Genius or Dynamic Learner?
Benjamin Franklin’s Path to Greatness

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Abstract

While the remarkable accomplishments of Benjamin Franklin stand without parallel, the means of their attainment can be considered more accessible to ordinary people and not necessarily attributable to a special genius. The steady development of Franklin’s knowledge and skills are traced in light of a new model of “dynamic learning,” which is a method that can be followed by many. The method involves reading, writing, collaboration, and active, “hands on” experience. Simple steps are suggested for testing the method in the classroom.

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Scholars and biographers frequently describe Benjamin Franklin as a genius, a protean figure who made himself a philosopher, inventor, scientist, diplomat, and statesman. In particular he is widely regarded a scientific genius, the discoverer of electricity in lightening, charter of ocean currents, pioneer demographer, and intrepid inventor (Chaplin 2006). But if that is the end of the story then what inspiration can a student find there? Geniuses are born, or drive themselves into great accomplishment through exceptional intelligence and inspiration plus, in Thomas Edison’s words, “ninety-nine percent perspiration.”

What if a case can be made for another way of seeing Franklin that explains how he achieved greatness in more than one field of endeavor with very limited formal education? What if he developed a method that could be replicated by learners of more average intelligence? Such a case is offered here for consideration.

What is Genius?
A look at dictionary and encyclopedia—including Wikipedia—definitions of genius finds common usage of such terms as “exceptional creative ability,” “originality,” “work in areas not previously explored,” and “extraordinary intellectual powers.” Genius commonly is distinguished from talent and is usually associated with the accomplishment of an individual. While there is no definitive list of geniuses, Shakespeare, Leonardo da Vinci, Isaac Newton, Immanuel Kant, and Albert Einstein offer widely accepted models for the phenomenon. In a recent study Harold Bloom argues on behalf of “appreciation” by others as the
distinguishing characteristic, an augmenting of the consciousness of readers and followers. He offers as explanation a “God within” the genius, the “self” in “self reliance” (Bloom 2002, 1-12). Such reliance on unique qualities of intelligence makes genius something rare and special, something one is born with rather than something that can be learned and cultivated. There is not much that schools and educators can do to create more geniuses. Schools convey what is already known to those “needing to know,” which society defines as the young and uneducated. Geniuses venture beyond what is known and accept no limitations.

Within the education tradition there is a minority theme, a persistent, recurring call to trust the learner, to “free” them to pursue their own inquiry and follow their curiosity wherever that leads. In America this view has been around at least since John Dewey stressed the importance (1938/1959, 77) of learner “participation ... in the formation of the purposes directing his activities in the learning process.” Carl Rogers revived the point with his call (1969) for greater “freedom to learn,” and Neil Postman (1969, 25-38) insisted that the inquiry method is not a refinement of traditional education any more than the “iron horse” was a different kind of horse. Focusing on the learner changes the process and makes possible a different quality of learning experience. And in today’s high tech environment where members of the younger generation are “natives” something new is required: adults must be willing to learn from their children (Bateson 2004).

A New Status for “Learning”
The dynamic learning model seeks to capture these more complex requirements of the day. It begins with a new definition of learning, namely that learning is engagement that changes perception, belief, or behavior (Marcum 2006, 60). The learner must “show up” and take part; s/he cannot sit passively and listen. And if nothing changes in
the experience, from understanding to behavior, then in reality nothing has been learned. Memorizing and repeating information for an exam does not qualify as “deep learning.” Genuine learning today encompasses several perspectives from modern research and scholarship. The model must consider that:

Learning is Social: A stubborn problem for psychological research, which usually focuses on the individual, is how we can all know something together if each must construct their own knowledge? Lauren Resnick (1991) solves the problem by arguing that cognition is actually more shared than individual, the product of a common culture and language. The person whose understanding is too unique will usually be ignored or shunned (even if time warrants later consideration of “genius” level contribution).

