

### Anne Hull

Change Management  
Consultant and Training

This concept is popularly found in change management discussions and deals with our normal resistance to change. Unlearning deals with becoming aware of our habits and thought patterns. We have millions of habits, most unconscious ones, and some get in our way of being and doing our best. We have to become conscious of our behavior and mental maps, look at what needs to change and why, then create new habits to achieve our goals. Most self-improvement and positive thinking is based on this concept.

### Don McIntosh

Owner, Trimeritus  
eLearning Solutions Inc

Learning is clearly not a permanent change otherwise we would never forget. You have given some very good examples of unlearning.

### Thomas Garrod

Learning Consultant

Here is what it means to me.

Someone once said (7 Habits of Highly Effective People) that when the paradigm shifts, everyone goes back to zero. By this was meant that in an industry where some companies have a stronghold (e.g., market share and existing patents) all players fall to a position of equality because the new paradigm makes previously held advantages moot.

In period of shifting paradigms, realigning priorities, and evolving technologies, Toffler seems to suggest that we will need intellectual flexibility and agility. Only when we taken apart what we know, microscopically examine it, and challenge our present conclusions, can we unlearn where needed and then acquire a new perspective.

"That's the way we've always done it." is no longer a valid recommendation (if it ever was).

**Lyndsay Howarth**  
Director 11th Hour  
Group Pty Ltd

I agree RK, with both yourself and Tofler.  
13 years teaching intellectually handicapped illustrated many times when a different instructor not carrying out the program as designed resulted in 'unlearning'.

Typists had to unlearn double-spacing for computer purposes. There are many things we get used to that change and we have to unlearn. WHO (World Health Organization) used to have (and may still have) a definition of IQ which said it was the extent to which an individual can adapt to new circumstances... as per Darwin. It is true... and sometimes involves unlearning.

**Fareena Mahmood**  
E-Learning Technologist

As Lyndsay says, I would try to interpret 'unlearning' as 'unlearning' a process of learning technique rather than knowledge and concepts. Unlearning would mean accepting change for the better and I agree with Toffler's view.

**Jan Watrous-McCabe**  
E-Learning Technologist

This is a wonderful topic, one we frequently don't consider enough when we design learning opportunities. Reading the comments on your blog as well as your post, I have to say that the comments about brain theory resound with me. It is not unlearning as much as it is relearning and establishing new neurologic paths in our brains. We have previous experience and knowledge that has served us well and we need a reason to practice a new way of doing things. Only with practice will the new way of doing things become the "preferred" method. As instructional designers we need to show the benefits of doing something in a new way and then give lots of time to practice. Establishing a new way of doing things is difficult (I can speak from experience...not getting any younger!).

**Steve Chorny**  
Sr eLearning Specialist  
at OLG

I agree, 100 percent

**Yvette Alejandro**  
Office Manager at  
Suzanne Anderson  
Properties

I agree, as a young adult everything I was taught I had to "unlearn" in order to better myself, nothing I knew compares to the things I know now!

### Amitai Gat

Instructional Designer  
and Learning  
Technologist

I make it the inability to adapt to new technology, to the abrupt changes in work force and work place. And most important in one's lack of motivation to keep current in his/her profession. If we talk about LLL (Life Long Learning), than failing to do the above activities, can probably be defined as "unlearning" because a person's knowledge will become obsolete and he will be as an illiterate person in previous centuries.

### Laura Lingle

Lambent Learning:

Regarding "unlearning"-- I believe it makes more sense to think in terms of change. Unless someone can literally go into one's brain and remove something one has learned (a ridiculous concept, yes?), there's really no way to "unlearn." Instead, we grow. We change. We replace older learning with newer learning.

### Paul Terlemezian

President, iFive Alliances

Excellent question!

Perhaps we did not "learn" what we thought we learned.

For example: As trainers did we learn how to help others be effective or did we learn how to:

1. Deliver a great "lecture"
2. Create engaging elearning
3. Produce videos that have impact

So to us in the training industry we need to "unlearn" our commitment to the method of delivery and refocus on learning how to be accountable for the success of others. Otherwise, we take the risk of branding ourselves as "illiterate" with our focus on the method vs. the outcome.

