

Developing Your Inner GURU

by Brian Remer

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Opening the Door for Learning

One warm summer day I wandered out to the screen porch to cool off. There I found an overly large housefly bouncing against the screen trying to find a way out. When it came to the outside door I thought, “Aha! I’ll simply open the door and let it fly away.” But when I opened it, the fly kept bashing into the screen of the door. I pushed the door open further, yet, to my surprise, the fly didn’t find its way out. Now with the door open more than 90 degrees and me waving my hand in the fly’s direction, it still kept ping-ponging itself against the screen door in its futile attempt to both leave the house and avoid my hand. Finally, I gave up trying to be helpful and let the door swing shut. The fly eventually died. All the while it could smell the fresh air but never find its way to freedom.

Sometimes we act like flies trapped behind a screen door. We don’t even notice that we are making the same mistake over and over. We don’t realize that a subtle change in our behavior, a simple shift in direction, will enable us to bring about the change we want. Perhaps some of us are so disempowered that we don’t believe we can learn from and change our environment. Still others may be focused only on the reward at the end of their actions so that they don’t pay attention to the here and now. Surely there are other reasons we become stuck but the point is this: when repeatedly hitting our heads against the screen door is not working, why do we believe that doing more of the same thing will make us free?

When our behavior becomes habituated and our responses conditioned, we need to use reflective practice. We don’t have to be slaves to our attitudes, preconceptions, mental models, or previous behavior. Reflective practice breaks unproductive cycles and opens the door for more options for our behavior.

Reflective Practice In (and About) the Moment

There are two types of reflection that Schön (1983) has identified. There is reflection *in* the moment and reflection *about* the moment. The former happens in real time, on-the-fly while the latter can be done at any time after an event or experience. Often, people initiate reflective practice in response to a problem, or difficult situation. That can certainly be a valuable time to learn from experience but reflective practice can be useful in any situation whether it is seen as traumatic or trivial. And it is even possible to combine reflection *in* the moment with reflection *about* the moment to create a highly effective learning environment.

This past year I taught my daughter to ride a bicycle. I wanted her to learn in a supportive environment. For me, this meant that I wanted her to be able to learn from her experiences but I also didn’t want to see her fall down and get hurt. Now, some people

say you can't learn to ride a bike without falling. They say it's good to learn the right way to fall so you don't get *really* hurt. Well, I've *never* fallen from my bike "the right way" so I thought I'd help my daughter avoid that all together. Besides, I wanted to experiment with the use of reflective practice.

We began in the deserted school parking lot one Saturday. I ran along side my daughter holding her up and, through my heavy breathing, hoping the day would soon come when she would be able to ride on her own. From our practice sessions, I was reminded just how long it can take to really learn – to master a skill. Though we worked at it for weeks, her progress was slow and, as encouraging as I tried to be, she did not always see herself as being very successful. I found myself wondering how one actually teaches the skill of bicycle riding.

Then one day, my reflective thinking kicked in. I noticed that it was easier for my daughter to turn left than to turn right. As I thought about it, I realized that, since I was holding onto the left side of the bike, I was better able to tell when she was falling and could lend the support she needed. When she turned to the right, she was falling away from me and I was in a poorer position to support both her weight and mine. This made it very difficult to keep her from falling too far.

A light bulb went on in my head. I suddenly realized that in order to turn a two-wheel bicycle, you have to *fall* in the direction you want to turn. The degree to which you let yourself fall determines the speed and tightness of the turn. Now I had a new theory and I immediately set out to test it. The next time my daughter turned right, I didn't try to keep her from falling too far. Instead, I eased up a bit to let her feel when she was falling into the turn. To my amazement, she corrected her fall and transformed it into a smooth turn. We then stopped and talked about what had happened. She described what she felt and how she reacted. I explained my new theory about falling and turning. Then she made a plan. She decided she would make three turns, right, left, right, to try it out. As I ran along beside her, we were both able to talk about what was happening and how we were experiencing it. We had made an enormous breakthrough as both learner and teacher.

My daughter and I had used reflective practice both *in* the moment and *about* the moment. *In* the moment, I noticed the difference between making left and right turns. That initiated my thinking through the phases of Kolb' Experiential Learning Cycle (Kolb 1984). My reflection led to an analysis of turning and I invent a theory. That theory then became the basis of an experiment. We used reflective practice *about* the moment when we stopped to rest. At that point my daughter engaged in some observation and reflection. I told about my theory and she made an action plan to test it for herself.

