

12

Learning projects planned by a person in a one-to-one relationship

Learning can proceed very effectively when guided by the appropriate person interacting with the learner in a one-to-one situation. For certain subject matter and learners, if the right person can be found to serve as planner, this is clearly the most efficient way to learn.

Learning to drive a car is an example of this dyadic relationship. Most of us, when we want to learn this skill, ask some other person to teach us. We expect him to give us the required information, and to tell us just what to learn during each session (left-hand turns, backing up, parking), and how to do so. Throughout these lessons, we expect him to point out any errors and weaknesses, and to suggest specific ways of improving.

A project planned by one person in a one-to-one relationship is also useful for gaining certain athletic skills. The golf pro or the ski instructor is usually available for private lessons, or for semi-private lessons with two or three learners together. The most advanced track and field star, skating champion, swimmer, or other athlete may regard his coach as the planner of his learning (training) episodes. Other learners interested in acquiring athletic skills *wish* they had access to an expert; examples from our studies include a man learning to play squash and a woman learning tennis.

Music lessons provide another common example of learning that is planned by another person. In order to play the piano or guitar, a young person or adult may be glad to put himself in the hands of a competent teacher. This instructor will demonstrate certain skills and styles, decide which weaknesses and skills to work on next, and tell the learner what to practice at home between lessons. During the lessons themselves, the teacher will also decide most of the topics and activities.

Preparation for certain occupations, too, is usually planned by a single person in a one-to-one situation. This planner may be more competent than the learner himself if he has already performed successfully in the occupation and knows just what knowledge and skills are necessary. He can also provide much of the subject matter himself, recommend additional learning activities, and even test whether the learner has achieved the desired level. In some forms of internship and apprenticeship, the

learner is attached to one practitioner in his field. For example, a teacher-in-training is assigned to practice in one particular teacher's classroom, an auto mechanic works in a garage under the supervision of an expert mechanic, and a novice T-group leader ("co-trainer") works with a highly skilled leader.

Learning projects planned in a one-to-one situation are common in many other areas of knowledge and skill. These include lessons in dancing and sewing, learning a foreign language, counseling and rehabilitation, and learning from a management consultant.

Some Variables

In some dyadic relationships, the instructor or teacher will provide most of the subject matter himself. That is, he will present the knowledge orally and demonstrate the skill for the learner. In other projects, the coach or tutor or other planner will not present much of the subject matter himself. Instead, he will recommend certain reading, exercises, practice, and other learning activities, perhaps based on his diagnosis of the learner's current level and weaknesses.

Projects planned by someone in a one-to-one relationship with the learner vary in another way. In some relationships the learner can definitely influence the learning objectives, detailed content, and learning activities. In others, though, he feels compelled to follow the teacher's instructions without question or complaint, believing he has no power to influence the activities. The latter situation may occur with an especially rigid teacher, or with a teacher much older than the learner or clearly superior to him in the particular subject matter area. A learner does not feel very free to suggest alternative needs and activities if he is studying the cello with a great master, for example.

The majority of planners in a one-to-one relationship are professional or expert helpers, as was pointed out in Chapter 8. Our 1970 survey also found, though, that the number of planners who are friends or relatives of the learner is also quite significant.

Learners who choose a professional planner are probably attracted by his expertise. Those who choose a friend or relative may be choosing the easiest and cheapest planner. When learning to drive a car, many persons prefer a driving school instructor to a parent or spouse, because of the relaxed interpersonal relationships (Hagstrom, 1965).

Our 1970 survey found that the typical pattern is one learner with one planner. However, in a few learning projects, one or two other learners are present.

Some Advantages

There are many advantages in having a learning project planned by a single person in a one-to-one relationship. These advantages help us understand why many learners are attracted to this type of project.

1. By having a person direct his learning efforts, the learner benefits from having the person's expertise adapted to him as a unique individual and to his particular learning project. The planner can modify the procedures and content whenever desirable, after diagnosing the learner's current level of knowledge and skill, and his current weaknesses and errors. In the one-to-one situation, the planner can come to understand the particular learner (and his unique goals, problems, and weaknesses) faster and better than he could in a group situation.
2. The learner can obtain immediate responses to his questions, difficulties, fears, doubts, and concerns.
3. The learner's errors (in understanding, style, posture, behavior, responses, and so on) can be immediately detected and corrected before they become habitual. The learner can practice with an expert (in learning a foreign language, for example, or in role-playing in order to practice salesmanship, counseling, tutoring, or consulting).
4. The planner may also provide the actual resources and facilities that are needed, or arrange for them to be available.
5. A person as planner is very flexible in the proportion of the knowledge and skill that he himself presents to the learner: in any one session, it can range from zero to 100%.
6. Despite first appearances, this type of planner may actually be less expensive than an object or a group if there are few learners. It may even be less expensive (measured in money or time) with a large number of learners if the efficiency of their learning (and the amount of appropriate knowledge and skill they learn) is much greater than with any other sort of planner. The cost can sometimes be cut to a third without greatly affecting efficiency by having the planner deal with three learners simultaneously.

The Negative Side

Our 1970 survey found that individual learning projects planned by an appropriate person are not as common as self-planned learning projects or group-planned

projects. The advantages listed in the previous section seem convincing, yet it is not very common for a learner to turn over the planning to another person in a one-to-one relationship.

