

In 1904 an obscure philosopher named Hermann Grunn published a pamphlet suggesting that human beings had progressed to the point where modern living was no longer valuable for the furtherance of the species. He suggested that the human animal had evolved a capability to develop a society beyond the needs of nature. Being slightly radical he also questioned what the real purpose was for 'modern man'. His own opinion being that "moderner Mann hat wenig, zum für zu leben" – 'modern man has little to live for', yet still we continue to invest in society for the sake of society and in learning for the sake of learning.

To an increasingly materialistic society Grunn's views were anathema. They were deemed those of someone at odds with living, themselves and society. Perhaps this view reinforced his own ideas, and added to his obscurity.

Interesting philosophically, and particularly with regard to learning. Why does homo sapiens have the facility of such powerful learning and creativity?

We evolved over many thousands of years with the same selfish gene Richard Dawkins wrote of, common to other species. The caveat being that homo sapiens evolved one way of adapting to a far greater than most other species: through conscious, 'rational' thought. In fact it is almost as though our ability to learn developed at the expense of a fundamental recourse to evolve. Essential to learning is the ability to create. Our capacity to create, for the sake of creation [both problems and solutions] is, I submit, no further forward than 1000s of years BC.

So what does learning provide?

Learning gives us the opportunity to adapt in a social world, as much as in the natural world, in order to achieve the goal of our selfish genes – to survive and thrive.

Grunn's comment about man having little to live for was, I suggest, his take on the creation of challenges and problems. Such creation being purely to sustain our own interests and motivations, without real relevance to the continuance of our species. For example: What is the real genetic purpose of large palaces, armies, glittering jewels and tableaux of finery? What is the real genetic value of junk food, mp3s and memorabilia?

They are purely to survive and thrive in a social world [no longer the natural world].

If learning is about survival in a social world, what is the importance of 'history', whether it be a reference to an obscure turn of the [last] century philosopher, or a 13th century palace, or a Bakelite phone?

Why should we preserve these things, even cherish them? What do they contribute to in the world of a selfish gene?

I have a sense that many people perceive that the human race is continually evolving. Already you have read that I do not believe this to be the case. Let me elucidate.

Schemata and survival

Learning is the gradual development of mental schemata – conceptual models of the world that enable us to operate better [potentially, if not in reality] in our social and natural world. The difference between the first true homo sapiens and ourselves is that they lived in social groups of perhaps 50

individuals with little other contact. In the modern world we live in social groups of thousands, if not millions.

For Mr and Ms Homo Sapiens way back when, the number and range of schemata their mind contained were probably less than ours, and more about surviving and thriving in the natural world. As group size grew language developed, more to deal with the social politics of life than going and hunting a large animal for tea.

Language, alongside creativity, enabled our minds to develop more and more schemata because it enabled us to learn through both conversation and, when it was developed, reading. Combined with our rational mind, mental reflection was enhanced too. In effect, our opportunities to learn were greatly increased.

We know more, though we are probably no wiser. Our patterns of behaviour are just the same as thousands of years ago. Another little story waiting in the wings!

The value of language

Languages great value is in providing us with a means to pass on our learning about life and how to survive and thrive. For the most part transmission occurs at three levels:

- ➔ **Skill-learning:** to homo sapiens most learning was of practical skills, based on survival in the natural world. Humans have an amazing capacity for imitation. As a new-born baby we learn not through language but through observation, complemented by some external manual guidance. For learning practical skills language is not necessary.
- ➔ **Attitude-learning:** this too can be learnt predominantly through observation. This is combined with bio-feedback as to what is felt to be comfortable, and from external manual guidance.
- ➔ **Knowledge-learning:** this is where language provides an opportunity to learn when there is no practical situation to learn in [skill/attitude]. In effect we can learn off-the-job.

Of course, once available, language also helps in skill and attitude learning too.

Stories for learning

In early societies those who had language could pass on learning. These were the sages and story-tellers. One of the best ways to pass on learning is through story-telling. Having a message wrapped up in an engaging metaphor allows the recipient to take meaning in **their** world, rather than having to consciously comprehend precise data from someone else's world.

