Toward a Neurocentric View of Learning

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.neuron.2017.05.021

Synaptic plasticity (e.g., long-term potentiation [LTP]) is considered the cellular correlate of learning. Recent optogenetic studies on memory engram formation assign a critical role in learning to suprathreshold activation of neurons and their integration into active engrams (“engram cells”). Here we review evidence that ensemble integration may result from LTP but also from cell-autonomous changes in membrane excitability. We propose that synaptic plasticity determines synaptic connectivity maps, whereas intrinsic plasticity—possibly separated in time—amplifies neuronal responsiveness and acutely drives engram integration. Our proposal marks a move away from an exclusively synaptocentric toward a non-exclusive, neurocentric view of learning.

Ever since its discovery in the early 1970s, long-term potentiation (LTP) of synaptic transmission (Bliss and Lomo, 1973) has been seen as a plausible cellular mechanism underlying information storage and learning. LTP indeed meets the basic requirements that a cellular learning correlate needs to fulfill: LTP increases synaptic weights and enhances the probability that an active synaptic input contributes to action potential generation; LTP lasts sufficiently long to lay the foundation for stable memories; LTP can be input-specific and thus allows for selective information storage; and LTP is actively reversed by long-term depression (LTD), enabling bidirectional modification (for reviews on LTP/LTD in different neural circuits, see Pittenger and Kandel, 2003 [Aplysia]; Malenka and Nicoll, 1993 [hippocampus]; Singer, 1995 [neocortex]; Jörntell and Hansel, 2006 [cerebellum]). However, a preeminent role of LTP—and, in extension, synaptic plasticity—in learning has been challenged based on the argument that properties of LTP do not match crucial properties of learning. Most importantly, learning can result from single experiences, whereas LTP typically requires repetitive stimulation (for this and other critiques of the synaptic learning theory, see Gallistel and Matzel, 2013; Gallistel and Balsam, 2014).

New technologies based on the manipulation of neuronal activity using optogenetics now allow us to monitor and manipulate “mnemic traces” (Semon, 1904), or memory engrams, enabling a critical assessment of established views on the cellular events that underlie memory storage and retrieval (for a review, see Tonegawa et al., 2015; Holtmaat and Caroni, 2016). Using these techniques, Nabavi et al. (2014) were able to show that optogenetic stimulation of auditory inputs to the amygdala, timed to mimic LTD and LTP protocols, successfully inactivates and reactivates fear memories, respectively. This finding is in line with the long-standing notion that synaptic plasticity is a cellular correlate of learning (e.g., blockade of N-methyl-D-aspartate [NMDA] receptor signaling or Ca2+/calmodulin-dependent protein kinase II [CaMKII] activation prevents LTP and impairs fear conditioning; Kim et al., 1991; Miller et al., 2002; but see also Gu et al., 2002, for a dissociation between effects on LTP and fear conditioning in a fragile X syndrome mouse model). The study does not, however, provide a critical test for a general, pan-essential involvement of synaptic plasticity in memory formation.

Optogenetics has also been used to study memory storage and retrieval by engram cells. An important first step has been the development of transgenic mice, in which activation of the c-fos promoter is coupled to the expression of the tetracycline transactivator (tTA; Reijmers et al., 2007). Using this technique, it is possible to label neurons that have been activated (c-fos promoter) during a specific conditioning period (conditioning in the absence of doxycycline; Reijmers et al., 2007). When coupled to the expression of channelrhodopsin 2 and the fluorescent marker enhanced yellow fluorescent protein (EYFP) (ChR2-EYFP), an elegant system becomes available that allows for the fluorescence labeling and light-triggered re-activation of neurons that participate in a memory engram (Figure 1A). This technique has been used to optogenetically retrieve fear memories in the hippocampus. The experiments were designed to obtain an expression of ChR2-EYFP only in those neurons of the dentate gyrus that were active during the conditioning phase and in which the c-fos promoter was activated. Subsequent light stimulation resulted in increased freezing, suggesting a successful, optogenetic retrieval of the fear memory engram (Liu et al., 2012; for a review, see Tonegawa et al., 2015). Photo-activation has subsequently been used to create artificial neuronal ensembles in the visual cortex that can be reactivated upon stimulation of individual neurons participating in the ensemble (Carrillo-Reid et al., 2016). The photo-activation of channelrhodopsin opens nonspecific cation conductances that depolarize the labeled neurons and initiates spike firing (Figure 1B). In these studies, light-triggered memory recall rests on the channelrhodopsin-mediated depolarization that brings the cell closer to the spike threshold. Remarkably, in the presence of the protein synthesis inhibitor anisomycin, which blocks the late phase of LTP, photo-activation caused freezing at a rate that was indistinguishable from controls (Ryan et al., 2015). Context-dependent freezing also took place, although at a significantly reduced
rate. Of note, anisomycin treatment prevented the strengthening of synaptic weights and the increase in spine density that is observed under control conditions but unveiled an increase in intrinsic excitability (slope of the spike frequency versus injected current curve; f-i curve) (Ryan et al., 2015). These studies allow several conclusions of interest. First, the observation that photo-activation alone—in control or anisomycin-treated mice—triggers freezing shows that the ultimately decisive factor in memory recall is the suprathreshold re-activation of participating engram cells. From the perspective of synaptic learning theories, the interpretation of this finding is that, under physiological conditions, enhanced synaptic weights increase the probability for spike firing in the engram cell and that photo-stimulation simply bypasses the need for a sufficiently strong synaptic drive (Nabavi et al., 2014; Poo et al., 2016). However, freezing also occurs in anisomycin-treated mice when they are placed in the context in which they were conditioned—in the absence of photo-activation and in the absence of synapse or spine plasticity but with a significant, >30% increase in excitability present (Ryan et al., 2015).

