

1. ADULT LEARNING  
ARCHITECTURE – AN OVERVIEW



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Statue in Hotel Ca' Pedrocchi, Venice, Italy

15<sup>th</sup> July 2014

Fountain Pen on A5 Sketchbook

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This book is primarily geared towards the adult who wants to learn something new. Throughout the first half of the book, you will read examples of people who took on the task of learning new things very late in life. You will also learn some strategies that can help you boost your intrinsic motivation. The second half of the book will focus primarily on my own experience developing my Adult Learning Architecture. Don't be afraid to put these principles into practice and take on the challenge of learning something you're interested in.

Richard Branson, the founder of the Virgin group, once said that "Education doesn't just take place in stuffy classrooms and university buildings, it can happen everywhere, every day to every person." Regardless of your stage in life, you are able to learn anything. Being over the retirement age doesn't mean that you can't learn to play the piano or paint a beautiful landscape, for instance. The brain is a powerful and complex organ. Studies have shown that when we are motivated to learn, "the brain's emotional and cognitive processing areas are activated" (Sousa, 2009). This book is based on the premise that you can learn anything. It presents the Adult Learning Architecture model that I developed through a variety of experiences that I have had throughout my life.

You won't find a plethora of academic research, although I do present some of the more interesting models in summary form for background purposes. You can skip the second half of Chapter 2 if you like, it won't disrupt your reading of the book. This book is not intended to be a coalescing of ideas put forth in the great books of learning. Instead, you will be presented

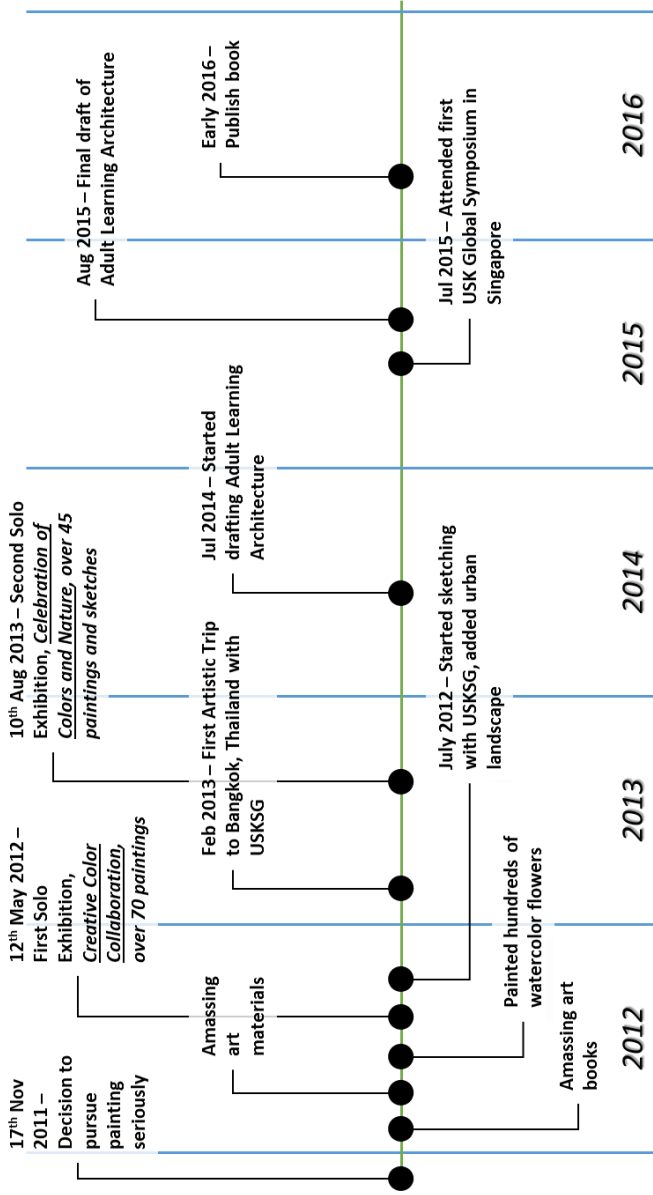
with an approach to learning that is based on my own experience in learning a new set of skills as an adult learner.

Some of my recent learnings have centered on creative pursuits, for example, learning how to draw which I began in 2012. I have also attempted other learning projects such as songwriting, deepening my knowledge of enterprise architecture (this is an area of study that's relevant to my information technology career) and photography.

