

ESSAY 7

REAL LEARNING BEGINS WHEN TEACHING ENDS

*How unlocking curiosity—not curriculum—
drives real transformation.*

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This essay is part of
Training Is Broken: Learning Doesn't Have to Fail.

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*How unlocking curiosity—not curriculum—
drives real transformation.*

*We dismiss “going down a rabbit hole” as distraction.
It’s actually where real learning happens—when
curiosity takes over and people pursue answers
because they need to, not because they’re told to.*

SYNOPSIS:

The phrase “going down a rabbit hole” is typically used pejoratively—a warning against distraction, a sign of losing focus, evidence of poor time management. But what if we have it backwards? What if the rabbit hole is exactly where transformative learning happens? When someone becomes genuinely curious about something, when a question lodges itself so deeply they can’t stop exploring, when they look up from their screen at 2 AM realizing three hours have vanished—that’s not distraction. That’s learning in its purest form. The future of corporate learning isn’t better content delivery or more engaging modules. It’s becoming architects of curiosity who create the conditions where people stand at the edge of their own rabbit holes and decide to jump. Because once that internal drive ignites, nothing can stop them. And in the age of AI, where every answer is instantly available, the only question that matters is: What makes someone want to ask?

The Moment Everything Changed

Think about the last time you genuinely learned something complex—not because you had to, but because you couldn't help yourself.

Maybe you were renovating your house and suddenly needed to understand load-bearing walls. Or your teenager mentioned a historical event you'd never heard of, and you spent the evening tracing connections across Wikipedia. Or a colleague used a technical term in a meeting, and you found yourself three articles deep at midnight, following link after link, diagram after diagram.

You weren't completing modules. You weren't earning badges. You weren't checking off learning objectives. You were tumbling down a rabbit hole—and it felt entirely different from any formal training you'd ever experienced.

| *That difference isn't incidental. It's everything.*

What Actually Happens in the Rabbit Hole

When we dismiss someone as “*going down a rabbit hole*,” we're usually implying they've lost focus, wandered off task, gotten distracted by tangential curiosity. But neurologically, something powerful is happening that formal training rarely achieves.

Research in cognitive science shows that self-directed curiosity activates the brain's reward system—specifically the release of dopamine in the hippocampus, the region responsible for forming long-term memories. When you're curious, your brain doesn't just receive information passively; it actively hunts for it, creates stronger neural pathways, and

retains it more durably. Studies by Dr. Matthias Gruber and colleagues at the University of California demonstrated that states of high curiosity enhance learning and memory for both the target information and incidental material encountered during that curious state.

More remarkably, curious learners show better retention not just immediately, but 24 hours later—precisely when most corporate training content has evaporated from participants’ minds.

The rabbit hole works because *it flips the fundamental equation of learning*. In traditional training, we start with answers and hope people find them interesting enough to remember.

In the rabbit hole, people start with questions they genuinely care about—and the answers become unavoidable.

The Training Model Was Built for the Wrong Era

Corporate training emerged in an era of information scarcity. Knowledge was expensive, difficult to access, and concentrated in experts, books, and institutions. If you wanted to learn project management, you needed someone to teach you. If you wanted to understand financial modeling, you attended a course. The training model made sense: gather people together, transfer knowledge from those who have it to those who don’t, measure completion.

That world no longer exists.

Today, any curious question can be answered in seconds. YouTube hosts millions of tutorials. AI can provide personalized explanations at any time, in any format, adapted to your level of understanding. The constraint isn't access to information—*it's the motivation to seek it out and the curiosity to keep exploring when you hit complexity.*

Yet our training infrastructure still operates as if it's 1985. We still design courses that “cover material.” We still schedule learning at convenient times for the organization, not moments of genuine need. We still measure success by completion rather than by whether anyone cared enough to keep learning after the session ended.

We've optimized the delivery of answers while ignoring the more fundamental question:

What makes someone curious enough to seek those answers in the first place?

Why Mandated Learning Kills Curiosity

Here's an uncomfortable truth: *Making learning mandatory is the fastest way to ensure people don't actually learn.*

When you tell someone they must complete a training module, you've activated a psychological response researchers call “*controlled motivation*”—behavior driven by external pressure rather than internal interest. Studies in Self-Determination Theory, developed by Edward Deci and Richard Ryan over four decades, consistently show that controlled motivation produces shallow engagement, minimal retention, and rapid abandonment once the external pressure disappears.

By contrast, “**autonomous motivation**”—the drive that comes from genuine interest—produces deeper processing, better retention,

greater transfer to novel situations, and continued learning long after any formal requirement ends. It's the difference between compliance and commitment. Between checking a box and actually caring.

The tragedy is that mandated training doesn't just fail to produce learning—it actively suppresses curiosity. When you force someone to sit through content they don't care about, you train them to associate “learning” with obligation, boredom, and coercion. *You make it less likely they'll seek out knowledge voluntarily in the future.*

We've built a \$370 billion industry around controlled motivation, then wondered why behavior doesn't change.

