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## Episodes and learning projects

A learning project – the central focus of this book – is here defined as a series of related episodes, adding up to at least seven hours. In each episode, more than half of the person's total motivation is to gain and retain certain fairly clear knowledge and skill, or to produce some other lasting change in himself.

For convenience, we have adopted the shorthand label *learning project* to refer to this series of related episodes. "A sustained, highly deliberate effort to learn" or some such phrase might communicate the meaning more clearly at first glance, but seems cumbersome after repeated use.

### Episodes

The concept of an episode is the foundation on which the definition of a learning project is constructed. Any one day in a person's life may be crowded with a multitude of activities, and one way of grasping or conceptually organizing this variety of activities is to see how they are divided into episodes. An episode is a period of time devoted to a cluster or sequence of similar or related activities, which are not interrupted much by other activities. Each episode has a definite beginning and ending in time. The activities during an episode include all of the person's experiences (everything he does, thinks, feels, hears, and sees) during that period of time.

A concrete example will illustrate the concept of an episode. If we asked an executive to record his activities between 8:10 A.M. and 9:00 A.M. one day, here are the episodes that he might record: 8:10–8:25 read the morning newspaper; 8:25–9:00 drove to the office. To the person himself, and to anyone watching him, it would be clear just when he was moving from the first episode to the second. This transition would be marked by the executive putting down the newspaper and putting on his coat.

In each episode, the intent or activity remains constant throughout the episode. Other aspects, though, may change. The first episode the executive recorded, for example, was reading the morning newspaper. The goal may change from one article to the next, because one article may be relevant to his job and another may be read primarily for pleasure. But the activity of reading and the place remain constant. In the second episode, the intent (reaching the office) remains constant even though the activities may include starting the car, sitting, and walking, and even though the place changes.

An episode, then, is a well-defined period of time that is held together by the similarity in intent, activity, or place of the thoughts and actions that occur during it. The episode has a definite beginning and ending, and is not interrupted for more than two or three minutes by some other activity or purpose. Many episodes are between 30 and 60 minutes in length, but some are shorter or longer.

The concept of an episode emerged in 1966 in some open-ended interviews about adult learning. In these exploratory interviews, I asked people to tell me about their entire range of learning – about all the different things they learned and all the ways they learned. Most people structured their descriptions in the form of episodes. Each person's daily life seemed to consist of activities divided into various "chunks" of time, each period lasting 20 or 30 minutes, two hours, or somewhere in between.

I became aware that many people plan or describe their day in terms of episodes. In this sense, episodes exist in real life: they are not just arbitrarily and artificially imposed on experience by a researcher. I then asked several individuals to record their activities for a day. They found little difficulty in dividing their day into clear-cut episodes; the time of each transition was clear and precise.

It became evident that focusing on episodes was the most appropriate psychological foundation for defining the phenomenon in which I was interested. For most persons, it was fairly easy to recall and describe an episode accurately, and each episode was clear, definite, almost tangible. Our choice of episodes as an especially meaningful piece of reality has not been shaken by our experience in the countless interviews since then.

## Very Deliberate Learning Episodes

Now let us narrow our focus. Instead of being concerned with the great variety of episodes in a person's life, let us select one sort of episode – episodes in which more than half of the person's intention is to gain and retain certain definite knowledge and skill. Such episodes can include reading, listening, or watching. They can take place in a library, classroom, store, living room, den, kitchen, hotel meeting room, or train. The person can learn with an instructor, in a group, or alone. The desired

knowledge and skill can be simple or complex, deeply personal or almost trivial. The person can use the knowledge and skill for solving a problem, obtaining academic credit, or reflecting on the future of mankind.

Despite their variety, these episodes all have one thing in common: an intent that remains dominant throughout the episode. In each episode, the person's desire to gain and retain certain definite knowledge and skill is dominant. It is stronger than the sum of all his other reasons for beginning and continuing that episode.

We have selected this type of episode, which we will term a *very deliberate learning episode*, or sometimes just a *learning episode*, because it seems especially interesting and significant. These short phrases are a label referring to a phenomenon that is described in greater detail in the following sections.

## **"Knowledge and skill"**

When we state that, in a learning episode, the person's intent is to gain certain "knowledge and skill," we intend the phrase to have the following meaning. The term *knowledge and skill* includes any positive or desired changes or improvement in a person's knowledge, understanding, awareness, comprehension, beliefs, ability to apply, ability to analyze and synthesize, ability to evaluate, judgment, perceptual skills, physical skills, competence or performance, response tendencies, habits, attitudes, emotional reactions, recall, sensitivity, insight, confidence, patience, and self-control, and/or some other personality characteristic, inner behavior, or overt behavior.

