

The fourth of the six 'I' s of real learning - Iterative

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I didn't know what iterative meant

When first advised that learning is an iterative process, I nodded wisely, and pretended to understand what this meant. In truth, I had no idea. The Cambridge dictionary as many times before came to my rescue, and advises that Iterative is 'Doing something again and again, usually to improve it'.

Thus iterative learning involves the deliberate revisiting of whatever is the issue or experience, to intentionally, often immersively and incrementally (see previous items in this series), learn deeper, build capability and performance.

First is worst

It is rare that any first learning effort is the best, makes such immediate progress that no revisit to refine, develop and enhance is necessary. For this reason 'First is worst', meaning any initial progress, particularly with complex, difficult and dynamic issues will be the least valuable, and that later iterations will often significantly move value forward. This is a natural, normal journey to mastering anything – new or previously worked upon.

In the 'hurry up/move on' world of work that is so often the norm, time to think, to reconsider, and look for not just better, but best, is rarely encouraged or rewarded.

Lord Allen Sheppard when Chairman of Grand Metropolitan bemoaned a culture of 'acceptable under-performance', and this can be shown clearly in the 'that's good enough' approach to learning that is made so much more valuable when consciously, deliberately revisited and polished.

It's often a challenge

Such iterative learning may be hard work, and require persistence, can be lonely, exposed and time consuming, without support or encouragement. It will often be driven not by the demands or needs of others but by our own personal standards, and desire to achieve higher levels of outcomes beyond the first effort. The greatest value comes from difficult, not easy learning.

Learning is not linear, there is no straight line to mastery of a skill, or thoroughly understanding new knowledge. Revisiting learning may well involve moving backwards, or forward in such small steps as to seem not worth the investment of time or effort. Maintaining motivation and belief in achieving a learning goal can mean digging deep, managing expectations of ourselves, and being realistic about what progress is possible with each iterative visit.

Iterative learning is how the best get better

Authors, song writers, musicians and sports men/women know well that getting close to optimising performance takes more time than most are prepared to find, and more robust, honest self-review and analysis than most are prepared to take. Drafts and redrafts of books, hours of working on a three second section of a song, or thousands of hours of work on a practice ground means going over current positions and results critically then seeking small and significant changes that get closer to all they can achieve.

Matthew Syed, in his powerful book [Bounce](#) makes a strong case for the 'Ten thousand hour rule', saying it takes typically that much dedicated, immersive practice time to achieve true mastery of anything.

Syed emphasises that practice alone, that the constant repetition of key elements of excellence is not enough, that feedback and coaching multiplies impact and value and makes application of the learning most likely.

If the 'it takes time not talent' maxim is right, and that iterative, long term persistence is the key to success, this is a lot of revisits. He cites test cricketers and orchestral musicians as well as chess masters and reflections on his own journey as a champion table tennis player. This huge, daunting number of hours is what differentiates the most capable, the most persistent, the most driven from the rest of us.

The appetite to return again and again with a relentless desire for excellence and do the same things over and over until genuinely embedded in behaviour is the far end of high performance. Some way back from those extremes are our own contexts and performance pathways, likely to involve less hours, although plenty of frustration, disappointment and if we stick at it, ultimately, achievement.

Accept, embrace, and use iterative learning

Not getting the best ideas, results, solutions and outcomes first time is not failure, it's life, it's reality. It helps to develop a mindset that accepts that learning anything needs to be regularly revisited and worked upon anew. This is true for any specific skill or knowledge and more broadly for professional development. The world of work is moving ever faster, and many previously prized competencies are redundant or far less often used.

The last words are from that much missed master of words Charles Handy, who advised that the learn-ing are of far greater value than the learn-ed.

Link to 3 minute 40 seconds Matthew Syed explanatory video

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l1K6bOG8mj8>