**Maxwell Repplemeyer  
(LIGER)**

Chief Musclehead at  
Max Rep's Bodybuilding,  
Inc.

If you don't stand for something you'll fall for anything. Unlearning behaviors is fine but you need to understand why you do what you do, why you should change and have an idea of what your next change will be.

**Beryl Loeb**

Training, coaching,  
retreat design &  
facilitation

Too often people get into a rut in how they communicate, lead, manage or problem-solve. "Unlearning" can mean seizing the opportunity to break precedent. Change the previously learned behaviors that may no longer work for you.

I love this Alvin Toffler quote. For many years it was on the opening page in my capabilities brochure and an opening quote in many of my training workbooks. Such a critical concept in the Information Age and now even more relevant in the Digital Age.

**Colleen Starchuk**

Consultant, Trainer,  
Coach at Creating  
People Power

I prescribe to a 'constructivist' view of learning. Within this context is 'unlearning' even a consideration? Isn't adaptation more appropriate? I don't believe we forget our old approaches, I think we adapt and refine them to match current circumstances. Somewhere, back in those banks, we would have access to our previous approach if we felt the circumstances demanded it. Unlearning? Not so sure that ever really happens. Forgetting? That's a different story!

**Clare Novak**

Consultant, Trainer,  
Coach at Creating  
People Power

Unlearn? I suspect that is difficult as it would require brain neurons to atrophy and the information to literally die out in the brain. Possible yes, but slowly, if at all.

Learning grows new neural pathways. So learning constantly could be considered a new literacy in addition to reading and writing. After all, if we didn't read and write, we wouldn't be on LinkedIn learning from our peers.

Perhaps as important as what Toffler proposes as a new literacy, is the ability to think critically and separate information from noise and to be able to judge the quality of information.

### Ann Stites

Expert Organizational  
Change Consultant and  
Trainer

Toffler nicely built on Kurt Lewin's change model of unfreeze, transition, refreeze. Still works!

### Vincent Bouw MSM CPC

Specialist Human  
Capital Development &  
Performance

To me, unlearning is just learning a new way. Unlearning does not mean you forget something or get rid of something, but rather you overlay it with a new, stronger behavioral pattern. From a more brain scientific point of view, you learn something by repeatedly firing a certain pattern of neurons. This repeatedly firing creates a coating around the neuron path called Myelin which helps the energy/electricity to run faster through the neuron path, hence establishing the learning (simply put). You cannot just overnight erase such a neuron path, it has to be replaced by a new path that is stronger/faster and with time the old path (read behavior/skill) will get weaker and weaker.

### David Dubin

Senior Curriculum  
Developer @ Sage  
Software

I do not totally agree with Toffler's statement to begin with. Literacy, by its very definition and etymology means "pertaining to letters." Therefore one cannot be truly literate if they cannot at least read and write.

With regard to unlearning and relearning, I do not believe that one can unlearn something, but one can forget or disregard something that they have learned, and therefore learn a new or better way to do the same thing -"relearning."

In my opinion, literacy is distinct and different from knowledge, as one can have vast knowledge without literacy. Many craftsmen in the middle ages could not read or write, but had a great deal of skill born from the verbal and visual transmission of knowledge. An aboriginal's knowledge about his or her environment could be extensive, but that culture may never have had an alphabet or writing system.

Conversely, there are those who are extremely literate and well-read, but don't have a bit of knowledge. In the United States, we call them politicians!

### Katherine Bolman

Curriculum Director at  
The Applied History of  
Art and Architecture

I agree with David. The foundation I work for is creating an online course in the history of art and architecture which is free. It is written in English and we are now adding a voice component so that students can listen and read as they learn about the art they are seeing. This, it is hoped, will deepen the learning for those who have a hard time reading and increase their reading ability when they read along as they listen.

**William Brandon**  
Editor, Learning  
Solutions e-Magazine

It seems to me that Toffler was trying to make a point about the increasing rate of change, and the necessity to keep up and change what you do, more so than about "unlearning."

