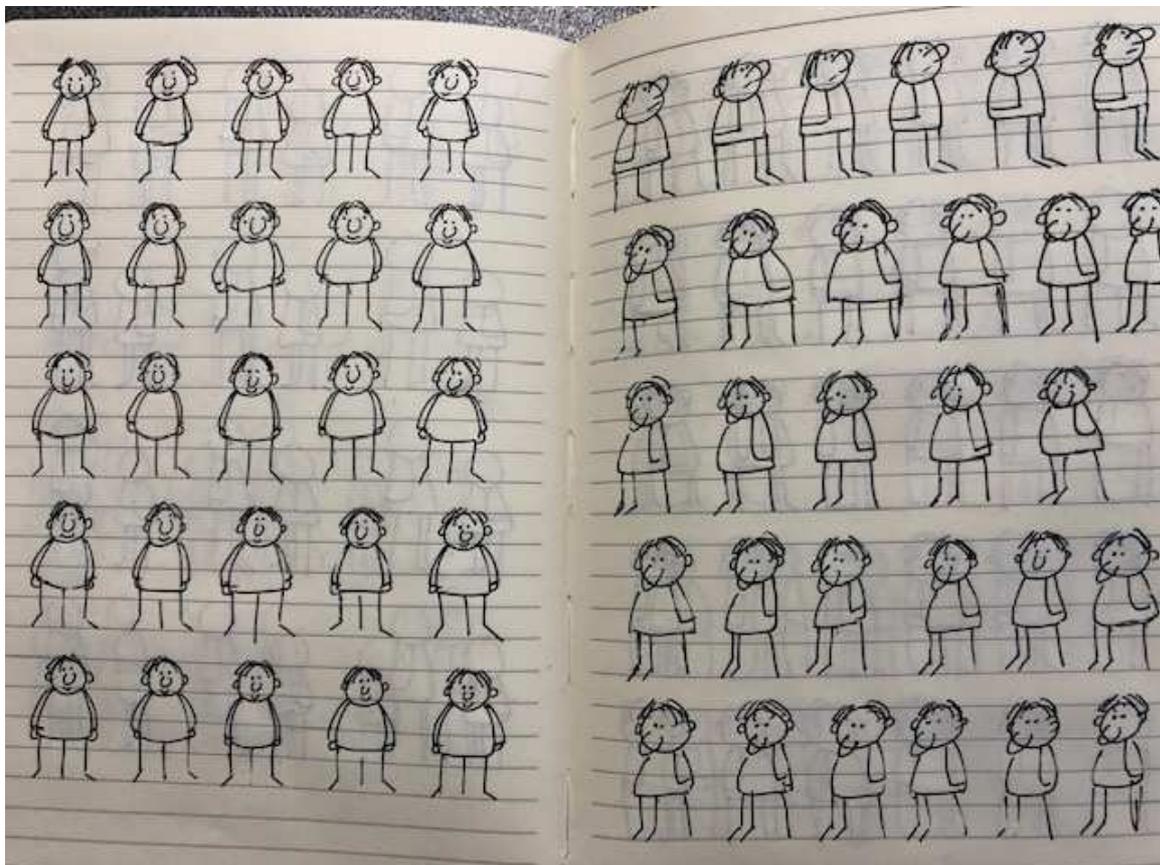


The Art of Learning

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ABSTRACT

How do we get better at something? We have all had to spend time learning, through school, university or the sports field. But as we get older and get responsibilities and jobs does it get harder to learn or is it just that we need to do things differently? This paper will explore some of the ideas out there.



1. Introduction

It is the first month of 2020 and we are already almost mid-way through it. One-twenty-fourth through and if that doesn't scare you, it does me.

Time seems to speed up as we get older. Maybe that's because there's so much more we have to do, work, sort out things at home, look after kids, get the car washed, get the bins out —

and perhaps we look back longingly at the time in our life when we had time. Time to learn and experiment and do and study.

These days I spend a lot of time thinking about work as a form of art. Whatever you do should have an element of artistry to it. Whether you're creating a product for a customer or designing a new app or improving a billing process, the most important thing you bring is

your creativity, ability to look at things differently and connect with the customers, suppliers, employees and partners you work with to deliver a particular experience.

