

Education Works!

Relevance 101

By Tom Broussard

I think we have entered a time where more and more of what we need to succeed in life has been quietly lost. It's been lost the way the song said, "You don't know what you've got, 'til it's gone." Some things we've lost we really didn't know we needed until we couldn't find them again.

Relevance is one of those concepts that we (probably) knew was important but didn't notice it as it faded away.

In recent years, especially in education, relevance was relegated to an extra, an extravagance that couldn't be measured and therefore could not compete for "black board space" in the classroom. Now we find that people cannot compete without it.

The age old question regarding relevance, "Why do I need to know that?" has been strangled by the answer, "Because it is likely to be on the test."

Please don't get me wrong. We need to know things. We need to know facts. But absent context, facts don't tell us much. The facts are, the queen died and the king died. *Who cares?* Facts must tell a story to be useful. The story is the queen died and the king died of a broken heart. *Ahhh, now I want to know more.*



Ants on a Mobius Strip by M.C. Escher

Daniel Pink tells this tale in his book, [A Whole New Mind](#) and writes that people today need to use both sides of their brains. They have to use the left side--the factual side as well as the right side--the creative side to succeed in the global marketplace.

Relevance is a right side brain attribute.

People and organizations must *search* for relevance (because it is so critical to learning) and learn to *recognize* relevance (because it is not so easy to see). This endless search is necessary because relevance has a shelf life and can "expire" in a world of constant change. Like the virus scan software in your computer-- the search for relevance has to be running in the background all the time.

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"Excellence is an art won by training and habituation. We do not act rightly because we have virtue or excellence, but we rather have those because we have acted rightly. We are what we repeatedly do.

Excellence, then, is not an act but a habit."

- Aristotle, Philosopher

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Relevance is about the present. The search for relevance is about the future. "To be relevant" relies on the context to set its currency. The world around it changes and something that was relevant is no longer. Think-- rotary phones, Beta tape recorders, the Berlin wall, etc.

These changes in relevance conjure changes in skills too. In fact, relevance and skills are so closely coupled as to form a Mobius Strip with relevance on one side and skills on the other. If you remember, a Mobius Strip gives the impression of having no beginning, no end, and only one side even though it clearly must have two! Skills (and consequently education) are bound to relevance in the same way.

As some skills become more relevant--more useful--such as computer skills, communications skills, and computation skills, other skills become less useful--less relevant--such as physical labor or jobs requiring less education.

There are many recent examples. Modern papermaking machines require fewer operators but with higher skills. Agribusiness is feeding more people with fewer farms and displacing many farmers who must learn new skills. Call centers can be operated in India cheaper than in Indiana putting farmers out of work who just recently learned how to be call center operators. And the beat goes on.

The search for relevance is one of the cards in the lifelong learning deck. As a matter of fact, lifelong learning is not a single monolithic skill. Rather it is a family of skills in the same way that a deck of cards consists of related cards of differing values. In this metaphor, relevance is a face card for sure. When Bill Gates talks about high schools being obsolete, relevance

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is one of the things he has in mind. For too many years, our schools have treated education as an exercise in storage. How much can a person be told and retain about a subject.

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Tom Friedman, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of The Lexus and the Olive Tree has just released his latest book, The World is Flat. In it he describes what he calls "the ten forces that flattened the world". Taken together, these forces--these 'flatteners'--such as worldwide communication, collaboration,

and competition--are shaping the world of the 21st century.

Now, in the new "flat" world, the answers, most of them anyway, are there for the picking. The issue is no longer storage. Google has plenty of that. Now the effective employee knows how to learn. Now the effective employee is the one who *knows how to know*--anything.

These are new skills and an entirely new approach to learning. While getting "the right answer" isn't irrelevant yet, the likelihood that today's right answer might not be right tomorrow, makes the emphasis on "knowing how to learn" the gold standard for success in the global market.

As long as education reform continues to emphasize *things to know* rather than *how to know things*, too many people will not get their first lesson in relevance until they are laid off, their skills are out of date and they report that they never saw it coming.

Call it Relevance 101.