If you look at the research on forgetting, it seems that natural decay takes care of a lot of the unlearning. :)

Much of the time, learning a new way to do something, or a new bit of knowledge, may push the old learning out of memory. It's when no new learning has taken place, and a person thinks that what used to work will still work, that things go wrong! And of course, sometimes, as Will Rogers once famously said, "It ain't what you know, but what you know that ain't so, that causes the trouble."

**Neeraj Jain**  
Writer

I totally agree with you, Sir.

**Leanne Hoagland-Smith**  
Chief Results Officer

Due to conditioning that is innate within all human beings, unlearning is very difficult. However, my sense is your overall premise is right on.

This is why conversation should move from being a lifelong learner to being a self directed learner where individuals take the personal initiative to learn what they need for their current role and future roles.

According to some of the research I have come across, we experience more change in one year than our grandparents experienced in their entire lifetimes.

To be successful with this change suggests that human beings must become more flexible, more open minded, and even more questioning. This also suggests a concentrated focus on higher order thinking skills which is probably the weakest link in the chain to move from where individuals are to where they want to be.

**Larry Barkan**  
Business coaching,  
training, consulting

There is a Taoist saying that in order to gain knowledge, add something every day, to gain wisdom, subtract something every day. Alvin Toffler really was ahead of his time, wasn't he?

**Kathleen Henderson**  
Business Development  
Manager, Corporate  
Gift Cards and  
Incentive Sales

The truly valuable employee of the 21st century must always be in learning mode. Skills are tools and one must always be looking for better tools. The key question should always be "How can I do whatever I am responsible for better, smarter, faster", so employee's should not be "unlearning" but constantly learning.

**Rob Verheyden**  
Materials Management  
Professional

Sounds a bit like the typical self-help regime - replacing a negative habit with a positive one.

**Mark Powell**  
Database Administrator  
at EDS

The ability to adopt past learning which under this definition would require a change in behavior to reflect additional new learning that requires another change in behavior. You in effect forget what you learned yesterday and replace it with what you learned today as opposed to simply falling back into your older, pre-learning behavior.

**Chris Prior-Jones**  
International Business  
Development Specialist

You'll be aware of [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neuro-linguistic\\_programming](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neuro-linguistic_programming) . Practitioners would probably refer to 'Swish', 'Reframing' or a derivative

Hope this helps answer the question

**Anil K**  
International Business  
Development Specialist

Behavior as in action outcomes? Behavior is well studied in the realms of psychology. One has to be careful in trying to introduce this co-relation of learning.

### Peter Rush

International Business  
Development Specialist

As with learning, "unlearning", or no longer applying learned responses, is a process which occurs naturally over time when the learned subject or action is not practiced for a while, or when it becomes uninteresting or boring to carry out.

Deliberate unlearning, or wiping clean the accumulated knowledge in a particular field, is essentially brainwashing, and can be achieved by replacing the previously learned knowledge with more readily accessible and responsive information, which then drives the previously earned knowledge to the deeper and less accessible recesses of the mind.

However, in my view, there is no possibility to entirely "unlearn" our previous experiences and acquired skills without a tabula rasa approach which would render the subject quite inane!

### Darren Acosta

Director de Desarrollo  
de Negocio en Valadis  
System

If learning is changing your behavior, then unlearning is going back to a past way of behavior... not possible at all, as you are always learning by experiences, learned skills, relations and so on. How can you select and ignore some of these and go back to a past estate.

I have had to help staff "unlearn" some bad habits, but it proved too difficult and changed our strategy to helping them learn new good habits.

### Bob Turel

The Trainer Guy

I think a great deal of our "unlearning" has to do with our level of motivation. Think about it, even on an unconscious level, we can be self-inspired, moved, or just plain interested in doing something different. When you eventually stopped smoking it was because you simply didn't want to do it anymore. That is essentially how I stopped too. I recall one day looking down at my hand and seeing my yellowed fingers from the nicotine, and thought to myself, I'm done with this. It happened then within a few days after that I simply went "cold turkey".