You may think that my learning model would be better suited to those who are creatively inclined. However, the principles outlined in this book can easily be applied to a variety of areas, such as golf or Sudoku. I will use my artistic journey as a backdrop to this book in order to illustrate the ideas and concepts of my learning process. We all want learning to be fun, but we also have to understand that if we are to seriously pursue any learning venture, we are going to need to put in some amount of work and to overcome hurdles.

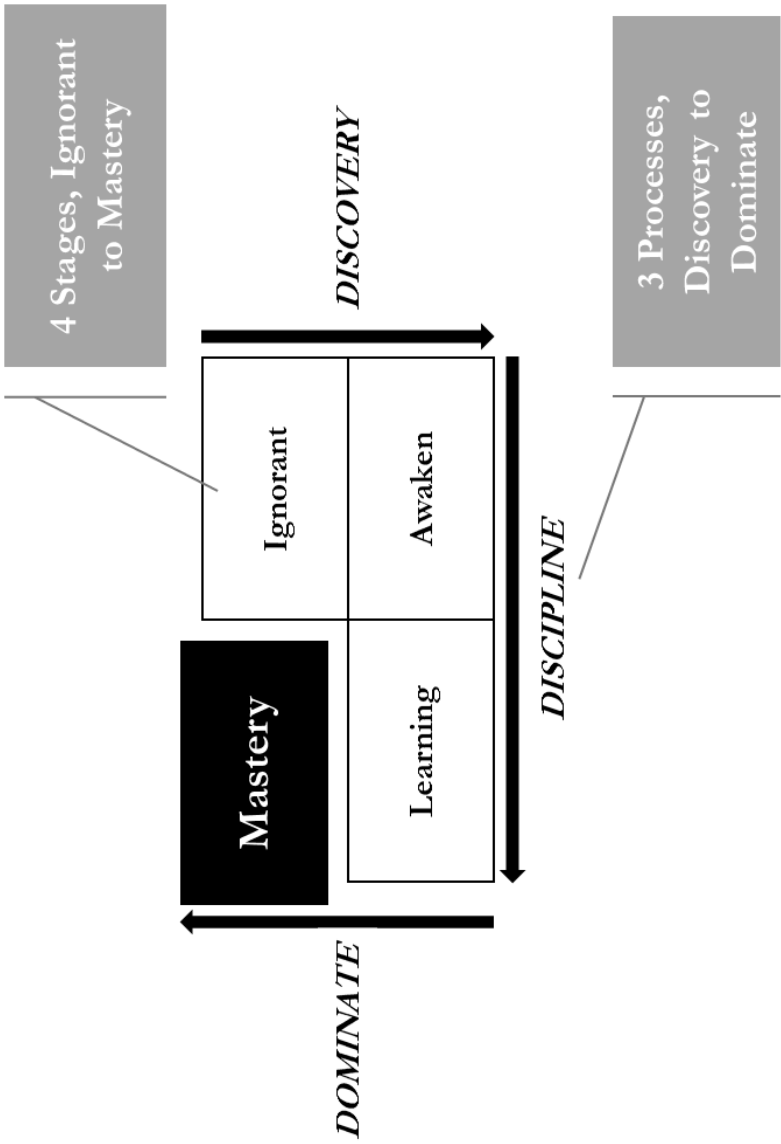
When my artistic journey began in 2012, I believed that I had no drawing ability. In 2009, I attempted to paint, but I was using technological tools to help me draw, I couldn't draw, not even lay down basic outlines for my painting. My drawing method then was to project an image onto the canvas using a projector and copy the outline. Some people would say that nothing is wrong with that approach (some might call it cheating!), but I knew that I couldn't draw. I had some time on my hands in 2012 when I took a year off. So, I decided to learn more about drawing. That's when my roadmap to becoming an artist began.

## – Whee Teck’s Artistic Journey –



USKSG = Urban Sketches Singapore

As I taught myself how to draw and paint, I discovered many principles of learning. As a career IT consultant, this has been an enriching journey for me. My art has been showcased in two shows thus far: one in May 2012 and the other in August 2013. This sense of accomplishment has unearthed a desire within me to share what I have learned with you. This book outlines four learning stages that are linked by the three learning processes, the Ds of the learning process. The stages and process are shown in the diagram below.



