Mistakes are part of learning

Submitted by a TCS reader (not verified) on 6 June, 2005 - 20:04

If we consider that learning is a process of conjecture and refutation, then we must understand that mistakes and failure are a necessary part of creating knowledge! While taking reasonable precautions against mistakes that threaten life and limb, we must refuse to fear making mistakes and welcome them as a part of learning.

Your thoughts on this, please.

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Two kinds of mistakes?

Submitted by solasister (not verified) on 8 June, 2005 - 09:16

Sometimes I wonder if there are two kinds of mistake we can make.

First, the mistake-in-learning-situation, which we quite clearly *do* need to accept in order to create knowledge. I think it's John Holt in one of his books who provides a striking example of this. A class of children are being asked to guess a number between 1 and 100. Someone starts by asking "is the number greater than 50?". Holt answers "no", and the entire class groans - even though they've obviously got as much information as if he'd answered "yes"! The children are already so tied up with the idea of the correct answer being the best one.

More broadly (in terms of learning situation), there are days when you've gone out to do something with your children, and you discover that despite your plans to travel home on a bus as requested by your children, that the bus runs too infrequently and everyone is fed up and bored by the time it arrives. You have now learnt that it's not always wise to rely on buses for transport, and that next time perhaps the bus ride should be for fun, and not a necessity :-) In this case, the "failure" was less pleasant than guessing the wrong number, but I think it's still important to see it as something to learn from, not something to beat yourself up about.

But when we go further along, to the kind of mistake one could also describe as a "moral error" - the times when you made a decision that quite clearly had a bad effect on people you care about... well, I *can* still see these as mistakes that we need to learn from, but I find it much harder to do so. And, to be pragmatic about it, if the mistake *has* been made ... well, it's been done, so take the knowledge and move along with it :-)

So maybe it's not two kinds of mistakes. Maybe it's just that the levels of "reasonable precaution" differ, and that while it's totally reasonable to guess at a number or choose a form of transport without too much thought, there are other situations where it would be unwise to dive in like that. But yeah, learn from all of them - I suppose you could make the case that the *only* way you learn is by making mistakes.

Mistakes...

Submitted by Dawn Frank on 8 June, 2005 - 19:02

Solasister wrote: "I suppose you could make the case that the *only* way you learn is by making mistakes."

I disagree. We learn by thinking about things, by looking closely, testing our theories... (Conjecture and refutation and all that.) It's possible to learn a great deal while reading a book. It's also possible to make many, many mistakes and not learn from any of them.

I agree that failure shouldn't be cause for debilitating guilt and depression, but I don't think it needs to be embraced either. It just is. Sometimes we figure things out and learn without having to stand around waiting for a bus in frustration, sometimes we don't. Once we're standing around waiting, it makes more sense to think about how to make that experience better than to despair and wallow in misery.

It seems possible to me that trying to launch right into planning better for next time overlooks the very real situation, which CAN be improved right now, if the people involved are up for it. I think when we accept "this is a failure, we'll do better next time" then this -- right now -- becomes a failure. How about reframing it as simply a different problem to solve? Before, the problem was how to get out and about w/out a car. Now, the problem is how to enjoy waiting for the bus, or how to rest on the bus ride home, or how to get home w/out the bus, or whatever it is. It seems to me that rather than reject or welcome failure, we might want to re-think the whole notion that every event has to go a certain way, and if we're lucky/creative/optimistic enough, we'll either find the perfect way or fail and learn from it. Better, I think, to let go and be present right now, and keep working to find solutions in the moment that work for everyone.

More mistakes

Submitted by solasister (not verified) on 8 June, 2005 - 19:40

Yeah, I don't think I disagree with any of that. I suppose I was thinking mainly of people trying to be TCS rather than everyone else, and in those circumstances I see far more people making mistakes and feeling they've somehow failed, compared to people who wander through life, making mistakes left right and centre, learning nothing from that, and not giving a shit.

Again, in those trying-to-be-TCS circumstances, I think people often read their being able to refute their theory (discovering that it is not a good idea to always take the bus) as a failure to be TCS. Ideally, they should have a great time at the bus stop instead, but even if that *doesn't* happen ... use *that* failure, and move on :-) I agree that finding new solutions in the present is wonderful, but I don't think that to be in a situation where that's not happening is the same as "wallowing in failure". Sometimes the learning process can just take a bit longer, especially when it's a way of thinking that's totally new to someone.

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