

Learning Lego - 5 reasons why structured learning works harder

By Wendy Shepherd, issued by Red & Yellow 17 Sep 2019

Structured learning isn't the death of flexibility. You can still do the assignments in your pyjamas, I promise. You can still do them at 3 am.



Excellent. Your boss has just bought your whole department an online course that is going to change your whole life, and the best news is, you have as long as you want to finish it. That's right. You can comfortably work at your own pace, your pyjamas, forever, and nobody can say anything about because it's Flexible Learning.

Let's play the video out. You're going to start, with great enthusiasm, on Wednesday night. And somehow, it doesn't happen. It's amazing how much other things suddenly become more interesting. You discover you'd rather regROUT the shower than open your laptop. Eventually, you do an assignment. You do it back a few months later when you've forgotten what it was about. You haven't done another one because you're 'learning

flexibly'. Sixteen years later you finish the course. It's not important what you learned, because you can't remember it anyway.

Okay, so maybe that's a slight exaggeration for dramatic effect, but it's not very far from the truth. I am a huge fan of structured learning, largely because I am useless without a deadline, and I respond well to work affirmation. If either of the things applies to you, then this is when you should prick up your ears.

No deadline is bad

You can read that two ways and both of them are true. You are a human being. Trust me, you need to know what point A and when you should reach point B or nothing will get done. Your best friend in any educational foray is a deadline. It compels you to manage your time, which is an essential and very misunderstood ninja skill. It gives you something to aim for and best of all, it makes the period you're working on something a finite one. Nothing destroys your learning energy faster than dragging yourself through an assignment over endless weeks with no end in sight. Ask anyone who's taken nine years to get a degree.

Your brain is plastic

This can also be read two ways, but only one is true. Your brain is bendy - it shapes new knowledge into applied skills in very clever ways that mean information can go in your ears and eyes and come out on the keyboard to the infinite benefit of yourself and others. If you take in a new tranche of information in a measured way, preferably in a prescribed amount of time, your brain is better able to retain it so you can actually use it. This is an incredibly simplified explanation of a very complex process. Feel free to do a deep dive [here](#) though, should you choose to.

Humans like patterns

Another word for "pattern" is "context". When we learn things, it's a lot more effective if we learn them in related groups. Most reputable online courses are scaffolded in a gradual process of learning - they start simple and become more in-depth as you progress. This is especially helpful when you're learning a new skill set, or further polishing an existing one. Knowledge builds over the duration of the course and your brain is prepared to make connections between Module 1 and Module 5,

which enables you to make effective use of all the information. Structured learning delivers this context beautifully, in a well-designed sequential way that helps your brain absorb the information meaningfully. The key to this is timing - a flexible mode can mean the information is spread out too wide for it to make sense and the context is lost.

Your brain likes it more than Instagram

The affirmation we get from the dopamine rush of Being Liked On Facebook is a real thing. Gen Xers might dismiss that as an educational driver but it can, and is, used to great effect when learning is structured. It's quite simple really - human beings like affirmation. When you're delivering assignments on a regular schedule, you get marked on a regular schedule too. Even if you didn't do magnificently, the fact that someone took the time to give you helpful feedback is satisfying and motivating. It makes you more likely to continue with the course. What's even nicer, is that you get an actual person to talk when you have a question, and a useful face-to-face tutorial every week that makes your whole learning experience richer. Such are the props of structured learning.

It's just what grown-ups do

This is an unpopular sentiment, but I'm afraid it's true. Being able to meet deadlines, learn from experience and manage your time effectively are things you actually get paid to do. Flexible learning sounds lovely but it doesn't do anything to help you galvanise your soft skills. It's not easy balancing a full-time job and an online course, but it is totally doable and totally worthwhile. Learning in a structured framework doesn't limit your creativity, or curtail your individuality. It makes them more valuable.

Structured learning isn't the death of flexibility. You can still do the assignments in your pyjamas, I promise. You can still do them at 3am. You can still do them at your own pace. The difference is that you have help at every turn, an expectation of what is coming next, and the delightful feeling that you will finish the course, and have something to show for it.

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About the author: Wendy Shepherd is the Section Head of our Certificate programmes and huge contributor to our new [Advanced Diploma in Copywriting](#). She is passionate and hardcore with a soft centre and has a huge heart for her students. She spends her free time on criminology and mom-dancing.

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