(Effectively) Building a (Self-Sustaining) Culture of Learning

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learning in organizations is fundamentally broken
benefits of ongoing learning

- scale better by reducing team debt
- attract and retain amazing people
- bring in fresh ideas
- reduce waste
- allow “repotting” and cross-training
excuses abound
“We really just need the CTO and the CEO to make this a priority.”

– Me, a long time ago
“If we could pause our current projects and deadlines for a few weeks...”

– Someone like me
“We’re dedicated to investing in our people, but we’re in a crunch right now.”

– Some manager of mine
about me and my work
not a teacher,  
but that’s okay
Building Learning Culture in Three Not-Entirely-Easy Steps

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happy teams have many similarities, but the path they take is always different
Phase 1

Guerrilla Learning

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what it looks like

- high resistance to taking time away from shipping
- ad-hoc learning
- onboarding by oral tradition
- few folks driving learning
the approach

- think opportunistically
- focus on fast returns for low investment
- improve people at their primary roles
what worked

- attend meetups
- open book policy
- new hire buddies
- cross-team code reviews
- lunch workshops
- watch talks as a group
Unlimited Book Policy

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phase 1 dangers!

- low credibility
- people latch onto failed attempts
- overcoming inertia
- fear of looking dumb
Phase 2

Expand to Others
what it looks like

- new hires learn a bit, existing employees mostly ignored
- people want more, but aren’t empowered
- some teams learn as a group
- small, somewhat standardized onboarding
- a small core of folks drive learning

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the approach

- start using longer payoff opportunities
- start cross-training
- leverage internal experts
- seed good role models
- mentor the mentors
what worked

- host / speak at meetups
- internal workshops
- attend conferences
- dedicated onboarding
- weekly tech talks
- new hires as buddies
- open source participation
Juniors Code Reviewing Seniors

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Weekly Talks

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phase 2 dangers!

- key personnel leaving
- perception of “spending too much time”
- mentor burnout
Phase 3

Make it Stick

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what it looks like

- learning is becoming boringly normal
- momentum and reputation sustain efforts
- dedicated learning for *all* engineers
the approach

- make them forget that learning and teaching was ever *not* part of their job
- everyone in the department gets involved
- try riskier things without destroying momentum
what worked

- 20% time / exploration
- apprenticeships
- three-part onboarding
- learning as a job requirement
- teaching as a job requirement

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Three-Part Onboarding

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Six Month Apprenticeship

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phase 3 dangers!

- payoffs are hard to measure, but costs are visible
- nobody personally responsible
- losing the habit (deadlines again!)
- an active chaos of new ideas
"Dissent, if managed properly, breeds really good ideas." #abstractions
self-sustenance
wrapping up
being a 10x developer means being a force multiplier
come talk to me
my request to you
thanks!
references & reading

- Some images from https://www.flickr.com/photos/wocintechchat/albums
- http://leveluprails.com