

Transcript: What Does it Mean to be an Expert Learner

Dr. Eric J. Moore
University of Tennessee, Knoxville

My name is Dr. Eric Moore. I'm a Universal Design for Learning and Accessibility Specialist at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

Today, I want to explore this question: What does it mean to be an expert learner? Well, before we go too far into defining an expert learner, I think it's worthwhile starting by talking about the question: What does it mean to be an expert at anything?

For example, what does it mean to be an expert musician?

What does it mean to be an expert athlete?

What does it mean to be an Expert?

Well, I think one conception – or perhaps common misconception – is that expertise is granted when somebody achieves a certain level of greatness. So, we have a variety of people in a given field of endeavor, and they're at various levels of skills and achievement. And some of them cross over this imaginary invisible line of greatness, and we can say, "There! Congratulations on your expertise! Now you can rest on your laurels."

However, when we talk to those who we consider expert or great in various fields, across time, I don't think this is what we see.

Look, for example, at Leonardo daVinci. He obviously is very famous for his beautiful artwork, but he's also infamous for never being done. I like to imagine: what if daVinci was a modern day graphic artist? What would his filenames look like? Like MonaLisa.jpeg; MonaLisaFinal.jpeg; MonaLisaFinal2.jpg, MonaLisaFinallllll.jpg and so forth. Maybe you, like me, have experienced this type of file name horror before, where you feel too attached to something and it's too hard to let go. There's always something you can make a little bit better.

What about Simone Biles? Since beginning her gymnastics career early on her life, she has managed to obtain 25 World Championship medals and has earned seven Guinness World Record titles, all by the age of 22. She is the most decorated Olympic gymnast in history having won seven gold medals in the last Olympic gymnast competition.

What does she have to say about resting on her laurels? Actually, she doesn't. What she says is: "We can push ourselves further. We always have more to give." Surely, if greatness if expertise was simply get into a point of accomplishment, then Simone Biles could stop. But she doesn't.

One more.

What about Yo-Yo Ma? Perhaps the greatest cellist in the history of the world! He makes beautiful music with warmth and character I can only begin to understand. What does he say? Well, he says “mastering music is more than learning technical skills some days I practice for hours other days it will be just a few moments– minutes.” And, what strikes me about this, first, is that Yo-Yo Ma, such an accomplished cellist, still practices every day. Moreover, he doesn't just practice, he practices strategically, for purposes that have changed – I'm sure – since when he practiced when he was younger.

So, what does it mean to be an expert?

We're not hearing from these experts that expertise is simply crossing this line of greatness. It seems as though this conception is wrong, or at least, partly wrong. What does it mean to be an expert? What we're seeing from them is that expertise is more like an attitude, a disposition.

Expertise is commitment to growth, its persistence through challenge. And when you see expertise in this way, accomplishment is a side effect. Sooner or later, somebody who demonstrates such commitment to growth and persistence through challenge will accomplish remarkable things.

But they won't stop there – Not if they're experts.

Let's go back to our original question. What does it mean to be an expert learner? Well, expert learners have been defined well by the Center for Applied Special Technology or CAST, who themselves have done great work looking into neuroscience, cognitive science, and Education Science Research. They say in their book “UDL: Theory and Practice,” in 2016, expert learners are motivated and a purposeful; they're knowledgeable and they're resourceful; they're strategic and goal-directed.

These three domains reflect different parts of the brain that are activated in learning. The part of your brain that deals with emotion and engagement, the part of your brain that deals with recognition and comprehension, and the part of your brain that specializes in taking action and expressing yourself.

Let's look at each one of those.

Expert learners are motivated and purposeful. In their guidelines, Meyer, Rose, and Gordon break this up into three major domains: first, motivated and purposeful learners engage in the learning. This might mean, among several other opportunities, the expert learners might engage by finding a study group as a way to continue to learn outside the formal classroom environment.

Motivated and purposeful learners persist through challenge, when it gets difficult. One way to do this might be to always look for ways to make the learning more personal. For example, if you're in a general education course where the subject matter is not necessarily what you're interested in for your career or your personal ambitions, find ways to look for skill development and opportunities to connect what you're learning to things that do matter to you. That will help you persist when things get difficult.

Motivated and purposeful learners self-regulate. This might mean, for example, that they carve out a time every week to reflect what's going well, what's not going well, how did the amount of time that I studied affect the quality of my grades? How well am I working as a member of that group? These types of reflections allow you to find those areas that you can improve and where you can build on current strengths.

When you begin applying these different strategies and skills, you'll find that you can grow in your capacity to be a motivated and purposeful learner, which is a critical part of being an expert learner.

Expert learners are also knowledgeable and resourceful. Again Meyer, Rose and Gordon break this up and they say, first, this might mean finding ways to enhance your perception of learning. For example, you might learn how to use text-to-speech software that's available to all students. You might use that to convert PDF or digital textbooks to audio files that you can listen to while you read, listen to while you're stuck in a traffic jam, listen to after you've read to reinforce. You can find the best way to make that work for you.

You might also request your instructors' PowerPoints, so that you can watch the PowerPoints at your desk instead of having to look across the room to see them. This might also allow you to go back and reinforce or connect ideas to things that were said before, and therefore enhance your understanding.

Knowledgeable and resourceful learners also know how to seek support. This is critical. It might mean, for example, visiting your instructors' office hours, using the Student Success Center, or finding web tools that can reinforce or support your knowledge and Understanding. Things like Khan Academy, YouTube, LinkedIn learning, are all great ways to shore up knowledge that you find out the things you're missing in a given class.

Knowledgeable and resourceful learners look for ways to understand deeper. This might mean finding applications or practical opportunities to take what they're learning in the classroom and put it into practice. You might also do something like revisit or reformat notes that you took in class. So, if you took text-based notes, can you go back and redevelop them into a visual map or a diagram. And in that way, reconceptualize and reorganize the main ideas. By doing this, you'll reinforce and increase the quality of your comprehension.

If you use these types of strategies and approaches to learning, you will become more knowledgeable and more resourceful with whatever it is that you're learning about. And that's a critical quality of being an expert learner.

Expert learners are also strategic and goal directed. This means they do things like use tools effectively. This might mean, in your case, finding different note-taking software to use when you're in class or when you're reading or when you're watching a lecture video. Finding those different types of software that worked for you and allow you to take good notes is a great strategy. You might also use tools that allow you to convert speech to text for dictating. Maybe, for example, you really struggle to express your ideas in writing, but you're much better at

expressing your ideas verbally. So, using a tool like this, you can speak your ideas onto a page and then go back and reorganize them into an essay format.

Strategic and goal directed learners know how to practice, practice. This means that they are always looking for chances to actively and strategically work on their weaknesses and reinforce their strengths. Especially the ones that are most relevant to their goals and ambitions.

Strategic and goal directed learners know how to develop their own executive functions. This means, among other things, learning how to set good goals for yourself that are challenging, but reasonable. They know how to work out strategies to succeed with those goals, and they know how to monitor their progress along the way.

As you begin applying these strategies and approaches to learning, you will become more strategic more a goal directed, and therefore you'll become more expert at learning itself.

What we find is that learning, like any other endeavor, is something that you can get better at. You can learn to learn better. And, as we learn to learn better, you'll find that learning content is like grist for the mill. When you're so good at learning, you can learn anything you want.

So, what will you learn?