What does Learning Look Like?

A few pages ago, I glossed over something that I'd like to discuss in more depth now. Here's what I said: "From our very first contact with our students to the last, we should work to give them an understanding of what learning looks like…" This is crucial for helping students keep going when things seem tough. After all, to a lot of people, learning looks like failure – because by definition, the student who is learning is the one who has not already reached their goal. They're still in process.

To help students forgive themselves for being in process, we should tell them how that process looks and explain how it can help them reach their goals. Knowing what learning looks like can be useful for us as instructors, because once we know what it looks like when our students are learning, we find it much easier to tell whether they actually are. This helps us do our jobs better, and allows us to spot-check the quality of our work throughout the day.

The type of learning that we see happening can also give us some clues for how each student needs to be coached for best improvement. A frustrated learner on the edge of an "aha!" moment may need only a word of encouragement or a suggestion to try a slight shift in strategy on the existing task, while someone who is advancing slowly may need a higher bar or a fresh challenge. There's also a significant difference between coaching someone who has had no prior experience (and who therefore can be expected to make giant leaps in skill with relatively little effort), and coaching someone who has had a great deal of experience (whose improvements will be more incremental and often require much more effort). Knowing what to expect at different points in the learning process can help us coach our students more effectively.

So, what *does* learning look like?

It doesn't take much detective work to catch the first type of learning. It's the one learning phase that nearly everyone has experienced, and the one we most commonly expect to see and feel for ourselves when we are in the learner's role. It is not, however, the only type of learning there is.

Learning looks like a sudden wild jump forward with almost no effort. Or sometimes, a series of wild jumps forward with very little effort. This one's probably the most fun and it's definitely the easiest to spot. Think of the brand-new beginner who has literally never held a handgun before. At first the shooter is tentative, maybe a little nervous. He's wondering whether he really wants to do this thing after all. He can't quite figure out where to put his hands and he's not sure how the mechanics of the gun might work. But you let him know that it's normal to feel that way and that there's no pressure. As long as he stays safe, he can do whatever he likes and nobody will think worse of him for it. Then you show him how to hold the gun and describe how to line up the sights. He presses the trigger for the first time and turns around with a huge grin on his face. He says, "This is fun!" And so it is. A few minutes later, with just a

little coaching about trigger use, he's slowly but happily putting all his shots into a 5-inch circle at 5 yards. Smiles all around.

Just before this type of learning really starts, while the student is still a bit worried or nervous, we as coaches may need to provide reassurance and a little encouragement. But once students find their courage and are willing to try, all we really need to do is suggest what they should do and then mirror their enthusiasm while they do it.[24] They will do the rest.

This happy, almost effortless turn of events provides a lot of reward for just a little work. It does take some effort, but the payoff in pleasure far outweighs the energy we put into it. With such a predictably high return on investment, this early part of the learning process feels so good that people easily get addicted to it. That's why many people bounce from fresh new hobby to fresh new hobby, never really becoming the master of any one thing.

Some people expect learning to look like this at every step along the way. When it doesn't, they falter and fumble, think themselves incompetent or incapable or unsuited for the task. They're tempted to give up as soon as the going gets tough – not because they don't have it in them to succeed, but because they *think* they don't. Or because nobody has ever shown them what it might take for them to reach success. They don't know what other types of learning look like. They might even believe that anything less than immediate, effortless success means they are "bad at" the task they are trying to learn, and thus there's no point in trying.

These folks need to know that not all accomplishment comes without cost, and that it's normal to struggle a little bit along the way to higher achievement. They need to know that learning sometimes looks more like hard, steady effort for relatively small gains.

Learning looks like hard work for small improvements. After the first big burst of progress, the learning process may look like a series of small steps forward that come only with effort. Unlike that first wild jump, later learning tends to take more work and provide less reward for the amount of energy the learner puts into it. To be more accurate, maybe we can say that the bulk of the student's work changes from making an effort of *will* ("Do I really want to learn how to shoot this thing?") into making an effort of *skill* ("What physical behavior do I need to change in order to reach my performance goal?"). As students progress in their abilities, the learning hill gets a little steeper and each improvement takes a little more work.

