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## Why people learn

Several times during the year, an adult initiates a major effort to learn or change. What sorts of reasons provide the impetus to learn? What do people expect to gain from their learning efforts? There are many other ways in which a man or woman could spend the hundreds of hours devoted to learning, some of which would provide more pleasure or income than the learning projects. Instead, the adult spends several hundred hours a year at learning.

The question of why men and women learn is extremely important, for it is hard to develop better help for adult learners without understanding their reasons for learning. The question has been discussed by many writers (Hall, 1965, Appendix A), going back as far as Socrates.

A complete picture of why adults learn will require many approaches, focusing on various aspects. Even understanding why one particular adult begins one particular learning project is an enormous task. He may anticipate a variety of benefits from the learning project. One might also have to study his childhood, his basic personality characteristics, and his long-term goals and responsibilities. Strong irrational forces within him may be influential, though he may not even be conscious of them. His age, previous education, socioeconomic status, occupation, intelligence, optimism, or mobility might be part of the explanation. Various events and individuals in his environment may also increase his motivation.

### Our Approach

The goal of this chapter is to fill in a small but significant portion of the total picture: the benefits that the person intends to obtain through the learning project. These desired outcomes are present in his conscious mind when he decides to begin the project.

Some of the intended benefits are immediate; others are expected to result from a chain of consequences. The benefits anticipated by the learner are not only

intellectual, cognitive, and material; many are emotional or psychological, including pleasure, satisfaction, self-esteem, impressing others, and receiving praise.

### Rationale

There are several reasons for choosing this portion of the total picture, that is, for trying to determine which benefits a person anticipates in undertaking a learning project.

First, exploratory interviews indicated that the anticipated benefits constitute a significant portion of the person's total motivation for learning. Though subconscious forces deep inside the person and the stimuli in his environment affect his decision to learn, in most learning projects the person's clear anticipation of certain likely benefits is even more important.

Second, the appropriateness of our approach is supported by a certain view of man that is becoming more widespread in psychological literature. Man, according to this view, can be active, energetic, free, and aware. He often chooses his goals, direction, and behavior; he is not always pushed and pulled by his environment and by unconscious inner forces.

Third, in many of our efforts to teach certain knowledge and skill and to change attitudes and behavior, we do something *to* the person regardless of his needs and even his wishes. When beginning a learning project, however, the person often has fairly accurate and complete information, and makes a fairly free and conscious decision to undertake the project. Many episodes in which someone else is trying to influence the adult do not fit our criteria of a learning project; in such cases, the person's intent may be vague, or the person may even be trying to *resist* the persuasion.

Fourth, our approach to understanding why adults learn fits in with our definition of a learning project. That definition emphasizes one sort of anticipated outcome: certain fairly clear knowledge and skill that the person wants to have a few days or weeks later. Also, the definition requires that the person be fairly clear about his motivation for beginning the episodes: if he feels uncertain or doubtful, he cannot meet our criteria.

There is an interesting parallel between the individual level and the societal level. A growing corps of futurists point out the importance of a society examining alternative futures. A society, or all mankind, should study the consequences that are likely to result from each decision that is possible at the present time. By making appropriate selections today, society can influence its future, rather than merely wait for the inevitable to occur. The individual, too, can consider what sort of person he wants to become, and what goals he wants to achieve, before making a choice between various alternatives. He can set out to produce a certain future for himself, instead of feeling that his life is completely determined by forces over which he has little control.

## Overview

A person begins a learning project because he anticipates several desired outcomes or benefits that are interrelated. Figure 2 shows the various possible chains of positive consequences that a learner might anticipate and summarizes the various benefits that might motivate a person to begin a learning project. The various routes (chains of events) show the possible relationships among these benefits. An arrow means that the event or feeling at the left produces the event or feeling at the head of the arrow.

## An illustration

Let us suppose a man has decided to landscape the front yard of his new suburban home. He realizes his actions will include deciding whether to grade his yard, deciding the location of the flower beds and shrubs, choosing certain plants, and actually doing the grading and planting. He also realizes that he could learn about grading and landscaping from books, magazines, friends, neighbors, and salesmen.

The sequence of future events being considered in the amateur landscaper's mind is represented by A-B-C in Figure 2. That is, box A leads to box B, which in turn leads to better decisions and performance (box C). In addition, the man might expect to have a better image of himself just as a result of possessing his new knowledge of landscaping. This anticipated benefit is represented by the arrow from box B to *self-esteem*. Finally, the man may anticipate certain sorts of enjoyment or satisfaction while actually reading the landscaping magazines and talking with his neighbors. These expected benefits are summarized by the *pleasure* growing out of box A.

For this particular learning project, all the other reasons presented in Figure 2 might be irrelevant. The amateur landscaper is not interested in credit (box F) or some material reward (box D) for undertaking his learning project.

If we were interviewing the amateur landscaper, we might ask him to imagine that his motivation for the learning project could be measured in some sort of unit. We could then arbitrarily define 100 units as the strength of his total motivation for all the episodes in the project. After helping him to understand our diagram, we could ask him to distribute the 100 units throughout the diagram to show the relative strength of the various expected outcomes. His distribution would show which expected outcomes were especially important in his mind when he decided to begin, which were moderately important, and which were of no importance.