One of the keys to your question is what makes us interested in doing something different? What makes the "unlearning" appealing or attractive? Perhaps it is the attraction of doing something new, different, and uncharted, like an exploration. When I think of how many years I have struggled to convince adults to change their behavior in terms of the subject I am teaching them, I often think I should just introduce the subject to them, and then let the change be "organic", come from within themselves when the timing is right for them.

I think that those who are truly flexible about changing times and conditions, will inspire within themselves the attitude to bend and flex with those times and conditions. If you don't teach yourself, who will really teach (lead) you?

### Terrence Seamon

Facilitating Change -  
Achieving Results

I wouldn't define learning that way. Rather, I see learning as a lifelong process of adaptations.

### Allan Katz

Chief Entrepreneurial  
Officer at Momentum  
Marketing Institute

Who said you can unlearn a behavior? You always remember the behavior, you just change your behavior depending on the situation and perceived outcome.

### Elizabeth Deputy

Marketing pro: Corp  
Intell., Mkt Research

Learning is not a permanent change in behavior -- that definition clearly should be questioned. Learning may or may not affect behavior. For instance, learning about subjects such as the life of cavemen or the way the universe was created does not change the behavior of the average person.

**Ann Middleman**  
Market Research  
Consultant and  
Contractor

I agree with Elizabeth. Learning does not necessarily change behavior. It might change attitudes or opinions, but we all know how quickly those can change again. It seems to me that most learning is temporary, anyway. Most of us forget nearly as much as we have learned.

The learning that sticks the longest is attitude/belief learning, rather than fact-based or skill-based learning. These learnings drive most of our actions, including purchases and voting. The most powerful "teaching" comes from our parents and our own experiences. If someone has a bad experience with a restaurant, airline, car, or retail establishment, that experience, which causes anxiety, fear, unhappiness, and/or anger, will stay with the person, even if those businesses change their products, prices, or policies. If someone has a good experience, it will last until he or she has a bad experience with that product or service. For example, someone whose parents bought ONLY Chevrolets will undoubtedly buy a Chevy first. If that is a good experience, the person may buy another Chevy. But if that one is a lemon, the person will never buy a Chevy again.

It's like what Shakespeare wrote: "The evil men do live forever; the good is oft interred with their bones."

So how do you help someone "unlearn?" From experience. For example, many people grow up with prejudices of various kinds. They unlearn them by getting to know "the other;" by seeing that "the other" is a human being with many of the same cares and concerns as they, themselves have.

It's the same with products: try it, you'll like it! That's why companies give out free samples. But the trick is to maintain those good impressions; some companies know how to do that, and others just get lazy (American Airlines, for example).

Now I'll read your opinion, and see if I'm as smart as you!!

**Ernie Castruita**  
Marketing Research  
Manager at ECCU

You never un-learn, unless you sustained brain damage. One simply learns something new.

### Ron Sellers

President at Ellison  
Research

I would also agree that learning and change of behavior are not synonymous. People who engage in high-risk behavior (e.g. smoking, dangerous sexual practices) can learn about the likely consequences of their behavior and still not change that behavior. People all the time learn that cheating and lying are wrong, yet they still do both.

And Ernie is largely correct - short of forgetting, we don't really "unlearn" (I would argue that one can unlearn something by simply forgetting it, as I have unlearned the phone number of my first apartment). If you "learned" that Southwest Airlines is always your least expensive bet from Las Vegas to Portland, and then they double their prices, you will eventually "learn" that your previous knowledge became wrong and you need to "learn" who is now the cheapest fare on that route.

Where this really hits home in a marketing setting is in the area of reputation. GM has been building some pretty high quality cars for a while now, but they're still seen as junk by many Americans who were burned by horrible products in the 70s and 80s. Although their facts are now largely wrong, Americans still largely have not "unlearned" that GM no longer builds cars that fall apart in your driveway.

### Ann Middleman

Market Research  
Consultant and  
Contractor

Ron, your last example is exactly what I was talking about. Bad experiences cause so much trauma and difficulty, that they remain with us. It is extremely difficult to "unlearn" them.