[24] Note: when I say "mirror their enthusiasm", I mean just that. You're mirroring their level of enthusiasm. If they aren't highly enthusiastic, be sympathetic with their reluctance, quietly cheerful yourself (a relaxed smile or crinkly happy eyes will do it), and wait for the beginner's grin to surface – which it nearly always will. That beginner's grin is a near-universal! If the beginner's grin never surfaces, ask how your student is doing and respond appropriately. Remember that some folks give off grumpy vibes even while having a grand old time, and that others might smile wanly to cover fear or other negative emotion, so don't put expectations on them when you ask how they're doing even if you think you know.

Consider the intermediate student who has a measurable goal: she wants to draw from concealment and get a good hit on a handprint-sized zone in the upper center chest at seven yards in less than two seconds. And she wants to do this reliably, every single time she tries it, all day long.

To reach this goal, the student first needs a solid dose of good instruction. What does an efficient drawstroke look like? What elements does she need to include for safety? How should she clear her cover garments? She needs information, so you provide that information and give her a good model to follow. But that's only the beginning of her process. Now she needs to try it for herself. At first she moves slowly, making sure she has the broad outlines of the drawstroke, making sure she can get the good hits she's after, making sure each of the elements is in place as she thinks her way through the entire procedure. You watch and make sure her practice stays clean, her technique correct, so she doesn't engrain bad habits. Where can she eliminate wasted motion? How can she fix the mistakes that lead to added time or missed shots? You work to help her find those elements and correct them.

As she works, you'll soon notice a pattern in her efforts.

One example of such a pattern: you might see that when she concentrates on one element of this complex skill set, other elements slip away from her. When she concentrates on bringing the gun quickly out to the target, for example, she might fail to see any part of the sights or fail to press the trigger properly. When she thinks about her trigger press and sight alignment, she moves too slowly out to target. She's having a hard time keeping all the elements in their proper place and balance.

Or you might notice that when your student concentrates on one thing, she actually gets clumsier or slower at doing that one thing. For example, we sometimes see this happen if we spend too much time telling students *how* to move instead of simply telling them *that* they need to move. They slow down because they can't figure out which foot to move next. The more extreme version of this can even spread to other elements. When the student thinks too much about her feet, for example, she slows down *and also* loses track of her muzzle direction.

Or you might notice that when your student concentrates on one element of the skill, that element improves and several other elements also fall quite nicely into place without her paying direct attention to them. We see this happen sometimes when we tell a student to concentrate on getting a good, solid firing grip on the gun while it is still in the holster, which often preps them to move smoothly throughout the remainder of the draw. Call this the golden move for instructors: finding the element that, when the student concentrates on it, actually improves not just itself but also the other elements around it.

As you watch your student work any complex skill with multiple elements, you might notice these patterns, or any of several other patterns of improvement you can work with. Each one should lead to a different

emphasis in your coaching. In this sense, your skill as a coach will be directly related to your skill as an observer.

The challenge for your student is that she will need to perform many different elements in the right way and in the right order before she can reach her overall goal. This is another place where your skill as a coach comes into play. You must decide which errors you should draw to your student's attention right away, which errors you will address later, and (because life is not perfect and you have a limited time with each student) which errors you must leave for her to work out on her own during later practice.

Think of the process you use to decide which errors to correct immediately as something like medical triage:

- **Safety Errors**. Some errors would be catastrophic if left uncorrected. These you must address at once no matter what else is going on.
- **Critical Errors**. Some errors, such as failing to press the trigger correctly, will very likely stop her from reaching her goal, regardless of what else she is doing right. Correct these more significant errors one at a time, as soon as you reasonably can, because they are a decisive factor in her success.
- **Non-Critical Errors**. Some errors may affect her efficiency or consistency, without having a strong impact on her ability to reach the immediate goal. You may choose to set these errors aside to work on at a later time, or start tackling them one by one after the more significant errors are fixed.