Together, these findings raise the possibility that non-synaptic, cell-autonomous modulation of neuronal excitability is sufficient for engram integration under some conditions (Figure 1C) and that, therefore, synaptic plasticity is not essential for the integration process (note that the terms “non-synaptic” and “intrinsic” refer to the expression phase of this form of plasticity; synaptic activation is needed for its induction). An intrinsic plasticity-dependent engram model is reminiscent of a class of so-called “constructive” machine learning algorithms in which the ability to move artificial neurons in and out of ensembles is used for optimization of multiple-layer networks (e.g., Mezard and Nadal, 1989; Marblestone et al., 2016). Intrinsic plasticity functionally resembles such a mechanism because it modulates the activity level and output efficacy of the entire neuron rather than selected subsets of its inputs. But is there indeed a physiological equivalent to such operating algorithms used in machine learning? Although intrinsic plasticity has been observed in electrophysiological recordings and has been characterized in some molecular and cellular detail, a conceptual framework for its role in learning and memory is still missing. Here we will summarize what is known about intrinsic plasticity, present first steps toward an “intrinsic theory” of learning, and discuss which experiments are needed to test whether intrinsic plasticity can indeed assume key functions in learning and memory.

We suggest that purely synaptic learning theories are no longer enough to reconcile models of information storage in neural networks with the emerging role of entire neurons (“engram cells”) in memory engram physiology. We propose an extended learning hypothesis in which we assign a more broadly defined role in establishing connectivity maps to synapses and add plasticity of intrinsic excitability as a mechanism for engram integration:

1. The decisive factor in memory engram formation and recall is the activation/integration of participating neurons (engram cells). Two plasticity processes are critically involved: synaptic and intrinsic plasticity.
2. Intrinsic plasticity sets an amplification factor that enhances or lowers synaptic penetrance and defines the neuron’s presence within a memory engram. Here we introduce the term synaptic penetrance in analogy to genetic penetrance to describe that synaptic weight changes (as in LTP) do not always result in enhanced spike firing but that other factors, such as intrinsic amplification, provide important co-determinants. Intrinsic plasticity alone can, under some conditions, mediate engram cell integration based on pre-existing but unaltered synaptic connectivity.
3. Synapses play three fundamental roles in learning: they convey the specific information contents and input patterns that are to be memorized; synaptic plasticity shapes connectivity maps by establishing connection patterns and by assigning synaptic weights; and synaptic activity triggers intrinsic plasticity (induction phase) and drives the (re)activation of memory engrams, albeit without the need for accompanying changes in synaptic weight.
4. From the above, it follows that learned information is represented in two different ways in memory engrams: first by the synaptic inputs that convey information to a neuron and collectively determine the coding identity of this neuron, and second by the neuron itself, whose response...
Intrinsic Plasticity: Cellular Mechanisms and Relevance to Learning

In a recent review, we compared molecular signaling cascades involved in LTD and developmental synaptic pruning at synapses in the visual cortex, the cerebellum, and at the neuromuscular junction and found that, at each type of synapse, the signaling pathways used for developmental and adult plasticity almost completely overlap (Piochon et al., 2016a). This observation suggests that forms of synaptic plasticity found in the adult brain (LTD and LTP) may serve similar functions as their equivalents in the developing brain; namely, the weakening/elimination of weak synapses and the strengthening/stabilization of efficient ones. A more general prediction from these findings is that the optimization of neural circuits and synaptic input maps continues into adulthood and that synaptic plasticity is the cellular tool used to fine-tune these connectivity maps in an experience-dependent way. This prediction is the basis for a core claim of our hypothesis: synaptic plasticity primarily forms and adjusts connectivity maps and only under specific conditions contributes to acute learning effects.

What then is the evidence that intrinsic plasticity provides a crucial cellular learning correlate? Most importantly, intrinsic plasticity has been observed in vivo (Table 1), and available evidence demonstrates a role in some forms of learning. Using intracellular recordings from layer 5 pyramidal neurons in the motor cortex of anesthetized rats, Paz et al. (2009) found that repeated injection of suprathreshold, depolarizing current pulses led to a long-term change in the intrinsic excitability of these neurons. Excitability was determined by injecting current pulses during the test periods before and after tetanization and by measuring the slope of the f-i curve as well as the spike threshold and activation characteristics. The table summarizes reports of intrinsic plasticity observed during in vivo recordings or in recordings from slices that were prepared subsequent to in vivo conditioning. Note that this is an incomprehensive selection that is focused on mammalian studies. ND, not determined; CREB, cAMP response element-binding protein. The question marks in the Mechanism column indicate that the cellular mechanisms listed here are suggested by separate studies other than the main reference.