Learning is Contextual: Wisdom and knowledge are often treated as a special, ideal domain, something apart from everyday life. But the reality is that learning occurs most often in a given situation, which often is outside the classroom in a lab, workplace, or community. Some people, who would do well on the Jeopardy game show, have photographic memories and can recall details and facts that they have “learned.” But generally what is learned in the sense of becoming useful is the product of a situation involving other people.

To return to our subject, it is often said that Franklin “educated himself.” But the dimensions of that process can be explored anew. There is more to it than reading and study. We will see that Franklin learned socially, and contextually, and in a manner that can be described as dynamic learning.
A formal definition of dynamic learning is *engaged and reflexive participation in a life-discovery process that builds new knowledge and enhances the development of skills and competence appropriate to the personal, social, and technical contexts of importance to the learner* (Marcum 2006, 80). The discussion properly begins with preconditions needed for the dynamic learning process to flourish. These include historical self awareness, an open belief system, active learning, engagement, and involvement in the social dimensions of learning and knowledge. Then we turn to the dynamic learning process, which includes the specific steps of reading, observing, or having experience to gain information; writing or explaining for understanding; and persuading for mastery. It is time to trace this process in Franklin’s life and experience.

The argument is not, by the way, that Franklin was not a genius; too many scholars and writers have argued that he qualifies. But as we will see his life and behavior appear to match the dynamic learning model with remarkable precision. And if the argument is persuasive then a path to accomplishment emerges that more ordinary folk can follow.

**Dimensions of Dynamic Learning**

Several components make up the environment where dynamic learning becomes possible. These include:

*Historic awareness:* Understanding of self and circumstance requires appreciating how the present situation came to be. Franklin began his autobiography with a brief discussion of family background and lineage. He sensed that he lived in a “better time” than his ancestors. This realization meets the historical awareness criterion. He moved on
quickly to discuss his love of reading, noting that he could not remember being unable to read. From an early age he borrowed books from his brother’s print shop, often reading them overnight. He used any available cash to purchase books, his “most consoling possessions ... and friends for life.” This was a lifelong habit; at the end he owned 3700 titles, quite a feat considering the relative scarcity and cost of books in that day.

Open environment and belief system: The move to Philadelphia as a young man could have been the most important early decision in his life. His home town of Boston was a more rigid environment, bounded by religious doctrine and social norms. Early expressions of “free thinking” won the teen-aged Franklin social disapproval; his exposure to, embrace, and discussion of skeptical reason created tensions. His brother and printing master James earned legal sanction for criticisms of authority in his early newspaper, *The New England Courant*, requiring that he officially turn the operation over to the young Benjamin (without relinquishing actual control). This step created strains and freed the younger brother from further obligations as an apprentice, making his “flight” to Philadelphia a matter of family dispute more than an unlawful act. Benjamin learned at an early age the power and constraints of social disapproval.

In contrast to Boston, Philadelphia was a frontier town, where fewer questions and more lax social standards allowed Franklin to sire an illegitimate son and take a common-law wife without business or social consequence; one’s work and contribution to the community were more important than propriety and other-worldliness. Such behaviors would never have been sanctioned in Boston. Thus Franklin found his domain of tolerance that allowed him to develop his interests
far more freely. Which is not to say he acted frivolously. His deference to colonial authority, his hard work and frugality and his business acumen allowed him to progress rapidly into the leading circles of the developing city. In Philadelphia he flourished in an open belief system allowing dynamic learning without social or economic sacrifice.

Dynamic Learning: the Process
With this background in mind we can now turn to the specifics of the dynamic learning process.

*Reading* remains the basic, “critical first skill;” it is the key to one’s vocabulary, spelling, and writing ability (Krashen 2004). Franklin never lost the habit or his love of reading. His baggage for his final journey home from Europe in 1785 included 27 crates of books. It was a great time for books and reading. The 18th Century built upon the intellectual revolution of the late 17th and added the literature, science, and philosophy of the Enlightenment. Franklin found his important mentors in this way, as noted by many biographers. One mentor overlooked by some was John Locke, from whose writings he gained—beginning at age sixteen—his empiricist, practical, experimental approach to knowledge; his spirit of criticism; his belief in tolerance and reason; the importance of ideas with the need to test them for their utility; and his republican and anti-monarchical leanings (Anderson 1997; Meador 1975, 42-43). Franklin’s constant reading and learning provide the first key to his method.