Your decision to temporarily disregard minor errors frees your student to focus on the factors that keep her safe, and to make changes that will have the biggest impact on her shooting development. After she has corrected (or at least learned how to correct) the big-picture errors, you can shift your own focus to help your student identify the smaller issues that she should work on.

As a rule, good coaches suggest that students change only one thing at a time. There is one exception: if your student is doing two things that are unsafe, you *must* address both of those things immediately. For example, if she is pointing the gun at her leg with her finger on the trigger, it is not enough to tell her only to point the gun elsewhere, or only keep her finger off the trigger. She must make both of the needed changes at once, even if changing two things at once confuses her. You cannot allow her to fix one thing while ignoring the other, because that would be unsafe. And this is true no matter what other new ideas she's trying to process.

If you see or even suspect that correcting your student on one or more safety issues will not *immediately* get her to a place where she can work without posing a risk to herself or others, do not allow her to work with a functional gun. Instead, have her practice your corrections to her safety habits with a dummy gun, or

some other type of gun-shaped object that could never under any circumstances launch a bullet. Allow her to use a working firearm only after she has used the non-functional one to smooth away her confusion and her existing bad habits. Then make sure she also gets a few dry runs with the real gun before loading it for live-fire work.

Safety factors aside, suggest only one change at a time for students who are in the incremental phase of learning. Make sure your students get enough repetitions to see how each change improves their performance before you suggest the next one.

When making many small improvements toward a big goal, students may feel discouraged because it often feels as though nothing is changing at all, or as though things are not changing quickly enough. The student can feel like she's driving along an endless highway, with the high mountains of her goal far off in the distance and seeming never to get closer no matter how many miles pass under the wheels. To work around this, try giving the student a series of smaller goals that she can reach more easily. As she reaches each small milestone, she can see *and feel* that she's still making progress toward the larger one. The smaller goals function just as the mile markers along a highway let a driver know she is drawing closer to mountains that are so far in the distance that the scenery barely shifts as she drives.

For example, if the student's eventual goal is to make that two-second draw from concealment with a good handprint-sized group at seven yards, you may want to start out with a three-second par time. Or you may try moving the target a little closer – five yards rather than seven. You can increase the difficulty once your student has met the easier standard.[25]

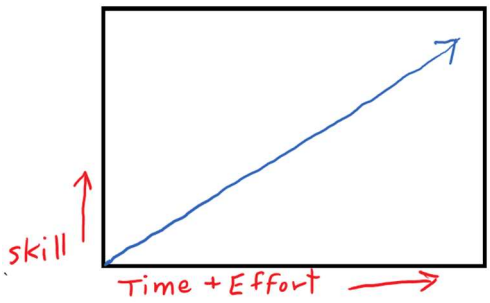
> "Thank you Mario! But our princess is in another castle!" – popular video game

Be sure to help your student celebrate each milestone before you drive on to the next. Few things are more discouraging than to conquer a challenge that we find difficult, only to have someone else imply that it wasn't much of a challenge and not worth paying any attention to because there's still more work to do. So acknowledge, even celebrate, each milestone along the way. In this way you can keep your student engaged and working hard to improve even when she might feel discouraged about her progress toward the overall goal.

This series of small, measurable improvements toward a larger goal definitely looks like learning from our perspective. But it's not the only thing we might see while our students are learning.

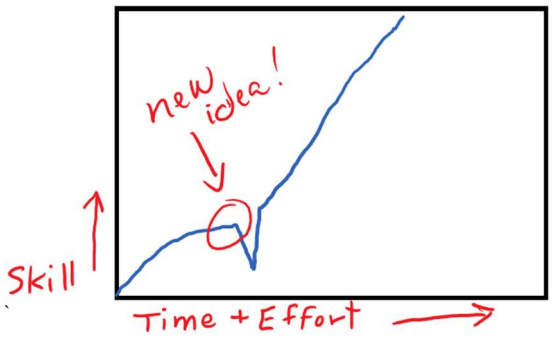
Learning looks like a step backward. Most people tend to think of learning as a process that looks something like this:

[25] I do not suggest lowering accuracy standards. It's easiest to teach students how to shoot before teaching them how to shoot quickly.



