

LEARNING IN DIFFICULT CIRCUMSTANCES

GUIDE + WORKBOOK PACK
BY PUNK LEARNING



Learning in difficult circumstances (v1.0)

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Learning in difficult circumstances

a Punk Learning course

2022

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Preface

This course matters so much. And at the same time, it doesn't matter at all.

It matters because assuming that people will flock to the learning resources you put behind a paywall or a registration page on a bloated website is a bit rich in a world where your learners may only have had a chance to grab their phone on the way out before the bombs fell.

It matters because assuming that a 700-megabyte interactive animation is exactly what students want is, more often than not, a serious miscalculation - in terms of broadband speeds, learning styles, teaching qualifications, and time available to plan a lesson.

It matters because we learn, even in the darkest of times. We learn to create possibilities, to build a future. We learn to pass things on. We learn to take our mind off things. We learn to keep from crying. And even when we've been locked out of normal life for years - maybe especially since we've been locked out - we've flocked to learning.

At the same time, this course doesn't matter at all. I am writing these words shortly after Russian invaders started a war in Ukraine. Everything changed. Things became less important. This course became less important. I wish I could write a different preface to this course. I'm not going to.

The course was fully formed in my head before the war started. After the war, as with many other things, the ideas for this course turned darker - and more necessary. I had examples, stories of learners which I wanted to share here. Now I have other stories, of other learners, but I'm not sure you want to hear them.

I still want to write this course. I still want you to have it. I want

people to look at their learning, and the learning which happens all around them, and prepare to grow and protect it. I want there to be a “v2.0” soon – as a result of all I learned while researching and writing the first version.

If you paid for this course and downloaded it - thank you. If you couldn't pay for it and downloaded it - thank you.

I asked someone today, “why do you learn?”

She said, “I learn for humility. To realize there are still things I have no fucking clue about.”

Whatever your motivation, I wish you more humility, and more anger, in your learning. Yes, both at once. Such are the times.

Let's get going.

London, 08 April 2022

Introduction

Welcome to "Learning in difficult circumstances"!

Why does this course exist?

I wrote this course for two main reasons.

The main reason is this: learning is important and vulnerable. To learn is to grow and to cope, and to change. And at the same time, when we learn (just about anything), we go through doubt, questioning, trial and error. This means that when we learn, we deserve the time in space in which our learning happens to be respected and protected.

The second reason is this: there are still many situations in which this isn't the case. When we learn, sometimes we find that others don't respect our time or space of learning - and fail to protect it. And sometimes, we are given time and space for learning which doesn't respect or protect us. This means that our learning cannot happen, or happens at a wrong time or in a wrong way.

Our schools could be doing better. Our governments, companies, parents, and teachers, too. Sometimes they try. Sometimes they don't. And sometimes, they don't know how.

I wrote this course to give us all some strong, simple tools to protect and grow our learning.

If you are a learner, you can use this course right away to help you learn in a steady, strong way. If you are a teacher or a leader, you can plan your work to help your learners and colleagues feel supported and respected when they learn or teach.

How does this course work?

Each chapter of the course is built of three parts.

The first part is based on a question. The question describes an ideal situation: this is what it would look like if your learning was perfect and easy. The first part of each chapter is where we look at the differences between this ideal question and your reality.

The second part is built around an answer. The answer describes a plan. We may never get perfection, but if we plan for what's around us, we have a chance of getting something changed. There are different ways of planning how you want to learn, and we will talk about some of them in the second part of each chapter.

The last part is built around an activity. The activity helps you work on your plan. This is how you make the course work for where you are: you take our question and our answer, and start working with your own ideas, resources, and learning.

Each of these activities also has another section, called "The Mini-max Plan". For many of the workbook activities, this will be the part where we deal with the most difficult circumstances. This is where we try to take your plan and make it even more resilient. The goal is to see if we can achieve maximum benefits from minimal resources.

What do I need to get started on this course?

There is no need to study or prepare anything. You can get going straight away!

You can start with any question you like and choose the way you go through the chapters and activities. I think it makes sense to start with Chapter 0 - where you look around you and figure out what you can work with. But it's up to you.

If you want to work on this course with others, feel free to share the course materials with them. You can work on the workbook scenarios together.

Finally - it's OK to keep coming back to this course as you think of more ideas and improvements.

Trigger warnings and disclaimers

This course contains discussion of the following aspects:

war,
abuse,
anxiety,
depression,
deprivation,
burnout,
trauma

This course is not medical advice.

This course is not psychological advice or therapy.

This course is not psychiatric advice or therapy.

For any of the above, please consult your doctor or other medical specialists you have access to. I am not one.

Before I begin

###

Q: How much power have I got to change things?

I am writing this course to be as practical as possible. In order to do this, it will contain many questions, techniques, and ideas for people to try.