It behooves us to consider, as an aside, that reading is falling from favor among the young. They “read,” but it is more ephemeral material on the web or more graphic novels and presentations in keeping with our visual age. It could develop that new formats and
technologies will “reformulate” the printed book into something that serves even better. But teachers and librarians should explore every avenue of cultivating serious reading among the young. One key may be finding methods to allow students to read whatever piques their interest rather than assigning books of literary or intellectual merit as determined by their elders.

*Writing* is the next phase of the dynamic learning process. Franklin wrote copiously and continually throughout his life. In so doing he continued to hone his skills, which improved step by step as he faced new tasks and challenges. His first significant publication came at age fourteen and consisted of a series of letters written under the pseudonym Silence Dogood, ostensibly an immigrant widow of sharp eye and keen sense of morality. These fourteen essays appeared in his brother’s Boston newspaper and addressed social and moral issues of the day. These were the first of a surging stream of writings. As he wrote he carefully rewrote, practiced and edited his work, adapting it to different situations and contexts.

In 1730 he acquired the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, an early colonial newspaper, and made it successful by writing for the barely literate general reader, instructing and entertaining his customers with wit, humor, and imagination. Three years later Franklin introduced *Poor Richard’s Almanac*, intended for tradesmen and farmers. Plagiarized heavily (a common practice then since books were both rare and expensive) and facing a competitive market with many “almanacs” available, the venture proved challenging. But again wit, broad-ranging topics, and treatment of scientific, commercial, and European issues made Franklin, and his press, owners of a best seller. An
estimated ten thousand copies sold annually for twenty-five years, a significant factor in the personal wealth being accumulated by Franklin.

Another step in his learning development by means of the pen can be found in the political writings, beginning in 1757 during his first public venture to London. Here the goal, ultimately successful, was to persuade the English to recognize the value of North American commerce and repeal the Stamp Acts. But the original assignment of assuring that the Penn family would pay their fair share of colonial taxes did not succeed. The ensuing second round of political efforts in London to find solutions to the growing colonial crisis—beginning in 1764—ultimately failed and Franklin sailed for home just as the American Revolution broke out. But during his long residencies and self-taught diplomacy he developed clear, influential, and persuasive language skills.

By this time his scientific reports and letters had earned him an international reputation as a “natural philosopher,” in the terminology of the day. Again, his ability to explain complicated matters clearly is a key to his growing prestige and influence.

Later came the bagatelles, sophisticated satires for a French aristocratic audience to cultivate new friends and influence at court. Part of his appeal for the French was his sharp tongue and satire, viewed as remarkable for a homespun “colonial” from a primitive land (as he presented himself in Paris). No wild, ranting revolutionary here.

Among his later efforts was his Autobiography, written “for the ages.” He now presented himself as searcher for morality... not his strong suit for much of his storied career and troubled family life. In all this, and throughout his varied endeavors, he continued to write, be it articles, letters, or treatises, all of which he rewrote and polished with feedback sought from friends and colleagues. Always there was the
insatiable curiosity and determination to learn. Writing is an essential step in the learning process. We learn by writing, sharpening our story, making it interesting. If you can write about something clearly and explain it to others, you have some understanding of it, whatever the subject or task. Franklin’s growing understanding was manifest in the breadth and extent of his writings.

*Collaboration:* Franklin could not possibly accomplish all that he did alone. He usually worked in collaboration with others. Indeed, he’s an excellent candidate for America’s first “networker.” Periods of isolation resulting from his “heretical” views in Boston or his early “standoffishness” as a young printer in London were unhappy times that he took pains not to repeat.