## MY OWN ART JOURNEY<sup>1</sup>

In chapter 3, I write about the lives of some popular personalities and how their determination, focus, commitment, passion, and experience make the perfect recipe for succeeding as an adult learner. Age isn't a factor when these ingredients are in the mix. My Adult Learning Architecture will prove that it is possible to learn at any age, just like my own art journey that began when I was 43.

Trained as an engineer, I've spent over 20 years in the Information Technology (IT) industry. Although primarily working in the financial services sector, I've also completed IT work in other industries, including public sector, transportation, utilities, and more. While growing up, I've dabbled with drawing, like doodling and such but never pursued the subject with any deep interest.

My strengths have always been in subjects like mathematics and physics while the ability to draw was beyond me. I had plenty of friends, who were "gifted" and I admired their ability to draw and create beautiful things during my school years.

My own art story should rightly begin in November 2011 when I decided to take a sabbatical year. I had worked close to two decades by then, and my dad was going through early cancer treatment. To spend more time at home, I decided it was a good time at that point in my life to take time out.

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<sup>1</sup> One of the best books on drawing would be "Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain" by Betty Edwards (Edwards, 2012)

So the sabbatical year would be 2012. I didn't want to play golf – I tried that but felt it took too much time. I didn't wish to sit at home and be a couch potato either. No, I wanted to learn something new, something different.

The motivation for me to pursue something new and different is driven by my desire to use that experience to fine tune my own approach to learning. I had to pick something that I wasn't good at, something that gives me a chance to use my learning strategy. Something I could get to a proficient stage relatively quickly, after all, one year is very short to want to master something. I ended up picking painting as the learning project for 2012.

In 2008, I tried for a few months to learn how to paint. I did that, but since I couldn't draw back then, I had used a projector to trace photos onto a canvas for me to paint on. I had some success in 2008 with acrylic and it looked quite half-decent back then. What I learned in 2008 was that I couldn't draw, whenever I tried to do free hand drawings on the canvas, inevitably, the drawing would be wrong. If I drew people, the proportions of head to body would be wrong, etc. If I drew buildings, they would look funny because I didn't get the perspectives right. I knew I couldn't draw. So when I decided to take time off and learn something new, I decided I would like to learn how to draw and paint “properly.”

### **Natural Learning Habits**

Most of us have a natural learning habit, I start my learning project by reading a book. Therefore, I classify



myself as a “Mind” first learner. Others might start with hanging out with people to learn, more as social activities. For example, to learn cycling, one might start to hang out with a cycling enthusiasts. That I classify as “Membership” learner. In all, I found there are 5 ways to classify elements of learning, they became the 5 elements of learning which I will describe in detail in this book.

The 5 Ms thus are Mind, Muscles, Motivation, Membership and Matter.

Since I am a Mind first learner, I researched on Amazon and bought over a hundred books on drawings and paintings. The books were varied and covered a wide range, from perspectives, to “loose and quick sketching”, etc. I joined a few online forums and art communities, the main one at that time being a website call [www.wetcanvas.com](http://www.wetcanvas.com). Connecting with other artists and hobbyists were part of my attempt to be “one of them.”

I found a few online art stores that shipped to Singapore, and I went crazy with the new found hobby of collecting art materials. Colors, brushes, palettes of all shapes and sizes, fountain pens, ink – you name it, I probably have a stash of it somewhere. All these to the horror of my wife. So materials play an important part in that art journey. All through 2012 when I was exploring my new “hobby” that has gone mad, my collection of materials piled up, and I was still in the process of reducing them to what I really need.

The true driver of my artistic journey was none other than my Motivation to learn something “left brain.” I was trained as

an electrical engineer, and I have always been more inclined towards mathematics and physics, so I felt it was time to develop the other side of the brain – the left brain. The desire was to prove to myself that I could pick up something completely foreign to me like drawing and painting, that I could systematically approach such a learning project and be proficient at it.

Today, whenever I tell others this story, the inevitable response has been, “Oh! You must have some inborn talent!” I must say that I didn’t and still don’t think so. Implying I was born with some talent diminished the amount of effort I’ve put into my learning project. I had a strategy and I executed it with tenacity – plenty of hard work has gone into it.

From January to May 2012, when I started my new learning project, I had a very disciplined timetable. I painted from 8 to 6 pm every day, Monday to Saturday. I read or took an online course of 2 hours from 8 am to 10 am every morning, then I painted from 10 am with breaks for lunch and tea, till 6 pm. By March, I had close to 200 paintings, mostly badly done, but I’ve clocked my hours.

