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Old “Dawg.” New Tricks.

By John A. Lanier, DSL

Researchers have told us for years that the aging process may be slowed by keeping the mind active. Even though the body may not indulge youthful vigor indefinitely, the mind may comparatively resemble the Energizer Bunny’s seeming indefatigable stamina. The human brain is like any other muscle. Unless exercised, it atrophies. For example, my grandfather practiced law well into his 90s until debilitated by a stroke. His charm was disarming and his wit rapier-sharp. Accordingly, I better understand my grandfather’s infatuation with Scrabble. Concurrent with this theme, this installment is about a learning milestone in a personal continuous improvement odyssey.

As an undergrad back in the Stone Age, the only thing I liked about college was football season. I stayed out of my parents’ penalty box by making the grades, but absolutely hated school. It got in the way of work. During my last two years of college, I worked at least 60 hours per week while pulling a full load. I later discovered that my disdain for school was rooted in my learning style—not a disregard for knowledge. When I graduated, the economy stank for fresh graduates—much like it does now. Even so, I was blessed to have no student debt.

Learning is a competitive non-negotiable. Learning styles differ among individuals.

Not long into my career, I realized what I should have learned in college. Fortunately, I received excellent on-the-job training and development by Viet Nam veterans who returned to civilian life with the practical, transferable skills of intelligence (marketing), strategic intent, planning, triage, prioritization, and crisis management. They knocked out their degrees with their GI Bill benefits. What they learned in the classroom was complementary to their practical experience and provided them a “hunting license” for their white collar aspirations. This was a model that I grew to appreciate as I grew older.

Along the way, a personal desire sprouted and grew to return to school for an MBA. However, my version of life, punctuated with heavy travel, precluded nights or weekends for post-secondary options. Thankfully, my employers offered various forms

of continuing education that I embraced enthusiastically. Nonetheless, the hunger for an MBA remained unsatiated. Somewhere amid my longing, the disruptive innovation of the internet introduced the virtual classroom. I found a program that worked for me and I accomplished a goal that had eluded me for over 25 years. The story did not end there, though.

My wife of 33 years and I enjoy a Saturday morning ritual over coffee, whereby we catch up on each other's activities of the past week and review our priorities for the coming week. The visit is tantamount to a family staff meeting. On one particular summer morning in 2009 following the completion of the MBA, she stared at me knowingly and told me that I was not finished with school. She knew that I harbored a passion to one day teach at the collegiate level, but that my "union card" was not yet punched, i.e., I needed a terminal degree. Thus began the doctoral program which I completed in June. Although I will not walk across the stage until May of 2014, my school tells me that I am a doctor. This greatly appeals to my vanity, and doubles as a psychological salve for recuperating from the grueling marathon.

I have been in school for five of the past six years—non-stop stretches including summers. I started the MBA curriculum in an internet café in Italy. Over two years, I worked in 38 states and four countries. Every spare moment—on trains between Boston and Delaware, in airport lounges, on airplanes, and in hotels—was invested in study.

*Continuous learning is
the differentiable
response to the strategic
half-life of knowledge.*

The modus operandi did not stop during the doctoral program. Whereas the MBA was akin to regurgitation, the doctoral curriculum was defined by cogitation. As framed by one of my professors, I was responsible for presenting logical arguments, i.e., opinions substantiated by facts.

This meant mountains of research. Moreover, I had to subject myself to publication editors that tested both conviction and intrepidity. I consumed the equivalent of a textbook per week. The pilgrimage tallied created content of about 4800 files and 2.6 gigabytes of hard drive. In addition to the required text, I squeezed in another 90 books. The better volumes are in the reading list on my website.

These experiences have left me with some indelible impressions on life and education that I am compelled to share. First, intelligence as measured by traditional tests is overrated. IQ says nothing about applying what you know. Grit means more than MENSA membership. Henry Ford summed up the sentiment thusly: "If you think you can or cannot, you are right." Sometimes, the only thing that matters is the determination to get the job done despite all manner of obstacles. Simply put, if you want something badly enough, you will figure out how to make it happen—period. As Mark Twain put it, "It's not the size of the dog in the fight, but the size of the fight in the dog." Given a choice, I will partner with the passionate and resolute. I hope my competitors hire the whiners. Whiners are culturally toxic.

Second, all knowledge has a strategic half-life. The wise response to this axiom is continuous learning. This does not necessarily mean obtaining degrees. Learning is a journey—not a destination. Socrates taught that “the only true wisdom is in knowing you know nothing.” In my case, the more I learned, the more I realized how much more there was to learn. Academics regard this epiphany “conscious ignorance.” Moreover, these scholars contend that “stupidity” is the disease of eschewing the cure.

