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SUNDAY BOOK REVIEW

Uncram

'How We Learn,' by Benedict Carey

By DAN HURLEY AUG. 22, 2014

A spate of recent best sellers has trumpeted a supposedly surprising secret to success, both in school and in life. It's called hard work.

In "Outliers," a fixture on best-seller lists since it was published in 2008, Malcolm Gladwell assured us that talent and intelligence matter little, but that 10,000 hours of practice in our chosen endeavor is all it takes to become a chess grandmaster, Bill Gates or a rock star as successful as the Beatles.

Taking that can-do message toward a Jillian Michaels level of hysterical intensity was Amy Chua's "Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother" (2011). A similar but gentler approach came from Paul Tough, in "How Children Succeed" (2012), who described the benefits of grit and character — the ability to overcome and learn from failure. Last year, Amanda Ripley chimed in with "The Smartest Kids in the World," showing why students in countries like South Korea perform so well: because they study so much.

Now comes the inevitable counterattack against these purveyors of the hard-work school of schooling. In "How We Learn," Benedict Carey tells us to ease up, take a break, get a good night's sleep and stop the cramming. Instead of beating our brains into submission through 10,000 hours of drudgery, we need to study smarter, not harder.

Carey, a New York Times science reporter, begins his book with a confession: He once was a grind. Like those high-school students in South

Korea, he was "the kid who sweated the details, who made flashcards. A striver, a grade-hog, a worker bee." Then, after being rejected by all but one of the colleges to which he had applied, and dropping out after a year, "I loosened my grip," he writes. "I stopped sprinting."

The softer approach, which he jokingly refers to as "freeing the inner slacker," worked well enough for him to eventually obtain degrees in mathematics and journalism before landing at The Times in 2004. Now he has devoted his considerable reporting chops to uncovering the scientific basis of how learning actually occurs, and how we can make the most of our brain's natural proclivities: A nap is not just an hour or two of lost study time; sleep actually enhances learning. Daydreaming and distraction are good ways to generate creative solutions to difficult problems. Breaking up study times across days and weeks beats cramming, even when the total study time is the same. And mixing up your environment, by trying a new cafe or new music on your earphones, works better than serving time in a library carrel.

I very much would like to report that all this makes for gripping reading. Almost a decade ago, I collaborated with Carey on a profile for The Times about the psychologist Albert Ellis, and like millions of readers, I have learned immensely from his many well-reported articles over the years.

After a promising introduction, however, Carey makes most of his points by reciting study after study, with only the occasional cameo of a psychologist or research subject to break things up. Alas, strong narratives and scene-setting, personalities and detailed observation are the sleds on which data, studies and statistics move in the best science books.

Some of these insights, moreover, are already well known and widely applied. Do we really need randomized, placebo-controlled studies to tell us that taking breaks, getting a good night's sleep, and letting ideas percolate are better than cramming for 48 hours straight on the wings of Provigil?

Then again, following Carey's recommendations, I intentionally read his book over a period of weeks, and then took a full day's break before sitting down to write this review. It helped.

Ultimately, "How We Learn" makes for a welcome rejoinder to the faddish notion that learning is all about the hours put in. Learners, Carey reminds us, are not automatons.

HOW WE LEARN

The Surprising Truth About When, Where, and Why It Happens

By Benedict Carey

254 pp. Random House. $27.

Dan Hurley's latest book is "Smarter: The New Science of Building Brain Power."

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