On building knowledge networks

For TCI x Are.na's Library of Practical and Conceptual Resources, Édouard U. advocates for conceptual wandering as a way to find and make meaning.



* Library of Practical and Conceptual Resources
* View Édouard's Are.na channel

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As told to Édouard U., 855 words.

Over a year ago, I wrote a small reflection on building networks of meaning within my mind. This written reflection, "Reading Networks," captured a mindset I've brought to nearly everything I've wanted to understand in the world: "Nothing exists in isolation."

I'd like to revisit a few passages from my original text here:

… While texts often build and maintain an internal and pre-set collection of references in the form of footnotes, prior foundational texts, or subtle cultural "calls" to "events or people or tropes of the time and place the text was written," it's a far more personal practice to form one's own links in an inter-textual manner.

I'd like to think that building your own reading networks can foster a method of building personal abstractions, building personal relevance to any given topic, and improving the methods by which you consume others' ideas and structures.

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Gardening techniques

Learning and memory are by default automatic processes; their efficacy is proportional to the relevance that the thing to be learned has to your life (frequency, neurons firing together, synaptic pruning, interconnections, etc.). You could say that this relevance acts as filter for incoming information.

There are reasons why you might want to sneak information past this filter ("artificial learning"):

1. To learn abstract knowledge that is far removed from daily life (e.g. math). This is done using analogies, mnemonics, examples, anthropomorphism, etc.

2. To interfere with the process of "natural learning" with the goal of improving learning mechanisms, for example when learning a skill like playing the piano. This is done using deliberate practice, analysis, etc.

See these methods as gardening techniques. We either let the garden of the mind grow naturally or we sculpt it deliberately.

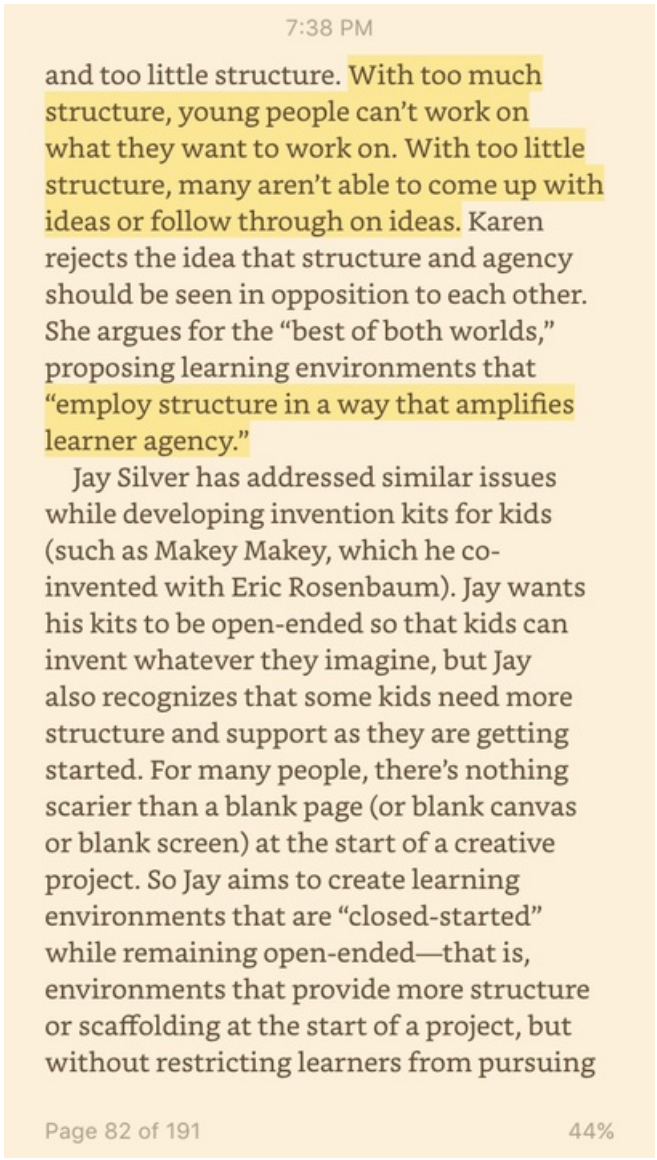
Pedagogy & Metalearning

I believe conceptual isolation creates the death of meaning. For as long as I can remember, I've felt discomfort towards the feeling of being cognitively hemmed in or "led along" in a linear manner. In my experience, compartmentalizing and segmenting our stories and observations of the world builds walls that are hard to tear down. When ideas and the concepts they form are isolated (within an individual, amongst a small group of people, or even within a larger group), they converge into singular modes of thinking, preventing exploration and divergence from happening.

My methods for avoiding this type of linear constriction have been simple: Read two or more books at the same time, always. Reject the closed-universe-on-rails nature of every single film ever made, and when possible, use the Wikipedia-while-watching technique to keep connecting the dots as I go. Always encourage myself to follow footnotes into rabbit-hole oblivion. Surf—don't search—the web. Avoid listening to music simply to listen to music. Instead, intentionally mix and match sounds and styles as one might mix ingredients within a recipe.

In forming this methodology of immediately and intentionally interrelating the cultural input my mind receives, I've nurtured the ability to form very distinct pockets of personal meaning across time and space. While I believe all peoples' "meaning-making" function operates in an ever-connecting manner, very few tools exist to support and nurture this reflex. While the nature of the web has normalized network-based thought/exploration patterns through the sprinkling of hyperlinks throughout text, most learners have yet to experience radical departures from the linear narrative. Platforms like Are.na and Genius and Hypothesis help us along, but we have a ways to go.

How can we teach people to draw in the margins of their books? To communicate with authors hundreds of years dead? At what point might conspiracy-theory mapping with push pins and thread become a more common learning technique for students, to encourage them to make their own connections and find their own lines of meaning?



It took me many years to develop and find pleasure in the habit of co-reading books. As I've continued this practice, "personal abstraction(s)" has become my preferred term to describe the ideas and artifact(s) gained from taking a networked approach to reading. Most people are likely to call this stuff "knowledge," since humans obviously need to come to some sort of agreement on our shared definition of reality to get anything done. But before they were melded into our collective consciousness, all abstractions and pieces of knowledge were once personal—woven within the mind of an individual, or a set of individuals in parallel—and only then distributed across time and space to be shared.

For the Library of Practical and Conceptual Resources, I am assembling a revisitation of how one might learn to construct their own knowledge networks. Additionally, my Are.na channels dedicated to networks of knowledge around books, essays, and movies are examples of how one might begin to assemble and intertwine small, personal, and intimate networks around established forms of knowledge.

While my own methods for learning new things is constantly evolving, developing “personal abstractions via personal knowledge networks” has never failed to keep me wandering.

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