That's a steady improvement in ability as the student invests time and effort in the task. As the student puts more time and effort into becoming more skilled, they naturally get better in a steady progression. It's all very smooth, very natural, very pleasant – and very much not what really happens to real students in the real world.

In reality, for physical skills and especially for complex motor programs, the learning process often looks a lot more like this:



The student puts some time and effort into learning the task at first. And they get better, but then they stop improving and they can't figure out why. Then then someone shows them a new way to go about it, suggesting a change that should definitely improve their speed, skill, or efficiency. Maybe it's just some small thing, like altering their grip or moving differently as they draw. But instead of getting better as expected, the student immediately gets worse. What happened?

We often see a sharp dip in ability when students change techniques or run into a new idea as they are improving a physical skill. For a short time, the new learning disrupts what they already know, so they will go through a decline in their existing level of ability or understanding before they have fully grasped the new material.

There's a double whammy on the physical skills side, too. Learning a new technique often *also* messes up the speed and smoothness of the student's older, existing technique. But they haven't yet practiced enough

with the new one to make up for the lost ground. Many times, they have to take on faith that the changes we suggest will help, as long as they keep working at it. But they can't always see or feel that right away.

The sketch isn't a picture of the entire journey, just a snapshot of one small part of it. If we charted the entire learning journey in the same way, the sketch would look a lot like we were traveling to the top of a high mountain by driving there on a bumpy road full of potholes and valleys. Every time we change something in a task the students have already practiced doing another way, we send them through yet another pothole.

Why bother changing anything, then? Take a look at the first part of the journey. At first, the student improved rapidly, but later on, their improvement speed flattened out. They hit a plateau. Some plateaus mean we just need to be patient and keep plugging along because we'll get where we want to go eventually. But often, when learning flattens out like that, it means we need to change something in what we're doing in order to take our skill to the next level. Until we change technique or try a different strategy, our skill will not advance much no matter how much time and effort we pour into getting better.

With some exceptions, the more time someone has spent learning and refining their existing technique, the deeper and wider that initial dip in performance will be. When someone has spent a lot of time and energy on one technique, it can take a lot of time and energy to learn a different one. So we can hit some pretty big potholes with experienced students.

This has several very important implications for us, both as instructors and as lifelong learners:

- We cannot – repeat *cannot!* – accurately judge the long-term value of techniques that are new to us after trying them just once or twice. It takes time and repetition to overcome that initial dip in performance. This is one important reason why, no matter what their own preferred stance might be, smart students shoot in Weaver Stance all week at Gunsite, and use Stressfire Isosceles throughout a class from Massad Ayoob. It takes repeated practice of an unfamiliar technique before we can adequately judge its merits for ourselves.
- We cannot – repeat, *cannot!* – reliably judge new products after trying them just once. Again, it takes time and repetition to overcome the initial dip in performance when we change away from doing something we've practiced a lot. When you choose to write product reviews, even brief ones, for your students or a wider audience, be sure you're giving the products a fair shake (and, just as important, a fair chance to fail) before you take pen in hand. This goes for new holster designs as much as it does for any other type of gear.
- When we read articles comparing the speed or ease of use of Technology A against Technology B, we should view those claims with a healthy dose of skepticism. Lasers vs night sights, should we move the magazine release levers from here to there, which way is the best way to carry your

magazine? Whatever the question might be, very few reviewers take enough time and spend enough energy to become equally-skilled at both options *before* measuring one against the other. All too many already have an answer before they even ask the question, and that means we should always read such claims with caution – and certainly think twice before we repeat them to others.

Once we understand the initial dip in performance when people change an existing way of doing things, we realize why it's so hard to sell a new, undeniably better technique to students who've already spent a lot of time developing a different one. This isn't an unreasonable response on the part of our students. It's normal and even good.