He began with his Philadelphia Junto, a Friday evening discussion group of ambitious young professionals and tradesmen seeking to improve the emerging city. This community collaboration led to the famous subscription library and then on to founding a fire department, street paving, gas lights, and eventually to a hospital, college, and philosophical society. All this is well known. Less familiar is the collaboration with three colleagues in his intensive “electrical experiments” in the 1740s that brought him such fame. Somehow he developed the knack of getting most of the credit for his participative endeavors, a skill that pertains equally to the negotiations with fellow commissioners John Adams and John Jay resulting in the 1783 Treaty of Paris recognizing American independence (Chaplin 2006, 103-115, 262).

Many of his collaborations began with personal correspondence. Franklin wrote to make contact with someone doing interesting experiments or offering unique theories. He then typically shared his
own thinking on the matter and sought advice. Many authors respond with pleasure to thoughtful questions or commentary on their work. Some of these efforts went nowhere but a number developed into lifelong collegial cooperation. Then there were the many business partners chosen to do the printing work in various cities of the colonies. Another network grew out of Franklin’s role as developer of the postal system for the colonies. It is appropriate to look upon the emerging postal system of the century as the internet of that day, linking heretofore isolated scholars, thinkers, clergy, and governments into a new world of information and improved communication.

Another step in the “network building” process came with the public campaign to galvanize the colonists to create militias to protect the frontiers against the French and Indians during the Seven Years War that left the English masters of the continent. Thereafter Franklin steadily championed unity among the colonies for security and improved commerce, a tradition that bore fruit when that collaboration contributed to colonial unity during the struggle for independence.

Franklin labored to create circles of friends and allies in London, and then in Paris during his work and diplomatic service in those leading capitals, often building on prior correspondence. Some of these friendships failed during the strains of the growing crisis between the colonies and the crown, but by then Franklin was home again to join colleagues in writing of the Declaration of Independence. Eleven years later some of the same leaders reassembled in Philadelphia to craft a unified government to replace the confederation. He spoke little here until the end, rising to argue that while no one was completely satisfied with the drafted constitution, that it was the product of their collective wisdom and would enjoy greater possibilities of success with a unanimous vote of acceptance, a speech that carried the day. In all
these endeavors Franklin strove to "Dispute without disagreeing, to argue without angering, and to convince without humiliating."

As testimony to his social skills, biographers emphasize that for all his fame and influence, Franklin never sought personal power over another; only power together with others. (We’ll allow an exception for the two slaves he owned for many years before freeing them late in life.) Whomever can persuade many has little need to command one.

**Active, engaged learning**: Beginning in 1730 Franklin began a steady progression from tradesman to businessman to entrepreneur (even if the latter characteristic was not yet articulated). Beginning as a printer and then a newspaper editor, Franklin quickly added book publishing to his portfolio, enhancing the quality of his work by participating in the development of engraving to create an improved currency less easily forged. By circulating better copies of official documents he won the printing contract for the Pennsylvania Assembly, which he leveraged into official printer for other colonies. This positioned him to take over a large part of the postal service, including packet mail service to England. He traveled many of the roads and routes of the colonies as he improved the service dramatically during various periods of attention and direct management. By such means Franklin built a sufficient fortune (with business partners) over a period of twenty years to retire to private life. The free time gained thereby opened new worlds of possibility.

His interests ranged far beyond commerce and government contracts. He engaged with the natural world around him, inquiring into the circulation of air, the currents of the north Atlantic, political arithmetic (demographics), and eventually electricity. He read what books and learned papers he could acquire and built his network of
correspondents. He joined those amateur scientists known as “natural philosophers” and men of letters who reformulated our view of the world, humanity, and government during the Enlightenment into the set of assumptions we know as the “modern world.” He gained colleagues and adherents in Britain and France to become a full-fledged member of the “Republic of Letters,” certified by his acceptance as a Fellow in London’s Royal Academy in 1756.