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<th>Circuit</th>
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<td>intracellular recording in</td>
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<td>CREB fear memory allocation</td>
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<td>synaptic activation</td>
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<td>SK-type K current</td>
<td>Belmeguenai et al., 2010</td>
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plasticity has been described in a variety of preparations but has been most often examined in recordings from brain slices. The phenomenon itself is less strictly defined than synaptic plasticity and has been probed using various measures, such as spontaneous and evoked spike rates, the spike threshold, and the after-hyperpolarization (AHP) amplitude. Similar to synaptic plasticity, intrinsic excitability changes may result from brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF) signaling (Desai et al., 1999; Graves et al., 2016). In contrast to synaptic plasticity, intrinsic plasticity is not mediated by changes in neurotransmitter receptors but results from modifications of voltage- or calcium-dependent ion channels such as potassium (K) channels or mixed Na/K channels. For example, forms of intrinsic plasticity have been described that are mediated by changes in A-type K channels (Schreurs et al., 1998; Frick et al., 2004), large-conductance, calcium-dependent K (BK) channels (Nelson et al., 2005), small-conductance, calcium-dependent K (SK) channels (Sourdet et al., 2003; Lin et al., 2008; Belmeguenai et al., 2010), as well as hyperpolarization-activated and cyclic nucleotide-gated (HCN) channels (Nolan et al., 2003; Fan et al., 2005; Brager and Johnston, 2007). Intrinsic plasticity is not restricted to specific neurons but has been observed in a variety of invertebrate and vertebrate neurons, including hippocampal and neocortical pyramidal cells (for a review, see Zhang and Linden, 2003; Frick and Johnston, 2005; Mozzachiodi and Byrne, 2010). In the cerebellar system, intrinsic plasticity has been found in granule cells (Armano et al., 2000) and Purkinje cells (Schreurs et al., 1998; Belmeguenai et al., 2010) and in neurons of the cerebellar nuclei (Aizenman and Linden, 2000) and vestibular nuclei (Nelson et al., 2005).

The available data suggest that intrinsic plasticity may serve a range of functions, some of which complement synaptic plasticity, whereas others point toward roles independent from synaptic plasticity. For example, increases in excitability that are mediated by a downregulation of SK channels fall into both categories. SK channel downregulation amplifies spine calcium transients and enhances the LTP induction probability in pyramidal cells (Stackman et al., 2002; Ngo-Anh et al., 2005; Hammond et al., 2006), whereas a similar boost of spine calcium signals by SK channel-dependent intrinsic plasticity reduces the probability for LTP induction in Purkinje cells (Belmeguenai et al., 2010). The latter effect likely results from the “inverse” calcium thresholds that govern LTP and LTD induction at PF-Purkinje cell synapses (Coesmans et al., 2004; Piochon et al., 2016b). These examples show that intrinsic plasticity can modify LTP induction probability in an activity-dependent way. On the other hand, intrinsic plasticity may affect neuronal spike output independent from synaptic plasticity. For example, SK channel-dependent intrinsic plasticity reduces the duration of spike pauses in Purkinje cells and may thus alter the spike output of the cerebellar cortex without any synaptic involvement in the expression phase of this plasticity mechanism (Grasselli et al., 2016; Figure 3). Finally, SK channel plasticity may alter the spike threshold and thus affect excitatory postsynaptic potential (EPSP)-spike coupling. This effect demonstrates that it does not have to be either a synaptic or an intrinsic mechanism that allows for specific memory storage but that both can perfectly complement each other; e.g., when potentiated synapses receive further intrinsic amplification. This phenomenon has been observed in layer 5 pyramidal neurons of the sensorimotor cortex (Sourdet et al., 2003) as well as in cerebellar Purkinje cells (Ohtsuki et al., 2012). Here we focused on SK channel plasticity as an example to describe various consequences of intrinsic plasticity because SK channel modulation has been particularly well studied. There are aspects of SK channel plasticity that are not shared by all types of ion channel plasticity; importantly, SK channel deactivation is slow, which is reflected in the SK channel participation in the medium-late component of AHP currents (I_{AHP}; Bond et al., 2004). This feature enables SK channel plasticity to not only facilitate action potential generation per se (one spike versus no spike).
but also to promote spike burst firing (burst versus one spike or no spike), which might well be the relevant parameter for integration of neurons into active ensembles. Notably, excitability changes localized to specific dendritic compartments will benefit small groups of synapses (Ohtsuki et al., 2012; for a similar A-type K channel-mediated effect in pyramidal neurons, see Losonczy et al., 2008). Because intrinsic plasticity is, under physiological conditions, driven by synaptic activity (in the induction phase), it is conceivable that local intrinsic plasticity may favor potentiated synapses. In contrast, when a spike threshold shift occurs close the site of action potential generation at or near the soma (e.g., as a result of changes in ion channels that affect the spike threshold or as a result of changes in the function and/or location of the axon initial segment; see Grubb and Burrone, 2010; Grubb et al., 2011), it will similarly benefit all excitatory synapses that contact that neuron. This “somatic” expression of intrinsic plasticity has been described in multiple studies and can be observed whenever intrinsic plasticity is measured in the test periods before and after tetanization by counting spikes evoked by depolarizing current injections into the soma (e.g., Sourdet et al., 2003; Belmeguenai et al., 2010; Figure 2).

