

# The Ls Project

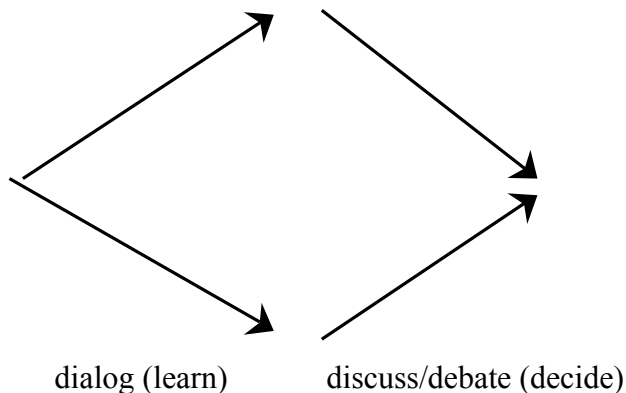
## Learn

Learning is an essential part of “being human.” But not everyone is good at it and none of us seems to be good at it all the time. This essay explores the art of learning and some of the things that either hinder us or encourage us to learn.

### **Hindrane #1 – We forget what kind of conversation we are having**

Last week, I got into a conversation at work that could have been very tense: in North Carolina, an amendment is on the ballot that would ban same-sex marriage. I don’t remember how the topic came up, but I do remember that in the end, we discovered we shared a lot of common ground and agreed that it isn’t easy to think about fair rules or try to exercise real faith in today’s complex world – not a bad outcome for a 5 minute conversation over the wall of our cubicles!

One of the things that makes this kind of conversation possible is remembering what kind of conversation you are in. There are at least two types. One is what some people call “dialog.” The goal of dialog is not to narrow down, conclude or make a final decision. The goal of dialog is to broaden understanding and increase knowledge, to get more ideas on the table. The opposite, what I am calling here “discussing,” is what you need when it is time to make a decision or you are in a debate.



The key is to know what kind of conversation you are in. Too often we use the form and style of discussing or debating, assuming the primary goal RIGHT NOW is deciding. Often, we do need to decide, but even then dialog can be a good place to start: it clears the air, shows respect, broadens perspective and gets lots of ideas on the table.

Here are my guidelines for dialog:

- Ask a lot of questions. (Often a good question is more helpful than a good answer.)

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- Assume that people have something worth listening to.
- Don't take over the conversation: let ideas develop.
- Listen well: don't spend the time while others are talking preparing my own answer.
- Make learning my primary goal.

## **Hindrance #2 – Pressure to defend**

Sometimes, we feel pressure to defend the things we know and care about. This can lead to the problem of “volume” control: instead of asking questions and learning, we turn up the “volume” of our explanation or defense. This increased volume is one of the fastest ways to tell somebody we are not really interested in their opinions, and not caring what others have to say is one of the fastest ways to discourage people from listening to us. In the end, nobody is able to hear and nobody is able to learn. Unfortunately, in today's political environment, learning does not usually seem to be the goal.

## **Encouragement #1 – Being a learner makes you better at everything**

On the other hand, being a learner makes everything – work, relationships, being part of a team, leading a team – better. It is also a way to live life in a more integrated way and to fit everything together. For example, part of my work is editing papers for graduate students. Taking the initiative and trying to learn why somebody chose a particular topic, what problem they hope to solve with their research, how they got interested in this area, etc., makes me – at the same time – a better editor, more informed about the world and a better friend.

Taking the approach of a learner can also deepen friendships you already have. Recently I asked a student I have a good working relationship with about his weekend plans. “Not much. I've got about as much stress as I can handle just doing my school work.” (A pretty typical comment for a busy grad student, and something we both could have just smiled about and gone on our way.) But because we have a history of working together and learning, it wasn't strange for me to ask, “So, how do you deal with stress?” This led to a great conversation, I learned some things and our friendship got a little bit stronger.

## **Encouragement #2 - Learning is safer than "knowing"**

One of things that limits our learning is the things we already know. Kevin Gurganus, my karate instructor, recently taught me something about the limits and dangers of our knowledge. One day after class I told him about a friend of mine, Valerie, who had taken a half-day self-defense class. Because it sounded like she had learned a little karate, I thought Kevin would be excited. Instead, he sounded mad. What he explained

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to me is that exposure to a technique is not the same as “knowing” it. It takes less than a minute to “learn” how to do a ball-of-foot front kick but a very long time before you “know” how to do it. Exposure is good, but it's important not to expect too much from what simple exposure is able to deliver and mistakenly think we know more than we actually do. Exposure/hearing can be dangerous in this way when it prevents us from really learning. For example, if you spend a couple hours in a self-defense workshop and then think you “know” how to defend yourself, you might take a risk that you otherwise would not have taken and end up in a bad situation. In this case, it would be better not to “know.” Actually being able to defend yourself in a real situation – a gun to your head or a knife to your back – requires years of training, feedback and experience.

In karate and in life, it is so much safer, and wiser, to assume that I still have a lot to learn.

### **One more karate story: keep learning**

Being human means we have a lot to learn, a lot to unlearn and much that we know in our heads but have never worked out in our lives. It is human and good to keep learning – there is no shame in the fact that we change and grow. The real danger comes when we fail to recognize that how we currently see things may need to change as we gain new knowledge and experiences and discover new vantage points. Change is a sign of health, growth and increasing wisdom. Stagnation should be our primary fear.

In karate, everybody begins with a white belt. This belt symbolizes your humble position as one who has just begun. As time passes and your skills, knowledge, experience and responsibilities increase, the color of your belt and your rank changes. In our school the order looks like this:

white  
yellow  
orange  
purple  
blue  
green  
brown  
black

Every time you get dressed, you are reminded of where you fall in the order. Your belt color is a very big deal.

That’s why the question my instructor, Kevin, asked one day was so powerful. He asked the class my son is in, “what color is my belt?” The kids all yelled “BLACK!” But he just shook his head. “No, I am a white belt. I have been doing this for 27 years, but I am

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a white belt. I am a beginner and I am still learning, just like you.” Suddenly, his skepticism about my friend’s 2-3 hour “self-defense” course made even more sense: martial arts – like much of life – is not something you “learn” in a morning. It is something you work at everyday, always learning, always putting on the heart of a “white belt.”

### Questions

- Who are some of the great learners you have met in your life? Why do you think they are able to learn so well? What is it like to be around them or to ask them a question?
- What is something you are currently excited about learning?
- Who have been some of the worst learners you have experienced? What is it like to be around them? Why do you think it is or was so hard for them to learn?
- When is it hard for you to be a good learner? In those situations, what blocks you from being a good learner?
- Are there ways that devotion to family, faith or politics makes you worse at learning? Taking the role of “devil’s advocate,” could you argue against the idea of learning from any one of these perspectives?

### Quotes

To learn is a natural pleasure not confined to philosophers but common to all.  
*Aristotle*

I have never met a man so ignorant that I could not learn something from him.  
*Galileo Galilei*

Learning is not attained by chance. It must be sought after with ardor and attended to with diligence. *Abigail Adams, American First Lady*

Learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. *Jesus*

They are no discoverers that think there is no land when they can see nothing but sea. *Francis Bacon*

Tomorrow is the most important thing in life. It hopes we’ve learned something from yesterday. *John Wayne*