The shape of the learning slope means that your available class time will strongly dictate how much you can expect to change your students' existing habits – and how hard you should try. Longer classes provide more leeway to introduce radically different techniques, while shorter classes must build on existing foundations. If you've only got them for a short program, it may be more worthwhile to simply teach them how to do better within *their own* paradigm, even when that paradigm may not be the one you prefer.

Before you try to switch anyone away from an existing technique that they believe is working for them:

- Be sure you will have enough time to be fair to both the student and yourself;
- Take a moment to explain the shape of the learning slope; and
- Make sure you understand the *student's* goal for the class, and match your suggested changes to your student's goals rather than your own.

Never suggest a student change techniques simply because you yourself prefer a different technique. Instead, carefully weigh the anticipated benefits against the time and effort it will cost your student to change. Are you absolutely sure your suggested change will be worth that level of effort and that investment of time from your student?

Don't suggest big changes, such as switching Weaver shooters to Isosceles (or vice versa), unless you will have enough time for their performance to rebound after the switch. Similarly, in the absence of safety factors, don't make big changes to students' grips unless you have enough time together for the change to settle in.

It's an easier sell if you have a compelling, easily-demonstrated reason that the switch will make a long term difference in the shooter's world.

In classes where using your preferred grip or stance (or whatever) will be foundational to later techniques within the same class, assure students that those later techniques will clearly show why you want them to switch to your preference now. Provide either a quick demonstration or at least a simple explanation of how things will later fit together, to give them a taste of what lies ahead. Then make sure you complete the

sale before closing time. Make sure your work throughout the class will give them enough time with the new technique that they can see its value for themselves before the class is over.

> "Be wary of instructors who refuse to tell you why what they are teaching is worth your time, money and energy to learn, master and anchor. 'Because I said so' or 'because this is how I teach this' is not enough." – Dave Spaulding

The shape of the learning slope has one more important implication for us as instructors. Because good teachers should be generalists – able to pick up many different types of guns and effectively demonstrate their use, able to efficiently demonstrate many different shooting and gunhandling techniques in addition to their own most-preferred method – it can be difficult for even the best instructor to display the absolute highest level of skill in competitive shooting events. That's because the highest competitive performers work very hard to keep small grains of sand like these out of their finely-tuned shooting gears. Although the best competitors will always remain open to trying new techniques to get a competitive edge, they also can't risk messing up their existing habits by constantly switching either gear or techniques. During the off season, they may play with a wide variety of techniques and try out new gear, but during the shooting season, they often work hard to perfect only the techniques and gear they will use in that season's events. There are important reasons for that, and the shape of the learning slope is one of those reasons.

This factor does not matter at all for instructors who compete in the mid ranges (as many do quite successfully), but if you're looking at the possibility of a jump to the supersquad, you may want to keep it in mind.

Once we realize that learning sometimes looks like hard work, and might even look like a step backwards, it isn't surprising that our students may not always see their progress the same way we do.

Learning sometimes looks like failure. From the student's perspective, learning sometimes looks and feels like failure. Repeated failure. Repeated, potentially demoralizing failure.

Because we continually set small, fresh challenges in front of our students, some will have a constant sense that they "can't quite" do any task we give them – even when they do succeed. These students tend to focus on the "just barely" nature of their success, and fail to see that they *are* succeeding. Because every task we set them is a little harder than the one before, together they add up to a long staircase of skills that leads the student to a higher level of ability and achievement, and we as teachers tend to focus on that progress. The student, however, might only see the effort and feel the continued sting of not quite getting it together.

This is another reason to celebrate each milestone along the road to improvement. Some students won't ever notice the mile markers, or realize how far they've come, unless we tell them. Showing them exactly where they've made progress can help these students stay engaged and working hard when they might otherwise give up in despair. We also need to look ahead with them to the ultimate goal so they understand how much more work there remains to do, so they don't quit prematurely from unrealistic optimism about their existing skills. They need to see both how far they still need to travel, *and* how far they've already come.

