIGNIFICANT EXPERIENCE:		
WHAT HAPPENED?		
CONCLUSIONS:		
ACTION:		
WHEN:		

Benefits of completing learning logs.

The effectiveness of completing learning logs is seen from this logs designer, (www.andrewgibbons.co.uk), who over 13 years has completed over 1100 learning logs in this format. These have brought such valuable insights as the following about learning:

1. Learning is a skilled process, requiring conscious effort. Having pondered this at great length, I feel skilled learners do this:

- § Anticipate opportunities for learning.
- § Recognise developmental situations.
- § Are interpersonally skilled.
- § Seek and accept (selectively) advice and feedback.
- § Filter potential learning and make connections between apparently unrelated experiences.
- § Innovate and take risks.
- § Seek out new learning.
- § Overcome barriers to learning.

2. Insufficient attention to, and knowledge of learning is given by trainers, managers, and for that matter all individuals.

3. Learning involves a long-term change in behaviour that requires the use of new knowledge and/or skills. The application of learning is for me therefore, more important even than its acquisition.

4. As learning is a voluntary process (except in rare cases where it is coerced), all development is self-development.

5. Our everyday lives are rich in potential learning experiences, yet these are eclipsed in significance by infrequent, less learner-specific, and unnaturally structured formal events - typically courses.

6. What has not been personally experienced cannot be understood with the same validity as s/he who had the primary insight. That said, we are very dependent upon the third party, vicarious learning of others.

7. Learning is normally, and most usefully, an incremental process, yet there is for me, too little value seen in this, suggesting an unhealthy preference for major, unsustainable, short term attempts to make major changes.

8. Most learning is not the result of deliberate action or reflection, but is the natural, unplanned result of everyday work, and life in general.

9. It seems to be easier to criticise others than to be self-critical. The need to be self-critical is an essential element of efforts to develop. Problems with accepting the need to develop and learn suggests that for many, learning may be a self-esteem, and/or ego issue. Those who feel it in a way that diminishes their status or sense of well being may be severely inhibited learners.

10. I find it very difficult to attribute learning to specific experiences. I feel it is easy to inappropriately attribute learning and, thus to be in ignorance of those experiences that truly contribute to our development.

Now all of these 10 points seem pretty useful keys about learning. They clearly show one of the benefits of keeping learning logs. Keeping the log is a conscious activity and learning needs to be consciously done. If people take the time to note their learning in this way they will often then have a further learning experience that can be different to the original learning. The conscious activity of log writing can lift things out of the unconsciousness.

You will also benefit from a permanent record of your learning, the act of writing and doing will give the time for reflection, patterns and trends will be identified, learning from what you have practised will increase the learning. Self-evaluation is part of professional development; it records the journey and the learning experiences en route.

But please do remember, when completing your learning logs, not to get caught up with just recording and learning only about the "what's" of learning, do please consider the "how's" of learning. Remember that the question is more important than the answer and that how to learn, comes before what to learn!

And finally...world domination with learning logs!

The learning log also puts the learning in a form that makes it easy to communicate with others. For example, including a 10-minute slot into monthly team meeting, where team members share their best log entry in the previous month. This can have a very powerful impact, takes individual learning onto team learning, and then can move, thereafter into wider company learning?

So, please do be positively challenged - complete learning logs and help you-your very self to learn!