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The learning machine: How did Bill Gates become so successful?



Rainer Zitelmann

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BERLIN, GERMANY – OCTOBER 14: Bill Gates speaks at the pledge session of the 2024 World Health Summit on October 14, 2024 in Berlin, Germany. The session raised over USD 1 billion for the World Health Organization (WHO) from a variety of international donors. (Photo by Sean Gallup/Getty Images)

Bill Gates' new autobiography recounts an unusual childhood, says Rainer Zitelmann

Bill Gates, who is turning 70 this October, recently released an autobiography exploring his childhood and formative years, *Source Code: My Beginnings*. The book's key themes include learning, rebellion, ambition and competitiveness. One of the formative experiences he recounts is how he used methodical study to eventually surpass his grandmother's skills as a card player: "Card playing taught me that no matter how complex or even mysterious something seems, you often can figure it out. The world can be understood."

The book also provides valuable guidance for any parents looking to encourage their children's intellectual growth and nurture their talents. As a child, whenever the Gates' family went on a trip, Bill Gates explains how his mom put together a travel log for his sister and him to fill in. They had to write two pages per day to record what they saw, organized in seven categories: 1. Land Forms 2. Weather 3. Population Distribution 4. Land Use 5. Products 6. Historical or other Interesting Sights 7. Miscellaneous.

While his mom was driving, Bill Gates' grandmother would read to the two children about Man o' War, the thoroughbred horse who broke countless speed and endurance records and was one of the most successful racehorses in history. "In time it would feel," Gates writes, "like my mom was on a similar mission with her children".

From a young age, Gates was an avid reader, immersing himself in a wide variety of subjects. And the more knowledge he absorbed, the more questions he had. As I was reading his autobiography, I was reminded of a Netflix documentary in which he reported how, on vacation, he and his wife would often select a new topic, read dozens of books on the subject, and then discuss what they had learned. Clearly, this intellectual exploration was a hallmark of his childhood, when he often lay in bed, pondering things very few children would ever even consider: "I could lie on the bed endlessly working through some question. I'd hear a car motor rev, leaves rustling in the wind, the footsteps on the floor above me, and wonder how these sounds travelled to my ear. Mysteries like that could occupy me for hours." He found the answers in books and turned his new knowledge into a science paper for school on the topic: "What is Sound?"

What does it take to be 20 per cent better than everyone else?

In seventh grade, when each of the students in his class was asked to profile one of the 50 US states, Gates chose a less glamorous state: Delaware. He wrote to Delaware for brochures on tourism and history, culled articles and contacted companies in the state to request their annual reports. By the time he was finished, he had written 177 pages on little Delaware and even made a wooden cover for the volume he had produced.

Gates studied successful people and asked himself: "What does it take to be 20 per cent better than everyone else? How much is that just latent talent versus dedicated effort – being relentlessly focused and deliberate about performing better today than you did the day before? And then repeating that tomorrow and the next day and the next for years and years?" And Gates was going to find out – by dedicating himself to doing precisely that.

On the one hand, Gates was very focused. On the other, his interests were extremely varied. He explains his decision to major in applied mathematics at Harvard by noting that mathematics was integral to nearly every discipline the university offered. This gave him

the freedom to explore what he actually wanted to do. Applied mathematics was the “wild card” that allowed him to take all kinds of interesting courses. “In my time at Harvard, I would repeatedly play this wild card to justify classes in linguistics, criminal justice, economics and even British history. It was the perfect major for an information omnivore.”

Bill Gates had such a thirst for knowledge and a keen interest in so many subjects that even after founding Microsoft, he did not immediately give up his academic pursuits – which, he admits in retrospect, would probably have been better. At first, he pursued two paths, balancing his studies with the demands of building what would become the second most valuable publicly traded company in the world. But even after he had finished his studies, he still dedicated time each year – typically a whole week, once or twice annually – to delve into books, articles and papers without interruption, giving himself regular crash courses on all manner of subjects.

Gates was not an easy child – he was a rebel both at school and at home and frequently clashed with authority figures, as he repeatedly recounts. In two of my own books, *Dare to Be Different* and *Grow Rich* and *The Wealth Elite*, I analyse the lives of exceptionally successful individuals and show that this is true for most high achievers. I am sure it is these fierce conflicts with teachers and parents that allowed them to cultivate the strength and assertiveness they would need to become so successful later in life. As for Gates, the conflicts escalated to the point where his parents finally sent him to therapy. But his therapist simply assured him: “You’re going to win”.

Gates soon realised that he was more intelligent than most of the people around him. He also had a very strong competitive drive and wanted to demonstrate his superiority to everyone. He describes himself as “a 13-year-old kid with raw IQ and a competitive streak, but little aim other than to win whatever game I was playing”. It was only later in life that he began to define specific goals toward which he could direct his ambition and competitive spirit. In the face of setbacks and tragedies, such as the loss of his best friend, he benefited from the forward-thinking mindset he had developed as a child: “As a family, we didn’t dwell on the past; we always looked forward with the expectation that something better lay ahead.” Which is exactly what happened. And now we can all look forward to more instalments of Bill Gates’ autobiography, which have already been announced.

Rainer Zitelmann is the author of the books *Dare to Be Different* and *Grow Rich: The Secrets of Self-Made People*<https://daretobedifferentandgrowrich.com/> and *The Wealth Elite: A Groundbreaking Study of the Psychology of the Super-Rich*<https://the-wealth-elite.com/>