

Digital Darwinism

Overcoming survival anxiety with amplified learning rather than simply applying technology to automate and accelerate the way we currently teach. **BY TONY O'DRISCOLL**



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From the alphabet to the Internet, the relentless progress of the scientific method through the unfolding of time has done much to improve the human condition. However, along with the many benefits accrued to humanity through the advancement of technology, there also comes the cost of having to learn to deal with an increasingly changing and unpredictable environment.

Since the beginning of time, the survival of our species has not relied solely on the advancement of technology but also on our innate ability to adapt to changes in our environment. The process we go through to adapt to our surroundings is called learning: probing the environmental context; parsing existential opportunities and threats; weighing options for forward progression; selecting a particular course of action, monitoring outcomes, and adjusting accordingly to ensure survival.

JERKED AROUND BY TECHNOLOGY

Today, however, technological progress is moving at an increasingly accelerating rate, so much so that it has achieved a third-derivative rate of change that we humans are not well equipped to handle. To use an analogy of travel, we are all familiar with the concept of distance: the measurement from Point A to Point B. We also can easily recognize the first derivative of distance—distance over time—which we call speed. We all also have experienced the second derivative of distance—speed over time—which we call acceleration. However, unless you are an astronaut, not many of us who have experienced the third derivative of distance—acceleration over time—a phenomenon that appropriately is termed “jerk.”

The time signature of life in the 21st century is no longer syncopated to speed or acceleration. Instead, it is synchronized to “jerk.” In short, the pace of technology diffusion has reached an inflection point where it literally is jerking humanity around, and the need to learn to adapt is becoming increasingly acute.

As this era of digital Darwinism continues its relentless march forward, our collective ability to learn to cope with the magnitude of change it throws off in its wake becomes increasingly critical. Ed Schein framed it well in positing that we humans are always balancing survival anxiety with learning anxiety. If

survival is not an issue, we may be more reluctant to learn as we have anxieties about the process of learning itself. If, however, survival anxiety kicks in, it trumps our learning anxiety, leading to a teachable moment.

My own sense is that we have reached a collective teachable moment where we understand that the status quo is increasingly untenable, but we are unclear what to do about it. The survival anxiety is there, but the course of action to address the third-degree rate of change thrown off by the technological progress we collectively face is unclear.

REBOOTING OUR POINT OF VIEW

To date, the educational community largely has leveraged technology to accelerate the way to teach rather than to amplify the way we learn. To overcome the imminent onslaught of what Andrew Keen describes as “digital vertigo,” we have to reboot our own point of view on what learning is and how technology can fundamentally change the way we learn to cope with the very change it is accelerating.

We have heard much in the last few years about social learning, social movements, massive open online courses, and artificial intelligence advances such as Siri and Watson. All of these represent components of an emergent collaborative learning platform that will allow each of us to learn in context and in real time from each other in a way that leverages our collective intelligence to rapidly adapt to the pace of change that currently is jerking us around.

Today, we find ourselves in the era of ferment for learning—one where there are many different parts of a new learning form factor floating around in the ether that have not yet coalesced into one dominant design. Achievement of this new dominant design for learning will require that we reframe our perspective on the important role technology can play in amplifying the natural learning process we each engage in every day, rather than simply applying technology to automate and accelerate the way we currently teach.

It often is said that, “None of us is as smart as all of us.” In my opinion, now it’s time for all of us to focus on developing this new form factor for collective, real-time, on-demand learning. Nothing less than the very survival of our species requires it. **f**