These changes result from experience – from what a person sees, hears, feels, thinks, or does. Changes that are produced by a drug, chemical, surgical operation, implanted electrodes, or illness are not included. Also excluded are attempts to improve one's appearance by adding lipstick or dentures, one's health and energy by getting more sleep or refraining from eating or drinking too much, or one's vision by wearing contact lenses.

It is now evident that the meaning conveyed by the phrase "knowledge and skill" is much broader than the bare dictionary definition of these two nouns. Several other terms might have been equally appropriate: learning outcomes, psychological changes, changes in the person, changed behavior. The meaning we have assigned to the term knowledge and skill is similar to the learning theorists' definition of learning. See, for example, Hilgard and Bower (1966, pp. 2-6).

In deciding whether a given episode is a learning episode, we ignore several characteristics of the person's desired changes. They may be large or small, superficial or deep, useful to the individual or harmful, useful to society or useless, intended to last for two days or for a lifetime. Sometimes, at one extreme, a person tries to produce deep and far-reaching changes in himself, as in learning to deal with a major responsibility such as child-raising or a new job. Or learning episodes may involve a broad and fundamental area of competence, such as becoming more effective with

other people. At the other extreme, the purpose of certain learning episodes may be to gain relatively simple information or skills that will be useful for only a week or two.

### **“Fairly clear and definite”**

One criterion of a learning episode is that the person is trying to gain certain knowledge and skill “that is fairly clear and definite.” That is, the person must have certain definite desired knowledge and skill clearly in mind. Alternatively, he could be clear on the desired application of that knowledge and skill, or on the question or puzzle to which he is seeking an answer. The desired knowledge and skill in one particular learning episode, for example, might be to understand the structure of galaxies. Or the person may want to memorize certain French vocabulary, or discover a colleague’s opinions about a proposed change.

This criterion excludes episodes in which the person wants to learn *something*, but does not have any definite or clear knowledge and skill in mind. Many people attend a museum or a world’s fair primarily in order to learn, but have little or no idea of what the content of that learning will be. The decision to take a certain job or to travel may also be motivated by a desire to learn, but with no definite knowledge and skill in mind. The person expects to benefit somehow from such an experience, but does not have a clear picture of just what changes will occur in him.

### **“Retain”**

The definition of a learning episode specifies that the person wants to gain *and retain* certain knowledge and skill. In many learning episodes, the person wants to retain the knowledge and skill for many weeks or years; in others he hopes to retain it for a lifetime. Sometimes, though, the person wants to remember the knowledge or retain the skill for just a few hours or days. Consequently, we have had to set an arbitrary minimum length of time.

The criterion we chose is simply this: the person must want to retain the knowledge and skill until at least two days later. If he is learning the knowledge and skill on a Tuesday, for example, regardless of whether it is eight o’clock in the morning or just before bedtime, he must want to retain it until at least Thursday morning.

This criterion means that efforts to gain certain knowledge and skill for only a brief time are not regarded as learning episodes. For example, reading a set of instructions one step at a time during one’s efforts to assemble something is not a learning episode. In that situation the person wants to remember the instructions only during the next hour or two while he completes the next step.

A similar example involves a person’s efforts to learn about new washers or new cars in order to decide about making a purchase. This learning and deciding might be crowded into one or two days. If the person was not strongly motivated to retain

the information after making the decision, these efforts would not be considered very deliberate learning episodes.

If the purchaser wanted to retain a *portion* of the knowledge for several days, we would have to discover whether the motivation to gain and retain that portion was at least 51 % of the total motivation. Similarly, a newspaper reporter might have some slight desire to remember the gist of an incident for some time, but be primarily motivated by the immediate goal of putting the information into today's story.

A salesman learning about a client and his needs before his first and only contact with that client is another example of an effort to gain, but not retain, certain knowledge. That is, the salesman might have no desire to remember the information after seeing the client that evening or the following morning.

Similarly, a secondary school guidance counselor may spend 25 minutes reading the files of the three students he is about to interview, but has no intention of remembering the information past the end of the interviews. This episode seems to be temporary "information processing": it is not prompted by a desire for relatively permanent knowledge.

The reader may wonder why I chose "two days later" or "until the day after tomorrow" as the minimum length of time for which the person must want to retain the desired knowledge and skill. A shorter time simply seemed too short to me. Gaining certain information in order to use it the next day seems quite different from wanting to remember it for a longer period of time. A longer criterion might make as good sense as the one I have chosen. Wanting to retain the knowledge and skill for at least three or four days, for example, or even for one or two weeks, might be an acceptable criterion. I cannot think of any special reason, though, for choosing one of these times instead of two days. In most learning episodes, in fact, the intent is to retain the knowledge and skill for at least a week or two.

