

What is ‘unlearning’?

Unlearning – what a counterintuitive term! It just sounds “wrong” – right?

Well, even if it sounds weird, we will find it in the dictionary (Macmillan, Oxford, etc.) – it means “*to change the way that you have learned to think or do things, usually because that way is not good or useful*” (Macmillan).

For most of us, ‘**unlearning**’ has actually been with us throughout most of our lives:

As children at school, we would get to know how our class teacher expected us to act; but whenever we had a change of class teacher, inevitably we had to learn some new ways. While the change needed may not have been huge, if we ever fell back to our old ways, we could end up in a bit of trouble. For me, I have clear recollections of the differences between Miss Blackie’s classes and Mrs. Entwhistle’s classes – one was quite relaxed, the other was quite formal.

For those of us who are drivers, and who have switched from a manual car to an automatic, there were new things to learn, and some things to change (or to stop doing). And, for anyone who has gone the other way, being used to pushing just the brake pedal at a stop sign, we need to remember to use two feet and also push on the clutch pedal (otherwise the car will stall). Yes – I know that too – from personal experience!

And how many of us have had to cope with some new technology, such as a change to our word processor (like – Microsoft Word 2003 to 2007/2010), or perhaps a new mobile phone (say - Blackberry to iPhone), or replacing a desktop PC with an iPad? The steepness of the learning curve involved in the change is, to some extent,

dependent on how much we need to ‘**unlearn**’ the old ways.

The common thread in my three examples above, and also in the definition of **unlearning**, is the word ‘change’. Change is now like a constant companion – we find it in our homes, in our workplaces, almost everywhere we go. Wherever there is change, there is likely to be something new that we need to learn. And often (but not always), when there is something new to learn, it is actually replacing something that we already know – but will soon no longer need to remember.



Unlearning is about new knowledge replacing old knowledge

Does our brain really ‘unlearn’?

It is easy to say that **unlearning** is about ‘*changing the way we have learned to think or do something*’, but it is not always so easy to actually achieve this. The difficulty comes with the way that our memory works. Different parts of our memories are stored in different parts of our brain [see [Memory mysteries unlocked – with help from Google](#)]. To recall something, we reconstruct the memory by reactivating its pieces from the different parts of the brain. The more times we do this, the better our recall becomes.

This means that when we learn something new as a replacement for something we already know, the ‘old stuff’ is likely to be much easier to recall. This will be especially so for things that we often recall or review, making it much harder for the new to become established as a replacement for the old. Overwriting of memory does not happen in the human brain – what does happen over time is that the pieces of lesser used memories lose their connections, making them less likely to be retrieved.

Knowledge and ‘unlearning’

Knowledge is the ability to understand, retain, and use facts and information. When we learn something, we are increasing our knowledge (and sometimes adding to our skills). Knowledge is often classified into two types: **explicit** and **tacit**:

Explicit knowledge can be recorded and communicated easily. Examples include facts, concepts, theories, statistics, instructions, procedures, best practices. It can be stored in human memory, or in written form, video and photo images, and audio clips.

Tacit knowledge is usually gathered from experience, and is stored in our memory. Examples include our beliefs and values, our skills and capabilities, e.g. our personal faith; or ‘knowing’ how to ride a bicycle. Tacit knowledge can be difficult to record or explain, and can even be difficult for the ‘owner’ to understand (e.g. “why” do we believe something?). This is because much of it is intuitive, i.e. we are often not consciously aware of everything that we know.

The extent of our stored tacit knowledge will exceed our explicit knowledge by a considerable margin (I have seen estimates ranging from 95%-5% to 80%-20%). Because of the complexity and volume of our tacit knowledge, **unlearning** something that is

explicit will always be much easier than **unlearning** something that is tacit.

Behaviours and beliefs

Unlearning is primarily about being able to change our behaviours (including habits) or/and our beliefs. While some of our behaviours may be based on explicit knowledge (e.g. how we perform certain tasks by following instructions or procedures), most will be deeply rooted in our tacit knowledge. The obvious implication is that changing some behaviours (or habits) may require considerable effort on our part.