You may be in a very different situation from mine, or from the next learner's. You may read some of the suggestions and think, "well, this is not going to work for me." And you may well be right.

That is why we begin with question zero. This is the first thing we will try, before we try anything else.

"What can I actually do / change?" is a good question for anyone who is trying to make any kind of change. For us, the change we're looking to make now is to make your learning habits and processes stronger and more effective.

This kind of question is helpful for many reasons. One of the best reasons for asking it, though, is that it helps you see other people's influence, and it also helps you look at the parts which you can influence yourself.

Let me give you two examples.

Example 1: "Where can I go?" - loud vs quiet

Anouk lives in a house share in South London. There are several flatmates living with her. Everyone has their bedrooms, but they

share the hallway, kitchen, bathrooms, and the living room.

The flatmates move in and out every now and then. They have varied work schedules, so they are in and out of the house at different times of day and night. And most of them like to chat with each other while they're cooking, eating, or watching TV in the lounge.

All of this makes sense - but Anouk needs to study. Since catching Covid, she has found it very hard to beat the mental "brain fog" and pay attention - so every noise is even more distracting.

She talked this through with the housemates, and they agreed to a "no parties or music after 10pm" rule. But Anouk still hears them, and still can't focus.

In the example above, Anouk's plans are interfering with other housemates' plans to live normal lives - come back from work, cook a meal, watch some TV, and talk to others. This means that Anouk's plan to stay at home and study is not a good one.

One of her housemates has an idea: "search for some places where the rules are strict - big places with plenty of space, good doors and windows, and soft furnishings, because they drown out the noise."

Anouk tries the library, but London libraries are still too noisy for her - they're open spaces, and she hears / sees people milling around. Then, one day, she walks down the corridor of her office building, and finally works it out.

She spends an afternoon exploring the floors of her company building, walking into every meeting room she can find. She makes a list of the top 4-5 rooms which she likes: small, with good doors and windows, and with no view of the corridors or spaces outside.

Every Friday afternoon, she tries to book early morning meetings in one of these rooms, for each morning of the week. The office isn't full in the mornings, so she's usually in luck.

She walks in and gets right down to study. There's nobody in - she's just meeting herself.

Anouk couldn't control where she lived, and couldn't control how her housemates lived. She couldn't control the way she felt, or the problems she had when trying to focus at home.

But she could control the other spaces she had access to, and she managed to control access to these spaces every now and then. She could control when her study happened, and could take the study materials with her to work.

Example 2: "Who else is there?" - unhelpful vs helpful

Batu's college assigns students to study groups at random. After two weeks, the study groups are locked, and cannot be changed for the duration of the term - once you're in, you stay in.

Batu's group tried to play nice for two weeks, and changed - for the worse - the moment the groups locked. Very quickly, several factions formed. There was a small group who was trying to get some work done, against all odds. There was a group who was just busy posting jokes and memes in the group chat, and trying to get everyone else to go the work. And, as a consequence, there were several people who saw all this, and showed up with headphones on, pretending they weren't there.

Normally, Batu would choose the last option, mute the group chat, and endure the mandatory meetings for several weeks. But the subject was something they'd been interested in since early teens, and they weren't going to give up on it.

Batu tried getting together with the diligent fraction of the study group. There was some success, but mostly, everyone was just very angry and bitter, and wanted to keep their nose down and do their own work. A splinter group chat was out of the question - imagine the ostracism, the drama!

Fortunately, Batu's enduring interest in the subject came to their

rescue. The discussion forums and message boards online were still active - and a quick Meetup search revealed that there are others in his town, who are still interested in this subject.

Batu decided to re-activate their account on all the message boards, and re-join the old communities of enthusiasts. They went along to the Meetup group, and enjoyed it enough to keep coming twice a month. Ironically, after a while, Batu started seeing the "diligent" folks from their doomed study group at the meetup!

Batu couldn't control the way the study group was formed. They couldn't control the choice of joining or leaving this group, nor could they influence who joined or left. Because of peer pressure, they felt they couldn't control other people's plans for the study group.

They could, however, control their own plan to keep learning more about the subject. They could control access to other sources of information, and other people who want to learn socially. And Batu was in control of where they go and who they meet outside of the study group.

I hope these two examples were helpful. In each of these cases, it would be easy to shrug and say, "well, there's nothing I can do."

Sometimes, that is true. In Anouk's case and in Batu's case, however, there were things which they still had access to - some areas they still had control over.

It will be useful to remember this as we go to look for the best way to plan our answers to the question, "how much power have I got to change things?"

A: Make a plan for what you can. Learn about other people's plans.

To find out how much power we've got to change our learning, we need to work out the "zones of influence", the way Anouk and Batu

did. For Anouk, her house was already as peaceful as it could be - but she could, for an hour every day, build a "zone of influence" in a meeting room. For Batu, the study group was a social minefield, and they weren't ready to influence this - but they could have influence over what they did outside of the group they were made to join.