There are at least 18 or 20 possible locations in Figure 2 to which he might assign several units. He would assign them to the end-points of his various chains of benefits. In most learning projects the person is influenced by several possible benefits, but certainly not by all. Alternate routes to some of the benefits are available, and the learner might choose one or both of them.

## THE ADULT'S LEARNING PROJECTS

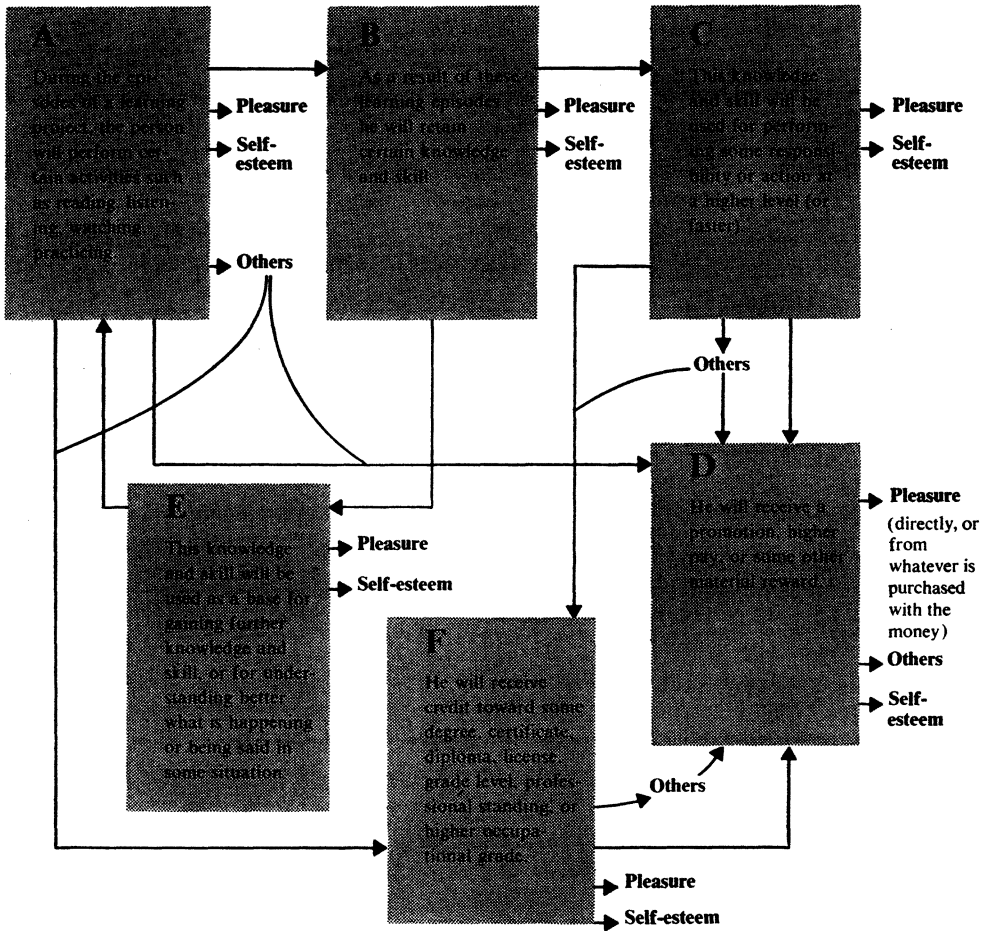


Fig. 2 / The relationships among the benefits that a learner may expect from a learning project.

As he proceeds in his learning, the landscaper will actually experience some of the benefits that he predicted. When deciding whether to continue his learning efforts, he will probably be able to predict benefits more accurately than at the beginning of the project. In addition, however, he may experience some unexpected benefits during the learning project, which will increase his motivation for continuing. The typical adult learner, in fact, has more reasons for continuing his learning than for beginning a learning project.

Figure 2 presents only the positive outcomes of learning projects: its purpose is to describe why people begin and continue learning, not to point out their obstacles and frustrations. The process of estimating the cost of the learning project in terms of money, time, and frustration is discussed in the next chapter. Here we are concerned only with the individual's reasons for beginning.

Three words in Figure 2 are used as convenient shorthand terms for describing a large cluster of ultimate benefits. One of these terms, representing the ultimate benefit occurring at the end of several chains of consequences, is *pleasure*. This benefit can include an increase in pleasure, joy, "feeling good," happiness, delight, satisfaction, enjoyment, or other positive emotions. It could also include avoiding or reducing some unpleasant or negative feeling. In Figure 2 and throughout this chapter, we will simply use the term *pleasure* to indicate this large cluster of benefits.

Several chains of events end in another sort of benefit: the person regards himself more highly, feels more confident, feels he is a better person than before, and/or avoids a damaging blow to his self-esteem or self-image. This benefit also might include maintaining one's self-image as a good parent, a knowledgeable man, an informed citizen, a person who always does a good job, or a curious person. We will use the term *self-esteem* to refer to this cluster of benefits.