The Shift from Teaching to Igniting

If the rabbit hole is where real learning happens, then our role can't be to teach. It must be to ignite.

This isn't semantic wordplay. It's a fundamental *reconception* of what learning professionals do. Teaching implies transfer: I have knowledge; I give it to you. Igniting implies activation: I create conditions where you become curious enough to seek knowledge yourself.

What does igniting look like in practice?

It starts with questions, not answers. Research by Harvard's Project Zero found that the most effective learning experiences begin by provoking authentic questions that learners genuinely want to answer. Not rhetorical questions with obvious answers. Not “What do you think?”

followed immediately by “Let me tell you.” *Real questions that unsettle assumptions, reveal gaps in understanding, or connect to challenges people actually face.*

Consider two approaches to teaching negotiation skills:

Traditional approach: “Today we’ll cover the seven principles of effective negotiation. Principle one: Separate people from the problem...”

Igniting approach: “You’re about to lose your best employee to a competitor. She’s in your office right now. You have ten minutes. What do you say?” [Pause. Let them struggle.] “Interesting. Let’s look at what just happened in your head...”

The first delivers content. The second creates a need to know—and *that need is what sends people down the rabbit hole.*

The AI Revolution Makes This Urgent

In a world where AI can answer any factual question, explain any concept, and provide personalized tutoring on demand, what is the value of formal training that merely delivers information?

The uncomfortable answer: There isn’t one.

When someone can ask ChatGPT to explain a leadership framework, generate five examples relevant to their situation, adapt the explanation to their learning style, and answer follow-up questions indefinitely—why would they sit through a three-hour workshop covering the same material at a pace designed for the average participant?

They wouldn't. And increasingly, they don't.

But here's what AI cannot do: It cannot make you care. It cannot ignite curiosity about something you haven't thought to ask about. It cannot create the emotional spark that makes a question feel urgent and important. It cannot design an experience so provocative that you can't help but explore further.

That's the irreplaceable human contribution to learning: not delivering answers, *but creating the conditions where people decide they need them.*

What Organizations Can Do Differently

The shift from teaching to igniting doesn't require abandoning structure or expertise. It requires redesigning around curiosity rather than compliance.

Start with provocation, not objectives. Instead of learning objectives that list what participants will know by the end, design provocations that surface what they don't know but suddenly need to. Show them a decision point where their current mental models break down. Present them with a problem that's harder than it looks. Create cognitive dissonance that makes curiosity feel less like interest and more like necessity.

Make exploration the design. Rather than content followed by practice, reframe current mindsets or mental model to learners become naturally more inclined to explore. Use provocative data and anecdotes to engage learners at an emotional and personal level, not a linear path to follow that doesn't challenge their preconceptions. The messy process of hunting for answers, hitting dead ends, trying approaches that fail—that's not something to avoid. That's the rabbit hole. That's where learning happens.

Measure curiosity, not completion. Track how many people continue learning after the formal session ends. Monitor what questions they ask, what resources they seek out, what conversations they initiate. If your training successfully ignites curiosity, people will keep learning without you. If it doesn't, completion rates are just theater.

Build “curiosity infrastructure.” Make it trivially easy for people to pursue questions when they arise. Embed AI assistants in daily tools so answers are seconds away, not next quarter's training calendar. Create channels where people can share what they're exploring and pull others into their rabbit holes. Recognize and celebrate people who go deep, not just those who complete requirements.

The Question That Changes Everything

The fundamental question of traditional training is: “How do we transfer this knowledge effectively?”

The fundamental question of *curiosity-driven learning* is: “*What would make someone care enough to seek this knowledge themselves?*”

The first question leads to better slides, more engaging videos, gamified modules. The second question leads to provocations, challenges, and experiences that people can't stop thinking about.

The first question produces compliance.

The second produces commitment.

The first question made sense when information was scarce. The second question is the only one that matters when information is abundant and AI makes every answer instantly accessible.

Standing at the Edge

The phrase “*rabbit hole*” comes from Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*—Alice sees a white rabbit, follows it out of curiosity, and tumbles into a world that transforms her understanding of everything.

| *That’s not distraction. That’s discovery.*

The organizations that win in the age of AI won’t be the ones with the best training content. They’ll be the ones who understand that their job isn’t to fill people with knowledge—it’s to make people so curious they can’t help but fill themselves.

They’ll be the ones who design experiences that put people at the edge of rabbit holes and make jumping irresistible.

Because once someone starts falling, learning becomes unstoppable. The only question is:

| *What are we doing to make them want to jump?*

Did you fall into the rabbit hole recently? 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 dive in? What ways have you tried to ignite the spark in others? I’m curious to hear your stories.

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