Together, these findings show that neurons can modulate their membrane excitability and that such a modulation is activity-dependent. But is intrinsic plasticity indeed involved in learning? To answer this question, rabbits were subjected to trace eyeblink conditioning, and intracellular recordings were performed from CA1 pyramidal neurons in hippocampal slices that were prepared 24 hr after conditioning. In control experiments, recordings were performed from pseudoconditioned and naive animals. In the conditioned group, neurons showed enhanced excitability, and the AHPs following spike bursts were significantly reduced (Disterhoft et al., 1986; Moyer et al., 1996). Similar observations were made in Purkinje cell recordings in vitro after delay eyeblink conditioning in rabbits. Here, too, neurons in slices prepared from conditioned animals showed enhanced excitability and reduced AHP amplitudes (Schreurs et al., 1998). These observations were not the results of artifacts of the in vitro recording conditions; enhanced excitability subsequent to eyeblink conditioning has also been observed in intracellular recordings from the motor cortex of awake cats (Aou et al., 1992). Together, these findings suggest that intrinsic plasticity exists under physiological conditions and that it plays a critical role in learning. There indeed seems to be “memory from the
dynamics of intrinsic membrane currents," as postulated about 20 years ago by Marder et al. (1996).

**Synaptic Penetrance as a Limiting Factor in Memory Storage**

When describing above the four critical components of our intrinsic theory of learning, we introduced the term synaptic penetrance to stress that intrinsic amplification often is required to lift EPSPs—in some cases even at potentiated synapses—above the spike threshold. An assumption underlying synaptic learning theories is that LTP, supported by the phenomena of temporal and spatial summation (e.g., Guzman et al., 2016), will enable synapses to efficiently contribute to spike generation. This argument is based on the necessity that cells participating in a memory engrain must show suprathreshold activity. However, recent findings suggest that low synaptic penetrance is not the exception but is, instead, found frequently. The problem for locally evoked EPSPs to reach the spike threshold is illustrated by the strong attenuation of EPSP amplitudes from their origin in dendritic spines all the way to the soma. Using two-photon glutamate uncaging and simultaneous two-photon voltage-sensitive dye recordings from cortical L5 pyramidal neurons, a recent study measured spine potentials in the range of 6.5–30.8 mV (average, 13.0 mV) that evoked average somatic EPSPs of 0.59 mV (Acker et al., 2016; for similar results, see Bloodgood et al., 2009; Palmer and Stuart, 2009; Harnett et al., 2012; Popovic et al., 2015). The latter value corresponds well to EPSP amplitudes that were somatically recorded in response to the activation of unitary synapses in the visual cortex (average, 0.55 mV; range, 0.05–2.08 mV; Mason et al., 1991) and in the motor cortex (in different cell pairs, average EPSP amplitudes in the range of 1.1–1.3 mV were reported; Deuchars et al., 1994). Although these values are informative, they do not tell us anything about the compound EPSP amplitudes evoked by several synapses under physiological conditions. The relationship between compound EPSPs and the spike probability has been best studied in the primary somatosensory cortex. In L2/3 pyramidal neurons of the rat barrel cortex, the average amplitude of responses to stimulation of the principal whisker has been determined to be 9.1 mV. The resting membrane potential was found to be 15–40 mV below the spike threshold, resulting in an evoked spike rate of 0.031 action potentials per stimulus (Brecht et al., 2003). In L5 pyramidal neurons, the average response amplitude to stimulation of the principal whisker was 5.0 mV. Because the voltage difference to the spike threshold was lower than in L2/3 (average, 20.9 mV), the evoked spike rate was slightly higher (0.12 action potentials per stimulus; Manns et al., 2004). These results indicate sparse coding in some cortical areas, an observation that has been made in both anesthetized and awake recordings (Margrie et al., 2002), and suggests low synaptic penetrance. Widespread, non-linear dendritic integration has been demonstrated during active touch, resulting from coincident sensory and motor input (Xu et al., 2012). Such regenerative dendritic events can be predicted to enhance spike output under sparse coding conditions, supporting the notion that low synaptic penetrance can be overcome by intrinsic amplification. Similarly, local intrinsic amplification of EPSPs, resulting from a downregulation of K conductances or the activation of subthreshold Na conductances (Carter et al., 2012), provides a cellular mechanism to boost synaptic penetrance and to integrate neurons more efficiently into active ensembles.

Notably, different cortical areas might show different coding characteristics. The findings described above are in stark contrast to the “high-input regime” hypothesis that describes cortical neurons (here in visual cortices) as being bombarded by synaptic input (Shadlen and Newsome, 1998). To some degree, the differences between the observations made in the barrel cortex by Sakmann, Brecht, and colleagues (using whole-cell patch-clamp recordings) and those made in the visual cortex using extracellular unit recordings (referred to in Shadlen and Newsome, 1998) result from an undersampling bias that is characteristic for extracellular unit recordings, which are “blind” to neurons that are silent or fire spikes at low frequencies (as pointed out in Brecht et al., 2005). However, highly reliable spike firing in response to preferred direction movement of visual stimuli has also been found in patch-clamp recordings from the cat primary visual cortex (Priebe and Ferster, 2005), suggesting that the high response rates found in the visual cortex cannot be fully explained by differences in the recording technique. It is conceivable that the primary visual cortex is tuned to high synaptic penetrance/intrinsic amplification values because of the uninterrupted inflow of visual signals that need to be processed, whereas cortical areas such as the barrel cortex and, possibly, higher cognitive areas operate using low-input regimes in which the distinction between spike and no-spike output is a more critical component of information processing. A prediction resulting from these considerations is that intrinsic amplification is not equally critical in all cell types and brain areas.