I was focused and deliberate in my “training” as well; I wasn’t just practicing blindly. Everything I did had a plan. I was developing my own syllabus of an art education. I defined something I learned as something I could teach. So I didn’t stop at being able to do something, such as drawing a car. I stopped only when I was clear that I could teach others to draw the car. I developed a sense of being able to clearly criticize myself when I was drawing. I believe that I’m ultimately my best coach, so I developed a voice that kept talking back to me as I was learning.

This is the voice – being your own coach – that I describe a little later.

So as I embarked on my own artistic journey, it was clear that I had also stepped out of myself and thought hard about how I was learning. Many of the lessons I describe in this book are based on that journey and the reflections on learning that I had.

By April 2012, quite a few friends knew what I was doing. During a friend’s birthday celebration around that time, I talked about my sabbatical and that I was spending time painting flowers. Little did I know my adventure would take a little turn for the better. Michael Conlin – a dear friend – whom I was talking to, asked me about my paintings and what I was going to do with them. In response, I casually mentioned that “Oh, I might just run an exhibition with those paintings.” He then casually remarked that he would be very glad to have the exhibition with me. At that point, I didn’t know he was working on glassware – his artistic endeavors involved creating tumblers, jewelry, and all kinds of glass stuff.

Now you have two technology consultants – one on sabbatical, and one working for Hewlett-Packard – talking about art! What a blend of left and right brain!<sup>2</sup> Both of us had a brilliant idea. We decided to mobilize our wives, and that proved to be a stroke of genius on many counts. Our wives, Cindy and Yitpeng went to work immediately. Cindy, especially, was the one who kept all of us on schedule. Before we

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<sup>2</sup> One fantastic book to read on how left-brain will rule the world would be “A Whole New Mind by Daniel H. Pink” (Pink, 2006)

knew it, the date was set, the marketing campaign was in full swing, and the invites had been sent out. Our friends were also roped in, to “volunteer” in all sorts of capacities. We had ushers, photographers, a fashion coordinator, etc., etc.

I didn’t realize when I started the voyage of learning to draw and paint that it would lead to this amazing journey of doing an exhibition. I had about seventy paintings, hung on the huge wall in the main exhibition hall at the Goodman art center, Singapore, while Michael filled the tables with his glass work. Although we didn’t expect to sell any of our works, both of us sold nearly everything we tagged for sale. We ended the three-day exhibition on a high!

In all but 5 short months, I went from a beginning painter to one who was privileged enough to be able to hold an exhibition of his paintings. There were plenty of time for reflections – that’s what sabbatical is for! So I thought about what all this meant – was there something I could learn from my experience and share with the world? The answer seemed to be that I could step back and think about how I had planned my learning journey to learn something new, something that was out of my comfort zone.

My journey didn’t end there. An artist named Jenny Sim came to see my exhibition, at the invitation of a common friend. Following the exhibition, she introduced me to the Urban Sketchers in Singapore. The Urban Sketchers Singapore (USKSG) is a fantastic group of like-minded people who love on-site sketching.

### USK (Urban Sketchers) Manifesto<sup>3</sup>

- We draw on location, indoors or out, capturing what we see from direct observation.
- Our drawings tell the story of our surroundings, the places we live and where we travel.
- Our drawings are a record of time and place.
- We are truthful to the scenes we witness.
- We use any kind of media and cherish our individual styles.
- We support each other and draw together.
- We share our drawings online.
- We show the world, one drawing at a time.

Through the Urban Sketchers, I've gone sketching with them, in and around Singapore. I've made trips out of Singapore, to Manila in the Philippines, to Bangkok in Thailand, Penang in Malaysia, to Bandung in Indonesia. Hopefully, there are many more sketching trips to come. Out of one of those trip, the one to Manila, Philippines, the seven of us even published a book titled "Show me Manila! In 101 sketches".<sup>4</sup>

It has been a very rewarding journey, much more enriching than I'd ever planned. What started as a journey to find out a bit more of myself, the artistic side – if ever there was one – I found more. I found good friends and I got to know the world a little bit better. All these led to a desire to want to share my

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.urbansketchers.org/p/about-usk.html>

<sup>4</sup> <http://show-me-manila.blogspot.sg/>

knowledge and hence the desire to write this book! So my hope is that you will find your own journey.