



A MASTER COURSE IN LEARNING HOW TO LEARN

Custom Edition for University of Phoenix



Peak LEARNING

How to Create Your Lifelong Education Program for Personal Enlightenment and Professional Success

Ronald Gross

Author of *The Lifelong Learner*

Featuring material from
Keys to Success: A Supplementary Reader

REVISED AND UPDATED FOR THE NEW CENTURY

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Preface

Our world is changing faster than ever before, and the importance of learning is growing even faster. Any significant improvement in life—from a more rewarding job to more enjoyable leisure time—is based on learning.

This book has a simple goal: I want to change your idea of learning. I want to show you how you can create a kind of learning style that is fast, efficient, thorough, productive, and more downright enjoyable than you could have believed. I want to show you how you can keep learning throughout life.

You are already something of a lifelong learner or you wouldn't have started reading this book. In your own way, you may well have done many of the things I will propose. But you may also have felt from time to time that you could learn even more, do it better, and have more fun at it. If so, you are just the kind of reader I am looking for.

The Peak Learning system described here is a set of techniques that you can use to achieve broader, deeper, and more personal learning skills than anything you experienced in your

previous schooling. Every day can become a rich adventure in discovery, with opportunities to add to your experience and knowledge, to make new connections and see new patterns in yourself and in the world around you. Rather than struggling to merely persist through the usual ruts and routines, you can turn each passing month into a milestone marking your continuing exploration, inquiry, and development.

Peak Learning is a new kind of learning, one that professional educators increasingly recognize as necessary for every individual. It is a program of self-directed growth. It means acquiring new skills to understand yourself and the world—true wealth you can never lose. It is an investment in yourself, a way to take better advantage of the chance to fulfill your potential.

Many people have trouble at first with the idea of self-directed learning, because they have been trained by society to equate learning only with what is taught in educational institutions. They assume that the *right* way to learn is in a classroom, from a teacher and textbooks, by listening to expert authorities, doing assigned readings, memorizing stale information for tests, and getting grades.

But Peak Learning does not involve consciously studying, or having to memorize something someone tells you to, or pursuing a certain set of subjects considered important by some school. Instead, independent, unconstrained, noninstitutionalized learning is the *real* education there is. From the attitudes and techniques described in the following chapters you will acquire:

Fresh confidence about yourself as a learner. You will discard negative attitudes and self-blocking learning strategies carried over from school days. You'll experience learning as exhilarating, as an open road direct to the person you want to become.

Powerful learning skills based on new discoveries about how the brain works, and ways to apply those discoveries to your own personal learning style. In developing your personal learning style, you will find how you learn best and how to arrange your learning for maximum productivity, ease, and enjoyment.

Ways to find learning resources from all over the world, which are ready for you to call on when you need them. You will discover how to tap into the invisible university, the multitude of sources of information, advice, and help that can assist your learning.

Step-by-step guidance that will allow you to apply these learning techniques in your own life. As you read this course book, you will find exercises that will help you make these learning skills a part of your daily activities. Applying them yourself will do more for your understanding and enjoyment than any number of abstract, theoretical descriptions.

This book was inspired by a series of Peak Learning experiences in my own life. These were moments when I gained knowledge, understanding, or insight that changed me dramatically.

The first was with my father, Michael Gross, a self-styled *auto-didact* who gave himself a first-class do-it-yourself university education (after dropping out of school in the sixth grade). Mike showed me how much you could learn traveling to and from work on the subway, or at the reading room at the glorious public library on Fifth Avenue and Forty-Second Street.

The second Peak Learning experience occurred while I was working at the Ford Foundation in its Education Division, and writing books about school reform in the evenings. It was there that I came to the conviction that improving schools and colleges, even with handsome grants, was not the answer to the education problem. Rather, education had to become a life-long activity throughout society. People of every age and in every kind of life circumstance needed to be empowered to learn, change, and grow.

I set up an Experiment in Learning program at New York University—the first university course with no syllabus, no textbooks, no preset lectures, no tests, and no grades. Instead of offering students what some teacher wanted to teach, we offered them help in learning what *they* wanted to learn. Experiment in Learning was a course for people who had, in a sense, graduated from taking courses. We were looking for people

who knew what they wanted to learn but felt they could learn it more effectively with better techniques, friendly companionship, more resources, and improved planning. In short, it was the first attempt to teach what this book teaches.

That first year I worked with about two dozen students who ranged from Ph.D.s to high-school dropouts, several of whom number among the best friends I've ever had. This experience taught me that whatever our fields of interest, the same basic principles and strategies apply to all—we need to set goals, plan for our learning, adapt to our individual learning styles, marshal and access resources, and monitor how we are doing. I also learned that lifelong learning is possible and immensely gratifying but that it requires new skills and resources. Peak learners need special skills to take command of their own lifelong self-development, skills that are seldom taught explicitly in classrooms. Furthermore, the resources for self-education need to be made more visible and accessible to those who need to find them.