The journey of an artist is a useful picture to keep in mind when thinking about your own work. And that's because no one starts with a perfect, finished conception of an end result. And no one really knows when the end result has been achieved, when things are perfect. It is said that a work of art is never finished, it is abandoned — and that is as true for a painting or a book as it is for a software application.

As I write these words, for example, I am practising how to write a longer form essay, and using that form to think through how to approach learning skills like drawing, cartooning, captioning, timing and humour. What is the process one should follow in order to learn such things?

2. The process of learning

I was watching YouTube instructional videos recently when one of the presenters talked about the three stages of learning: deconstruction, practice and reconstruction. And, while this is obvious, not everyone teaches things this way because many teachers have forgotten how they actually learned what they do, perhaps because they learned it so long ago or have been doing it as long as they remember.

Teaching is also something that has to be learned. It isn't at the same time.

The place to start is with collection — collect a sizeable stack of what you want to study. Perhaps it's cartoons, maybe jokes, perhaps you want to look at speeches or essays. But you have to start with material that is already out there, material you can use to explore and study.

The lack of real world material is why so many how-to books lack any real depth. They have lists and prescriptions for what you should do but if they put in all the examples you need to really get it the book would be four times as long. As a result, what's more important is the raw material. A how-to book may simply give you one approach to organising the way in which you sift and sort the material — but you need it to start with.

Then you've got to take the material apart. For example, I'm currently working through a book called "The cartoonist's workbook" and it's a brilliant way to approach the craft. If you look

on my blog you will see that for the first few years the people I draw are simple circles and lines. In more recent posts, they are starting to look more human, fill out and drawn from different angles.

I don't claim they are good but I am learning, because I've been practising how to draw the various elements that go into a character and how to lay them out in different positions.

Now, as I drive down the road or look at people walking past I start to notice things that I never did before, like the relative heights between a child and an adult or where the shoulders are relative to the head for an old person and a young one.

The more you study the more you see. And study is different from listening or being taught. When you read instructions in a book or when a lecturer talks you through some slides what you are getting is a framework that will help you understand reality. But, the important thing is that the framework is not reality — you need to look at reality and then put the framework on top to help you make sense of what is out there.

3. The goal is to reach beginner's mind

As you start to break things down and see the parts for what they are, the analytic side of you starts to dominate your experience. For example, if you like sitcoms and decide to study the way they are written you will start to see the structure and tropes and gag formulas that are being used. And, as that happens, you find yourself focusing more on the elements than experiencing the programme itself.

When you think of this in the context of something like a martial art, you might imagine that a spectator is amazed by what a master can do and so enrolls in a class as a beginner. They learn the basics and practise day after day, year after year. After a while the movements start to become natural, automatic — they flow and one day they are as much a part of you as your hands or legs. When you do a move it stops being a move and just the way you move, the flow of your body. And yet, I wonder if masters can appreciate the grace and skill in someone else's display without breaking it down and seeing it for the component parts. Maybe true mastery is when you can once again have the same experience you had when you knew nothing at all.

4. Conclusion

It seems to me that the world is full of people who will promise you results FAST. And then there are people who will let you practise for ever but you still don't learn anything at all. The error with both approaches, is expecting someone else to take charge of your learning. The only person who can learn, whether it's fast or slow, is you.

A teacher is a guide, someone who did it their way once upon a time, and who can perhaps point out exercises, observations and pitfalls that may help you along the way. But you have to put in the time, the time to collect samples, the time to deconstruct them, copy them, study them, do the practice and eventually reconstruct them. First you will do things like other people do and then you will change a few things and then you will find your voice, your own unique way of doing things and start to stand apart from everyone else. And one day, perhaps, people will study what you do.

About the author

Karthik Suresh is a Management Consultant who helps customers with energy, utility, sustainability, research, innovation and knowledge management projects. His experience includes working with large and small organisations to select and implement strategic decision systems, improve and develop management capability and deploy risk management, IT, communications and information systems projects.

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