My daughter is now a very good bicycle rider. She is confident, she has fun, and she knows *why* riding a bicycle works the way it does. She now knows some things about bike riding that I didn't know until I was over forty years old! What's more, she has learned some things about *how* to learn. She has applied those lessons about using

reflective practice to situations as diverse as her weekly spelling test and to solving confrontations with her parents.

When I was my daughter's age, I remember frequent evenings of fifth-grade agony trying to memorize my weekly spelling list. But my daughter has more success with less effort. She has devised a process that includes self-quizzes, study, and making up stories and rhymes as memory devices. She uses reflection in the moment to focus her study only on the most troublesome words. And she learns from her weekly successes by reflecting after the fact about what worked best for her.

Reflective Practice with GURU

Many formal programs of study make use of reflective practice. It is common for advanced courses to have a practicum or field experience that includes keeping a journal, writing papers about critical incidents, or participating in discussion groups. In these examples, students enrich their learning by relating their field experience to classroom theory. They reflect *about* the experiences they have had.

There are also several ways to reflect *in* the moment so you can learn when you need to most – right *now*. In his book, *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*, Peter Senge talks about “Moments of Awareness.” This means paying attention to what is happening with enough focus that you can analyze your actions and thought processes and change them while in mid step.

I prefer to use the GURU process, which combines reflection *in* the moment with reflection *about* the moment. It's a process of self-questioning that is easy to learn and dovetails with the experiential learning cycle. It was developed by Christopher Saeger and myself and presented at a conference of the North American Simulation and Gaming Association (Saeger & Remer, 2001). As a tool of reflective practice it is both memorable and flexible.

In the GURU process, you ask a series of questions that help the learner analyze the current situation, come to a conclusion, make a plan, and implement the first action step of that plan. GURU stands for four categories of questions: Ground, Understand, Revise, and Use. When you encounter a situation ripe for learning, a supervisor, mentor, coach, or you, yourself, can ask questions in each category.

Ground questions are meant to help the learner remember the event and recall basic data. Ask questions that will help people discover and share the common *ground* of their experiences. Your questions should zero in on people's thoughts and feelings. How can you help them identify their emotional reactions to the situation? Encourage learners to recall and report their decisions, actions, and experiences. In my situation as bicycle teacher, I asked myself what was working or not working about making turns. I got in touch with what I was feeling physically and emotionally about turning in different directions.

The second category of questions is designed to help people *Understand* the situation in a larger context. Questions should encourage people to identify similarities and differences within and between events, ideas, or actions. Encourage people in this phase to articulate what they learned and make generalizations or a hypothesis. In my case, I contrasted what I had to do to support my daughter as she made right and left turns. I compared her experiences turning with my own when I ride a bike. From there I developed the turning-is-like-falling theory of bicycle riding.

After *Understand* is *Revise* in which questions are asked that will help people think of modifications they might make to their actions or attitudes. The questions should encourage people to consider how they would react if the situation or information were slightly different. The point is to encourage people to think about what aspect of their thoughts, attitudes, or behaviors they would *revise* if given the chance. After articulating my theory, I asked myself how I would support my daughter differently given this new information. How could I test it out to see if it would be helpful?

In the last phase of GURU reflective practice, questions are asked that will help people plan their next actions and *Use* what they have learned. Your questions should help people think about what they want to do with the new information and ideas they have learned. Encourage them to consider how they would *use* their learning or apply it to various aspects of their life. As a bicycle teacher, my *Use* questions focused on how I could teach my new theory to my daughter. We took a rest break and I used the GURU questioning process with her immediately after the fact to help her reflect upon her riding and make a plan to try something new.

David Kolb (1984) in his Experiential Learning Cycle notes that learning is a combination of grasping and transforming. We grasp information through Concrete Experience (doing) and Abstract Conceptualization (theorizing). But then we must transform it, use it, apply it through Reflective Observation (thinking) and Active Experimentation (practicing). The result is a change in our behavior, attitudes, or knowledge level. GURU dovetails with the experiential learning cycle. When you ask GURU questions, you are initiating reflective practice and it is reflective practice that keeps people oscillating within the learning cycle between grasping information and transforming it into usable theories and skills.

GURU for Personal Growth

GURU has been an effective tool that has kept me moving through the experiential learning cycle both personally and professionally.