One other cluster of benefits appears fairly often in Figure 2. Like the two just mentioned, it often comes at the end of a chain of events. Sometimes it is an ultimate benefit in that no further benefit flows from it. That is, it is sometimes an end in itself, rather than a means to some other end. This third benefit is simply the following: other persons, when they become aware of the adult's learning or accomplishments, regard him more highly, like him more, feel pleased, or feel grateful. These other persons may then praise the learner or express their positive feelings or high regard in some other manner. Our shorthand term *others* can also mean avoiding displeasing others, or avoiding reducing their regard.

Any one of the three clusters of benefits just mentioned can, in turn, produce the other two benefits. A person's new self-esteem, for example, may lead to greater happiness, and may please or impress others.

## Procedure

This way of understanding why adults learn was developed in 1967 at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, by a research team consisting of Heather Knoepfli,

Vida Stanius, Ray Devlin, and Allen Tough.

In developing our thinking about why adults learn, we tried to remain open to all possible sources of insight and data, including our own experiences and those of people we knew well, published biographical material, and research and theoretical literature. In addition, we interviewed a fairly broad range of adults, and asked several other adults to write an account of their learning projects for us.

Our starting point was any adult who made a highly deliberate, sustained attempt to learn something, regardless of how or what he learned. His methods of learning could include reading, listening, attending a conference, taking lessons, practicing, and watching a television documentary.

Our interviewing moved from an early exploratory stage to a testing stage. After revising the interview schedule, we conducted intensive, semi-structured interviews with 35 adults. During the two hours he was interviewed, the adult was guided by detailed lay descriptions of the various benefits that might have influenced his decision to begin. Then, on a four-point scale, he rated the strength of each reason for beginning and for continuing the learning project. Our procedures and findings are presented in an early detailed report of this study (Tough, 1968). Much of the report, however, is superseded by the present chapter.

In our study, we were able to identify several reasons for undertaking learning projects. To discuss them, we will turn first to box C in Figure 2: *using* the desired knowledge and skill, a very common reason for learning. Then we will turn to box E, which includes future learning or understanding. Two other benefits flow from retaining certain knowledge or skill (box B): the pleasure and self-esteem that result from merely possessing the knowledge and skill. Credit toward some degree or certificate is a fourth outcome that a learner may expect; the various routes leading toward box F will be discussed. Finally, several benefits may flow immediately and directly from certain characteristics of the learning activities themselves.

## The Intention of Using the Knowledge and Skill

It is common for an adult to face some task or responsibility. He may have to make a decision, develop a set of recommendations, build something, or produce something. In order to perform the action at a higher level of performance, he may spend some time beforehand gaining certain knowledge and skill. He will then use or apply the knowledge when he is performing the action (box C in Figure 2).

This is the strongest reason in the majority of adult learning projects, as has been demonstrated by several studies that were mentioned in the previous chapter. Even when it is not the strongest reason, the intention of using or applying the knowledge and skill is often present to some extent in a learning project. The relevant portion of the total diagram is reproduced as Figure 3.