“Each person will make up a meaning that is relevant to them. The power of a metaphor is not measured by the storyteller, but by the recipient and what their unconscious mind does with the story. Trying to pass conscious, precise understanding is hard. As everyone has different experiences and models of the world, the more precise you become in **your** model, paradoxically, the more people you will miss in a group. Metaphors, on the other hand, cannot be right or wrong, they are just stories. A good metaphor will have many different levels of meaning, enabling you to speak to each person individually and simultaneously” [O'Connor and Seymour, 1994].

Our mental encyclopaedia of schemata, originally evolved to survive and thrive, as with all animals, now has the potential of unlimited capacity. It builds on the archetypes and learnings of our cultural ancestors, centred on what has been or is societally valued. By default it also maps a path of forgotten understandings, both of nature and other insights. As new devices have been cherished for whatever reason, the thing they replaced has drifted out of shared learning until it is all but forgotten. For example all those countryside skills of hedging [building hedges rather than the use of the word for

a stock market mechanism], coppicing and hazel hurdle-making. Such skills are no longer societally valued and their transmission to a new generation of learners has happened less and less.

The process of social forgetting provides an insight. That the schemata we develop and the learning we take from others [because it is all about learning from the past] is about how to survive and thrive in our **current, or imminent, circumstances**. Our schemata provide us with potential options and choices in case we need them to survive and thrive in the near future.

What defines relevancy for our learning?

How do we know what we need to survive or thrive? We do an internal relevancy check. An emotional check to assess whether we perceive value to us in what we are doing in that situation. Our relevancy check is internal – it is impossible for anyone else to determine for us, though they can guess and persuade and influence if they step into our world through rapport and empathy. The critical area to understand is the learner's purpose and contextually prioritised goals, for those are what they will do the relevancy check against.

That means we learn when **we feel** it is relevant to us, for now or perhaps a year or two in the future. Our emotions play three critical functions in learning:

- ➔ In our initial response to the stimulus,
- ➔ In the development of memory [schemata],
- ➔ In our relevance check.

On the issue of future relevance and timeframes, remember that the life expectancy of early homo sapiens was probably 30-35. So to consider what will be valuable in 10 years is genetically challenging, even though we have lots of points of reference [at least in the modern world] of people who live to 50 or more years of age. In modern society's increasing complexity, developed through learning and creativity, relating to the world of a 50-yr old now can be quite challenging for a 10-15 year old. This is a spur to the development of even more schemata, or...different schemata, for example one that forgets the value those of 50 or more years can offer.

In general terms the challenge of offering opportunities to learn is affected by:

- ➔ The overlap in schemata – for example: older peoples' understanding of computers and the internet are far less than the youth of today. The smaller the overlap the harder it is to find common language.
- ➔ The capacity for adjusting to societal changes – the capacity may be insufficient to keep up with societal change. For example: the older generation may be more laggards than leaders, yet they may have lots of valuable insights to offer...[particularly if you don't believe we have evolved, and that all that we are doing is repeating patterns from centuries ago with different dressing].
- ➔ The capacity of people to make their experiences relevant for the prospective learner, if they want to pass on any learning.

Evolution of language

One of the most interesting aspects of society for me is the subtle evolution in language. This brings in the other areas in the learning arena – training, education and coaching.

- ➔ Training – there is a tendency for this to be seen as an action external to the learner. “I am trained **by** someone else.” Overall it is a relatively neutral word, being balanced between the extremes of asking for training [positive], and being obliged to be trained [negative].

- ➔ Education and teaching, certainly in the UK, are increasingly associated with SAT tests, exams and scores in a societally **imposed** structure [curriculum and league tables]. As an aside one can be self-taught, and, because the verb to teach is irregular, self-*taught* can have different emotional associations teaching. In doing so 'self-taught' can remain unaffected by any negative connotation about teaching.
- ➔ Coaching has a duality to it – in sport it can be seen to be positive and relevant, though the commercial pressures in sport may start to undermine that association. In some industries, coaching is provided to those who fail to meet their targets, and is seen as being remedial.