I eventually became editor-at-large for the journal *Adult and Continuing Education Today*. I had the chance to meet, help, and learn from the best learners throughout the United States and abroad. Always and everywhere, I found men and women who were using learning to lead richer, healthier, more successful, and more useful lives. Some of my insights were collected in a book I wrote in 1977 called *The Lifelong Learner*, which introduced this term and helped spread its usage.

Encouraged by these discoveries, I began to give workshops, seminars, and *train-the-trainer* sessions. In 1980, I received the first of two federal grants to investigate outstanding learners and identify the skills and aptitudes that made them so good at learning. More than two hundred interviews produced an answer.

These exceptional learners did indeed share a definite set of skills and attitudes that accounted for their success. Moreover, these techniques were not natural talents—almost all were things these people had *learned* to do for themselves on their own, and they had no doubt that others could learn them as well. My most recent and current experience demonstrates just how true this is. The power of these learning techniques is

indicated by the fact that they work equally well with every kind of learner—from genius or near-genius independent scholars to individuals with mental disabilities.

During the past ten years I have successfully taught these methods to highly diverse people, ranging from top corporate, association, and public-sector executives, to persons with severe mental and physical disabilities. During a typical week of seminars and workshops, I often find myself dealing on Monday and Tuesday with, say, senior managers at the McDonnell-Douglas Corporation or United Way of Greater New York, and Thursday and Friday with eighty- to ninety-year-old retirees, some of whom have ailments such as Parkinson's syndrome. They *all* enjoy, learn, and use the same basic techniques to take charge of their growth and development.

A final testimonial to the power of these techniques is that, as this book goes to press, the audiotape of some of its major techniques is a national best-seller. Thousands are discovering these methods every day and using them to learn what they want and need to know.

Everyone can learn how to learn. Easy, enjoyable learning is accomplished by using a set of skills and techniques that can be acquired. You will learn these techniques and attitudes in this book.

In addition, I have included some of the best new learning methods developed over the last decade in such areas as human development, corporate and business training, government agencies, the military, and associations.

By this point you may be wondering what is so new and different about the Peak Learning approach I'm presenting here from other learning systems and theories. From my experience in developing and using it, there are four reasons why Peak Learning has proved to be the most powerful and enjoyable system for my students.

First, this system is tailored to *your* adult learning needs. You will select those techniques and materials that suit the sort of learning you want to do. Most other learning systems propose one method as the key to success. The well-known educator Mortimer Adler, for example, will tell you that there is one kind of subject that is worth learning above all (the liberal-

arts classics) and one way to learn them (through reading and discussion). I believe that it is *you* who can and must decide for yourself what is most worth learning. My method enables you to determine that and plan your learning strategy, both methods and materials, accordingly. Peak Learning offers you a set of tools; you decide which ones fit your personal style and the subject you want to study.

Second, unlike other systems, Peak Learning deals with both the psychological techniques for improving learning and the wondrous array of resources now available to stimulate and enrich your mind. Successful learning depends as much on being clever about finding the best learning materials as it does on psychological techniques. My system shows how to use the entire world as a storehouse of learning resources.

Third, Peak Learning helps you to discover your individual learning style. Few of the systems mentioned above take into account this factor. For me, “Know thyself” is a basic commandment. Since each of us is different, there is no universally optimal method of learning. Effective, productive, and gratifying learning comes directly from choosing methods that are right for *you* as well as for the subject you wish to learn.

Finally, some learning methods depend strongly on a powerful *guru* as teacher or on using cumbersome or expensive equipment, or sometimes both. Often an innovator includes some elements in his or her system that derive from their own personal tastes and styles rather than from empirical evidence or sound theory. These elements may not work, or they may work only when the guru presents them.

In either case, learners often are left with the feeling that they need to buy the whole farm in order to take a ride on the horse. By incorporating the best of many sources, Peak Learning separates techniques from their creators. While I will describe many kinds of resource materials you may choose to use, the essentials of Peak Learning require no specialized equipment. Whatever tools you need are easily available anywhere.

RONALD GROSS

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I

Peak Learning—Skills for Today and Tomorrow

What is a peak learner? It is someone who has learned how to learn, in the fullest sense of the word. Although this label may be unfamiliar, chances are you already know peak learners. In fact, you've probably been one yourself from time to time. For example, think about those occasions when your mind has quickly soaked up information about a new subject that fascinated you—whether new recipes or batting averages—seemingly without effort. Or when you got a sudden flash of insight about how to solve a difficult problem that had been stumping you. These were moments of Peak Learning.

Perhaps you can also think of people you know who constantly are getting excited and involved in some new interest and running to tell you the latest new information they've found out about it. While they are in that first flush of enthusiasm, the excitement and delight they find in their new discoveries seems contagious. They too are peak learners.

At work, you probably know colleagues—or competitors—who miraculously seem to stay on top of new developments. They can sift through stacks of memos, newsletters, advertisements, correspondence, magazines, and books to find just the

O! this learning, what a thing it is.