**Features Added by Intrinsic Plasticity**

Above we have shown that intrinsic plasticity is a physiologically relevant phenomenon that takes place in the context of learning. What then are the consequences of intrinsic plasticity for learning and which features does it add to memory engram storage? In the following, we will discuss functional implications of intrinsic plasticity focusing on changes in excitability that take place at or near the soma, where they affect the spike output of the entire neuron. Note that, for this consideration, it is irrelevant whether this form of plasticity is localized to the axon initial segment, the soma, or proximal parts of the dendrites as long as the probability to reach the spike threshold is changed for the majority of synaptic inputs.

Intrinsic plasticity, when it occurs at or near the soma and will affect the spike threshold and/or the excitability (slope of the f–i curve), can be predicted to have the following consequences.

First, intrinsic plasticity will alter the spike firing probability of a neuron and will thus determine its degree of integration into ensembles of synchronously active neurons (Singer, 1995). In this view, intrinsic plasticity adds an intrinsic amplification factor that acts like a light dimmer, adjusting synaptic penetrance via two effects: by boosting the response amplitude and by lowering the spike threshold. For example, in recordings from layer 5 pyramidal neurons in the barrel cortex of anesthetized rats, it was found that intrinsic potentiation and depression, respectively, modulate the spike firing threshold by about 1–2 mV, suggesting...
a total dynamic range of up to 4 mV (Mahon and Charpier, 2012). Furthermore, enhanced excitability in learning may not only integrate neurons into ensembles but may also attract memory storage to ensembles that encoded a different memory up to several hours prior ("memory allocation hypothesis"); Cai et al., 2016).

Second, intrinsic plasticity will similarly affect all synaptic inputs onto a neuron (note that this discussion only focuses on excitatory synapses) because all synaptic responses will be further amplified and will more easily reach the spike threshold (likewise, intrinsic plasticity can reduce excitability and make it more difficult to reach the spike threshold). A consequence of this neuron-wide scaling effect is that all synaptic inputs, independent of their recent potentiation or depression history and their current synaptic weight, share the same amplification fate and will therefore be up- or downregulated together. If a neuron’s synaptic inputs convey largely unrelated information, then combinatorial encoding across several neurons will reveal which information content was highlighted and stored, without further consequences of shared intrinsic scaling. However, if a neuron’s synaptic input portfolio is dominated by one or a few sets of synaptic inputs, or if the majority of synapses convey largely related information, then intrinsic plasticity and the shared amplification fate of its inputs will define a coding identity of the neuron; i.e., the activity of this neuron encodes specific information content.

In the extreme case—this is likely to be true for neurons that code for complex feature constellations such as concept cells (e.g., a "Jennifer Aniston neuron" (Quiroga et al., 2005; for a review, see Quiroga, 2012)—synaptic weights and weight ratios are optimally adjusted (Figure 4A). Here the advantages of intrinsic plasticity become obvious because intrinsic plasticity enables memory storage without changes in synaptic weight ratios that would disturb proper feature representation.

Third, the available data on features of intrinsic plasticity suggest that it may form the basis for learning phenomena that are not as easily explained by synaptic plasticity. Most notably, an important argument against LTP as a learning correlate has been that LTP requires prolonged, repetitive stimulation for its induction and, thus, cannot provide a cellular correlate of single-experience learning. This hypothesis has not yet been tested experimentally.

**Intrinsic Plasticity in Theoretical Models**

Theoretical studies have been useful to explore and quantify the potential benefits of intrinsic plasticity for learning. Learning in neural circuits is traditionally categorized as being unsupervised or supervised (Dayan and Abbott, 2001), with different brain regions typically associated with one or the other (Doya, 2000).

In classical unsupervised learning rules, synapses evolve according to the correlation of pre- and postsynaptic firing activities, subject to constraints that are needed to avoid uncontrolled growth of weights. Such synaptic plasticity rules have been shown, in some instances, to be able to maximize the mutual information between synaptic inputs and neuronal output by selecting the direction in input space that maximizes the variance of total synaptic inputs (Oja, 1982), as shown in Figure 4B. This concept of information maximization can be extended to intrinsic plasticity, as shown by Stemmler and Koch (1999) and as illustrated in Figure 4C. Given a particular distribution of total synaptic inputs, Laughlin (1981) showed that a specific input-output transfer function (f-I curve) maximizes the mutual information between inputs and outputs. In the absence of constraints on average firing rates, the distribution of output rates that maximizes information is a uniform distribution between the minimal (zero) and maximal firing rates. This has the consequence that the f-I curve that maximizes information is proportional to the cumulative distribution function of synaptic inputs. This information maximization principle can be extended to the case when a constraint on average firing rates exists; in this case, the optimal distribution of output rates is an exponential distribution that leads to a different form of f-I curve. Stemmler and Koch
(1999) proposed a learning rule that modifies calcium and potassium conductances so that the f-I curve becomes progressively closer to the optimal one. Such a plasticity mechanism would naturally solve the “penetrance” problem described above. If initially total synaptic inputs are far below threshold for the vast majority of inputs, then such a plasticity mechanism would progressively adjust the threshold and gain of the neuron until it uses its dynamic range optimally, subject to an average firing rate constraint. These arguments point to a natural division of labor between synaptic and intrinsic plasticity. In the model depicted in Figures 4B and 4C, the role of synaptic plasticity is to pick the most informative direction in the high dimensional space of inputs to a neuron, whereas the role of intrinsic plasticity would then be to ensure that neurons use their dynamic range in an optimal way, given a distribution of synaptic inputs shaped by synaptic plasticity. This complementarity between synaptic and intrinsic plasticity has been further explored in a number of theoretical studies. In particular, Triesch and collaborators showed that, in the case of non-Gaussian inputs, the interaction between Hebbian synaptic plasticity and intrinsic plasticity allows a neuron to learn sparse directions in the input and to perform independent component analysis (ICA) both in firing...
rate models (Triesch, 2007) and in networks of spiking neurons (Savin et al., 2010).

