

# Incidental Learning

## General

Incidental learning has been defined by McGeough and in 1942 as

- “**learning** which apparently takes place **without a specific motive or a specified formal instruction...**”<sup>1)</sup>

Incidental learning refers to the fact that people learn a lot without effort or explicit instruction, like learning of new vocabulary through imitation, learning geography through traveling or surfing the web. This type of learning uses the **intrinsic motivation**. On the contrary, traditional education is mostly orientated mostly on extrinsic motivation: learner should learn what is suggested by the teacher in order to win a *prize* or avoid *punishment*.

## What is incidental learning?

Incidental learning is usually a **byproduct of some other activity**. Some authors<sup>2)</sup> define incidental learning as learning that occurs only without intention of the learner nor the source.

Researches have provided various results about incidental learning, generally depending on how broadly it is defined and on which subjects it was tested. Incidental learning is largely influenced by **prior knowledge** and was easier if the information was related to a topic of interest. Incidental learning is often mentioned in the workplace context<sup>3)4)</sup>.

In childhood incidental learning is considered to be a common form of learning (**language and social skills learning**). Some researches<sup>5)</sup> focused on incidental learning through media and showed how children learned behavior, attitudes, values and cognitive information through watching television programs and commercials. Similar research on older adult subjects<sup>6)</sup> resulted similarly in incidental learning of information, but less significant changes in attitudes. Still, incidental learning becomes more complex to investigate in adult subjects because of the role of prior knowledge or specific interests of experiment participants.

## What is the practical application of incidental learning?

- *“The trick is not to teach the facts at all, but rather to have the facts be along the way to getting to something the student naturally wanted to know in the first place... We should use students' natural interest so they come across such facts incidentally, in the course of pursuing their interests.”*<sup>7)</sup>

An application of incidental learning (at least in its broad definitions) in the educational process can be done by representing facts that need to be learned through a material which is interesting to the learner. If the learner is motivated by doing something interesting, he can learn a lot without even noticing it. An example of incidental learning program is the [Road Trip software](#), designed to help children learn US geography through a drive simulation and videos they find interesting.

## Criticisms

Depending on its definition, incidental learning can not be used in education<sup>8)</sup> or can be used, but then it mostly ignores principles of instructional design in order to “hide” the learning part from the learner (for example, contain plenty of other material which mediates interest of the learner). Also, if the learning is incidental, same as in the case of [discovery learning](#), it can easily result in misconceptions and uncertainty of the really important parts of the learned material.

## Keywords

- **Incidental learning**

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[Schank, Roger C., and Cleary, C. Engines for education. 1995.](#)

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[McGeoch, John Alexander. The psychology of human learning: an introduction. Longmans, Green and Co., 1942.](#)

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[Marsick, V. J. and Watkins, K. E. Informal and incidental learning in the workplace. New York: Routledge. 1990.](#)

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8)

If defined so that nor the intention of the source nor the learner mustn't be learning.

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