Learning is the only one that to date has been the preserve of the **recipient** – currently, linguistically anyway, you can't "learn me," unless of course you've been badly taught. Yet society is often at a point where it is felt that 'you have to learn our rules of behaviour', the relevance is not for the recipient it is for the deliverer. Just as teaching, training and coaching have become more associated with control, for me there is a question whether the increase in the use of the word 'learning' in that context will damn it too.

Fundamentally there is question of societies that lead or manage, and trust or control, but that's another story...[request other references by David Newport at info@effectivevision.co.uk]

Two stories to consider as an adjunct, both reported on 21st October 2005, BBC Radio 2

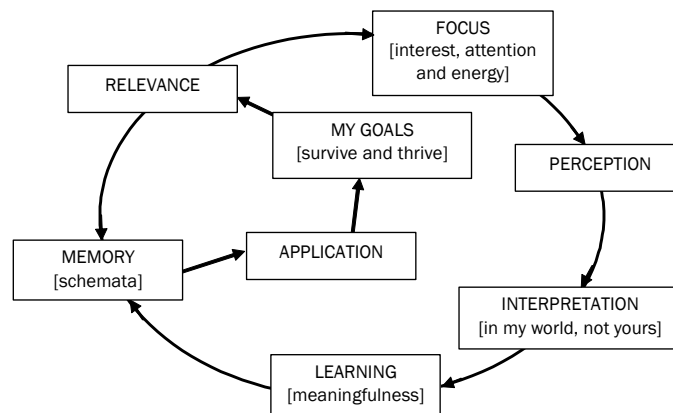
"Ministers believe poor behaviour must not be tolerated. Teachers in England are to be given stronger legal rights to restrain pupils and to punish badly behaved children, the government has confirmed. These proposals can help bring change not just to the rules but to the culture reaffirming respect in classrooms and putting teachers firmly in charge."

At the same time a senior naval figure was celebrating Nelson's leading of the navy at Trafalgar through his humanity – his treatment of people as individuals – as much as his tactical acumen and courage.

What inferences do you make about how these statements with respect to **learning** and **learning relevance**?

Technical diagram for those who prefer them

The diagram maps out a simple interpretation of the article.



Cycle of learning for relevant action
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My **goals** provide a frame of reference for me to make decisions about how to expend my energies and where to focus my attention. My check to ensure the appropriate **focus** is a **relevance** check against my **goals**. Once my **focus** is clear, my senses tune into and **perceive** only those things **relevant** to my **goals**/task at hand. All the time **relevance** checks are being done to check whether cues are of interest or a distraction. The cues are **interpreted** in my world against my existing **schemata** from which I take some **learning** that may reinforce existing **schemata**, adapt them or generate new ones. These **schemata** are then available for **application** to the current task or for foreseeable circumstances around achieving my **goals**.

Summary

Relevance, and the allocation of interest, is about what enables me to achieve my goals to survive and thrive. If I don't feel something to be relevant to my goals then I'm not likely to have interest in it.

Entertainingly my existing schemata are my world. Each individual is always interpreting from their own world and the schemata they have developed. People build their own schematic foundations, usually by the age of seven, derived from the behaviour of significant others in childhood. Why? Because our exposure to those people is far higher than to anyone else, they are our protectors and providers at a time when we literally cannot survive on our own, and they are most likely to be blood related. That too is another story.

Ref.

O'Connor, J and Seymour, J. 1994. "Introduction to neuro-linguistic programming."

PS: The use of language was mentioned as having evolved to deal with survival in a social group, for social politics. It is interesting that the increase in bureaucracy in society might be linked with the value attributed to those who were literate back in ancient societies and medieval times. The scribes, counsels, writers and interpreters had greater gifts with language and thus had greater potential influence over those in power and those in society. Why else would academic study be held as important or reading and writing the preserve of those in power?

Language was held as important by the people who were able to do it, and back in history these people originated as the story-tellers and sages. They were the people who could learn and apply the learning to solving problems for society and for those in power. At that time such people were relatively few in number, and their skills were important to transfer the critical lessons for survival. Nowadays...

PPS: Hermann Grunn is a figment of my imagination. If you found him 'real', thank you. His story served the purpose of providing an external reference point and for providing a metaphor about society.

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