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Seven Characteristics of Good Learners

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I've seen lots of lists that



identify the characteristics of good teachers. They're great reminders of what we should aspire to be as teachers. I haven't seen many corresponding lists that identify the characteristics of good learners. I decided to put one together and invite your input. This could be a list for our students or anybody who aspires to learn well.

1. **Good learners are curious** – They wonder about all sorts of things, often about things way beyond their areas of expertise. They love the discovery part of learning. Finding out about something they didn't know satisfies them for the moment, but their curiosity is addictive.
2. **Good learners pursue understanding diligently** – A few things may come easily to learners but most knowledge arrives after effort, and good learners are willing to put in the time. They search out information—sometimes aspiring to find out everything that is known about something. They read, analyze, and evaluate the information they've found. They talk with others, read more, study more, and carry around what they don't understand; thinking about it before they go to sleep, at the gym, on the way to work, and sometimes when they should be listening to others. Good learners are persistent. They don't give up easily.
3. **Good learners recognize that a lot of learning isn't fun** – That doesn't change how much they love learning. When understanding finally comes, when they get it, when all the pieces fit together, that is one special thrill. But the journey to understanding generally isn't all that exciting. Some learning tasks require boring repetition; others a mind-numbing attention to detail; still others periods of intense mental focus. Backs hurt, bottoms get tired, the clutter on the desk expands, the coffee tastes stale—no, most learning isn't fun.

4. **Failure frightens good learners, but they know it's beneficial** – It's a part of learning that offers special opportunities that aren't there when success comes quickly and without failure. In the presence of repeated failure and seeming futility, good learners carry on, confident that they'll figure it out. When faced with a motor that resists repair, my live-in mechanic announces he has yet to meet a motor that can't be fixed. Sometimes it ends up looking like a grudge match, man against the machine, with the man undeterred by how many different fixes don't work. He's frustrated but determined to find the one that will, all the while learning from those that don't.
5. **Good learners make knowledge their own** – This is about making the new knowledge fit with what the learner already knows, not making it mean whatever the learner wants. Good learners change their knowledge structures in order to accommodate what they are learning. They use the new knowledge to tear down what's poorly constructed, to finish what's only partially built, and to create new additions. In the process, they build a bigger and better knowledge structure. It's not enough to just take in new knowledge. It has to make sense, to connect in meaningful ways with what the learner already knows.
6. **Good learners never run out of questions** – There's always more to know. Good learners are never satisfied with how much they know about anything. They are pulled around by questions—the ones they still can't answer, or can only answer part way, or the ones without very good answers. Those questions follow them around like day follows night with the answer bringing daylight but the next question revealing the darkness.
7. **Good learners share what they've learned** – Knowledge is inert. Unless it's passed on, knowledge is lost. Good learners are teachers committed to sharing with others what they've learned. They write about it, and talk about it. Good learners can explain what they know in ways that make sense to others. They aren't trapped by specialized language. They can translate, paraphrase, and find examples that make what they know meaningful to other learners. They are connected to the knowledge passed on to them and committed to leaving what they've learned with others.

Good teachers model this kind of learning for their students, which makes me believe that “good learner” belongs on those lists of good teacher characteristics.