### Miguel Ferraez

Hispanic & Latin  
American Marketing  
Research

Selection of definition may have been unfortunate, but I see a valid underlying issue: From a behavioral point of view: How can we ourselves avoid and then help others to not become the illiterate of the 21st century? I do believe that the skills to learn, unlearn and relearn will continue being a demanded skill in this century.

**Natarajan Sivasailam**

Independent Market  
Researcher

Many valid points above. When we see the current economic crisis, what springs to mind is that human beings engage almost repeatedly, in stupid behavior even when they have learnt that a variant of those very same actions in the past had led to disaster (In these instances, learning has had nil impact). In fact, the last ten years can be claimed to be the infamous decade which was witness to two economic bubbles. Has anything been learnt?

Charles Mackay' Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds documents various mania - this was published in 1841, and yet still, witness the Great Depression, and all the rest.

A bit off-topic though...!

**Rajan Mathew Chelleth**

Marketing Analyst at  
Kuehne + Nagel

My 2 cents on the topic

I don't think that we 'unlearn' any basic learning. For example, we don't unlearn eating with a fork & spoon but you practice newer skills when using chopsticks. To be successful we need to adapt to various new techniques but it doesn't mean we need to unlearn the basic learning.

A willing person keeps learning till he wants.

**Paulette Marino**

Manager at JEA

I've always used the definition of learning as "a relatively permanent change in behavior." The behavior change is only "relatively" permanent because as we learn, we continue to modify our behavior...

**Elizabeth Deputy**  
Marketing pro: Corp  
Intell.

We're talking about two kinds of learning here -- the physical stuff, like learning to eat with a knife & fork, and the "mental" stuff, like learning to speak a new language or studying history. In either case, we tend to forget the learning we don't use. If we move to China and eat with chopsticks for 30 years, it may be awkward to eat with a knife & fork when we move back to the US, but we refresh that skill.

That being said, there is certain "mental" learning that we tend to ignore. The generation that went through the Great Depression as adults never forgot it, but their children quickly forgot the lessons learned from that experience, and more recent generations have never learned those lessons -- until now. Furthermore, we (in the US at least) don't study history as well as we should. In fact, few of us ever learn much history beyond what little we get in elementary and junior high school. Even then, many of the lessons to be learned from history aren't well "imprinted" on us until we have to go through the same situations. So, we have been doomed to recreate our mistakes repeatedly.

**Cherlyn Robinson**  
President at C R Market  
Surveys Inc

Where did you get the definition that something that is learned cannot be "unlearned"? I disagree. Learning is a form of memory. And memories can be forgotten, especially without application. I think that (most) people adapt to new information that is better suited to them. They may replace old info with these new learnings. Eventually past info that is not used may be forgotten. Natural process.

**Denise Rafuse**

The only ways of "unlearning" that I can think of would be a physical injury to the brain or not "exercising" what you have learned for a long period of time (subjective.) So essentially, we don't really "unlearn," we merely find new ways to do things and disregard our previous patterns of behavior.

For example, no one stops smoking. They merely compensating for the urge with a chemical substitute or hypnosis. By physically chewing on gum, a pen or occupying their hands, they are also altering their behavior by replacing it with another. In this case, a tangible object.

**Michael Esquivel**  
ampm Franchise  
Curriculum Designer

To me, his question is the same old question asked a different way. I read it as how do we incorporate the discipline of change into our business behavior to produce better results? I've had the luck of experiencing change and failed change from many different perspectives; the recipient of change, the designer of change and the observer. Here is my two cents.

For anyone to change, most importantly a business, the following must be understood by the business:

- 1) There must be a compelling or significant reason to change
- 2) a clear process that will facilitate change must be defined
- 3) an understanding that failure is a part of change - think of the smoking or dieting - cheating happens.
- 4) change is a non-linear behavior and will not follow a Microsoft Project timeline...people change at different rates and do not like discomfort. Learning new behaviors causes discomfort...try playing golf for the first time.
- 5) you can't change a business without considering and changing the business elements to support the change - culture, processes & procedures, systems and the people
- 5) Most importantly and truly underestimated, Leaders must be the change agents of the organization - not in just in word but in deed.

**Kirk Teetzel**  
Master Planner

You just learn new things...you don't unlearn.