*Why people learn*

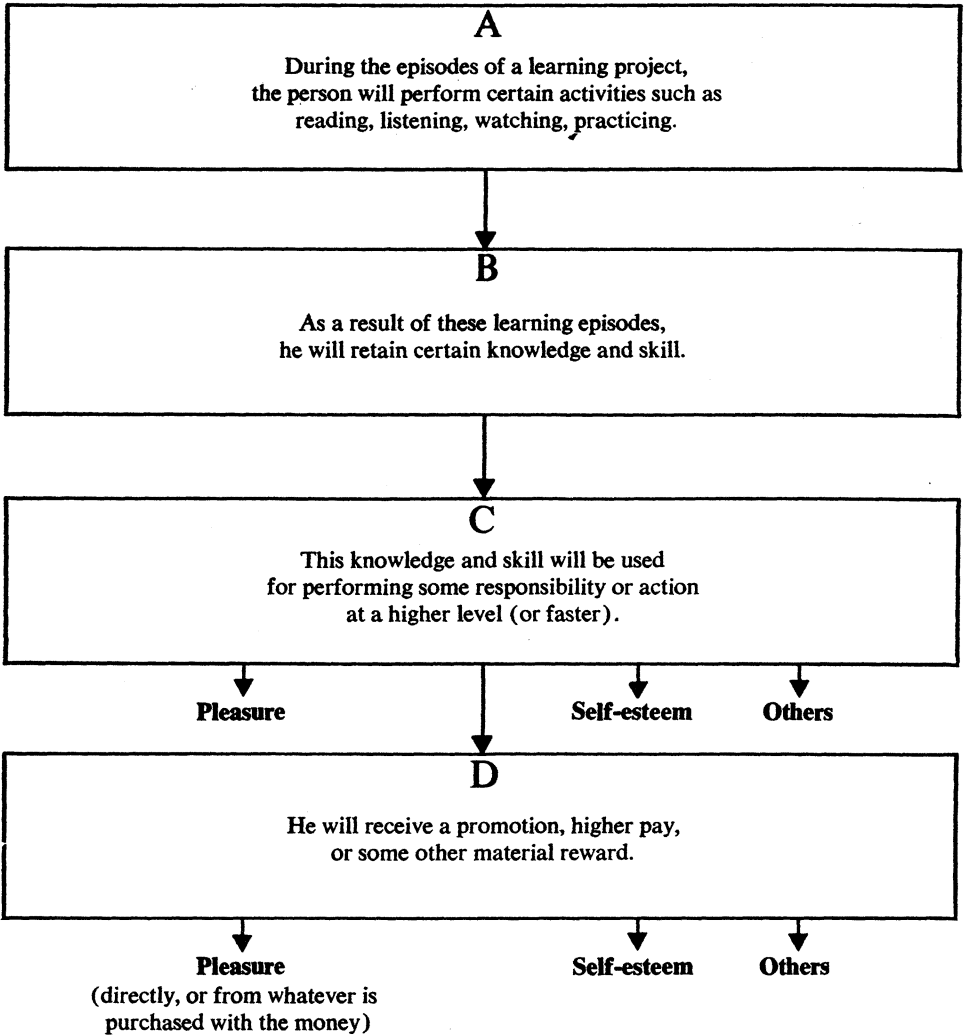


Fig. 3 / The intention of using or applying the knowledge and skill.

When the person's central concern is a task or decision, he will not be very interested in learning a complete body of subject matter. Instead, he will want just the knowledge and skill that will be useful to him in dealing with the particular responsibility of the moment.

## The variety of applications

Knowledge and skill are gained for a wide variety of uses and applications. One man we interviewed was asked to draw up recommendations on the most suitable computer installation for his company's personnel department. In order to prepare an excellent report, he set out to learn about computers, systems, and his company's needs. A young woman wanted to make certain clothes that could not be bought. Consequently, she had to learn how to operate a sewing machine and how to choose appropriate materials and patterns. A young singer who had agreed to sing in six operas wanted to perform very well. He therefore worked hard at learning the words, music, and stage movements for his six parts.

All three of these adults wanted to take some action: to plan, to sew, or to sing. Their action goals or desired end-products were, respectively, a good set of recommendations, some pieces of clothing, and a good operatic performance. In order to achieve these action goals more efficiently or successfully, they set out to gain certain knowledge and skill.

The action goal was chosen or assigned first; it then became clear that certain new knowledge and skill would be useful in achieving it. The knowledge and skill provide a means or tool for dealing successfully with some task, situation, decision, or activity: the adult learns because he expects to use or apply the knowledge and skill directly in order to achieve something.

The person may go back and forth, from learning to application, throughout the learning project. These alternating episodes can be illustrated by the previous example of the man who decided to landscape his property himself in order to save money. First he spent two episodes learning about grading. Then he spent one or two afternoons actually doing the grading near his house, using the knowledge that he had gained earlier. In the next learning episodes he read about topsoil. In subsequent episodes he bought and spread some topsoil. Before choosing shrubs for his property, or making other decisions, he also spent some time learning.

## Why was the learning desirable for taking the action?

Once a person has decided to carry out a responsibility or perform an action, why does he not just go ahead and do it? Why does he decide to spend many hours of effort, and perhaps some money, trying to gain certain knowledge and skill first? In short, why is the learning desirable for taking the action?

The question becomes even more puzzling when we discover that in most cases the person could go right ahead without bothering at all to gain any knowledge and skill. When interviewed about their learning projects, almost all adults reported that the learning efforts definitely were not necessary for performing the action at a low level (Tough, 1968).

Instead, their reason for learning was to raise the level at which they performed the task or action. They *could* have completed it at a bare minimum level without



learning, but they learned in order to perform it more successfully.

Why does a person want to perform the responsibility or action at a higher level? The various benefits that result from the higher level of performance flow from box C in Figure 3.

The individual may expect some pleasure or satisfaction *during* the application episodes. His pleasure or satisfaction may come from feeling he is “doing a good job” in performing the responsibility. He may feel pleased with his successful performance. He may feel more relaxed or confident, or feel more optimistic about completing the task successfully.

The expectation that he will experience some pleasure *afterwards*, too, may motivate him. After making a decision, for instance, he may feel pleased that it was a good one. His better decision might avoid certain undesirable consequences, for himself or his employer, that would have resulted from a hastier decision. His pleasure may also come partly from realizing that his better performance or decision is useful: it makes a contribution to his organization, or helps to improve the world.

In addition to providing pleasure, the improved performance may increase the person’s self-esteem. It may also impress or please other people.

There is one other arrow leading from box C. It is possible, though not especially common, for an adult to initiate a learning project because he expects to reach box D. The fact that his performance has been recognized and rewarded in some way can lead in turn to pleasure, self-esteem, and pleasing or impressing additional persons. A person with very long-range plans might even be motivated at the beginning of the learning project by the pleasure he will receive from the trip, activities, or purchases that the additional money or promotion will make possible.