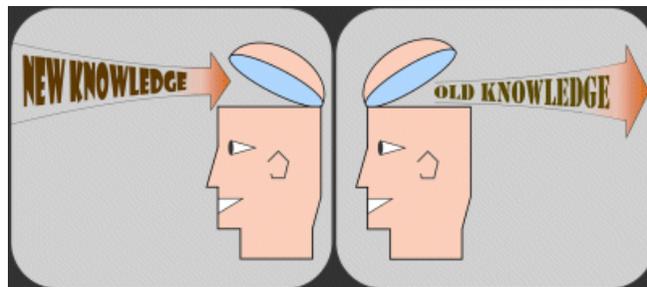
In any situation, old habits and practices are hard to change. And it can be equally as challenging when we need to revise how or what we think or believe. **Unlearning** something requires us to move on from what we have previously learned, practiced, and believed to be true, and replace it with new ideas, concepts, thoughts, and/or rules.

When this happens, especially when we have been used to using the 'old' as the basis for decision-making, we are moving out of our 'comfort zone' and into uncharted territory. At times this can be scary – very scary. And for that reason, we can become resistant to the 'new' – that is to replacing our existing knowledge (and behaviour) with something that we have yet to become familiar with (or to develop a trust in).

It is worth noting that should we come under pressure while we are in the process of **unlearning** something, there is a possibility that the 'old' knowledge will resurface, and we will find ourselves doing things the way that we used to previously. If this happens, the probability is that it was a completely subconscious decision – the fact is that the 'old' way has a longer history inside our memory.

Why do we need to 'unlearn'?

In one word – survival! I noted earlier that change is now a well-established part of our lives – it affects us both personally and professionally [see [Change – some important points to note](#)]. Be it from research or technology, or both, many of the things we took as facts a few years ago are no longer in vogue. An example is the 2010 revision of [Guidelines for CPR](#) from the American Heart Association. The traditional (\approx 1957) Airway – Breathing – Compressions [ABC] was revised to **C – A – B**. I learned ABC, now I have to **unlearn**, and relearn it as C - A - B. What about You?



Unlearning = new knowledge replacing old knowledge

In our workplaces, the reality is that jobs evolve over time. This brings change, not just to the job itself, but often it may also bring change to a career path. An example is the Contact centre industry, where speech recognition software and other technologies have enabled significant automation and also off-shoring of operations over the past 15-20 years. There are many other examples as well, from IT to Legal Secretaries, to manufacturing and engineering. Jobs have changed, technologies have improved, and once-secure career paths have been impacted forever.

What can we do then?

Rather than wait for change to arrive, our ability to proactively make changes in our careers will help to

set us apart and allow us to stand out from competitors. This is what 'Brand You' is about [see [Brand You - it's about personal branding](#) and also [Building the New You – it's about personal development](#)]. If we do chose to wait for change to arrive before we react, we will find ourselves 'back in the pack', competing with everyone else for new opportunities (or – watching as the world marches on, leaving us behind!).

For each of us, adaptability is the key – we must adapt to succeed in the changed environment. Much of this adaption must be in our thinking, which may then lead us to new knowledge and also new skills. The **unlearning**/relearning process may not be easy, but we cannot avoid it. To succeed, we must be prepared to be continually **unlearning** 'old' facts and rules, and relearning new ones. Should we decide to resist unlearning and relearning, our future options and opportunities will reduce greatly.

"It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent that survives. It is the one that is most adaptable to change."

This quote is often attributed to Charles Darwin, however it is apparently a paraphrase of Darwin by Leon C. Megginson, Professor of Management and Marketing at Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge [1963].

Worth a look

Our free nugget for this Post is "[Nuts and Bolts: Unlearning](#)" (September 2012) – an article by Dr Jane Bozarth, outlining her thoughts on **unlearning** from the perspective of a 'learning professional' [approx 3min read].

Coming next:

Teamwork and Leadership – it's all about planning

<http://freezapnuggets.com/wordpress/?p=931>