Engagement can be defined as “learning and involvement;” it develops into a self-generating force as one learns by doing, which increases competence which improves performance and the understanding of it, which motivates further involvement ... and improved learning (Marcum 2006, 65-66, 80-81). This was Franklin’s pattern, a process somewhat different from that usually ascribed to him. Joyce Chaplin describes his method of study as an “arsenal of resources” that included books, artisanal (hands-on) knowledge, and direct observation, while Roy Meador explains it as an “insatiable urge to question and to learn” (Chaplin 2006, 232; Meador 1975, 46). The more comprehensive concept of engagement explains the purposes of this essay more clearly. Learning and involvement combine to create engagement, a force for personal development.

Franklin often is described as a philosopher or a scientist. Neither descriptor is quite accurate. He was more like an engineer, having much in common with the practical developers of Birmingham’s Lunar Society who laid the foundations for England’s Industrial Revolution. He met with these gentlemen during his English travels in the late 1750s. He shared with them the characteristics of the practical, problem-solving orientation of craftsman or inventor as well as a measure of self-promotion through writings and publications (Schofield 1963). Even more apt is to think of Franklin as the first
American designer. Design involves “seeing” and creating something of utility and meaning. His “Pennsylvania” stove (later known as the Franklin stove), the lightening rod, bifocals, the musical armonica, and a flexible catheter were among his more notable inventions. More remarkable was his refusal to seek patents on these, making the designs available for others to manufacture for profit since he was already financially comfortable, thereby contributing to the public welfare. His pattern of seeking to understand his world and explain it to others for the general improvement of society continued throughout his life.

Conclusion

And so I return to the definition of dynamic learning: engaged and reflexive participation in a life-discovery process that builds new knowledge and enhances the development of skills and competence appropriate to the given personal, social, and technical contexts of importance to the learner. Franklin’s contexts grew steadily, from a colonial town to the larger Pennsylvania commonwealth, the British Empire (which he later committed to break apart), a new nation, and the “modern world.” He must be seen as a global citizen, spending twenty five years abroad. From the Junto to the Constitutional Convention to the “Republic of Letters,” his community expanded exponentially. From household experiments to charts of Gulf-stream currents to better understanding of the world-changing force of electricity, he studied, analyzed, and helped us understand his universe and ours.

Franklin’s method evolved but always encompassed reading, writing, explaining, clarifying, and persuading: a dynamic learning process. Which leads me to the point of the essay: Franklin can be
understood in terms other than being a “genius.” He received only two years of regular schooling, and yet he received honorary degrees from leading European universities. His insights did not come so much from great thought, however, but from constant reading, observation, “hands-on” experimentation and really “hearing” his colleagues and critics. His opinions on things frequently were proven wrong and he changed them as his understanding expanded. Anyone can develop those skills and habits. And so his greatest legacy lies not in the blessings of genius, nor his stature as natural philosopher or self-educated statesman, but rather in the demonstration of a simple, replicable method whereby hard work and disciplined, socially-grounded inquiry, action, and engagement enables one to accomplish great things. Providing a prototype for dynamic learning as a path to accomplishment may prove to be Benjamin Franklin’s greatest legacy.

_Learning about Franklin’s Learning_

Because Franklin’s _Autobiography_ is readily available along with a huge list of books and articles about the famous American, it is easy to test this argument. Students should be formed into small groups each of which would proceed to

1. Decide on a definition of genius.
2. Explore one or more of the arguments made here. Was Franklin’s scientific work that of a loner or a collaborator? Was he really a collaborator or did he “use” people and take all the credit? Did his writing skills continue to improve?
3. Seek agreement or consensus on the question: do we have to accept Franklin as a genius to understand and appreciate his life and work?
4. Reflect: what does the group experience of this exercise suggest regarding the “social nature” of learning?

5. The groups could then share their findings and explore whether a larger consensus is possible.

Finally, has anyone developed a different perspective on how they can build their own path to accomplishment?

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