A few years ago, I was living in Ecuador with my family. One thing I wanted to accomplish during our two-year stay was to learn Spanish. But that personal goal fell to pieces after seven months when Giovanni, my friend and tutor, announced he was going to take a job in Brazil. Up to that point, Giovanni had taught me all the Spanish grammar and we spent several hours every week in both practice conversations and practical use of the language. He was a resourceful and creative teacher but suddenly he was leaving.

My initial concern was that he would be hard to replace and that I would quickly lose the skills I had worked so hard to gain. In addition, what I needed most was practice. Who would agree to listen to me speak on a regular basis? Could there ever be anyone as patient with my constant mistakes in word choice and pronunciation? How could I expect anyone else to tolerate my misuse of verb tense and gender agreement? The prospects seemed grim.

Then, while riding a crowded bus through stalled traffic one day, I realized something important. I may have been losing one Spanish teacher but, living in the largest city in Ecuador, I was surrounded by a couple hundred thousand Spanish teachers! *Everyone* there spoke Spanish! All I needed to do was start speaking to the people I would meet every day. If I were to make a plan for what I wanted to learn, I could easily try it out with a dozen people. Then, with a little analysis, a little reflective practice, about what I did right or wrong, I could improve my speaking on my own. I wouldn't need a formal teacher telling me what I needed to learn. I could use GURU questioning to decide that for myself whenever I discovered something I didn't know.

My challenge became putting this idea into practice. For me it was difficult because I am not naturally a talkative person. I tend to listen more than speak. But I stuck to my plan and didn't hire a formal tutor. I studied regularly, practiced vocabulary, focused on subject matter that was relevant to me, and talked to people whenever I could.

I regularly asked myself *Grounding* questions to stay in touch with the emotional highs and lows I experienced in my attempts to speak on the street. I used *Understanding* questions to tease out relationships between the various situations when a difficult verb tense was used. *Revise* questions came in handy when I invented a clever way to remember what I had just learned, and, finally, *Use* questions helped me make a plan to insure sufficient practice of the new concepts. In the end, I surprised myself by what I was able to say in a conversation as well as what I was able to understand. I stretched both my language ability and my personal comfort zone.

The important lesson for designers and facilitators of experiential activities is simply this: if our goal is to improve workplace performance and develop continuous learning organizations, we cannot rely upon classroom training to do it all. We've got to help our participants realize that they can learn from each other. They don't need to wait for the right workshop taught by an expert or the latest version of an on-line course to do their jobs better. They don't need scholarships or study leave to begin to change their behavior for the better. The speed of business is fast enough that workers need to fine tune their skills and increase their knowledge on a daily basis. And some of the best teachers they will find are the people they encounter every day: coworkers, managers, administrators, people from other departments, and of course, customers and vendors. All they need to do is commit to regular reflection about their work. They can make a plan for what they want to learn, try it out, analyze what worked and what didn't work, and try again.

GURU for Professional Learning

The need to respond in the moment is no less important professionally, and GURU questioning has been an effective way for me to handle rapidly changing information in a workshop environment as well. Imagine thinking you are teaching one group of participants when really you are educating someone totally different. This is exactly what happened in a project I coordinated in the Republic of the Congo. Local leaders of a development organization had participated in a training of trainers workshop. At the end of the fourteen days, they were to work in small groups to deliver a two-hour training using some of the experiential techniques that they had learned about. The rest of the class would be the “learners” simulating a real group of participants for the practicing teachers.

I should have expected that something might get lost in the translation of this concept. Unfortunately, I could not even conceive how horribly it would become distorted! When the time came for the student workshops, the first group announced that they would lead a training on the control of erosion. They divided their own group of six into “trainers” and “participants” and proceeded to act out the delivery of a lesson to a group of local farmers. We were in the garden of the training center so they scratched some lines in the sand to represent a muddy road. Then, standing on either side of their dirt etching, they acted out an elaborate role play of a training class. Meanwhile, the rest of us, nearly fifteen real participants and trainers, stood on the sidelines ignored by the “presenters” who were busy acting out their skit about a workshop.

As the lead trainer for the entire two-week event, I was stunned, knocked off balance. When I asked myself some *Grounding* questions, I began to get in touch with what was going on. What was I feeling? Foolish for having assumed that the group understood my instructions and embarrassed that the rest of us had to put up with this silly show. What was happening right now? The small group was absorbed in their own performance while everyone else appeared to be bored out of their minds – except Leon, the gardener.