Working out these zones will do two things for us. It will help us see more clearly where the boundary falls between what we can and cannot change. But then, it will also help us decide what to plan for. It makes little sense to plan for something which is outside our control, but it definitely makes sense to plan for what we can influence.

This is the starting point of a plan for learning. It will let us do the best we can with what we've got. Maybe it doesn't sound like much - but for Anouk and Batu, and many other learners around the world, working out a plan like this can be the difference between learning something, and not learning at all.

We will be preparing our learning plan in the following chapters of this course, and making it stronger by looking at different parts we can work with. But for a moment, it also helps to think about the other side of our "influence zone" - about the things we cannot really do anything about.

Sometimes, these things are just the way things are: after a long and busy day, we're tired. After 9pm, the library closes, and we go home. Sometimes it's the way we are: when it's winter, my energy levels are low, and I learn less. After a meeting full of people, I need some time alone, so it's not always good for me to study in a big group. And sometimes, we learn about the way other people are.

As we're preparing to build our plan, it helps to think about other plans all around us. When we do this, we begin to think about their plans, and maybe adapt ours. In a football match, a good team will play a different game against an attacking opponent and a different one against one who defends - and will also be able to change their plans to adapt or surprise the opponent.

We don't always need to think about other people's plans as "opposing" us, though. If my brother wants to relax by watching TV in the other room after he comes back from work, that's his plan, and I shouldn't be upset that I can't study there.

Even the plans that look like they oppose us, sometimes help others. I would like to learn the Welsh language for free, but I'm too old. The government makes sure that children can get free Welsh classes in schools - but not necessarily all adults. This doesn't mean they're against my learning - just that they decided to help more kids learn the language. Sometimes this makes sense, like in this example. Sometimes you need to think hard to see sense in such plans.

Thinking about other people's plans around our learning can help us see how likely these plans are to change, or how easily they can be negotiated. If Anouk had only one annoying roommate, she could figure out when they're out of the house, and do her most difficult study tasks then. If Batu had seen the study group's behaviour earlier, they could have quickly requested to change the group.

Workbook activity: my plan, other plans - a brainstorm map

This activity can help you think about what you can and cannot plan for, during your learning. It shouldn't take more than 30 minutes to complete.

You will need a blank sheet of paper and something to write with. If you prefer, you can also do this on a computer, using a simple sketching software or a presentation slide.

You don't have to follow the instructions to the letter; they are there to inspire you, so feel free to use your own ideas alongside them. You also don't have to follow every instruction. Make this activity yours, and it will work best for you.

1. Start with the sheet of paper in front of you, in a landscape orientation (longer edges on top and bottom, shorter edges - left and right)
2. Somewhere near the middle of the page, write words like "My learning", or "my study" - or something more specific, like "My Computer Science exam". This will be the starting point for your ideas and thoughts - they will come out of the starting point like branches or roots from the trunk of a tree.
3. One side of this sheet of paper will be about things you can change and influence or work with - things which help your learning. The other side will be about things you can't change - other people's plans, deadlines, reality around your learning.
4. Draw the first two thick "branches" out from your centre point. Label them something like "I can change..." and "I can't change" - or "I can plan for..." and "I can't plan for..." - whichever words suit you best.
5. Each of the branches will now split into smaller branches. These smaller ones - into even smaller ones, and so on. You will be adding more detail in labels along the way.
6. Start where you like - with the "can" or "cannot" side. Draw the first branch, and label it with whatever comes to mind. Then you can move to the next branch, or you can split this one even more and add another idea.
7. A good way to do this is to do one idea per branch. You can always connect them later with more lines.
8. Another good thing to keep in mind here - don't write too many words on each label. A sentence like "Python books are useful, but they are expensive, although there is a big python book sale once or twice a year, so maybe I should wait for that" can be split into branches like so:

(What?) - Python books

(+) useful

(-) expensive!

big sale 2x/yr

wait for sale?

9. For each side of the brainstorm map, try to think of explaining the situation to yourself. Imagine you want to write a newspaper story about the problems and solutions to your learning. A good reporter would keep asking these questions: Who, why, what, where, when, how, how much, what else, how else? - about as many parts of your map as possible. Try doing the same.

10. Keep going for as long as you like. Don't be afraid to stop and come back to this later. Also, don't be afraid to follow an idea. It's your map, so it needs to be useful to you.

11. When you feel you've done enough work on both sides (or when you see you're running out of space!), put down your pen or pencil. Look at the map, read through the labels. The "can" part may become the start of your learning plan soon. The "can't" part can help you see patterns and solutions to other people's agendas and plans.

THE MINIMAX PLAN

What if you could only focus on 2-3 most important "can" labels from your plan? Which ones would you choose? How would you make sure they grow as strong as they can? Which ONE label would you protect, as the backbone of the rest of your learning plan?