THE TRAINING INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX

Why We've Been Taught to Doubt Our Ability to Learn

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This essay is part of
Training Is Broken: Learning Doesn't Have to Fail.
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It's time to stop treating adult learners like empty vessels waiting to be filled—and start acknowledging what we already know: learning is an individual sport.

SYNOPSIS:

We forget 70% of training content within 24 hours, yet spend $370 billion annually on programs that produce a 12% skill application rate. Meanwhile, we all know how we actually learn has changed: a YouTube video at midnight, a quick chat exchange with an AI tool, trial and error on real problems. The training industry has convinced us we're the problem when we don't complete their programs—but what if the programs themselves are the barrier? With AI making personalized learning instant and free, the role of structured education faces an existential crisis. The future isn't better content delivery—it's becoming activators of curiosity who create the spark that makes people decide they need to learn. Because once that spark ignites, nothing can stop them.

Here's a question that might make you uncomfortable: When was the last time something truly "stuck" from a full-day training session?

According to Ebbinghaus's Forgetting Curve (yes that's a real thing and that too by the same person who pioneered the Learning Curve!), we forget approximately 70% of new information within 24 hours if it's not reinforced. Within a week, that number climbs to 90%. Yet we continue to invest billions in multi-day training programs, wondering why nothing changes back at the desk.

> But here's the irony: *The L&D industry has convinced us this is our fault.*

We've been conditioned to believe that if we don't complete the long format full 8-hour training or the multi-day or multi-week learning journeys, if we don't sit through every module, then we are not serious about learning. We are the problem.

What if I told you that's backwards?

The Moment You Actually Decided to Learn Something

Think about the last skill you genuinely acquired. Not the one you were mandated to learn. I mean something you *actually* learned and can use today. Maybe it was finally figuring out how to increase your personal productivity, how to be more financially secure, learning enough about a new technology to have credible conversations, or developing a management or leadership skill that works with your difficult stakeholder.

> Now ask yourself: *Did you learn that by sitting through a three-day workshop?*

Or did you learn it through: a 7-minute YouTube video at 11 PM when you were stuck, or a conversation with a colleague who'd figured it out or after three failed attempts where you learned what *not* to do

The difference? You had **the spark.** You decided you needed to know this. And once you made that decision, nothing could stop you. You had access to the world's information—AI assistants, video tutorials, expert blogs—and you hunted down exactly what you needed, in the format that worked for you, at the moment you needed it. That's how most of us *really* learn.

The AI Revolution Makes
This Crisis Urgent

Here's what makes clinging to traditional training models not just ineffective but borderline negligent: *The rapid proliferation of artificial intelligence and access to abundant knowledge.* We now have AI assistants that can explain complex concepts in exactly the way *you* need to hear them, generate examples tailored to *your* context, answer your questions at 2 AM, and adapt based on your learning style and pace. A working professional doesn't need to wait for next quarter's training— they can have a conversation with an AI that meets them exactly where they are. A student struggling with calculus can get explanations regenerated in different ways until something clicks, at their own pace, without judgment.

> The world **has** shifted from information scarcity to abundance—and from one-size-fits-all to infinitely personalized learning.

Yet we're still saying: "Sit in this room, at this time, and we'll deliver content in the way we've decided is best." Meanwhile, every learner has

a personal AI tutor in their pocket that can outpace and out-personalize any pre-designed training program. This isn't just about corporate training. Universities face the same existential question: when students can get instant, personalized explanations from AI, what is the role of structured education?

The answer is to fundamentally rethink what learning means and what role we play in igniting it.

The Missing Ingredient:
Emotion and the Activation of Curiosity

So, let's talk about what actually drives learning and change. True learning—the kind that leads to lasting behavior change—happens when emotions are engaged. Research in neuroscience is unambiguous: Emotion and cognition are inseparable in the learning process. No emotional engagement? No lasting memory. No lasting memory? No behavior change. Yet look at how we design most training: learning objectives, content delivery, comprehension tests, completion rates. *Where's the emotion? Where's the moment that makes someone care?*

We've professionalized learning to the point where we've sterilized it. We've made it safe, predictable, and utterly forgettable. Here's the uncomfortable truth: Our job is not to transfer knowledge. Information transfer is now free, instant, and infinitely available.

Our job is to become activators of curiosity.

We need to create the conditions where: Someone encounters an idea that challenges their assumptions...a question emerges that they can't stop thinking about...an internal motivation ignites that drives them to explore, experiment, and persist. Helping learners ignite the spark of "*I*

need to understand this" is everything. Once that internal motivation takes over, the learner becomes unstoppable.

The Uncomfortable Truth About One-Size-Fits-All

Here's what the traditional training model refuses to acknowledge: *Every single person in that training room is different.* They have different prior knowledge, skill gaps, learning preferences, motivations, and contexts they'll apply this learning to. Yet we march them through the same content, at the same pace, in the same order, and expect the same outcomes. But acknowledging these differences is messy. It doesn't scale. So instead, we pretend the differences don't matter and blame individuals when training "doesn't stick."

Before the Pitchforks Come Out...

Let me be clear: I'm not advocating for the death of all structured training and coaching. Compliance training where everyone needs the same legal or safety information? Technical procedures where there's one correct way to operate equipment? Foundational knowledge where teams need a common language? One on one leadership coaching? These still have their place and often are the most optimal approach.

But let's stop pretending they're the right model for developing leadership capabilities for a group of aspiring or current leaders, driving behavior change, building strategic thinking, improving communication, or fostering innovation. These human, adaptive, contextual skills require something fundamentally different—something that respects the individual's journey and meets them where they are.

The Question Nobody Wants to Ask

What if the biggest barrier to learning in your organization isn't the lack of training programs—but the training programs themselves?

What if by trying to control, standardize, and scale learning, we're actually suffocating the very thing we're trying to ignite? What if instead of designing more engaging content, we need to fundamentally rethink our role? What if our job isn't to *teach* people but to create the conditions where they're inspired to teach themselves?

It's Time for Something Different

The future of learning isn't about better content delivery. It's not about more engaging videos or sophisticated LMS platforms. It's about fundamentally reimagining our role—*from knowledge transferers to curiosity architects.*

This isn't about abandoning structure or expertise. It's about respecting adults and young adults as the capable, self-directed learners they prove themselves to be every day when they're genuinely motivated. It's about lighting sparks, not filling vessels. It's about architecting curiosity, not transferring information. And in an AI-amplified world where personalized learning is the baseline expectation, organizations and institutions that don't make this shift will find themselves increasingly irrelevant.

Are we ready to let go of what's comfortable and explore what's actually effective and stop being the gatekeepers of knowledge and become the igniters of curiosity?

What's been your most powerful learning experience in the last year? Did it come from a formal training program, or somewhere else entirely? And more importantly, what triggered that moment when you decided you needed to learn it? I'm curious to hear your stories.

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