



Learning Together Again: An Unorthodox Review of Dave Cormier's *Learning in a Time of Abundance*

BOOK REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

In his book *Learning in a Time of Abundance*, Dave Cormier takes a fun and direct approach in communicating the context of contemporary learning as he sees it. Cormier confidently labels such context as an abundance of information that has come to shape both how we learn and how we communicate with each other. While Cormier's book is not a conventional academic text, it still has much to offer readers that are curious about how they can reconcile the new means of information.

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Once a year, for quite a few years now, my dad and I drive from Toronto to the northern end of Algonquin National Park. Last time, on the return trip, we got into a disagreement about using Google Maps. He kept politely insisting that I ought to know which exit was ours, calmly asking whether I'd been paying attention all those years in the back seat. I hadn't been. And I reminded him that my brother and I spent much of that time glued to our Game Boys. Put simply, unlike my dad, *knowing streets* was never something essential for me. Thanks in part to robust apps like Maps and Waze, it was never something I needed to learn.

That's the nub of what Dave Cormier gets at with his new book *Learning in a Time of Abundance*. Things are different now; it really is that simple (or complicated, if you've been paying attention). For my dad, working on his Mustang and knowing which street took you where meant freedom: the ability to go for a ride and meet new people and experience new things. For my younger brother and I, coming of age in the mid-aughts, that freedom was only ever a few clicks away: our computers and gaming consoles were the machines that got us there. Times have changed, and 'how we learn what we need to' has as well.

STRUCTURE AND CONTENT

Before I engage in any proselytizing of the work, I'll get the awkwardness out of the way: if you're looking for a long form study that has a lot of graphs and charts and p-values, Cormier's book isn't that. Written in a fun and relaxed voice, with scant citations (there is no formal works cited section to be found at the end of the text), Cormier is less preoccupied with scholastic self-corroboration than he is with telling you a rollicking story about learning. Indeed, by his own admission, it's not an 'academic' book (Greene 2023). What Cormier is mostly concerned with is distinguishing the inciting incident from the precipitating causes and subsequent effects: humanity has never produced (nor had access to) the extent of *information* that it has right now—and the ways in which we've traditionally come to know and learn things are somewhat incongruent with this, as Cormier puts it simply, abundance of information (Cormier 2024).

The book roughly outlines how learning has changed over the course of human history based on the goals and needs of society, mediated by technological bellwethers of the time as remarked on or recalled by Cormier. He highlights particularly interesting or amusing examples while establishing the handoff between a bygone era in which information was scarce, and now, an era wrought by the convenience of being able to instantly access hitherto unthinkable troves of information with just a couple of clicks. And this is the main thrust of the piece in many ways: the notion that, relatively speaking, we've all had very little time to adjust to a reality in which information is less something to be sought, and increasingly something that we're inundated by (Cormier 2024). Naturally, things like 'education systems' writ large—systems that inform and define our very conceptions of such amorphous concepts as 'learning'—are just as unlikely to have adapted to the new means with which we come to learn and know. It's the kind of thing that futurist Sohail Inayatullah might frame as a 'used future,' a reality informed by the inaction or objectives of the past (Inayatullah 2013). This is cemented by Cormier's contemporary examples of the ways in which we are currently culpable for (and susceptible to) these new existential threats. Whether it's just average people clickin' and scrollin' on social, thinking adults trying to draw some conclusions about the nature of children's sports and head trauma, or legitimate bad faith actors crafting content designed to enrage or entice you into engagement—the game has changed, it's here and we're in it, its ceaseless.

Quite possibly posing more questions than he does provide answers, Cormier splits the difference by offering a set of good practice tenets meant to guide our thinking and degrees of participation as we reconcile the new abundance. While such values of the new 'global citizen' could easily be lamented as sentimental or wishful thinking, Cormier sticks to his stance that in our global, digital community, it's going to take a lot of people and a long time to move the needle on matters deemed worthy of our collective attention. It's a stance that asks us to consider our audience beyond our immediate reach (be it the classroom, on social, or amongst your college friends that you play *Call of Duty* with on weekends) and actively demonstrate the values we'd like to see more of. Cormier asks that we learn from our community both directly and indirectly, our decisions and attitudes rippling and collecting to form waves that wash over the far-reaching shores of communities unseen.

What *Learning in a Time of Abundance* does a great job of is articulating the nature of the challenge—the naming of the thing: abundance. For anyone that’s had a feeling that they couldn’t quite put their finger on, Cormier’s accessible writing equips experts and laypersons alike with some firmer guidelines they can use to re-examine their own epistemic relationship with a reality of abundance. While higher-education veterans might find many of the collected musings a tad rudimentary, Cormier’s presentation of the situation is a great yardstick to both gather around and measure against. When it can sometimes feel like everyone’s out to get theirs—as you’re subjected to the bump and grind of algorithmic targeting, tracking, and tuning—a fun read suggesting that the world doesn’t have to be a cold and angry place, serves as a warm and friendly reminder.

OVERALL IMPRESSION AND RELEVANCE TO THE FIELD

While it’s hard to draw comparisons to more traditional books and studies, that’s not to say Cormier is peerless. In fact, in many ways, the book’s voice and presentation are emblematic of the community of experts and practitioners that Cormier thanks at the text’s outset. A genuine book for genuine people who do genuine thinking. Even if you’re simply someone that’s interested in reconciling differences and finding common ground in online spaces, Cormier offers great talking points about how we can have these conversations and build capacity together. My dad and I might not ever see eye to eye on navigation methods, but we still have much to learn from one another. He’s still the person I’m going to go to for insights into automotive repair, financial literacy, and social mores; I suspect I’ll remain his go to expert when it comes to push notifications and the dark patterns of e-commerce UIs. And if stuff comes up that we don’t know about, we’ll probably ask around. And so it goes.

DATA ACCESSIBILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR’S CONTRIBUTIONS (CRediT)

Christian Metaxas: conceptualization, writing – original draft, writing – review and editing. The author has read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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