It would be possible to establish 48 hours or some other definite number of hours as the minimum criterion. Although this would be easier to understand and communicate, it seems to me that, if the episode occurs on Tuesday evening, there is not really much difference between wanting to retain the knowledge and skill until Thursday morning compared to Thursday evening. However, I do see a fairly important difference between retaining it until Wednesday ("tomorrow") and retaining it until Thursday.

### **"More than half of the person's motivation"**

With notebook in hand, we could follow a person through a normal day. As he begins each new episode, we could ask "For what reasons are you going to perform this activity?" or "What are your goals for the next 30 or 60 minutes?" Our question would be focusing on his immediate reasons for the episode he is just starting, not on his ultimate or long-term goal or purpose.

## THE ADULT'S LEARNING PROJECTS

One of his immediate goals for the episode might be to gain and retain certain knowledge and skill that is fairly clear and definite. If this reason is stronger than all of his other reasons put together, we consider the episode a very deliberate learning episode.

Let us suppose, for example, that we are interested in four women, each of whom is taking a speed reading course. One evening, each woman picks up a biography or travel book in her home, reads it through quickly at two seconds per page, and then reads it again at five seconds per page. We cannot tell from the overt behavior of the four women whether this is a very deliberate learning episode or not. Consequently, we ask each woman her reasons for the episode, and we ask her to assign a percentage of her total motivation to each reason.

Let us suppose that we obtain the data shown in Table 1. Reading the book was clearly a very deliberate learning episode for the first two women. By adding together the percentages for the first two reasons offered by the third woman, we realize that it was a learning episode for her, too. For the fourth woman, however, even though learning was the strongest *single* reason, this was not a learning episode.

Table 1 / Reasons for Reading a Particular Book

Reason	First woman	Second woman	Third woman	Fourth woman
To gain and retain the main ideas of the book	0	70	30	0
To produce a relatively permanent increase in the ability to grasp the important ideas of a book at high speeds	90	0	30	40
Pleasure, relaxation, escape	0	30	40	30
Immediate interest in the content (apart from a desire to retain it)	10	0	0	30

The underlying concept may stand out more clearly in Figure 1, which uses a continuum to show the data for the same four women. In this figure, all episodes falling to the right of the 50% point are very deliberate learning episodes. All of the numbers refer to the person's conscious motivation just before the beginning of the episode, or very early in the episode. We are not concerned with the motivation several hours or days before the episode begins.

### Episodes and learning projects

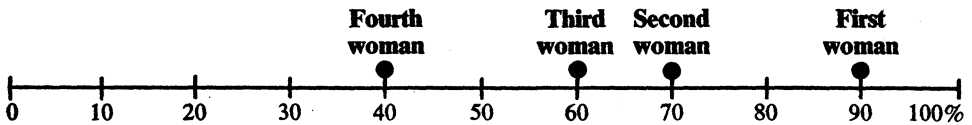


Fig. 1 / A continuum: The portion of a person's total motivation (for beginning and continuing a given episode) that is accounted for by his desire to gain (and to retain until at least two days later) certain fairly clear knowledge and skill.

## Our Central Focus

Since our central focus is on the adult's *efforts* to learn, we are interested in episodes in which a certain *intention* (gaining and retaining certain knowledge and skill) accounts for more than half of the person's motivation. These efforts produce a great deal of knowledge, skill, understanding, affective change, and behavioral change in people.

Many other experiences and factors, though, also produce changes in people. Consequently, many researchers define their central focus as any episode or phenomenon that does, in fact, produce some significant change or learning in the person, regardless of the strength of his intent. This is an important and useful focus, but it is not the one chosen for this book.

Instead, for a variety of reasons, we have chosen to focus on the person's highly deliberate *efforts to learn*. In particular, we study his decisions, preparations, reasons for learning, help, problems, and needs.

One reason for our focus is the probability that very deliberate learning efforts account for a large portion of the person's total change over a year. One section in the next chapter speculates on just how large this portion is, compared to the changes produced by episodes in which the person's intent to learn is weaker. A second reason for choosing to study and describe highly deliberate learning efforts is simply that they have been relatively neglected by researchers. The third reason is the most important. The adult's highly deliberate efforts to learn provide an excellent starting point for developing better competence and help in adult learning. A person may be willing to accept help (and accept opportunities for developing his own competence) with something he is *trying* to accomplish. He is not so likely to accept help with something for which his motivation is low.

