

Learning Steps

Learning is a process that moves from incompetence to competence. Oh, if it were only that simple and that linear. It's not as our own personal experience shows us. Think of something in your own life that you learned how to do: you learned to play a sport, or play a musical instrument; you learned a hobby like knitting, fly tying, or sailing; you learned to ride a bike or drive a car. Once you achieve mastery you rarely think about the activity anymore and before you knew it was something you wanted to do, it was completely unknown to you — virtually nonexistent because it had no place in your world. In between those two ends is the action and drama of learning, the attention, the euphoria and the frustration. Learning can be described as a process in four stages.

Stage One: Unconscious Incompetence

I don't know what I don't know. We're incompetent but we don't care — we don't even know we're incompetent because the activity means nothing to us. The skills or techniques for achievement don't even matter; the thing itself doesn't show up on my radar. Think of two things where you are currently at this stage: unconscious incompetence. (Piloting the space shuttle for example.)

Stage Two: Conscious Incompetence

Now I know what I don't know. When we first start learning a new skill or way of being in the world, it can be overwhelming to realize how much we don't know. It can even be scary. Some people stop learning at this stage and give up. We're all fingers and toes. It is an awkward stage because we are focused so intently on every detail of every action or component of the thing we are learning. If you learned how to drive a vehicle with a manual transmission, recall those early attempts to concentrate on clutch in, foot off the throttle, change gear, release clutch, step on gas... all the while watching traffic, speed and thinking about the process as it happened. That's what conscious incompetence feels like.

Stage Three: Conscious Competence

I know what I know. What a relief. At some point we begin to realize we have achieved a certain level of mastery — at least over some aspects of the challenge at hand. We may not be experts but we have some expertise. We are aware of knowing a bunch of stuff. It's quite satisfying — right up until the moment we run into the next thing we don't know how to do. Then bang, we're tripping over our own feet, back into conscious incompetence: another area to master. As we become more and more adept in a given area, we cycle frequently between stages two and three, between conscious incompetence and conscious competence. Most of our learning time is spent bouncing around in these two boxes. It can feel bruising sometimes as well as exhilarating as we become more skilled and sometimes even forget what we know — which leads to the fourth stage.

Stage Four: Unconscious Competence

I'm not aware, and I know. This is sometimes called the "flow state." We are so in tune with the knowing we are on a different plane of being with it. Which sounds mysterious or transcendental — which it is in a way. We've all experienced it, even on a relatively elementary level. After driving a car for a few years,

most days all we do is put the key in the ignition, set a destination in our brains and then drop the whole driving notion until we pull into the parking space and turn off the key. Have you ever changed jobs or moved to a new location in the same city and suddenly found yourself on the highway going to the old job or somehow driving an old route out of habit? Lost in space — or another way to say it is unconscious competence. It's an example of the downside of this kind of mastery or flow state. Sometimes it's no help to be unconscious. Most of the time, this level of mastery makes the activity fun, even magical.