Note that, in specific cases, synaptic plasticity could be sufficient to maximize mutual information, in particular when multiplying all synaptic weights by the same factor can allow the neuron to optimize its dynamic range. Such a global multiplication may be performed by homeostatic plasticity (Turigiano et al., 1998). However, even in this scenario it might be advantageous to use intrinsic plasticity because it would be far more economical to adjust only a few parameters characterizing the intrinsic currents of a neuron rather than all of the synaptic weights. Vice versa, in other situations, intrinsic plasticity could be sufficient to optimize the transmission информации by neurons. This would be the case, for instance, after an initial stage where synaptic plasticity has already picked the most informative direction in the space of inputs. If, then, the magnitude of these inputs (but not the direction) changes, then intrinsic plasticity could readily adjust the neuronal input-output relationship to restore an optimal dynamic range. Intrinsic plasticity could then be responsible for the adaptive rescaling of the input-output relationship with changes of the statistics of sensory inputs, which has been demonstrated in several sensory systems (e.g., Brenner et al., 2000).

In supervised learning theories, synapses are modified based on pre- and postsynaptic activity but also based on an additional “error signal.” The classic example is learning at the parallel fiber to the Purkinje cell synapse, where plasticity depends on the powerful climbing fiber input, which is thought to provide the error signal (Marr, 1969; Albus, 1971). In the simplest possible supervised learning model, a binary output neuron needs to learn to classify all possible input patterns in two classes: those for which it should be active and those for which it should remain silent (Figure 4D). The role of synaptic plasticity is then to adjust synaptic weights until the neuron performs the right classification (see the straight line separating the sets of points of different colors in Figure 4D). In this simple model, the role of intrinsic plasticity would be limited to adjusting the neuronal threshold until the hyperplane separating the two sets of points is at the right distance from the origin, whereas synaptic plasticity would adjust the direction of this hyperplane. Note, however, that in this case again, learning can perfectly occur without intrinsic plasticity because changes in neuronal threshold are equivalent to a uniform change in all synaptic strengths. As in the case of supervised learning, there are, however, cases where intrinsic plasticity could allow a neuron to learn a classification task that could not be done without such a mechanism. This would be the case when the neuron is no longer binary but, rather, its desired outputs are continuously valued firing rates. In this case, intrinsic plasticity could again be needed for the correct input-output classification to be performed. Another example of potential benefits of intrinsic plasticity is shown in Figure 4E. In this case, the neuron has to learn to be active at specific points in time in an input temporal sequence. In the example shown in Figure 4E, this particular learning problem cannot be solved by a standard perceptron. However, it could be solved by a bistable neuron. For such a neuron, a range of total inputs exists for which it is bistable, and its state for these inputs depends on the initial condition. The bistable zone is the hatched region between the solid and dashed thick and straight lines in Figure 4E. Clopath and Brunel (2013) showed that, in the case of random correlated sequences, bistability is beneficial, provided temporal correlations in the outputs are large enough, and that there exists an optimal size of the bistable range. This size could be adjusted using intrinsic plasticity mechanisms that would regulate intrinsic conductances leading to bistability. Another way to achieve learning of complex input/output relationships is to add neurons until a particular input/output relationship is reached. This class of learning algorithms is known in machine learning as constructive algorithms (e.g., Mezard and Nadal, 1989). One might speculate that the addition of neurons into an active network could be mediated by intrinsic plasticity. Such a mechanism would allow silent neurons to take part in a network whose goal is to solve a particular computational task.

Critical Tests for a Role of Intrinsic Plasticity in Learning and Memory

To establish a significant role of intrinsic plasticity in learning, it needs to be demonstrated that it occurs under physiological conditions relevant to learning, and it needs to be assessed whether intrinsic plasticity is necessary for memory engram storage. The ability of neurons to regulate their intrinsic excitability in an activity-dependent way has been demonstrated in multiple studies we have discussed above. Most notably, intrinsic plasticity has been found in vivo in the neocortex (Paz et al., 2009; Mahon and Charpier, 2012) and in the cerebellum (Belmeguenai et al., 2010). In the latter study, intrinsic plasticity was observed in nonanesthetized, decerebrated adult rats after synaptic activation, demonstrating that intrinsic plasticity is not restricted to anesthesia conditions and that it occurs in response to activation of synaptic inputs. In addition, recent work from Sheena Josse-lyn, Paul Frankland, and colleagues shows that high intrinsic excitability predisposes neurons for allocation to a memory trace (Yiu et al., 2014). This study points toward a relationship between high excitability of a neuron and its assignment as an engramp cell, but it remains unclear whether the engram allocation ultimately results from high intrinsic excitability per se or from an enhanced probability for LTP induction at activated synapses.