It is difficult to determine the negative characteristics that account for this lack of interest. Sometimes the cost may appear prohibitive to the learner. But even if the help is free, the learner may be reluctant to consume so many hours of the other person's time.

What Process Does the Planner Follow?

The person who plans the project for the learner will probably perform certain actions, make certain decisions, and follow certain procedures. The molar level of the planner's behavior is probably the most significant portion of what he does. That is, the molar or comprehensive level of his behavior and the overall process he follows probably have a greater impact on the learning than any particular decision he makes about the detailed content and strategy. He can probably afford to make a few mistakes in his choice of particular methods of learning if his overall pattern or style of teaching and helping is effective.

In order to understand this process better, it is useful to select several clusters of activities from the total process. Although the process is fairly continuous, it can be divided into several clusters for purposes of analysis. It is possible to distinguish six types of things that the planner does. These are presented here in approximate chronological order.

1. At an early stage in the learning project, the planner usually verifies that he and the learner agree on the learning objectives. The planner may help the learner discover and clarify the knowledge and skill he wants to gain, decide whether its attainment is realistic, and suggest certain modifications in the objectives.
2. The planner may be aware of several routes (learning activities, resources, or sequences) by which some learners can obtain the desired knowledge and skill. Some people successfully learn to type by starting right in typing essays or personal letters, for example, whereas other people learn successfully by beginning with detailed exercises such as j u j u j m j m j m. The planner may also try to "dream up," as creatively and flexibly as possible, additional possibilities for learning. The range and number of routes vary from one sort of subject matter to another. Familiarity with these various routes is an especially common sort of expertise provided by planners.

Even before he has much information about the learner, the planner may be aware of the relative effectiveness of the various routes. That is, he knows the most effective way to achieve the given goal for the typical or average learner, the second best way, and so on. His criterion is probably something like this: by

which route will a learner be most certain to achieve the desired outcome, but with a minimum of time (both his and mine) and money? With a highly motivated learner and readily accessible subject matter, there may be very little difference between the efficiency of the best two or three routes.

3. Before choosing or recommending one particular route, the planner tries to discover the factors that will influence the relative effectiveness of the various possible routes. He may have to ask questions or even administer tests in order to obtain some of this information; other factors will be evident without much effort. Certain characteristics of the learner will probably be included in the factors that influence the choice of route. These characteristics include the learner's motivation, current level, ability to learn, emotional or physiological blocks to learning, and confidence. Certain physical factors, such as the accessibility of certain equipment or resources, may also be influential. A few planners seem oblivious to most of these factors. They do not really know and understand each particular learner, they suggest methods of learning that are inefficient, or their actions and comments actually do more harm than good (in affecting the learner's self-concept or future ability to learn, for instance). The planner also takes into account his own personality, skills, needs, feelings, and competence. How comfortable and effective would he be as the planner, and possibly the provider of content, for each of the various possible routes? He will not let these factors override the others, but he will not ignore them either.
4. At the beginning of most learning projects, the learner will have some idea of how to learn the desired knowledge and skill. He will be surprised if the planner suggests a radical departure from these preconceptions. If he wants to learn to type, for example, he will probably be disturbed if the planner hands him a novel to read and some arithmetic problems to do. Consequently, the planner will probably try to discover the learner's expectations about the learning activities and resources. He will then reinforce the expectations that are suitable, will point out the weaknesses in other expectations, and will suggest alternative or additional activities.
Because of the planner's greater experience or skill in choosing appropriate ways to learn the given subject matter, the learner will usually accept his suggestions. At the same time, though, the planner will probably explain the reasons for each of his recommendations, and will emphasize the causal relationship between his recommended learning activities and the desired outcomes. As a result, the learner will follow the recommended route because he believes it will lead efficiently to his goal, and will not feel it is just the planner's whim or unthinking recommendation.
5. Throughout the learning project, the planner will notice or try to discover the learner's activities, progress, and difficulties. He may also notice additional factors that influence the effectiveness of various possible activities. Whenever it seems desirable, the planner will modify the route originally chosen, and may even

THE ADULT'S LEARNING PROJECTS

suggest some entirely different route. In general, he oversees and monitors the entire process of learning.

The most important action that the planner takes is to seek feedback. He realistically assesses just how effective his suggested activities are proving to be in actual practice. If the learner is not gaining the desired knowledge and skill quickly and efficiently, another procedure is recommended.

If the planner accurately obtains feedback on the effectiveness of his suggestions, he will probably avoid some of the worst pitfalls that trap so many teachers. He will not choose learning activities primarily for his own benefit and needs, rather than for the needs of the learner. He will not merely plan activities without regard to outcomes. He will see the folly of recommendations based on a fond but unrealistic hope that they will result eventually in certain changes in behavior.

6. In addition to recommending certain activities for the learner to perform, the planner may himself perform certain actions. He may provide materials or other resources, remove some physical distraction, provide orally some of the desired knowledge, or demonstrate part of the skill.

In the next chapter, we will see that the leader of a learning group may follow a similar process. A helper in a self-planned learning project may also follow parts of this process.