Efficiency is a supplementary motive for some learners. They expect to achieve the action goal faster, in the long run, by spending some early time at learning. The learning will save more time than it will cost. By making a better decision based on learning, for example, the person may save time or money in the future for himself or his company. Also, by learning more effective techniques, he may perform his responsibilities in much less time.

## **Imparting the Knowledge and Skill**

When a person expects to use certain knowledge or skill, he usually plans to produce, decide, or complete something. Sometimes, though, he has a somewhat different use in mind for the knowledge and skill – he wants to impart it to others by means of a speech, conversation, written article or report, lecture, broadcast, lesson, or demonstration. This may be his primary reason for learning the knowledge and skill, or just a small part of his total motivation.

Here are three actual learning projects in which the desire to impart the knowledge or skill was the *primary* reason for beginning and continuing. A secondary school

teacher learned about the stages and problems in a family in order to teach this content to the students in her family living course. Another teacher had a different target audience – some of his fellow teachers. Having noticed some incompetence in their teaching, he learned about better teaching methods so he could discuss them with certain colleagues. A third person wanted to teach her two supervisors about a revised accounting procedure for the hospital in which they worked. To their request for help, she responded with a written report as well as several conversations after she herself had gained the necessary knowledge.

In the typical pattern, the first decision is to impart certain knowledge and skill to certain people. For example, the person may commit himself to write an article, deliver a speech, or teach a lesson on a certain topic. The subsequent decision is to make certain efforts to learn the knowledge and skill before imparting it.

A second possibility is that the motivation to impart the knowledge and skill will arise (or become stronger) after the learner has already gained the knowledge for other reasons. As he proceeds, he realizes how useful or important or interesting the knowledge and skill could be for other people.

We have also found a few examples of a third possibility. In this situation, the person accepts a commitment *because* it will provide motivation (or an excuse) for learning about some topic of great relevance to him. He may deliberately accept a commitment to teach a class, for example, or to write an article or report, in order to make himself learn something that he already wants to learn. One man offered to teach a Sunday school class because it would give him a chance to explore the question of the existence and nature of God. A woman volunteered to write an article about certain political leaders of the past in order to make herself learn about her country's history.

## Future Understanding or Learning

We turn now to a different use for knowledge and skill: to help the person to understand what will happen, or what will be said, in some future situation. This reason for wanting to gain and retain certain knowledge and skill is shown in box E (Figure 2). It can be a small part of the total motivation, or a fairly strong part.

In the previous sections, the person was using the knowledge and skill to produce something or impart something in the outside world. In this section, he is using the knowledge and skill in order to take in something.

### Future learning

Sometimes a person tries to gain certain knowledge and skill that will be used, in some future learning episode, as a base on which to build further knowledge or develop further skill. For example, a person may first learn certain technical terms in a field so that he will be able to read advanced books in that field. Or he may improve

his algebraic skills before beginning a statistics course. In Figure 2, the arrow that goes from box E to box A represents this type of learning.

The future learning episode may be the next episode in the same learning project or a much later episode in that learning project. Alternatively, it could be part of some other learning project.

A person may also work hard at developing some general learning skills. One teacher, for example, who wanted to increase his effectiveness at reading a large amount of material each week, took a course to improve his reading speed and comprehension. A person might set out to gain some other skill, information, mental capacity, awareness, or sensitivity that will be useful in a variety of future learning situations.

### **Future understanding**

The person may want to use the knowledge and skill in some future situation in which he is listening, reading, or observing, even though learning is not his primary intention in that situation. Sometimes the person faces some specific situation in which he wants to be able to understand better what is happening, or what he is seeing, hearing, or reading. In this future situation he will be primarily receiving certain stimuli rather than trying to accomplish something. His new knowledge and skill will help him do so with greater understanding, insight, or appreciation. He wants the greater understanding for its own sake – because he is interested or curious, because he will feel happier or more relaxed – not to impress someone or take some action.

A man who had to attend several concerts, for example, decided to study music appreciation in order to receive more benefit from them. An adult educator who had to go as an observer to several meetings about educational television wanted to understand better the discussion about issues and policies. She set out to learn more about the topic beforehand. A housewife wanted to understand what goes on behind the scenes during a national election campaign. A woman learned about electronic music so that she would be able to understand it and know how it is composed and produced, whenever listening to electronic music in the future. A librarian attended a human relations training lab partly in order to understand her own behavior and feelings, and those of others, in all future group situations.

### **Pleasure and Self-Esteem from Possession**

The second box in Figure 2 represents the learner's expectation of retaining certain knowledge and skill. In previous sections, we have traced the anticipated consequences of this box through one or more subsequent boxes. That is, we have looked at one way or another of using or building on the knowledge and skill.

We have not yet discussed the pleasure and self-esteem that flow directly from box B. We turn now to those two important clusters of benefits that a person can feel by merely possessing or retaining certain knowledge and skill.

