Is it Time for Slow Learning in GIS?

Everything is speeding up but I'm going to suggest slowing down. My guess it that the phrase 'slow learning' is new to many readers. Slow learning is a vision for less formulaic, less time-driven learning. It's self-directed (students select the topics to learn), long-lasting (more like lifelong learning than finishing a course, grade or degree), authentic (based on real world activities), and supports, and is supported by, a learning community. Slow learning joins other slow movements such as slow food, which aims "to prevent the disappearance of local food cultures and traditions, to counteract the rise of fast life…" and slow weights which suggests, instead of going to the gym and pumping iron for an hour, that individuals do a few exercises in a few sessions during their day.

I've seen what I'd describe as 'fast learning' taking hold in our industry. I see queries like "How can I learn python tomorrow?" on forums and e-mail lists. There's a proliferation of online on demand offerings to address such questions. I found a course 'Python for Geospatial' with just two hours of video, available any time you'd like to begin. I learned from a colleague that a student recently completed Esri's four week Do-It-Yourself Geo Apps course in two days. Institutions that offer GIS certificates are trying to out-market one another by offering the quickest time to completion - current offerings boast completion times in anywhere from two years to just a matter of months.

Fast learning's promised quick return on investment is perhaps its greatest potential benefit. But, it has a number of downsides. Fast learning, I'll posit, happens when there's a proverbial "gun to one's head." For example, you may have to learn to make a bivariate 3D map today because the boss wants one tomorrow. Learning under pressure, as every college student who had "crammed" can tell you, is stressful and boast little long-term mastery. The pressure almost ensures that the student is not in a good headspace to learn. Elementary teachers know that calm, well-rested, well-fed students can absorb new skills like a sponge, while the agitated, drowsy and hungry cannot. Fast learning forces an experience of the content that's high level and light at best. Fast learning is the highlight reel, rather than the full story arc, of a topic.

In contrast, slow learning is guided by the learner and thus is more likely to be selected when there's a smile on the student's face and twinkle in the eyes that says, "I want to learn to do that!" Further, there's a sense of "I'll learn a little today, a bit more next week, and then go to the session on it at the conference next month." Slow learning encourages participation in a learning community. That may mean colleagues who chat about image formats over lunch now and again, or a regular crowd that convenes for Geo-beers once a month, or an online community that tackles cartographic issues as they are raised.

Where does a publication about GIS fit in? Is it fast learning or slow learning? I'd suggest it has the best of both worlds. When you pick up a GIS magazine, or any magazine really, the first thing you do is flip through it or review the table of contents. While the activity may be fast, it sets up slow learning's self-direction. The skimming helps you find areas of interest as you are drawn to some articles and uninterested in others. Finally, with a few articles selected, I like to imagine, you slowly and deliberately begin reading.

I'm hopeful that in the coming months you'll find and commit yourself to some slow geospatial learning activities. If you select them well, they will keep you interested, interesting, marketable and successful.

This article was published in GIS Professional October 2018