When I asked *Understanding* questions of myself, my insight deepened. I realized that the teachers of erosion control had worked hard and it would be inappropriate for me to simply cut them off – even if they weren’t doing the assignment right. I compared this situation to other times that a workshop didn’t go as planned and remembered that experiential learning is nearly always salvageable. And then I became curious about Leon. Why was he so interested when no one else was? As an employee of the retreat center he wasn’t even a member of our training of trainers program. He had simply been distracted from his weeding. Nobody else even noticed him, yet he was totally captivated by the performers.

When the “show” ended, I called a break. After a few minutes I found Leon busily digging channels to redirect the rainwater around the steepest paths in his garden! I asked myself an important *Revise* question: What if the “audience” of a workshop isn’t whom we think it is? What other educational possibilities might this open for us as trainers?

Asking questions about how I might *Use* this new insight, I decided to invite the other participants to admire Leon's work and congratulate him on applying what he had learned. Afterward, the group of "real" trainees had a rich discussion about accidental teaching and learning, how to capitalize on the positive "fall out" from a training program, and the difference between formal and informal teaching methods. It became one of our richest learning experiences – all because the "wrong" person was being taught. And reflective practice, through the use of GURU questions, made it possible.

Teaching GURU on the Job

When supervisors begin asking GURU questions in the workplace, they open new possibilities for both learning and increased productivity. If you are a manager, ask your supervisees to talk about a situation from their work. This can be something that went well or it can be an incident that was problematic. Then methodically work through the GURU questions until a new plan of action is agreed upon. Managers who use GURU in this way report feeling less tension in situations where ordinarily there would have been conflict. They find themselves being less judgmental and better able to address workplace issues. Supervisees say they feel listened to and that they leave the session feeling encouraged and supported to revise their work practices.

Managers can take GURU questioning from the conference room to the shop floor. They can use it to promote reflective practice among their workers and, in the process, become coaches. They can target questions to what they see is immediately happening and model how to use reflective practice in the moment. For example, a manager sees that one worker is producing a high percentage of scrap and asks questions of the worker.

Ground: Describe for me the process you use to set up this particular job. How well does this job fit in with your workflow and other responsibilities?

Understand: How does the set up of this job differ from the set up for other jobs? What makes it more complicated? What are some best practices of other workers for setting up complicated jobs?

Revise: What can you do to ensure you are following best practices? Which specific practices will you incorporate into your work?

Use: When will you implement your revised plan? What goal will you set for yourself to reduce your percentage of scrap? Over what time period will you achieve your goal?

The opportunities for using GURU and nurturing an atmosphere where reflective practice flourishes are endless. The supervisor of a customer service counter can use any interaction with customers as a learning opportunity for new employees.

Ground: What were the non-verbal cues that told you that last customer would be difficult? What did you see me do that helped put her at ease?

Understand: Why do you think she might have been so vocal? What are some of the effective strategies we've talked about for responding to people when they become excited?

Revise: What are two things you could have done to help defuse the situation? What are some additional ways you can assure customers that you are genuinely interested in their concerns?

Use: How do you plan to be empathetic to overly sensitive customers while still conforming to the company's policies? What other staff are available to you as resources?

A negotiation team can revise their strategy during a fifteen-minute stretch break.

Ground: How did people react when the other negotiation team started playing hardball? What were you thinking when they added the pension clause? What made that feel unfair to you?

Understand: How is this negotiation session similar to the last time we negotiated this contract? What did we learn then that we could use now? What political pressure is the other team trying to address through the pension clause?

Revise: If the negotiation continues in the direction it is going, what can we do to make sure our most critical interests are met? What can we do to move forward even if we think the other side has been unfair? What can we do to reduce the political pressure that's driving the disagreement about the pension?

Use: What's the best way to talk about our most important concerns without revealing our bottom line? Who is the best person on our team to respond to the pension issue? At what point, if ever, should we confront them about the issue of fairness?

A ski instructor can recharge a lesson half way down the slope.

Ground: How did that last run feel? When did you feel most confident and what were you doing at that moment? At one point your arms were behind you. Did that make you feel more or less stable?

Understand: How did this run compare to the last? How do you account for this difference? What have you learned about the importance of keeping your arms out in front of you?

Revise: What can you do to make sure your arms stay out in front? How might you hold your polls to keep your arms and your weight shifted forward? If someone

suddenly falls in front of you, how will you move your arms to maintain your balance?