Google lends easy access to most anything anyone wants to know. Interestingly, both of my graduate schools afforded tremendous virtual library resources. However, Google’s algorithm nerds continue to refine their unsurpassed search engines that are much more user-friendly than those available in most library search engines. I used Google to find what I wanted before going to the library databases to retrieve the material. There is no excuse—only an explanation—for ignorance: laziness. Technology is a beautiful gift to humanity that should be exploited for good. Warren Buffet advised that “price is what you pay; value is what you get.” I paid—and continue to pay—the price to be informed. The value is applied knowledge. This is a bargain. Despite my enjoyment of vintage rock-n-roll, my brain is better served by listening to another audiobook en route to the airport.

Third, the school of hard knocks hammers certain lessons into our psyches about what works and what does not work. The academic term for these practical lessons is “tacit knowledge.” One of the more interesting discoveries of my research is *why* certain

Our 80/20s are more compelling when corroborated by research.

things work versus *why* certain things do not work. For the most part, my tacit experiences were in the 80/20 zone. Even so, I dropped certain approaches that have no validity in science. Moreover, my clients are more comfortable embracing recommended calculated risks

when I offer the research by luminaries who opine to the utility of the suggestion. This is cool. Abraham Maslow chided that “if the only tool you have is a hammer, you tend to see every problem as a nail.” Continuing education perpetually adds tools to my toolbox.

Fourth, arrogance comes in many shapes and forms. One of the more intriguing phenomena is the forfeiture of the virtual education target market by brand name brick and mortar schools. For all but the most elite schools, the garden variety brick and mortar model may be headed for extinction. General George Patton quipped, “A good plan, violently executed now, is better than a perfect plan next week.” This is tantamount to first mover advantage that favors disruptive technology by appealing to the latent demand of early adopters. The tenured old guard of the brick and mortar paradigm may never recover.

The virtual classroom has unique appeal. There are multitudes of people like me—working professionals—who know why they want to go to school. We tend to be older

and more seriously disposed to study. In my MBA class and doctoral cohort, as examples, our average age was many years beyond the typical post-secondary co-ed. Virtual continuing education is a practical option for employers supporting employee skill improvement. MOOCs (massive online open courses) are directionally correct, but tend to stop shy of qualifying for degrees from their content sponsors. Of course, a student may be delighted to learn without earning a degree. However, degrees are an integral component of professional qualification for many industries.

There is an irony to the brick and mortar story. Students of the quintessential B-school curriculum invariably encounter the return on assets measure. Since measures bolster an argument, one might find amusing the comparison of return on assets of a classroom that is empty a good portion of its useful life to a virtual classroom that never depreciates.

As I promote virtual education, I must also confess a bias against the for-profit university model. I investigated them thoroughly. Despite the existence of several highly recognized names, I could not get comfortable with their missions. They struck me not as diploma mills—indeed, they are accredited—but rather tuition mills. I cannot condone

*Support systems are critical
to personal development.*

a business model that encourages a student to take on student debt—just because they can—to earn a degree whose realistic earning capacity is deficient to service the debt. Indeed, there is more to the prevailing student debt

delinquency story than a sour economy. The student loan scenario is eerily similar to the mortgage fiasco that erupted in 2008. In my case, both degrees were from excellent non-profit, faith-based schools: one Catholic and one non-denominational. Simply put, I trusted their values. Both pummeled me with challenging curricula and intense instruction.

Finally, I am reminded that there is no such thing as a self-made person. Successful people have support systems that make the difference. These systems include teachers, mentors, coaches, friends, and family. My professional network includes scores of people with similar convictions. I am blessed by those who shared their inspiring stories. Providentially, some did so at critical moments, when coffee had long since exhausted its stimulative attributes, yet petered out concurrent with copious quantities of work, exacerbated by looming deadlines. Although my name is on the shingles, neither educational milestone would be possible without my muse and best friend—my wife. Moreover, my faith convinces me that the Big Guy wanted these goals met—in this lifetime—and His fingerprints are all over this formula.

My academic pilgrimage humbled me while honing me. Pre-Socratic Greek philosopher Heraclitus admonished that “nothing endures but change.” I learned long ago that approaching change as an opportunity affords a differentiable edge on the competition. Not only has this old dawg (sic) learned some new tricks, but there are a few more tricks

to learn before retiring to the dawghouse (sic). (Forgive me, but football season is about to start in Athens. Woof!) Aristotle closes this installment with poignancy: “Education is the best provision for the journey to old age.”

For my next act, will I pursue Spanish, guitar lessons, or another degree? Decisions, decisions!



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