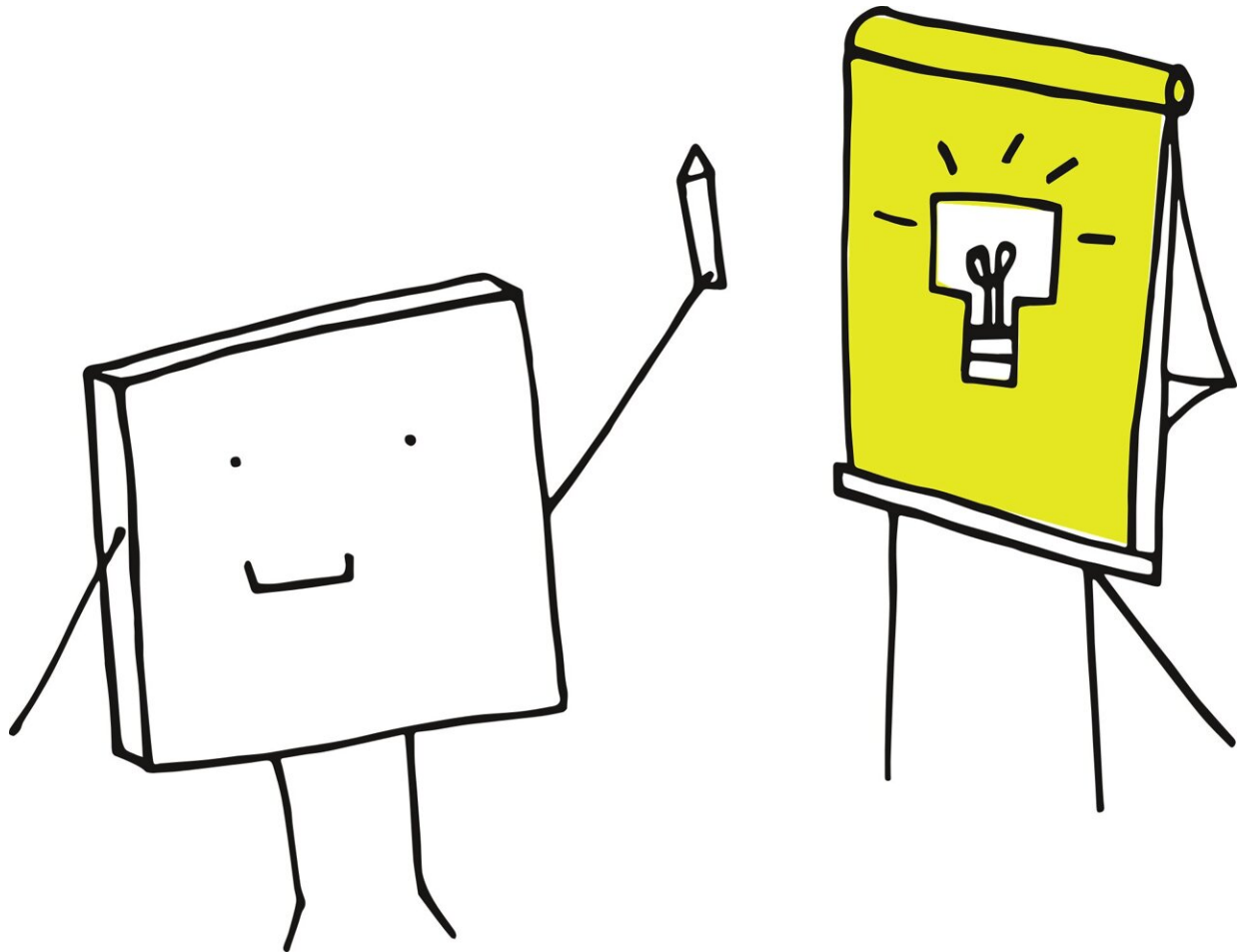


Five ways to learn new things in the new year

January 12 2022, by Emily Boudreau



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The start of the new year can feel like the perfect opportunity to follow through with that resolution to learn a new skill or finally tackle a

challenge. But sometimes it feels like the older you are, the harder it can be to change habits, add a new skill to your repertoire, or start a hobby. Is it really true that an old dog can't learn a new trick?

One thing learning scientists do know is that fluid reasoning—the ability to think logically and solve problems quickly in new situations—does tend to decline as adults age. However, crystallized intelligence—knowledge that comes from experience and prior learning like reading comprehension or vocabulary—increases over time, explains Chris Dede, Harvard Graduate School of Education professor and co-principal investigator on the NSF-funded National AI Institute on Adult Learning and Online Education.

"Essentially, what this means is that some forms of learning are harder as one ages, but other forms of learning actually become easier," says Dede. Here, Dede draws from research around adult development and learning science to provide five tips for learning new things that adults can keep in mind as they head into the new year:

1. Start with what you already know

This is because learning science suggests that people learn by building off existing knowledge or "the edges" of what they already know. So, for example, if you're an accomplished photographer but you've always wanted to take up painting, you may be able to learn faster because you can build off what you already know about composition and light.

"Because adults have more knowledge from [past experiences](#), they have more edges to learn from and build off of," says Dede.

2. Identify your motivation

Learning something new at a later stage in life tends to be more about

positive self-concept and intrinsic interest. While motivation is key in the K–2 space too, adult learners don't generally have to pass a test at the end of a unit. As a result, there's often less pressure or lower stakes attached, making the conditions more conducive to positive experiences with learning tasks.

3. Analyze your interest to help find potential new areas to explore

Think about what you like doing and ask yourself why. Maybe you like cleaning the house because it's a finite task with a concrete sense of accomplishment. Maybe you like jigsaw puzzles because you like recognizing patterns. By deconstructing your engagement with different activities, you're exposing more "motivational edges" you can build on as you expand learning.

4. Find ways to connect and bond with others

The best way to learn is often to teach or to have someone to bounce ideas off. It can also help to have someone to hold you accountable. In fact, studies have found that you'll often work harder to help a protégé than yourself. Find someone who appreciates what you know and tackle the project together.

5. Challenge yourself and have a growth mindset

Surmounting a challenge has been shown to make people happier—and learning something new can provide that kind of challenge. "Picking something you might enjoy and building your growth mindset by learning it in a challenging way that involves other people can really make all the difference and help form a successful learning experience for an adult," says Dede.

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