**MUKESH LEDWANI**  
GE Energy tax  
reconciler at Genpact

Hi, I believe this is an awesome point to be discussed as from my concept un learning is nothing but the behavior which can be implemented within ourselves but we don't want to implement it whether knowingly or unknowingly is unlearn. Every day is a new day for us we meet many people and get to learn many thing and we try to adopt the same within ourselves but there are some exceptional cases who don't want to acquire those changes.

**Elza dos Santos**  
Career Coach at  
IMPACT Group

Learning cannot be defined as a permanent change in behavior. Permanency implies stagnation while learning implies evolution. Therefore, changing an acquired behavior is learning.

**Tito Domine**  
Technology Manager at  
JPMorgan Chase

If learning is a permanent change in behavior then one can argue we unlearn by supplantation or supersession.

### Phil Wright

QLD Sales Executive at  
Pentana Solutions

I don't subscribe to that as being an accurate definition or useful.  
By very definition it is not possible to 'un-learn'.

It is however, possible to forget, discard, be distracted from or to learn more relevant or useful information.

It is also possible to apply newly learned skills/behavior superseding that which you previously learned.

### Harlan Goerger

President, H. Goerger &  
Associates

The view I take is we really do not "unlearn" but rather alter our current belief, thinking, habit and action to a new paradigm, thus a new outcome.

If we have continually been told "no" and believe we do not deserve something, we are not un-learning, rather we are changing the base belief and altering it to a new belief, thus a new thinking, new action and new outcome which say "yes".

In the past I thought one had to completely quit one "habit" before you could replace it with a new "habit". Damn that was hard and never worked. Now, address the belief at the base of any action or thinking, work to alter that belief and suddenly the outcome changes! Generally on a permanent basis.

This changed my training significantly.

### Dan Weigold

Personal Success  
Coach at Coach with  
Heart

Not all learning results in behavioral change.

The rate at which new knowledge is being generated we do have to let loose of old information that no longer provides any tangible benefit.

Developing new habits and "unlearning" old ones is a process that requires commitment and in some cases substitution - why did you honor a bad habit and what replaced that bad habit? Often it is the process of substitution that allows you to break and old habit. Of course there is more to breaking a habit than just substitution, but that is one method that works for some people.

Understanding the root of a bad habit is helpful in designing a strategy to unlearn the bad habit.

### Richard Stanuikynas

Leadership  
Development, EQ  
Practitioner

The well-known saying that insanity is repeating the same behavior and expecting different results. I believe that developing one's self awareness of one's values and goals are important in evaluating learned behavior. Another practical question is, "what outcome do I want?" As a life-long learner, I realized that stepping out and looking in and around for the impact of behavior is important in creating and sustaining new ways of being in the world. Here is a link I found useful for "unlearning" - [http://wiki.answers.com/Q/How\\_do\\_you\\_unlearn\\_bad\\_habits](http://wiki.answers.com/Q/How_do_you_unlearn_bad_habits)

### Marianne Weidlein

TopLinked.com  
Facilitator

This is very simplified, but better simple than complex. Habits, along with everything we know and remember, are held on neural pathways in the brain.

The best and easiest way to change a habit is to determine need that one is attempting to satisfy through that habit, then figure out a positive habit with which to replace it. This will become a new neural pathway.

Repeat the new habit so when the satisfaction of that need is triggered, the new neural pathway becomes established in the brain for satisfying that need. The old neural pathway, which is no longer or is rarely activated, eventually falls away. Poof, it's gone! You probably don't even remember it anymore.

