

LEARN YOUR WAY

New to the PMP family in 2023, Michael Maser is an award-winning educator, author and learning coach who teaches Neurobiology and Learning in the Individual Masters program with Antioch University. He has just wrapped up his PhD, focused on learning, at Simon Fraser University, BC, Canada.

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Michael Maser

Hello and welcome to the second instalment of “Learn Your Way.”

In my previous column I introduced the concept of ‘learning detective’ as a metaphor to support you in learning math or other subjects of interest.

I also left you with some homework, to identify the things you are pretty good at and your general or specific learning goals. Being honest and clear about these things will help you be more focused and successful.

In this column I’m going to apply the ‘learning detective’ concept in studying another person to see how they achieved learning breakthroughs in the face of serious challenges, maybe similar to what you are facing or have endured. Our subject today is Christopher Havens, who is responsible for starting the PMP and the newsletter you are reading.

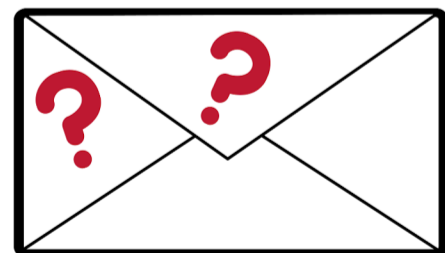
In a nutshell, Christopher is serving a 25-year sentence, at the beginning of which he found himself in solitary staring at the walls. It was a grinding environment, but Christopher turned it into his personal ‘learnscape,’ as he shared with me in a recent interview.

The details of his transformation are worthy of carefully unpacking to reveal the strategies he invoked. This is the stuff of learning detective work

– noticing the *what* and *how* of somebody doing something you consider important. I urge you to try this because “success leaves clues,” and these clues can also help guide you to learning success. Below is my summary of Christopher’s story in which I unpack the specific things he did that ultimately helped him.

Strategies are real processes

1. While in ‘the hole’ Christopher noticed a staff member slipping envelopes to other inmates once a week. He asked what was going on and was told they were math problems that helped inmates pass the time. He was offered an envelope and he said yes. That is, he OPENED himself to be CURIOUS, to check this out for himself. Now, Christopher was not a math whiz; as a kid, he had average success with math but dropped out before finishing high school. So it took some COURAGE to take this first step and try something new.



2. Christopher liked trying to solve the problems and puzzles. The math was pretty basic but it made sense to him and he KEPT AT IT. In deepen-

ing his FOCUS on the problems he began to experience real satisfaction and powerful sensations—like an ability to filter out the noise that was the soundtrack of life in the hole. And those walls he was staring at? With a little IMAGINATION he turned them into ‘blackboards’ on which he sketched out math equations and also taped real sheets of paper.

3. As he continued to experience success he began to recognize foundational truths in math that had been lacking in the experiences that had led to so many problems in his life and, ultimately, to prison. In another step of OPENNESS, he reflected on his own life and found himself facing a critical, life-changing decision. Again, he summoned the COURAGE to embrace change and continue deepening his commitment to math as a LIFE-CHOICE that helped him move away from the unstable world that had created problems for him.



“I began to think that if I really worked at it maybe I could become a ‘mathematician,’” he said. “That was a huge breakthrough for me.”

4. After making this choice, Christopher was willing to transform but it required a whole new level of COURAGE for him to move into unknown territory and basically CREATE A NEW REALITY for himself, including a new identity.

“At this point I had to restructure my values and my life,” he said. To accomplish this he needed support and allies to help him stay on the path that was bringing him success. Released from the hole into the general prison population, Christopher bumped into inmates who expected him to act as his former self, leading to more stress. This is a hinge point that trips up many

people trying to make important life changes, and Christopher was no exception. At one point he pleaded with staff to return him to the hole so he could avoid conflict. Staff initially dismissed him but he was eventually supported in entering a prison-based transition program. Two additional allies helped him at this time, including his mother who offered unwavering support, listening to him and fulfilling his requests for new math texts. A little later Christopher also gained a mentor beyond the prison, a professional mathematician in Italy willing to accept him as a long-distance student.



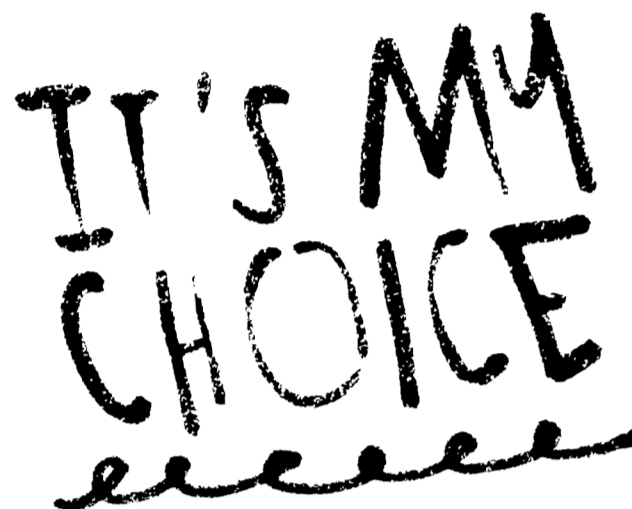
5. Christopher COMMITTED TO TRANSITIONING INTO A NEW LIFE, characterized by NEW IDEALS he had created. In math he continued to experience joy and satisfaction and it filled him up. But he also SAW A BIGGER PURPOSE here, too, and strove to create the PMP to HELP SERVE fellow inmates who also might engage with math, or something else, as a way to discover a new life of meaning and purpose around their passion for higher education.

“I didn’t know if I was ready to do this,” he said. “But I’ve learned that even inside a prison, the world can be cast in beauty and meaning. The PMP is an embodiment of this.”



And that's where our learning detective work sums up for now. If you 'follow the puck' here you can see Christopher's transition was no accident but the result of deliberate choices he made. He faced real psychological challenges, candidly reflected on his life, saw a bigger picture of possibility and set new goals to achieve. His goals did not all appear at once, or even very clearly, but were more like stars twinkling through a cloudy night.

It's up to you to determine if or how the strategies Christopher invoked might apply to you. You must make your own choices for your own learning journey. And of course nothing will change if you don't set an intention to change. But once you set an intention in motion, the psychic force of this is powerful, as Christopher's story reveals. That helped him find the courage to face his past, keep trying math problems, and ask for help.

The image shows the phrase "IT'S MY CHOICE" written in a bold, black, hand-drawn font. The letters are thick and slightly irregular, giving it a personal, expressive feel. Below the main text, there are several horizontal, wavy lines that look like a signature or a decorative flourish.

Your homework:

Observe somebody doing something you are curious about or admire, carefully noting the processes they seem to be following. Now, approach them and respectfully ask them how they are doing this and if they might help you learn it. I know asking for help is often challenging—especially in prison where it may be interpreted as a sign of weakness. I encourage you to work through this in your mind and also to practice it, aloud. If someone blows you off, roll with it and move on to ask someone else. You *will* find someone to respond to your request and show you what they're doing. Like most things, this will be easier the more you do it. Remember to thank them.

In my next column I will discuss the power of 'self-talk' to create your own blueprint for learning success.



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