Up to this point, we have not addressed the important question whether intrinsic plasticity is necessary for learning. The appropriate approach to address the question of necessity is to prevent intrinsic plasticity using pharmacological or genetic approaches and to monitor the effects on learning. There are several studies in which this strategy has indeed been used. In trace eyeblink conditioning, hippocampal pyramidal neurons show a reduction in fast AHPs that is mediated by a downregulation of BK channels (Matthews et al., 2008). It was subsequently shown that BK channel blockade impairs trace eyeblink conditioning (Matthews and Disterhoft, 2009), suggesting that BK channel availability for plasticity-related modulation is a requirement for this type of associative learning. Similarly, pharmacological activation of SK channels, which mediate the medium AHP that is also downregulated in trace eyeblink conditioning (Moyer et al., 1996), impairs object memory encoding (Vick et al., 2010) and trace eyeblink conditioning (McKay et al., 2012). These studies suggest that pharmacological interference, in ways that occlude or counteract the downregulation
of the respective potassium channels, will prevent proper intrinsic plasticity and learning. Purkinje cell intrinsic plasticity depends on the activation of calcineurin (PP2B; Belmeguenai et al., 2010). In mice with a Purkinje cell-specific knockout of PP2B (L7-PP2B), motor learning is affected (Schonenville et al., 2010). However, LTP at PF synapses depends on calcineurin activation as well (Belmeguenai and Hansel, 2005). Thus, the study on learning deficits in L7-PP2B mice was useful to examine the consequences of impairment of potentiation (rather than LTD) in cerebellar learning but does not allow one to distinguish between the need for synaptic and intrinsic potentiation mechanisms, respectively. The experimental isolation of intrinsic plasticity-related deficits is difficult in general because the pharmacological or genetic interference with intrinsic excitability will alter parameters relevant to synaptic plasticity and spike coding. For example, SK channel modulation/intrinsic plasticity changes spine calcium transients and the probability for LTP induction (Ngo-Anh et al., 2005; Belmeguenai et al., 2010). Future studies will have to attempt to separate the blockade of intrinsic plasticity from interference with LTP and LTD; for example, through spatial specificity (e.g., blockade of the mechanism underlying excitability changes only in the soma). It will be equally important to attempt to separate blockade of intrinsic plasticity from changes in basic excitability. To this end, upstream signaling factors need to be identified that are involved in intrinsic plasticity but do not control excitability under baseline conditions and do not interfere with other forms of plasticity.

It can be concluded from these studies that multiple lines of evidence point toward a role of intrinsic plasticity in learning. The evidence showing that intrinsic plasticity is necessary for memory encoding, too, is somewhat weaker. This conclusion results from the observation that it has so far been impossible to fully isolate intrinsic from synaptic plasticity; i.e., to block intrinsic plasticity without interfering with synaptic plasticity as well. It is similarly difficult to block intrinsic plasticity without disturbing neuronal spike firing patterns. These separations will be required to convincingly demonstrate the necessity of intrinsic plasticity in memory encoding and, thus, should be a priority in future studies. Finally, it should be emphasized that even simple forms of learning are likely based on complex interactions between several types of plasticity, which makes it difficult to assign roles to any specific plasticity mechanism.

In addition to experiments addressing the necessity of intrinsic plasticity for learning, studies are needed that address the questions of whether intrinsic plasticity is a long-term phenomenon and under which conditions it is optimally triggered. We already know that intrinsic excitability changes accompany some forms of learning and last at least 24 hr after training (Disterhoft et al., 1986; Moyer et al., 1996; Schreurs et al., 1998). It remains possible that excitability returns to naive pre-training values soon after, which would indicate a more transient role in memory engram (re)activation. Thus, it will be important to determine whether intrinsic plasticity mechanisms can last sufficiently long to play a role in the various stages of memory processing, including encoding, recall, and consolidation. From a conceptual point of view, intrinsic plasticity can be involved in any of these stages to the degree that they require the integration of individual neurons into memory engrams. At any of these stages, the specificity in information processing rests on the connectivity patterns of synapses onto engram cells and between them. Further studies are needed to assess whether the specific roles of synaptic and intrinsic plasticity qualitatively differ between the different stages of memory processing. Because, at many types of synapses, enhanced postsynaptic excitability will increase the probability for LTP induction, it also needs to be investigated how increases in excitability can be curtailed and/or reversed to avoid runaway activity and enable stabilization. Decreases in intrinsic excitability have been described in the cortex (Paz et al., 2009; Mahon and Charpier, 2012), which, in this scenario, would serve to homeostatically regulate excitability. Homeostatic plasticity has been described in detail and can also occur in a cell-autonomous manner (Turrigiano, 2011). It needs to be determined under which conditions increases and reductions of intrinsic excitability take place.

It will also be crucial to examine induction conditions for intrinsic plasticity, which will offer clues about sensory environments and input constellations that efficiently engage this plasticity mechanism. Induction of intrinsic plasticity will typically involve glutamatergic transmission (note that the term intrinsic only refers to the expression, not the induction phase). Indirect evidence suggests that the attentional state of the animal is of importance, too. Layer 5 cortical pyramidal neurons show SK channel-dependent intrinsic plasticity (Soudet et al., 2003; see also Belmeguenai et al., 2010, for similar results from Purkinje cell recordings). SK channels can be inhibited by muscarinic acetylcholine receptors (mACHRs; Buchanan et al., 2010; Giessel and Sabatini, 2010), suggesting that SK channel downregulation may be facilitated when neuronal activation coincides with cholinergic signaling. Thus, it is conceivable that cholinergic modulators, by promoting SK channel plasticity, may set the amplification scale of neurons, affecting their ability to generate spike output on both short and long timescales. This possible role of cholinergic signaling is exciting because it suggests an effect of the attentional state of the animal on memory engram formation and recall but still awaits experimental verification.