**Rande Howell**  
Owner, EmPowered  
Horizons

First you recognize that the body, the brain, the emotions, the mind, and (I assert) the spirit are interlocked into a "conversation" that becomes wired into our neural pathways. And these pathways are fired, or triggered, as we negotiate our world. To "unlearn" a way of interpreting the world, we first have to learn to observe the behaviors, thoughts, and emotions of what we experience are not us. They are only a neurologically wired response and interpretation. As you learn to observe that you and your thoughts and behaviors are not you, you can begin the disruption process by attuning to your breathing and becoming an observer of the wired response you call habit. A great freedom happens here -- you discover that you and your thoughts are not the same. By breathing into the triggering of the emotional response, you interrupt its cascading into the chemistry of a runaway emotionally driven behavior and thought pattern. Most of these patterns are based in fear responses that have short term survival value. In moving from fear based reactions, you come to a place of calm assertiveness. This is where you can open the emotional state of courage that allows you move through the door of the fear that started the pattern and into creating habits, triggered by the same event, that have long term value. Until you appreciate the power of your biology and how to work with it, habits will always trump will power. The sages of the Hindu tradition have worked with elements of this for centuries. What I am adding here is your active part in the creation of yourself.

**Alan Farrell**  
Director, Quickstep  
Consulting

'Can we just plainly unlearn knowledge, skills and attitudes?' It depends on a whole lot of things: the extent to which the knowledge, skills and attitude are embedded; the environment in which the learners find themselves; have the benefits of unlearning and relearning been understood and accepted by the learners?...

**Paul Florenzano**  
Sr. Process Engineer at  
Keystone Dental

Your definition of learning is incorrect; permanent is not associated with learning but behavior is...thus your conundrum.

### Guido Quesada

R&D Advisor at  
Mechanical Problem  
Solving

As odd as it may sound, I have discussed this topic extensively among groups of poets.

In order to create good poetry, a poet must first learn about it. But this learning leads to what we call "mimetic" esthetics, that is, writing just like the people you learned from.

The next step is to "unlearn", that is, to free yourself from the limitations imposed by your current knowledge, so you can really create something.

To me the answer to your question (in the terms you propose it) is quite simple: if learning is a change in behavior, then "unlearning" is also a change in behavior.

However it is not the same as "forgetting" or going back to your previous behavior. The change in behavior related with "unlearning" has to do with learning something else: that what you just learned was either wrong or incomplete. This incompleteness imposes a barrier on your current knowledge (and behavior) and now you must break it.

### Kenny Edwards

Manager, Learning &  
Development at SRP

Which came first, the chicken or egg? In order for learning to change behavior, it must have an "unlearning" component to it in order for the old behavior to be modified. I suggest that "permanent" is a relative term and that a behavior is only permanent until it is replaced by another, presumably a more desired one developed through learning the benefits of changing.

### Cathy Lamers

HR Consultant at  
Bonestroo

Do you really need to unlearn? Or are you just learning something new? Deliberate changes are the result of building your knowledge and understanding of a particular thing. Your previous knowledge doesn't disappear, it is just built upon with new information adding new pieces to the ever widening puzzle. This new knowledge is the basis for the conscious choice you make to modify your behavior.

### Tony Ingle

Senior Human Capital  
Consultant at SRA  
International

Transcend and include. The thing that is learned is always embodied, but it evolves with experience into wiser forms.

**Celia Szelwach**  
Sr. Organizational  
Development  
Professional in Transition

I hadn't heard this definition of learning before...interesting to think that we are dynamic beings capable of growing and changing and yet there is a perception by some that any behavioral change can be viewed as "permanent". In my own personal and professional experience, I learn from experience and gain new knowledge with the goal of changing behaviors and improving...sometimes this learning requires "unlearning" in order to change, but I don't think I haven't "learned" if my behaviors are impermanent. Perhaps I have "unlearned" past behaviors that no longer work for where I am developmentally in life, but this doesn't mean I never learned the behaviors the first time because I am changing behavior. Learning is growth and change, and unlearning what no longer works for us personally and professionally is part of this process. Thank you for such an insightful query.

**Victor Escalante**  
Executive & Corporate  
Consultant

One model I have used in organizational development is  
Evaluate the current learning's

Motivate to create curiosity about a new learning that goes contrary to learned "truth"

Create doubting processes, rituals, etc to old truth

Pretend as though the new learning was true

Develop a whole systemic process for implementing new truth

Celebrate the adoption of new learning

**Bruce Hoag**  
Psychologist, Author, &  
Speaker

Learning is simply re-learning, i.e. learning to do something differently or in a different way. Toffler was trying to be clever with words. Things sound better in threes than in twos, but it didn't quite work in this instance.

