

What do good learners believe? What do good learners do?

First, good learners have confidence in their ability to learn. This does not mean that they are not sometimes frustrated and discouraged. They are, even as are poor learners. But they have a profound faith that they are capable of solving problems, and if they fail at one problem, they are not incapacitated in confronting another.

Good learners tend to enjoy solving problems. The process interests them, and they tend to represent people who want to 'help' by giving them the answers.

Good learners seem to know what is relevant to their survival and what is not. They are apt to resent being told that something is 'good for them to know', unless, of course, their crap detector advises them that it is good for them to know - in which case, they resent being told anyway.

Good learners, in other words, prefer to rely on their own judgment. They recognize, especially as they get older, that an incredible number of people do not know what they are talking about most of the time. As a consequence, they are suspicious of 'authorities', especially any authority who discourages others from relying on their own judgment.

Good learners are usually not fearful of being wrong. They recognize their limitations and suffer no trauma in concluding that what they believe is apparently not so. In other words, they can change their minds. Changing the character of their minds is what good learners are most interested in doing.

Good learners are emphatically not fast answerers. They tend to delay their judgments until they have access to as much information as they imagine will be available.

Good learners are flexible. While they almost always have a point of view about a situation, they are capable of shifting to other perspectives to see what they can find. Another way of saying this is that good learners seem to understand that answers are relative, that everything depends on the system within which you are working. What is 'true' in one system may not be 'true' in another. That is why, when asked a question, good learners frequently begin their answers with the words 'It depends'.

Good learners have a high degree of respect for facts (which they understand are tentative) and are skillful in making distinctions between statements of fact and other kinds of statements. Good learners, for the most part, are highly skilled in all the language behaviors that comprise what we call 'inquiry'. For example, they know how to ask meaningful questions; they are persistent in examining their own assumptions; they use definitions and metaphors as instruments for their thinking and are rarely trapped by their own language; they are apt to be cautious and precise in asking generalizations, and they engage continually in verifying what they believe; they are careful observers and seen to recognize that language tends to obscure differences and control perceptions.

Perhaps most importantly, good learners do not need to have an absolute, final, irrevocable resolution to every problem. The sentence, 'I don't know', does not depress them, and they certainly prefer it to the various forms of semantic nonsense that pass for answers to questions that do not as yet have any solution - or may never have one.

Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner, *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* (New York: Delacorte, 1969).