These benefits – pleasure and self-esteem – flow directly from the possession itself. No intermediate step or box intervenes. The pleasure or self-esteem comes from simply possessing the knowledge and skill – from having it, not from using it and not from other people being aware of it. The pleasure or self-esteem from possession may be the primary reason for beginning and continuing a project, or may just supplement some other stronger reason.

We are referring here to benefits that are expected to occur at least two days after the learning episode. Benefits that are expected to occur while actually gaining the knowledge and skill, or within a few hours of gaining it, are discussed later in this chapter.

### Pleasure

In this chapter, the term *pleasure* refers to the large cluster of positive feelings that a person may expect from certain aspects of a learning project. These positive feelings – pleasure, joy, happiness, or whatever – can arise directly from possessing the knowledge itself. Several interviewees describe their positive feelings as enjoyment, satisfaction, or interest. Other learners have a strong desire for possessing the knowledge, but cannot find precise words to describe or explain it.

In some learning projects, the person is puzzled or curious about something, and wants to remember the resulting knowledge for at least two days. Sometimes the pleasure seems to come, as one man put it, simply from “knowing something I didn’t know before – something new.”

Some men and women have a strong drive to achieve certain basic understanding or perspective. They want to develop their own set of beliefs about religion, the nature and future of man, some controversial contemporary issue, or some proposed innovation. One woman, for example, wanted not only to understand the background of the war in Vietnam, but also to have an answer to a crucial question: “Must man continually kill his own kind?” A man expected great personal satisfaction from having an answer about the existence and nature of God, which he regarded as “the most fundamental question in one’s religion.”

Sometimes a person wants to remember certain subject matter because it seems so important or significant. He may feel that knowing certain things about mankind, history, the universe, philosophy, or other nations is part of being human – or that this knowledge makes him “more” human. He may feel he is learning the most important things in the world: truth, reality, what the world is really like, a true and complete picture of mankind or of God. Indeed, he may become so enthusiastic about the subject matter that he comes to believe that all human beings should learn it.

Another important topic is oneself. It is fairly common for a person to have an interest in learning about himself – to gain insight into how he reacts to others, and how others react to him. Human relations training groups, sensitivity training

groups, and encounter groups are designed to help individuals gain this sort of knowledge.

## **Self-esteem and confidence**

The other direct benefit from possessing certain knowledge is an increase in one's self-esteem or confidence. The person expects to regard himself more highly after he gains and retains the knowledge.

Sometimes the increased self-esteem is general. That is, the adult feels he is "a better person" because he possesses the knowledge (or because he possessed it sometime in the past). Learning about one's community or about certain geographical regions, and perhaps learning to read faster or to drive a car, are examples of learning efforts that increase one's overall self-esteem.

More often, the self-esteem seems to be related to some particular role. The person sets out to gain certain knowledge and skill because he perceives it as part of being a good parent, citizen, teacher, nurse, Christian, musician, or spouse. A man may feel that "all Christians should have an opinion about the existence and nature of God," or a woman may believe that skill at sewing is "part of the wife identity – it is a good thing for young women to know," quite apart from its usefulness.

A person's picture of the ideal parent or citizen, or at least of the sort of parent or citizen he wants to become, may include certain knowledge that he does not now possess. Consequently he sets out to reduce this gap between his actual self (as he perceives it) and his ideal self.

The person may also expect that, as a result of gaining self-esteem, he will feel more confident or self-assured. A woman who took a modeling course, for example, expected to "feel even more self-confident as an individual." A man who greatly improved his reading speed also expected his "self-assurance and confidence" to increase.

## **Learning for Credit**

In some learning projects, a large part of the motivation comes from the expectation of receiving credit for the learning. This is shown in box F in Figure 2. The credit may be toward some degree, certificate, diploma, license, academic grade level, professional standing, or higher occupational grade. The credit may be granted and recorded by any one of a variety of agencies: an academic educational institution, a government, a civil service commission (or the military), or a professional association.

There are four routes to credit. Two of these routes flow from box C. In both routes, the learner uses his new knowledge and skill in performing some action, such as passing an examination, and obtains credit for his satisfactory performance. The only difference between the two routes is the extent to which someone has to be aware of the learner's performance. In some situations, no human being plays a

major evaluative role: an objective test may be marked by a machine, and the marks recorded and reported by a computer. In other situations, the learner is definitely conscious of the individual who is assessing his performance.

The product or performance that is used to assess the person's knowledge and skill may be a test, examination, assignment, case or project (field work or practical work), or thesis. Performing successfully on an examination, assignment, case, or thesis may produce various benefits in addition to academic credit, as shown in Figure 2.

One common examination situation is an automobile driving test. When learning to drive, a person may be strongly motivated by wanting to demonstrate a sufficient level of skill during the driving test, as well as wanting to use that skill throughout the rest of his life.

Many examinations are related to one's job or occupation. Employees in the civil service and the armed forces can achieve higher levels of work and pay by passing certain examinations. Several occupations, such as accounting, have a series of examinations for entry to certain levels in the field. A correspondence course, textbook, workbook, or other materials may be available for anyone preparing for a certain examination.