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

Learning can be defined as the process of remembering what you are interested in.

RICHARD SAUL WURMAN

nuggets of fact they need. Their capacity to handle that flood of information and ideas gives them a decided edge. They too are peak learners.

Learning has a different *feel* for these people. It isn't just a matter of going back to school to sit in a classroom and listen to a teacher. It has little to do with tests or grades. Instead, this type of learning springs from within them: it is self-education. Whether sparked by joy or driven by need, it expresses who they want to become, what they want to be able to do or to know about.

Peak learners have a number of distinctive characteristics. First, they feel best about themselves when they are learning something new. They are unusually open to and interested in new experiences, ideas, and information, whether they be sampling a new cuisine, listening to a scientist describe her work, or reading an article on corporate mergers. Typically, they do not think of learning as some special activity; for them, learning is just part of the way in which they habitually live. They take pride in meeting their daily challenges, from a newspaper's crossword puzzle to mastering a new computer program.

Another characteristic of peak learners is that they are keenly aware of how much they don't know, but that doesn't bother them! As they wander along the shoreline of wonder—the boundary between what they know and the vast sea of things they *could* know—they feel exhilarated by the prospect of constantly learning new things. They know that there are always things to know more about, to appreciate more deeply, or to learn to do. Because they are not afraid of their own ignorance, such learners aren't afraid to ask *dumb* questions or admit they don't understand something the first time it's explained. Instead of pretending to understand, they keep asking until they do. They then take action to use their new information quickly, to draw connections between what they already knew and what they have just learned. Peak learners look for similarities and differences, make analogies, and try to find out what something is *like* in order to understand it.

Peak learners have learned enormously from important life experiences and in other ways outside the usual channels of study. They seek a wide range of helpful resources for learn-

ing, rather than giving up if their usual sources of information run dry on a particular topic.

Confidence in one's ability to learn and to understand is another key characteristic of peak learners. They know that anything that *one* human being truly understands can be understood equally well by others willing to follow the right steps. They know how to judge sources of information shrewdly and how to narrow down any gap in an explanation. These learners have a repertoire of simple but powerful tools for processing information, tools that help to select the information they need, to store it in memory, and to use it.

Finally, peak learners believe that investing time in their own personal growth is the best investment they can make in the future, occupational or personal. They begin to learn new things *now* in order to prepare for the life they want to be leading in five years.

These and other characteristics are what define a peak learner—someone who has made learning a part of his or her lifestyle.

Our lives today call on each of us to become a peak learner. When you think of the people you most admire, or of yourself at your best, it is easy to recognize that this sort of learning is a major part of the *good life*. At work or in our personal lives, practically anything we want will involve some kind of learning above and beyond the knowledge and skills we got in school.

Anyone who stops learning is old, whether at twenty or eighty. Anyone who keeps learning stays young. The greatest thing in life is to keep your mind young.

HENRY FORD

WHY BE A PEAK LEARNER?

We are the first generation of human beings born into a world that will change *drastically* during the course of our lives. As the noted anthropologist Margaret Mead pointed out, only two hundred years ago people knew that the world they grew up in would be about the same when they died. A few things might change, but the basic texture and quality of their lives would remain constant throughout their life span. Things simply changed more slowly. When she pointed this out some thirty years ago, Mead could already see that modern men and women no longer had that assurance.

The illiterate of the year 2000 will not be the individual who cannot read and write, but the one who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn.

ALVIN TOFFLER

In 1970, in fact, Alvin Toffler introduced the term *future shock* to describe a pervasive reaction he saw developing: People seemed to be overwhelmed by accelerating change. In every field, knowledge was doubling every decade or so. Doctors and engineers found that the information they had struggled to master in their professional training had a *half-life* of about fifteen years—after that, half of it was no longer true or relevant. New discoveries seemed to be made every week, and they resulted in newer ways of doing things or new kinds of gadgets almost every day.

Today, the pace has not let up. At this very moment, it is already trite to talk about an information explosion. As computers have become ever more capable of generating quantities of new information, we human beings have been increasingly challenged to keep learning and to remain up-to-date. Continual growth has become a requirement of contemporary living. We must be able to master new facts, new skills, and even new attitudes and beliefs.

At work, for example, most Americans will change fields three or four times in their careers—to say nothing of even more frequent changes of *jobs*. All of these changes require substantial learning. Indeed, in today's world, *learning a living* is an integral part of earning a living for most people in professional, managerial, and other high-level jobs. Change is so rapid in the business world that virtually every day presents new challenges and opportunities to learn.

In our personal affairs as well, the mobility and fluidity of social life means we have to be more adaptable, better able to learn quickly. Just consider how many of these areas you needed to learn about in the last year, in response to needs of your own, your family, friends, or your company:

- ◆ Health and medical developments, including new knowledge about diet, exercise, and stress or new treatments for specific illnesses.
- ◆ Economic developments affecting your business or profession, such as new tax regulations, investment opportunities, or dangers, or financial innovations in your field.