The Synapse versus the Neuron as the Critical Site in Memory Engram Storage

The current thinking about learning is dominated by a synaptocentric view, which describes the synapse as the site central to all processes involved in learning and memory. Here we advocate for an alternative, neurocentric view of memory, which describes the entire neuron with its synaptic input portfolio as the central player in any memory engram (hence the term engram cell; Tonegawa et al., 2015). The shift of focus toward entire cells ultimately includes cells with a modulatory function in plasticity, such as astrocytes, which also play a role in learning. This important aspect is beyond the scope of this paper, but excellent reviews on the topic are available (e.g., Singh and Abraham, 2017). The neurocentric view of learning presented here is based on the argumentation that a memory engram is defined by the spike output of all participating neurons, a parameter that is efficiently controlled by intrinsic excitability. Activity-dependent intrinsic plasticity modulates excitability and has the capacity to mark engram cells for low-threshold re-activation and, possibly, burst firing, a feature that promotes memory engram...
storage and retrieval. Thus, intrinsic excitability can be seen as the "currency" in engram storage that regulates the synaptic penetrance factor of a particular neuron. A potentially important role in amplification was previously ascribed to intrinsic plasticity (Marder et al., 1996; Hansel et al., 2001; Zhang and Linden, 2003; Frick and Johnston, 2005; Debanne, 2009), but these previous proposals have not as radically abandoned the established view that LTP and LTD are ultimately the sole correlates of memory ("synaptic memory"). Here we present a different perspective that looks at the immediate cellular consequences of synaptic and intrinsic plasticity mechanisms, stripped down from any traditional assumptions about their respective roles in learning. In this view, LTP and LTD change synaptic weights in an experience-dependent manner and provide the processes needed to establish proper synaptic connectivity between neurons, similar to the synapse stabilization and pruning events that shape neural circuits during development (Piochon et al., 2016a). It remains undisputed that LTP has the potential to contribute to information storage by enhancing the probability that activation of the potentiated synapse(s) contributes to spike firing in the postsynaptic neuron. However, synaptic penetrance is a limiting factor, and intrinsic plasticity provides a critical activity- and experience-dependent amplification mechanism that will boost (or negatively regulate) synaptic responses and change the spike threshold (or the slope of the f-i curve) for all synapses contacting a neuron or for a subset of these synapses. In the latter case, locally restricted intrinsic excitability changes may further amplify synaptic responses (Losonczy et al., 2008; Ohtsuki et al., 2012), which can be a powerful mechanism, particularly in combination with synapse clustering (Govindarajan et al., 2006, 2011; Kleindienst et al., 2011; Makino and Malinow, 2011; Takahashi et al., 2012). It has recently been demonstrated by one of us that, in the cortex, information storage is optimized when a large fraction of synapses are silent (Brunel, 2016; see also Brunel et al., 2004). In this scenario, synaptic response amplitudes need to be sufficiently close to the spike threshold so that a critical number of coactive synaptic inputs leads to suprathreshold activity. Intrinsic plasticity might well play a role in fine-tuning the spike threshold.

If LTP and LTD are primarily phenomena concerned with experience-dependent changes in network connectivity, then it can be predicted that synaptic and intrinsic components of learning can be separated in time. Prior experience may lead to the formation of proper synaptic connectivity and input maps, and a new learning situation may, at a later time point, trigger intrinsic plasticity and memory engram formation without further changes in synaptic weight. In this functional distinction, LTP/LTD-mediated changes in synaptic connectivity and input maps are part of an active learning process as well and will not be restricted to early development. For example, it is likely that synaptic rewiring occurs during associative learning in the adult brain, which typically is a slow process that evolves over several consecutive days. The available data suggest that, in contrast, intrinsic plasticity is a faster phenomenon that may enable acute and, possibly, single-experience learning. This is a plausible scenario because the induction threshold for intrinsic plasticity is lower than that for synaptic plasticity (e.g., Purkinje cell intrinsic plasticity can be triggered within 3 s of activation, which has not been shown for any form of synaptic plasticity; Belmeguenai et al., 2010; Ohtsuki et al., 2012; Lopez-Rojas et al., 2016). Thus, intrinsic plasticity may well occur isolated from synaptic plasticity and may enable an ultra-fast change of intrinsic amplification values (and, thus, memory engram formation) underlying single-experience learning.

In the considerations detailed above, intrinsic plasticity is described as an independent and crucial mechanism in learning but still operates by amplifying synaptic responses. On a final note, we would like to point out that changes in intrinsic excitability can also be part of the memory trace without any involvement of synapses (other than in the induction phase). We have recently shown that intrinsic plasticity can alter the duration of spike pauses in Purkinje cells, thus changing the spike burst-pause sequence that is characteristic for the output from the cerebellar cortex (Grasselli et al., 2016; Figure 3). This finding points to an additional aspect of intrinsic plasticity that might play an important role in types of neurons that show high spontaneous spike firing rates. Together, the findings reviewed here suggest that we need to expand the currently dominating, too narrowly focused view on synaptic learning mechanisms to fully appreciate the complexity of important cellular tools the brain uses for memory storage.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank David Freedman, Daniel Margoliash, and members of the Hansel laboratory for comments. N.B. is supported by the National Science Foundation (NSF IIS-1430296), C.H. is supported by the NIH (NS62771). The experiments were approved by the Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee of the University of Chicago.

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