The other two routes toward credit flow directly from performing the learning activities (box A). In order to pass a course or a grade, the student may have to attend class regularly, refrain from talking or laughing during class, and do certain exercises for homework. Regardless of whether he wants to retain the resulting knowledge and skill, he may be hoping that the instructor will be more likely to pass him if he performs the learning activities as expected.

A machine rather than an instructor could monitor the learning activities. A computer, for example, can record how quickly and successfully a person is going through certain programmed instruction material. This is shown in Figure 2 by the arrow going directly from box A rather than going through *others*.

## Immediate Benefits

Before undertaking a learning project, the person may expect to enjoy the reading, watching, practicing, and other learning activities involved. He may also expect that these activities will increase his self-esteem, or will impress and please other people. These benefits flow directly from the learning episode itself. They do not depend on retaining or using the knowledge and skill.

As the learning proceeds, the person may actually experience some of the immediate benefits that he anticipated earlier. Unexpected benefits may also occur. As the person becomes more realistic about the likely benefits flowing directly from future learning episodes, his motivation for those episodes may increase.

Various aspects of the learning episodes may produce the pleasure, the self-esteem, or the impact on others. We have identified seven aspects, each of which adds to the

motivation of at least some learners for beginning and continuing a learning project.

These anticipated benefits, however, do not depend on retaining the knowledge and skill for at least two days. Consequently, they are not included when deciding whether a particular episode meets our criteria for a learning project. Only the motivation that flows through box B is included when estimating whether at least half of the person's intention was to gain and retain certain definite knowledge and skill. The subsidiary benefits discussed in this section are excluded because they flow directly from box A.

We will now examine, in turn, each of the seven aspects of learning activities, such as reading, listening, and practicing, that sometimes contribute to the person's motivation for the learning episodes. Each of these aspects can lead to certain feelings of pleasure or satisfaction, an increase in self-esteem, or a sense of pleasing and impressing others. These three sorts of benefits are shown in Figure 2 by the short arrows from box A.

## **1. Satisfying curiosity, puzzlement, or a question**

A person may look forward to a learning episode because it will help to satisfy his curiosity or puzzlement about something. In this case, he anticipates some psychological benefit from discovering part or all of the answer to a particular question. The psychological benefit may be the positive pleasure or satisfaction of finding the answer. Feelings of mystery, ignorance of the unknown, indecision, ambiguity, and the resulting doubt or unhappiness may be reduced.

The pleasure will come immediately from discovering the knowledge or information. The person may also want to retain the answer, but the benefits we are concerned with here are independent of retaining certain knowledge. In a few projects, increasing self-esteem or even impressing others may also result from working toward an answer to one's curiosity, puzzlement, or question.

The source of the puzzlement or curiosity is often a controversial issue, decision, or procedure. The person may frequently encounter two contradictory sets of beliefs on some question: God is dead, or God is important; UFOs are nonsense, or they are real. The person wants to work out his own set of beliefs about the existence and nature of the phenomenon. There is a second possibility: the person may wonder how effective some current or proposed procedure will be in his job or organization. We interviewed four persons, for example, who felt some skepticism or doubt about a new procedure (a teaching method, accounting system, or set of tests for personnel selection). In a fair and open-minded way they wanted to learn how effective the procedure would be. Third, a person may frequently encounter both positive and negative evaluations of a particular government policy, such as the government's stand on some current international crisis.

In other learning projects, the curiosity seems to arise from a fascinating, exciting, glamorous, or puzzling phenomenon. Some of these topics seem to be new fads that may lose some of their appeal during the next few years or decades. The following are

examples of phenomena about which our interviewees were curious: electronic music, sensitivity training groups, and the mass media.

Learning efforts are one possible reaction to a personal crisis in one's life. For instance, a person may want to discover and understand the causes of an accident or a medical condition. A request from one's spouse for a divorce may set off an attempt to find out the underlying reasons. After the birth of a defective child, the parents may set out to learn everything possible about this defect.

### **2. Enjoyment from the content itself**

We have just seen that the content of a learning effort may provide pleasure by moving the learner toward an answer to his curiosity, puzzlement, or question. In addition, he may enjoy the content itself, finding it interesting, fascinating, or stimulating.

When we list the content of the various projects in which this occurred, most of the items are not surprising. They are interesting to many people. Our interviewees found the following topics enjoyable to read or hear about: the tourist attractions of a certain city, anecdotes about individuals in history, human nature (oneself and others), new sorts of music, golf, educational television, unidentified flying objects.

Some authors on child-raising provide as much entertainment and humor as fiction writers do. Biographies and nonfiction accounts of mountain climbing can be more exciting than adventure stories. The excitement and interest of many news reports are enjoyable for many people.

### **3. Enjoyment from practicing the skill**

Pleasure during the learning episode may come from practicing the skill rather than from learning the content. That is, the learner may enjoy performing the activity in which he is trying to improve his skill. Our interviewees, for example, enjoyed practicing the following skills: golf, interviewing potential employees, singing and acting in an opera, producing electronic music by operating various machines, posing for fashion photographs, proofreading, sewing, and operating effectively in a group. When telling us why they enjoyed practicing the skill, they used a variety of phrases: it was just fun; it feels great; thoroughly enjoyed it; new and different; a challenge.

