

Learning on Steroids:

Total Immersion Method



by Scott Young

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How to Remember Formulas

How do you become insanely good at a subject in a short amount of time?

That's the question I'd like to tackle today—specifically, how you can rapidly build skill and knowledge in an area in much less time than it takes people normally. The tactic I'm going to describe, total immersion, takes a lot of effort and is one of the hardest to apply. That said, there are a couple non-obvious reasons it works so well.

Total Immersion

Total immersion is learning by extreme saturation. That is, you learn because every aspect of your life becomes drenched in the subject matter. No life balance. No breaks. Complete immersion all the time, so that every facet of your life is touched by the subject you want to learn.

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A perfect example of total immersion is the technique Benny Lewis uses to learn languages. He arrives in a foreign country and speaks as little English as possible. He switches his phone, computer and all of his electronics over to the language. He listens to all his radio and television in the language. He does everything in the language he wants to speak, and he does this from Day 1.

The intensity of Benny's mission means that he quickly adapts to spending much of his time interacting with the language in some fashion. As a result, he's able to reach fluency faster than most people. After learning eighth languages and working on his ninth, he can reach a level most people take years to reach in a few months.

Total Immersion Versus “Studying”

Studying is the opposite of total immersion because it's drawing a boundary between your time in the subject and your time outside of it. By creating this boundary, learning becomes an activity you spend a few hours every week working on. But outside that boundary, you don't do much work on it at all.

Immersion on the other hand, changes your daily life into mini exposures to the target subject, and as a result, you spend far more time learning without specifically making it a part of your day. Given, this transition isn't easy (and it works for some subjects better than others) but if you successfully pull it off, you can compress years of learning into just a few months.

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Let's take a hypothetical example:

Jill wants to learn about biology. So she sets aside an hour every day to read through books on biology. This is a large commitment (as anyone who's ever committed to an hour every day will attest), and it nets her seven hours per week learning her target subject.

Now let's look at John who **really** wants to learn about biology. He orders a stack of books on the most interesting biology material he can find. He makes a leading science column his browser homepage. He syncs his iPod to receive biology talks automatically. He puts biology magazines in his bathroom and gets science documentaries to watch on television.

John sets aside no time specifically for studying biology. He simply replaces his current activities with similar ones that help

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him on his quest to understand more about biology. The first month of this quest is hard—he has to focus and be extremely motivated. But in the end, he's able to average about 40 hours per week of exposure to biology material.

Jill set a difficult trial and netted about 7 hours per week. John set a harder trial, admittedly, but probably only twice as hard in terms of sheer effort. However, by going with total immersion, John ended up investing 40 hours per week and making much more significant gains.

How to Successfully Run an Immersion Challenge

The first step is to do an audit of all the things you do in a typical day. Carry around a notepad and write down whenever

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you interact with something or invest time in a project. Make a big list of activities such as:

- Eating
- Web surfing
- Watching television
- Exercising
- Showering
- Reading books
- ...
- Talking to friends

The next step is to, one-by-one, convert as many of these activities as possible into something that immerses you in your chosen subject. You won't have time to run a 30-Day Trial for each conversion, but you can focus on one new conversion per day for a month, doing your best to maintain ones you've made in the past.

Deciding to have a stack of journals in the washroom when you're using the bathroom is one example. Another would be to pick up a DVD series exploring the subject when you have downtime. Changing over your browser homepage, or listening to podcasts while you exercise are others.

Isn't Total Immersion a Little Much?

The goal of total immersion isn't to have a lukewarm state of life balance. It's not to be in a state of blissful relaxation while you slowly enjoy a new subject. It's about rapidly gaining proficiency in a field and increasing your skills.

That said, total immersion will **only** work when:

1. You ***really*** enjoy the subject
2. You're absolutely committed to seeing big results

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If you really enjoy the subject, then total immersion can require some work, but it shouldn't burn you out. When I've done this in the past with business and self-improvement areas, my own natural curiosity meant I enjoyed the immersion process tremendously.

However, if you only have a mild commitment or you don't really like the subject, total immersion will never work.

Painless Conversion of Activities

The goal of total immersion isn't to spend your entire days and nights studying. The point is to tweak how you already spend your time so that it can foster learning. But this won't work if you replace your fun activities with boring substitutes from your field. This is why you need passion and also why you need to get creative.

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Replacing your favorite television show with textbook reading isn't sustainable. But switching up half or more of your television reading with incredibly interesting documentaries or talk programs dedicated to your subject is.

Try to make conversion as pain-free as possible. If you need to really force yourself to do the new alternative, you should try to think of a different, creative, alternative that puts you in that position.

Examples in Action

I'll run through a few hypothetical learners who would apply total immersion to their field, so you can get an idea of how it works:

Example #1 - Paul learns Spanish

Paul wants to become fluent in Spanish. To get into total immersion, he'll have to convert most of his communicating life into Spanish and speak as little English as possible for the duration of his challenge. Here's what he does:

Paul starts by joining a group that meets once a week to speak Spanish. This is Paul's anchor, so he can always have at least some Spanish as he converts his activities over.

On the first day, Paul converts his cell phone to put all displays in Spanish. The day after that, Paul converts his Facebook and internet browser into Spanish. He downloads Spanish podcasts, and picks up dubbed translations of his favorite television shows into Spanish.

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Paul starts reading a Spanish book he's interested in, and makes an effort to find people who speak Spanish. He starts out by going onto Spanish language forums and reading responses and making comments. Then he tries to continue his friendships that he's met in the Spanish speaking group.

In all, without ever leaving his home, Paul ends up investing 20 hours per week engaged in some kind of Spanish by the end of the month, and after 2 months he is feeling confident enough to have conversations.

Example #2 - James learns computer programming

James wants to improve his computer programming skills. To start, he buys several books and magazines on computer

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programming. He installs programming related podcasts on his iPod and finds videos from old tech conferences online, related to software design.

James invests his off hours building small programming projects, from a simple website to a text-based computer game. He also joins a local club where people talk about game design projects and James contributes.

Even in his homework assignments, James finds a way to use his skills. In his statistics class, James creates a computer program that will automatically sort and display the data he needs for a project.

During breaks in his time, James works out programming algorithms on a notepad he brings with him around, or he reads trade journals from people working in software startups. After a

few months of total immersion, James is skilled enough to follow the programming classes a year ahead of him in university.

Example #3 - Jessica masters business

Jessica wants to let her small company which sells handmade paper cards. She invests in total immersion first by creating a list of everyone who sells design or crafts online. She then sends them emails and tries to get a chance to speak to them one-by-one through Skype during her lunch hours.

Jessica finds every trade publication and reads them during her rides on the subway. She subscribes to every major blog in her niche and buys a few courses on marketing skills for her field. She joins a local entrepreneurship meet-up where she can talk with other people also trying to learn the craft.

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She surrounds herself with books related to business and entrepreneurship, and watches the business news media so she can have a better understanding of the big picture of the economy. A few months of initial push, and Jessica is now entrenched in her industry and has numerous contacts who can help her with her business.

Going for Total Immersion

Total immersion can work with any subject. The key is to not compartmentalize your learning from the rest of your life, but to saturate yourself in it. Given, this isn't a tactic for the mildly enthusiastic, since it requires so much to work effectively. But when it does work, the results are pretty dramatic and it's a strong way to go if you want to make gains quickly.

Good luck with this technique and I'll see you on the other side!