## Learning Projects

In the earlier part of this chapter, we selected very deliberate learning episodes from the ever changing activity of a person's life, and discussed only single episodes.

We now use that concept as a foundation for defining our central phenomenon. That central phenomenon – a learning project – is a *series* of clearly related episodes. Instead of focusing on a single episode, we examine several related episodes, usually spread over a period of time.

These episodes may be related by the desired knowledge and skill. For example, the learner may want to learn about various aspects of India. In one episode he reads about the roles and relationships of men and women in India. In another episode he learns about the current economic and political situation from an Indian graduate student. In a third episode he watches a television program describing the life of an Indian child. These three episodes differ in method of learning, in place of learning, and in the particular aspect of the total subject. Yet in the person's mind, they are clearly related by his overall goal of learning about India.

Very deliberate learning episodes can also be related by the use to which the knowledge and skill will be put. A person might undertake a variety of experiences in order to improve his competence as a parent. Another series of episodes might be aimed at obtaining the knowledge and skill necessary for building a boat, solving a problem, or drawing up a set of recommendations.

### Time

A series of related learning episodes might add up to a total of 3, 30, or 300 hours. In order to define a learning project precisely, it is necessary to set a minimum length of time. We have chosen a minimum of seven hours, even though most learning projects are much larger than this. In fact, the mean time for a project is more than 100 hours.

There are several reasons for our choice of seven hours as the minimum size. A seven-hour period is equivalent to one working day, which is a significant amount of time to spend at one particular learning effort. In addition, this minimum seems to work out well in actual interviews. We find that this criterion does not eliminate many learning efforts that are especially important. At the same time, most of the learning efforts that do meet this criterion are quite large or significant.

Of course, one could probably argue quite successfully that six hours or ten hours would be just as appropriate a choice. Either of these criteria would eliminate learning efforts that required only two or three hours.

We also wanted to eliminate learning efforts in which the minimum time was spread over a year or two. Consequently, we set another criterion: the minimum of seven hours must occur within a six-month period. The total learning project might last much longer than six months, of course, but we must be able to identify some six-month period in which the individual spent at least seven hours at this learning effort. Otherwise, the effort does not seem intensive enough to include; it seems too diluted or spread out.

Most learning projects go far beyond the minimum criteria we have set. These

criteria seem necessary, however, to separate major learning efforts from those that are not very significant or intensive.

Almost all learning projects consist of more than three or four episodes, and these episodes occur on at least two or three different days. Our definition, though, could include an intensive one-day effort that had very few interruptions.

With most learning efforts mentioned in interviews, there is no doubt about whether they fit our definition of a learning project. Our interviewers found that almost all efforts to learn mentioned by the interviewees either met the criteria for a learning project without any doubt, or clearly did not do so. Only a few examples were borderline or doubtful. Some of these difficulties and borderline cases are discussed in Appendix A.

## **Laymen grasp the concept**

Few people actually call their learning projects by that name; many do not even apply the term *learning* to their efforts. They simply regard the series of learning episodes as an interest or hobby, or as part of some responsibility. During the first few minutes of an interview, helping a person to identify his learning projects is often a challenging task. Few adults see their activities related in this way except when taking a course.

Quite quickly, though, the typical interviewee does grasp the phenomenon we are describing and does identify one or more recent learning projects. Indeed, "clearly related" in our definition of a learning project means that the person himself considers the episodes clearly related (by the desired knowledge and skill or by the responsibility or action for which they will be used). The learning project must be clearly defined in his mind, and he must be able to decide without much difficulty whether any given episode in his life is part of the project or not. The learner, not just the interviewer, must perceive that the various episodes are clearly related to one another, and are fairly distinct from all other episodes.

Even though a person may have some professional interest in learning or education, he may have the same difficulty as others in thinking immediately of his recent learning projects. One way to bring examples to mind is to think of subjects or topics in which one is particularly interested, for example, hobbies and other leisure-time activities. Another way is to recall some major problems or decisions that one may have tackled recently. An effort to learn may have accompanied them. One further way to recall examples of one's own learning projects is to think of certain recent activities; reading, television, travel, meetings, or group discussion may have formed part of a recent learning project.

The concept of a *series* of episodes is not just an arbitrary concept that we impose on experience. People do plan and describe many of their activities in this way. Miller, Galanter, and Pribram (1960), for example, have pointed out that people do have plans, and that these plans provide structure to what a person does during

the day. When planning a day, the person may have several possible plans in mind, though the details for each have not yet been established. The person then decides which one to execute or continue that day. Although the authors discuss intention in general rather than intention to learn, their concept of plans seems readily applicable to learning efforts.