

# Learning About Learning

Ben Dean, Ph.D.

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*I am learning all the time. The tombstone will be my diploma. —Eartha Kitt*

## Defining Love of Learning:

People who possess the character strength **love of learning** are motivated to acquire new skills or knowledge or to build on existing skills or knowledge. They feel good when they are learning new things, even though they may occasionally become frustrated when the material is challenging.

This strength exists as a continuum. It is hard to think of someone who does not love learning in at least one domain, be it history, fashion, bike mechanics, sports trivia, etc. Indeed, some researchers speculate that an across-the-board absence of this strength may be indicative of pathology (Peterson and Seligman, 2004; Travers, 1978).

Although a love of learning appears to be universally valued, the way this strength is manifested and the conditions that foster it may vary across cultures. For example, psychologist Jin Li noted that the Chinese have a concept that roughly translates to “heart and mind for wanting to learn.” Whereas students in Western cultures may experience shame or guilt as the result of failing to achieve, the Chinese model of learning suggests that shame or guilt results from **failing to want to learn**.

Research suggests that individuals who have love of learning as a developed strength are likely to do the following[i]:

- Have positive feelings about learning new things
- Have the ability to self-regulate efforts to persevere, despite challenge and frustration
- Feel autonomous
- Feel challenged
- Have a sense of possibility
- Be resourceful
- Feel supported by others in their efforts to learn

## Benefits of Having a Love of Learning:

The benefits of loving to learn during the school years are obvious: Students who love to learn are more likely to engage in their schoolwork and receive positive feedback from teachers and parents. But the benefits of this strength extend far beyond graduation through the working years and into retirement. Indeed, a love of learning may be particularly valuable during older age in that it may prevent cognitive decline. Research suggests that individuals who are able to develop and maintain interests later in life are likely to be more physically and mentally healthy than their less-engaged peers (Krapp & Lewalter, 2001; Renninger & Shumar, 2002; Snowdon, 2001).

## Nourishing a Love of Learning:

Parents and teachers understand how challenging it can be to spark a love of learning that was previously undeveloped. Recall the charismatic but controversial teacher played by Robin Williams in the movie *Dead Poets*

*Society*. His successful strategy for inspiring an interest in learning poetry was to tell his class of prep school boys that poetry was a powerful tool for wooing women!

Although the Robin Williams strategy is largely humorous (and not recommended!), there is a lesson here. Research (ii) suggests that individuals are more likely to take ownership for their learning when the following conditions occur:

- 1) They are given a compelling, meaningful reason to do the task (e.g., to woo women).
- 2) They have options to make the task more interesting (e.g., sneaking out in the middle of the night to recite poetry in an abandoned cave).
- 3) Social networks exist to support the learning (e.g., the Dead Poets Society) so that individuals fulfill social needs as they connect with one another through a topic or project of interest.

### **Developing a Love of Learning:**

The following activities for building a love of learning are based on a list composed by psychologist Jonathan Haidt at the University of Virginia:

Take a class just for fun (cooking, yoga, auto mechanics, astronomy, etc.)

Go to an online search engine like Ask Jeeves, ask a question, and explore sites you never otherwise would have discovered.

Every day, read a chapter of a book just for fun.

Decide to become an expert in a specialized topic and begin collecting (and reading) books on the subject.

Every weekend, discover a new area of your neighborhood, town, or city.

Subscribe to a newspaper or a periodical of special interest.

Join an internet discussion group devoted to a topic that you think might be interesting. (For a list of Yahoo discussion groups, visit <http://groups.yahoo.com>)

I hope you enjoyed this newsletter! See you in two weeks when we discuss the character strength *Perspective*.

Ben Dean, P. (2009). Retrieved March 2, 2009, from Authentic Happiness, Penn University: <http://www.authentic happiness.sas.upenn.edu/newsletter.aspx?id=73>

### **Recommended Readings:**

Covington, M. V. (1999). Caring about learning: The nature and nurturing of subject matter appreciation. *Educational Psychologist*, 34, 127-136.

Fried, R. L. (2001). *The passionate learner: How teachers and parents can help children reclaim the joy of discovery*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Peterson, C. and Seligman, M. E. P. (Eds.). *Character strengths and virtues: A handbook and classification*. New York: Oxford University Press

Sansone, C., Weir, C., Harpster, L., & Morgan, C. (1992). Once a boring task always a boring task? Interest as a self-regulatory mechanism. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 63, 379-390.

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