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## Once We Know How to Learn, We're Off and Running

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## Once We Know How to Learn, We're Off and Running

**By Eileen Smith**  
UCF Forum columnist  
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I'm a great learner, if I do say so myself.

I learn at my own pace, with my own methods, and make my own connections as they relate to my life, both personal and professional. I feel confident in my ability to find answers to questions that I have, either on my own or by connecting with someone who has the answers. I say this as someone with a high level of self-empowerment and self-confidence.

So how can we as a society infuse the ability for every child in school to feel like me?

Every child knows how to learn. Watch 2-year-olds and see how they figure things out every moment of their day.

We need to have educational systems that are geared toward empowerment and encouragement, rather than, as a friend said, "systems that drive kids into conformity and don't encourage unique discoveries, interests and perspectives." We need to be actively engaging them in their learning, and creating tools that grow the natural engagement and unique perspective that they have been developing since birth. It's a lifetime skill to use every day as their future unfolds.

An interesting strategy being tested involves turning the idea of homework on its head: Use "introductory homework" as a way to present a topic in a variety of modes (reading an article, playing a learning simulation, watching a video) to attain a basic understanding of a topic, and *then* attend class to discuss it in more depth.

That allows the classroom environment to be used for active discussion of something familiar to learners in unique ways depending on the introduction they chose. For some topics the teacher absolutely needs to give guidance. However, we must make sure that

we don't stifle each student's personal approach before they get a chance to get excited about a topic.

And as class discussions progress, the teacher has opportunities for layering content onto the students' deepening understanding.

Today's technology offers an interesting array of tools to aid in that learning process. There are many quality simulations for learning that teach a specific fact or phenomenon with a short interactive game or a video. These are useful and necessary to give a basic understanding of a topic – and then the time is ripe to place learning into the everyday context and let students play with variables in simulations to see the results.

Experimental learning through play (another term for hypothesis testing) is hard-wired into us as mammals.

Interesting opportunities for research into successful learning can be pursued by designing simulations that are more like playgrounds, offering the learners the opportunity to choose their involvement and customize their level of engagement.

For a first exposure to a topic, any learner wants to just “poke around” and see what's interesting – just like students visiting a science center, for instance, as they first enter a large exhibition hall and run from one exhibit to another. That can develop interest on the topic and motivation to explore about it, a key element in learning.

Once introduced during “homework,” the topic is expanded upon in class with discussions and challenges in class groups, raising the performance level of students in an environment overseen by dynamic teachers.

Then students can return to the simulation they first used as a “homework introduction” to work on higher-level experiences, using that new knowledge and understanding gained from classroom discussion.

Students would be satisfied that *wow* – they ARE successful learners!

Then perhaps they would be off and running to tackle the next lesson on their own.

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