



Picasso, Learning and Innovation

Brad Barbera, NPDP

“Pablo Picasso changed his style, built on the work of others and tried new things of his own invention.”

“I am always doing that which I cannot do, in order that I may learn how to do it.”

—Pablo Picasso

Pablo Picasso produced more than 21,000 finished works of art in his lifetime—almost one piece per day, every day, from the start of his professional career to the day he died. Auctions of some of those pieces have brought in more money than a decent-sized product line does in a year. He never ceased to experiment, develop and grow. He changed his style, built on the work of others and tried new things of his own invention. Even within an individual work, he nimbly adapted and played, adjusting direction until his artistic vision was achieved.

The fascinating documentary “The Mystery of Picasso” captures the execution of several works with time lapse photography, demonstrating his creative process visually. In these examples, you see how he lays out his broad vision, builds a foundation, tries one direction and changes direction when he’s unsatisfied with the results. Amazingly, the movie was made when Picasso was close to 70 years old,

and he continued to produce new works in new styles for almost two more decades.

Picasso experienced enormous commercial success in his lifetime. So much so that in 1967, after completing his commissioned, 50-foot sculpture known simply as the “Chicago Picasso,” he declined the \$100,000 payment (roughly equal to \$680,000 in 2012 dollars), preferring to simply make it a gift to the city. He was so commercially successful in his other endeavors that he could afford to be that generous.

Picasso’s works, as invaluable as they are artistically, were products he developed. While there is no doubt that numerous factors played into Picasso’s product development success, one of the most critical was his insatiable willingness to learn. He learned from others, including fellow artists, critics and sponsors, through observation and feedback. He learned from experience by his own experimentation and application of evolving theory. Product developers should promote constant learning in themselves and in their organizations to improve the returns on both the quality and quantity of their innovative efforts.

KEYS TO LEARNING

Research into how adults learn sheds some light on how organizations can be made more innovative. First, people learn best when the information is connected to them. It must be relevant and important, and it becomes especially powerful when it relates to a problem they are currently facing.

Next, recognize that learning is ego-dependent. Egos can be fragile things, so individuals will erect mental barriers to protect them. Reduce those barriers by creating a safe learning environment that minimizes fear of judgment. Picasso seemed to have an exceptional resilience to criticism, but most people do not. To encourage learning, the



organizational culture must be receptive to failure and reward effort as much as results.

Learning within an organization should be experiential, based on actual “doing.” Offsite training programs and book reading do not compare to that of real world experience in long-term learning value. Picasso produced some of the world’s most recognized and valued works of art in part because he produced so much art. He worked and reworked and ultimately learned with every single piece he completed. Product development staff needs similar opportunities to learn while producing to become exceptional innovators.

Adult learning is generally best accomplished as a communal endeavor as well. Humans seem to be wired for small group connection. Working in teams is critical to learning as individuals. Picasso collaborated with many artists and thinkers throughout his long career, which facilitated his curiosity, experimentation and learning. Product developers should encourage and formalize team interaction, analysis and reflection on

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projects. Such discussion helps everyone grow and develop, and it makes the organization ultimately more innovative.

Finally, effective and efficient learning requires coaching. Whether from managers, facilitators or customers, people need feedback on how they are doing. They need correction and suggestion. They need input coming from outside of themselves and their team that can be trusted and acted upon. In his childhood and early career, Picasso had family and teachers to provide

such input. Later in life, he had critics, fellow artists and the general public to provide feedback that guided his future work. A critical component of product development and management is providing such coaching to project teams. 

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