Use: What are you going to work on during your next run? What can you do as a personal reminder of where to hold your arms for better balance? What would you like me to say or do that will help you as we make this next run together?

A quality improvement department at a garment factory can revise its processes during a quarterly meeting.

Ground: What are all the ways we currently track quality? Why do we use these particular methods? Which of these are the best determiners of quality?

Understand: How have our quality standards changed over the years? What new contracts are on the horizon and what types of demands will those contracts place upon workers and resources?

Revise: What changes will we need to make in how we gather data in order to be prepared for the new contracts? What revisions can we make to our quality process to catch deficiencies earlier in the production line?

Use: What's the best timing to roll out our new quality standards? Should we consider a pilot project? Which unit is in the best position to run our pilot?

The Benefits of GURU

In these examples, reflective practice through GURU questioning has eliminated the unproductive blaming that often accompanies highly charged situations. Instead, the emphasis is on identifying problems, analyzing the situation, and inventing solutions. Learning has become a process of two-way discovery, which ultimately puts the onus of changing behavior on individuals. It is the individual who decides what skills to practice and for how long. The manager or coach, meanwhile, remains alert and ready to offer suggestions or add new ideas for the individual to try.

With GURU you can infuse any situation, incident, or event with an element of reflective practice to accomplish many different purposes.

You can ...

- Assess a new situation to determine how to begin your interaction – entering a cocktail party, arriving late to a meeting.
- Step back from an emotionally heated encounter to begin anew – confronting your teenager, responding to criticism from your boss
- Adjust rapidly to changing interpersonal or environmental factors – the middle page of the instruction manual seems to be missing, it's raining on your parade
- Change course in the middle of a situation to take advantage of new information – the lost page of the instruction manual has just been found!

- Slow a process to make sure all relevant information has been considered – team members suddenly begin pointing fingers
- Evaluate past performance to determine effectiveness – conducting a year-end review, evaluating the last meeting you facilitated
- Make a plan for future encounters – avoiding heavy rush hour traffic next Friday afternoon, having a pleasant visit with your in-laws.

One of the difficulties of reflective practice is remembering to use it! Unfortunately, it's not enough to have a simple questioning process or a catchy name. To be effective, it has to become a habit. The good thing is that there are many strong indicators that can become reminders of when reflective practice might be helpful. Watch for them and you will soon find opportunities to use reflective practice more often.

Cues to consult your GURU

- When you find yourself making the same mistake over and over – you feel like the twin of that fly trapped on the screen porch
- When you are stuck and don't know what your next move should be – your mind keeps racing over the same small circle of thoughts
- When emotions run high – anger, fear, nervousness are especially good indicators
- When you experience cognitive dissonance – a clash of cultures or values
- When you experience a critical incident – any threshold or watershed situation
- When you fail or succeed – both have equal potential for learning
- When you've only completed a portion of the experiential learning cycle – wring the most out of every learning experience
- When you want to learn more about something – follow your interests at your own pace
- When you don't have a teacher or coach at hand– you don't need to wait for an expert
- When you unexpectedly find yourself in a teaching role – you can become the expert that others are waiting for

Get GURU and Get Creative

Of course, if you want to get creative, you don't have to confine yourself to the use of questions in GURU. You can keep a diary, write in a journal, or recount a critical incident to complete the initial *Grounding* phase. For *Understanding*, choose an object and turn it into a metaphor for what you learned or draw a picture that shows before and after images relevant to the situation. Rather than asking *Revise* questions, get the same effect by making a three-dimensional model or inventing an object to represent what you will do differently. Alternatives for the questions of the *Use* category include making a list, creating an action plan, or sending yourself a delayed e-mail reminder that will arrive two weeks in the future. Any of these activities will help initiate the process of reflective practice to transform experience into learning.

However we make use of reflective practice, we need to do more than spend time thinking about what we have done. We need to be highly focused. Some people argue “that ‘real’ reflective practice needs another person as mentor or professional supervisor

who can ask appropriate questions to ensure that the reflection goes somewhere and does not get bogged down in self-justification, self-indulgence or self-pity” (Atherton, 2005). If this is how we reflect on experience, we are no better than flies trapped on the porch. Our reflection *does* need to be purposeful. And, while a supervisor or mentor will certainly help us ask appropriate questions, it is not *absolutely* necessary to wait for an outside coach to open the screen door. Instead, we can consult our inner GURU, engage in reflective practice, and open new doors for learning ourselves.

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