> "Failure is a gift, embrace it in training because those failures will provide you with priceless insight and preparation. I am prouder of the student who fails, but tries harder to succeed. It shows great character. Even in this artificial environment adversity is something to be overcome. Plus, it makes your successes sweeter." – Jeff Gonzales

Does all of this sound discouraging? It shouldn't. It can actually be very encouraging for the student to realize that the reason he is finding the work hard to do, is because the work *is* hard. Without that understanding, he may think there's something wrong with him when he doesn't find it easy. He might beat himself up for that instead of celebrating his progress. He might even give up and quit, not realizing that the apparent failure he's experiencing in the moment is actually the fast track to success.

Learning sometimes looks like failure for a different reason. That's because sometimes, a student perched on the brink of an "aha!" moment might not be making any measurable progress at all.

We sometimes – often – see this type of learning the first time we put a student on a moving target. They try and try and try to hit the mover, and get annoyed that they can't quite seem to get the hang of it. We reinforce the fundamentals and remind them of the basic strategy. We coach them to see the front sight and press the trigger smoothly, simply moving the muzzle along with the target so that it's exactly like shooting a target that doesn't move.[26] They try again and they struggle some more. Then all at once the light bulb goes on, the student says, "OH!!" as they hit the target cleanly, and apart from minor bobbles they rarely have trouble with moving targets again. After a long stall on the edge of success, they finally unlocked the code and they feel wonderful.

The middle of this process looks a lot like failure – like repeated attempts that don't work, don't get any better, and don't achieve the desired result. What makes it learning instead of true failure, is that each of these failures is greeted with the kind of grit that gets up and tries again, again, again. And keeps doing that, over and over, until the result changes. That's true grit.

[26] This strategy works for hitting a target that moves at a relatively steady speed, such as someone might do sprinting between fixed positions. There are other strategies for other types of movement.

It's also the definition of insanity.

It's insanity, that is, *unless* each try includes either a slightly different strategy toward achieving success, or a slightly better effort at using an already known strategy. (There's a coaching hint in that sentence, somewhere.)

> "Success is stumbling from failure to failure with no loss of enthusiasm." – Winston S. Churchill

Not long ago, I saw a charming online video of a young boy who made a "Rube Goldberg machine" – a multipart contraption that creates a complicated chain reaction to do a simple task.[27] This particular creation would be started by knocking down one domino that would set off a series of dominoes, which would then knock a small bowling pin into a bowl causing a shockwave that would move a small gyroscope down a pair of dowels and then bump into a steel marble that would run through a spiral tube and then down a ramp where it would bump into a switch to activate a toaster that would cause the toast to pop up and a lever to rise that would ... but you get the idea.

As the child explained on the video, because Rube Goldberg designs are complex, it's common for them to fail many times in trials before the builder finally gets it right. The kid estimated that he would probably need to run the machine ten to twenty times before he succeeded. Then he began running his trials. As each attempt failed, he figured out what had caused the failure, corrected it, and tried again. By the end of the video, when his machine finally worked, he was dancing around and giggling with ecstatic glee: "It worked on the *fourth try!* Look, I thought it was going to be umpteen failures, but it was *only three failures!* That's surprising! It worked!"

Having an expectation that failure – even repeated failure – would be a normal part of the process made it possible for the boy to keep working despite the effort it took to get it right. It gave him the energy to try different strategies and avoid discouragement. It set him up to celebrate his achievement when it came, rather than beating himself up for having to work hard to get there. Learning *should* feel good!

There's something else. Every failure brought the Rube Goldberg kid incrementally closer to his goal. He failed in a different spot every time, fixing a different step in the process each time the machine went off the rails. Because he was committed to learning from each failure, he did not fail in the same place twice. He analyzed each failure and figured out how to avoid it in future. (And there's another coaching hint.)

Although from the perspective of an accomplished shooter, a task such as drawing to fire a single round might seem incredibly simple, it's actually quite complex – even more complex than getting a Rube Goldberg machine to work. For this reason, as we work with students it's important to remember that sometimes, from a student's perspective, learning looks a lot like failure. We must frame this reality in a way that keeps them motivated and helps them to move forward.