### **4. The activity of learning**

Pleasure, self-esteem, and impressing others may arise directly from the activity of learning – from the mere fact that the person is, at that particular time, engaged in learning rather than in some other activity.

First, many people derive pleasure from learning. They feel the activity of learning is fun, enjoyable, satisfying, mentally stimulating, challenging, pleasant. They enjoy the adventures and problems that a learner experiences. These feelings are closely connected to the activity of learning, although some of them would occur while the person engaged in certain other activities as well.



Second, several persons found that the activity of learning increased their self-esteem. One said, for example, "I think more highly of myself when I'm learning." Another felt he was putting his time to good use, and doing the right thing, whenever he learned. Perhaps being a learner was central to his self-concept.

Third, some other person may notice one's efforts to learn. That other person may be pleased or impressed by the learning activities, and may regard the learner more highly. The other persons may include the learner's wife, husband, employer, colleagues, or acquaintances. They may be pleased or impressed by the mere fact that he is trying to learn, by the particular method or resources he is using, or by the subject matter. Figure 2 indicates that when others develop a higher regard or greater respect for the learner because of his learning activities, other benefits may follow. For instance, he may receive a promotion or some other reward.

## **5. Learning successfully**

Sometimes, during a learning episode, a person is pleased or "feels good" because he is learning quickly, easily, or successfully. He has proved to himself that he can master the knowledge and skill, or he has faced the challenge of planning and conducting his own learning, and feels proud because he progresses well.

In short, the learner is pleased by the effectiveness or speed of his attempt to learn. He enjoys meeting a challenge and feeling successful as a learner. The pleasure arises directly and immediately from his own success at learning. It is distinct from the realization that he will retain the knowledge and skill, and be able to use it.

## **6. Completing unfinished learning**

In a few learning projects, part of the motivation for continuing is the desire to finish certain learning activities once they have been started. After enrolling in a course and perhaps paying a fee, for example, the adult may feel a strong commitment to finish it. Some people feel such a commitment after starting to read a book: because they have started it, they strongly want to finish reading it. Indeed, some people feel the need to complete any sort of task or project they have started.

## **7. Aspects unrelated to learning**

Some learning activities provide benefits that could easily be obtained through other activities. These benefits are not closely related to the activity of learning or to the particular knowledge and skill. The importance of such benefits was pointed out by Houle (1961), who found that some adults engaged in many educational activities primarily because "they find in the circumstances of the learning a meaning which has no necessary connection, and often no connection at all, with the content or the announced purposes of the activity [pp. 15-16]." Using factor analysis, Sheffield (1964) and Flaherty (1968) found similar orientations to learning.

Such benefits usually arise from one's association with other people. Adults find that learning in a group provides opportunities for companionship, meeting new

people, or making good friends. Sometimes one develops a special closeness with one or more persons when learning with them.

Adult learners sometimes benefit from the change in routine, respite, or escape that learning activities can provide. They may enjoy the quiet, peaceful atmosphere while reading in a den or library. At other times they may enjoy "getting away from the house" to a class or library, or traveling to visit some other institution or city. They may simply enjoy any new activity, thus avoiding boredom.

## Further Work

What further inquiries should have the highest priority? Three possible directions seem especially promising.

One clear need, in moving toward a more complete picture of why people learn, is a rigorous testing of the framework presented in this chapter. Most portions of Figure 2 should be tested with a refined procedure and with a more representative sample than the earlier study. The three clusters of benefits (pleasure, self-esteem, and others) that emerged as the end-point of several routes need to be confirmed, and described more precisely.

A subsidiary study might examine the different kinds of perceived discrepancies that are related to self-concept. In explaining why adults learn, some writers emphasize the gap between a person's present self (as he perceives it) and the sort of person he would like to be. If these two perceptions of self are not congruent, the person may try to achieve certain knowledge and skill in order to change his present self or performance. It is also possible for him to foresee a gap occurring in some future situation, and then avoid this anticipated discrepancy by learning beforehand (Tough, 1969). Figure 2 suggests that there may be at least six different kinds of gaps or discrepancies (at each of the *self-esteem* points). These might fruitfully be explored.

A second priority is an accurate picture of the relative weight of the various anticipated benefits presented in Figure 2. In what percentage of learning projects does each anticipated benefit contribute to the motivation? How strong is that anticipated benefit in most projects? Perhaps the interviewee should be asked to indicate relative strength by assigning a total of 100 points or units (or 10 or 20) to the various boxes and end-points. Large samples could be chosen to represent various groups and nations. The typical pattern of motivation (distribution of units in Figure 2) may differ enormously among various groups and cultures.

A third possibility is to speculate about other areas of human choice to which this framework might apply. People choose many goals and activities in addition to learning projects. Perhaps some elements of the framework could help us understand those choices.