Make Learning New Software Applications Quicker and Easier With the MISS Method

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Stan Skrabut: Well, welcome back. Thanks for taking time to listen to this podcast, it certainly means a lot. I know you could be doing other things but you're hanging out with me and I really appreciate it. I hope you had a great Halloween. I can't believe how fast time has passed. I am now in Massachusetts, specifically I have moved into my apartment. You may hear some new sounds in the background. I have neighbors that are really close. I'm getting used to it but you may hear some new sound.

Well, I just finished my first week on the job. I'm really enjoying the new responsibility but during my transition, I have to learn a new software stack, a new technology stack, different than what I've been using in the past six years, not radically different but different enough. To learn that new stack, I am actually applying what I'm going to talk to you about today. During my career, I have been helping faculty and students learn how to use different software.

For some reason, a number of these individuals feel completely helpless when they are presented with a new piece of software. It's like they've never worked with software before. This ends up being a barrier to their productivity. They have certain tasks they want to get done, they need this software to do it but because they are totally locked up because of the newness, they're not able to proceed. They believe the learning curve in front of them is so steep, it's just getting in the way but the reality is not as steep as they believe. Once I show them this concept called the MISS method, M-I-S-S, then they start feeling a little more comfortable.

When I introduce a new software application to faculty, they tend to look at it as it's entirely different than anything else they've ever done. They don't necessarily realize how much they already know about the software. I try to explain that they know more about this software than they think they do. Compare it to driving a car. When someone is renting a car, they are not starting from scratch. They already know how to drive. They may not necessarily know where the switches are for the windshield wiper and the light, but they know they have to be there, question is where?

I've been in a few cars that I was actually stumped because how to put it in gear was very different than what I had done before, but I knew there was a way to put the car into gear. The question was finding it. One of them happens to be this round knob that I had to spin, entirely different than what I was used to, but I knew it was there. I knew you had to put the car into gear. I knew that that capability had to be there.

Well, software is similar. When I am learning a new piece of software or helping somebody else learn a new piece of ware, I have to activate prior knowledge. In Episode 89, we talked about activating prior knowledge. This is actually key to

implementing the MISS method for learning new software. Because we have used other software applications in the past, we already have prior knowledge that we can use to learn a new software application. We're able to transfer our knowledge of one software application to a new application.

Let's take a little closer look at this MISS method. First of all, MISS stands for Menu Item Search Strategy. MISS was created by Professor Allen at the San Diego State University to teach students how to use different applications. They were finding that the process was taking long the way that they normally did it, and so this helped speed that up. I tend to agree with them because what it does is it allows you to focus on the things that you don't know rather than try to learn all of the software.

Let me explain. When you open up a new software application, what you want to do is you want to look at the menu that's typically at the top of the application. It may be on a sidebar but typically, it's on the top. You're going to look at each of those menu item and then you're going to click on those menu items, see what the menu is that is available under those software items. You're going to start to see themes around each of those items. Many of the pieces or many of the menu items you already know how to use.

As I was drafting this podcast episode, I was using a program called Scrivener. It's an editing program for document. Across the menu, there was nine menu item, file, edit, view, project, documents, format, tools, window and help. Now even before I started drilling down into each of those items, I could pretty much predict which each one would do for example the file menu. Because I've used software before, the file menu is usually where I go to save a document, or open a new document, or create a new document, or print one. Those all can be found typically under that file menu.

I already know how to do those things, I know how to start a new doc. Now there may be nuances with this new program, but the overall concept is what I'm latching on to, that's my prior knowledge. I know what it means to start a new document. I know what it means to open a previous document, so I can do that. I predict that I can also print a document because historically, that's where I found it.

Under the edit menu, what do I expect? I can expect to cut and paste as well as be able to find information in the document because that's typically where I found those things in editing. Even before I start drilling into the program in more detail, I already have an idea of what's to be expected. Naturally, view lets me view the document in different ways. Maybe I can expand it, maybe I could track it, maybe it just has different formatting but it's going to change the view of the doc.

I have some expectations of the common tasks for that program. Now taking the next step, this menu item, is if I drill down into the file menu item, I now have 17 options. Many of the options I already predicted, new project, open project, recent project, close projects, close all projects, maybe I have multiple. I can save, I can save as something else. There're some options here, importing and exporting and sync. Not exactly sure what they do. Those would be the new things that I would have to learn,

backup, save as a template, that seems pretty straightforward. If I create a sample document, I can save it as a template.

Page setup, print, preview, print current document, compile, not exactly sure how to compile works so I have to look at that, and exit, and exit means close the program. Out of all 17 options, I'm pretty confident that only maybe four of them I have to dig deeper and figure out what they do, but I'm pretty confident for the other 13, I already have a good idea what's going to happen when I use those items. There may be a little nuances difference but overall, I think I have it in mind.

When you're looking at this, one of the things that you want to do is have these keywords in mind when you're looking through the menu especially when you're trying to figure out how to do a specific task. Look through all the menus first, find out what you know, be able to identify the things that you don't know how to do and that's where you're going to put your time and energy. As I said, it helped learn how to use the software more quickly. I use this when I'm introducing new faculty and students, to new software. I use this MISS method to do that.

Now, most software you can figure it out just by clicking on the different options. Every once in a while you have to go to the manual. Most software now doesn't come specifically with a manual but it does come with a help menu. If you use the help menu, you can go find out how to use various aspects of that software. Also, if you do it just a search on what you're trying to do and use that software name, you're going to be able to find out how to do that. The internet's been very good to me. Using Google, also YouTube, I can figure out most pieces of software pretty quickly.

This is going to come in very handy in my near future. One of the major tasks that I have coming up is to help the college transfer from one learning management system to another. I've already found a document that compares different tasks from one LMS to another. It also includes links to resources showing how to do this so that's going to speed up my process and getting information out to the faculty.

Also, this MISS method is going to be invaluable as I introduce the faculty to this. That if they have the idea of how to create a quiz in one LMS and they know probably that you can create a quiz in this new element, it's just a matter of how do you specifically do that. In most cases, they could probably figure it out because they have this prior knowledge and they can transfer what they know from one LMS to another. More than likely as we're figuring out what tasks to work on to help them learn this new software, we're going to use Pareto's 80/20 principle, so identifying what are the 20% of the tasks where 80% of the effort is realized.

We're going to really hone in on that, so adding content. A lot of faculty add content. That is a big important area that we need to focus on first. Then other areas are how to create quizzes, how to create assignments, how to create community in their course. Those are probably the areas that will start. Then later, when a smaller group of faculty want to know how to use a rubric, and so we'll figure out how to do that. Another group of faculty may want to use the LTI's to add a software pack that

is specific to their discipline or domain, and how to do that. Those will come down, those will be later.

The first things that we're going to focus on is the important things that faculty need to know to do 80% of the work. This is like I said learning a new piece of software. If you've got prior knowledge, using the MISS method makes it a lot easier. It's not a hard concept but you can learn a piece of software a lot quicker and a lot easier using it. Once you realize what you know, you can then focus your energy on what you don't. If you've never tried it, I suggest you try it out. With that, here's a quick plug from my book.