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[27] www.youtube.com/watch?v=0uDDEEHDf1Y

Here's one more possible thing we might see when we look to see whether students are learning in class. It's the flip side of learning looking like failure.

> "You have learnt something. That always feels at first as if you had lost something." – George Bernard Shaw

Sometimes, *failure to learn* looks like learning. Don't let this one fool you. Some students are highly committed to looking good in class, and that means they are *not* risking anything, *not* learning, *not* growing. These are often the folks who were told as children that smart kids never get anything less than straight A's in school, so they're reluctant to tackle anything that might make them look bad as an adult. Their shooting often looks pretty good when you first meet them, but it will rarely get any better, because they're afraid to push their own limits.

Some students have ego riding on their existing level of accuracy, and thus won't push themselves to get faster or to shoot at smaller targets or greater distances. Other students have ego riding on their existing speed, and thus won't sacrifice even an ounce of speed in order to learn how to shoot more accurately. In either case, these students aren't willing to learn and in fact they are not learning.

You may notice this when you tell your students to speed up and shoot faster. You don't want them to miss paper, you might tell them, but it's perfectly okay if their groups open up a little, perhaps from a fist-sized group to a hand-sized one – because that's how they'll learn what the right speed is for them right now, and that's also how they'll learn to shoot more quickly.[28] They have to push their existing limits in order to learn where their limits really are and then overcome them. They have to risk the miss in order to learn the speed.

But some students won't do it. Simply will not.

There are two ways to deal with this type of reaction from a student. No, three. The third and least-desirable option is to simply ignore it and let it slide, as if you'd never noticed what that student was up to on your line. Since this student will often be trying to avoid your attention anyway, it's easy enough to give her a day of supervised practice without pushing her to learn much more than she came with. This sometimes might be necessary, but shouldn't be done lightly, and never just for your own convenience.

[28] Most people have only one shooting speed, which is much too slow up close and much too fast at distance. Helping students discover this for themselves, and correct it, might be one of the more important things you'll do with them.

Because these slow but accurate students usually shoot small, beautiful groups, you might be tempted to think they don't really need your attention anyway – but they do. Meanwhile, don't let a small group size fool you into thinking this resistant student is learning well. She's not. She's simply practicing the things she's already good at in a way that doesn't risk her ego in front of others.

> "It is funny to see people complain so much about a miss… There is no pressure on you, there is no fear of death or injury. We are in a friendly environment trying to improve. Some people are more interested in stroking their ego than truly improving and that's a problem." – Jeff Gonzales

When you decide to reach this student and help her move to a place where she's willing to risk looking bad in the eyes of the other students (or her own) in order to learn, you have two choices:

1. **Say something.** Challenge her to do better, privately or semi-privately, as you walk down the line reading targets. Withhold any positive comment about her group size or shot placement, and instead focus on her shooting speed: "You're not pushing yourself enough. You're shooting too slowly. I'd like to see you go at least 10% faster than you went before, and I think you can do that. Speed it up!" Sometimes, this student needs an explanation of the 'wobble zone,' and what it means to simply accept her human limitations and press the trigger smoothly so that she *can* speed up. Or she may need some other quick technical tip that gives her the tools she needs to trust her shots. Give those tips to her. As much as possible, as you talk with her, avoid giving her an ego boost for practicing the things she's already good at. Instead, find ways to force her ego to ride on learning the new skill. (Then be sure to praise her for doing so!)