**Luana Vargas**  
Educational  
Development Manager  
at International Society  
of Arboriculture

I don't think the 'unlearning' should really be the focus - although I did enjoyed the blog posting, especially the Darwin quote :)

I think an important part of the learning process is the paradigm shift, the belief, the buy-in, or trust on the learner's part. If the learner really believes (that's different from being mandated) that a change in behavior - or you can call 'unlearn' - will bring better results in his/her work and in the overall work for the company he/she will be motivated enough to 'relearn' the task at hand.

It all comes back to motivation and trust, in my opinion.

**Des Martin**

I don't think that we 'unlearn'...we merely adapt to a newer, more effective learning when necessity demands it. For example, you don't 'unlearn' typing with two fingers, you practice typing with all fingers until the results are superior to the prior behavior, which then atrophies through disuse over time because it is less functional. The issue is not 'unlearning', but experiencing a tipping point that convinces you that a new learning is not merely desirable, but necessary, as the old learning is no longer successful. There is a great book on change by Arthur Koestler called "The Act of Creation" which essentially says that an old paradigm adapts to explain change in the world around us until a new paradigm provides a simpler, but more meaningful explanation.... but it usually takes a generational change, as there is institutional investment in the prior paradigm that can only be discarded by those who were not brought up in its heyday.....

Des Martin

jeff kotanchick

Des points to some very interesting areas. As a cognitive science undergrad many years ago I was involved with some very interesting research on the cerebral cortex within the context of learning new input. In short, novel input does not add incremental knowledge nor does it remove historical knowledge. Rather, new, important information produces a high level of cortical activity in the area it responds to and other activity associated with that information shifts in response to it. In other words, significantly important new learning changes not only its small domain but possibly an entire perception of the world.

The question about a formal process for unlearning has merit in the materialist realm as well. It has been shown that environmental factors such as extreme stress create chemical cascades that would not otherwise occur. The relationship between these cascades and the plasticity of the mind for change is correlated. Horse breaking through near death experience is but one example of how extreme stress can lead to extreme behavioral change, and I would argue that there is an attendant neuronal change.

I would assume that people who have a greater propensity to unlearn in rapidly changing times are those with naturally high neuronal plasticity or who have prior experience changing in similar situations. Perhaps biological health, a habit of learning new information and an openness to an ever-changing perception of the world are all that we can do at this point in order to keep the pump primed for times that necessitate rapid, fundamental change. I'd like to hear where the current research is on this issue.

Kuhn's "Structure of Scientific Revolution" points to the displacement of paradigms by better paradigms as necessary when new information is so substantial that it affects the entire perceptual framework. Incremental knowledge certainly has its limitations. The important stuff often relies on us really creating a whole new world.

Charles Wiseman

A question I've struggled with. I don't think we "unlearn" any more than we can solve the "try not to think of a pink elephant" problem. But there is "spontaneous" extinction and substitution is one strategy. The most significant strategy is of course a creative response to a given problem....

### Adele Buchanan

I continue to go through my 'unlearning' phase as I move further into my adulthood and truly understand who I am. I believe that we do need to unlearn many things we have been taught, from the second we are old enough to understand we hear "no" from our parents, our pairs, our teachers in school... we continually second guess ourselves and question if we are able to do something. The second that we unlearn "no" (don't do that, you can't do that, you aren't old enough, don't touch that, don't eat that) and learn that whatever we are doing right now is right for right now, we will all be a lot happier.

### Harlan Goerger

Author, The Selling Gap

The view I take is we really do not "unlearn" but rather alter our current belief, thinking, habit and action to a new paradigm, thus a new outcome.

If we have continually been told "no" and believe we do not deserve something, we are not un-learning, rather we are changing the base belief and altering it to a new belief, thus a new thinking, new action and new outcome which say "yes".

In the past I thought one had to completely quit one "habit" before you could replace it with a new "habit". Damn that was hard and never worked. Now, address the belief at the base of any action or thinking, work to alter that belief and suddenly the outcome changes! Generally on a permanent basis.

This changed my training significantly.