   If more than one student seems to be resistant in the same way, you can call out the group as a whole. I often do this with groups of women: "One of the things I know about groups of women is that we often don't shoot as fast as we really can, because we're afraid of making mistakes. Right now, that's not okay. Right now, our goal is to get around 80% of our hits inside the area we talked about. If you're missing more than that, you should slow down to get better hits because that's what you need to learn right now. But if you're already skilled enough with accuracy to hit your target that well on this drill, I want you to *push against* your existing speed limits so you can find out where they are. You can hit faster than you're going right now! If you're getting perfect little groups right now, you're going too slow for what we are trying to do. I am not impressed with tiny little groups right now. Right now, the goal right now is to push against your existing speed limits. I will be impressed when I see you speed up. Go faster!"
2. **Do something.** Change up the drill to challenge this student indirectly, so that her ego will rest on her speed instead of on her group size – or it will rest on her speed *as well as* her group size. For this, I'm a big fan of a series of shooting exercises I call the Speed Up / Concentration Drill,

learned from Marty Hayes at the Firearms Academy of Seattle. In this set of drills, students start with six rounds in each of three magazines. They begin by firing six shots, slow fire, while concentrating on the front sight and a smooth trigger press with good follow through. This should result in one-hole groups, or nearly so. On command, students reload with another six rounds and are told, "If you were going 20 miles an hour before, speed up to around 35 miles an hour to fire the next six shots. You're still going to do everything you were doing before – concentrate on the front sight, press the trigger smoothly, follow through – but you're going to do it a little faster." For the last magazine of six rounds, students are told to shoot as fast as they can hit: "Not as fast as you can *shoot,* but as fast as you can *hit*. You're still going to do everything you were doing before – front sight, smooth trigger, follow through – but do it fast!"

As we force the entire line of shooters to work faster, the slow student begins to push her own speed so she can keep up with the others. We can make this even more powerful by recognizing and praising the students who finish fastest, so that egos ride on going faster.

There are other options that do the same thing on the speed side of the question. For example, we can take accuracy partially out of the equation by moving students closer to their targets. Or announce that it's time to work on alternate indexes and tape up the sights. We can look for things that will give the student a "reason" to miss, an excuse she can use to shelter her ego as she works on her speed. This also often has the side effect of destroying the "perfect" target that's currently slowing her down. To get the same result, we can swap used targets around between students, so that the perfect, slow shooter no longer shoots at a perfect little piece of cardboard with all the perfect tiny little pieces of tape in the perfect tiny little center, but instead has a visual that indicates some rounds have already gone outside that perfect little center. The presence of tape outside the "perfect" area indirectly gives her permission to miss a little in order to work on her speed.

Of course, sometimes this same basic problem happens the other way around: the student who prides himself on his speed at the expense of accuracy. He missed every shot, but he was the fastest shooter on the line.

> "Take the risk of failure. Very little learning takes place when you succeed. Give yourself the benefit of failing. You learn when you fail. Fail magnificently!"
>
> – John Farnam

For this shooter, his ego is invested in shooting super-fast, and he's unwilling to slow down to get better hits. His ego will not let him invest the time in learning high-accuracy techniques that will help him in the long run. So we must give him a reason to slow down. Perhaps he needs a quick and dirty anatomy lesson about the fist-sized human heart. Maybe we can tell him about the cranial hit zone that's actually smaller than his iPhone. We might

put him in an uncomfortable shooting position that forces him to slow down and concentrate in order to stay safe and get any hits at all.

Overall, we want to look for ways to force his ego to ride on his accuracy. When we change up drills, try challenging this guy to be the *slowest* shooter on the line so that he can demonstrate his perfect trigger control for you. Or praise his accuracy in front of the class while saying little or nothing about his speed, so he makes an ego investment in being accurate.

Both the too-slow shooter and the too-fast one have something in common: they aren't learning right now. In each case, we must force students outside their existing comfort zones in order to build their skills. They need information and they need a coherent understanding of what their shooting goals should be. They need to know *why* you want them to change it up – what's in it for them? Learning something new is a risk, and often involves a blow to the ego. Give them a good reason to take that risk and make that change.

No matter what it looks like…

Regardless of how learning appears – whether it happens fast or slow, whether it comes with ease or takes a little more work, whether it looks like instant success or annoying failure or something in between – understanding what's happening with different types of learning helps us do a better job as coaches and teachers. It helps us encourage and inspire our students to keep working hard when they might be tempted to give up in frustration or complacently rest on their laurels. As you work with your own students, you will soon learn to identify the different ways learning appears, and flex your teaching style to suit your students' needs.