



## Tips for you, and your students: helping learners to make learning happen

There are numerous sources of study skills advice for learners, many suggesting tried-and-tested approaches to learning. One of my own contributions to the genre (Race, 2007) is built around helping learners to get their heads inside the processes of assessment so that they optimize their performance when their achievement is being measured formally. I have chosen to end this chapter on learning with a set of 25 key suggestions written directly to learners, which you may find useful to copy for your learners or, better still, adapt for them, tuning the suggestions into the particular contexts of their own studies in your own discipline.

- 1 *Want to succeed.* Don't just *hope* to be successful. Be determined to get your result and to do everything you need to do to make it happen. Think positive. Keep reminding yourself of 'What's in it for me?' Think ahead to how much better your life will be *having* succeeded: more choices available in your career; a better developed brain.
- 2 *Make good use of the intended learning outcomes.* These tell you a lot about what you need to become able to do to actually get to your target. These help you to sort out what to learn from what not to learn. These help you to find out about what is fair game as an exam question and what is not. These help you to work out what your assessors are looking for in assignments. (There are some more detailed suggestions about how to make good use of intended learning outcomes in Chapter 3.)
- 3 *Don't bury your head in the sand.* Getting your learning to work for you is a big job, but like any big job, is done a little bit at a time. Keep doing little sections of the job all the time rather than hiding from the enormity of the whole task. You get your result for doing all the *little* jobs, not just for tackling the whole task.
- 4 *Confront your work avoidance tactics.* It's all too easy to put off the evil moment of starting a task. Meanwhile, you could have got the task well under way. Don't waste time feeling miserable about the backlog of work you've got – just do one thing from the backlog and you'll immediately feel better. Then do another thing, and you'll feel ahead of the game.
- 5 *Don't mix up 'important' with 'urgent'.* The danger is that if you're too busy doing things that seem urgent, you'll miss out on things that are really important. Do one short important thing *before* you do the urgent thing you've got to do that day. That's one less thing that will become urgent. Revising last week's lecture for 10 minutes is often more important than the first 10 minutes you will spend writing up this week's assignment.
- 6 *Don't confuse being busy with working effectively.* It's all too easy to be busy working at something which will only contribute a mark or two towards your overall result, when you could have spent the same time on something that would count for a lot more. Being busy can actually become an advanced work-avoidance tactic. Keep your eye on the big picture, not the small detail.
- 7 *Don't spend too long on any one thing.* Don't get so involved in writing a particular essay or report that you miss out on spending time getting your head around the important concepts and ideas from the last couple of weeks' lectures. An extra two hours might just get you one more mark on that essay. Two hours spent consolidating the last two weeks' learning might pave the way to earning you 20 marks in a forthcoming exam.
- 8 *Take charge of your workload.* Don't just respond to the pressures around you. Be your own manager. Do what's expected of you, and what's required of you, but also do things that no one has told you to do – for example, going back over things you've already learned, making sure they're not just slipping away again.
- 9 *Think questions.* Any important fact or concept is just the answer to a question or two. If you know all the questions, you're well on your way to being able to answer any question that will come your way. Write your own questions down all the time – in lectures, when you're reading, when you're thinking, when you wake up, any time.
- 10 *Find out the answers to important questions.* Look them up. Ask fellow students. Ask lecturers when necessary. Don't just guess the answers – check whether your guess is good enough. Life is too short to learn 'wrong' stuff.
- 11 *Learning happens by doing.* Don't just read things or listen to lectures or browse websites or books, handouts and articles. *Do* things all the time. Make your own headline notes. Practise solving problems. Practise answering questions. Do it again – repetition deepens learning. Find out about those things you need to do *six* times before you get your head around them – these will usually be more important than something you only have to do once.

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- 12 *Make notes – don't just take notes.* When reading, or sitting in a class, or working online, you're only really *doing* something useful if you've got a pen in hand or fingers to keyboard, and you're *not just copying things down*. Capture your own thoughts, questions, ideas and so on, and link them to what you're seeing and hearing.
- 13 *Find out how you're doing – all the time.* Get as much feedback as you can – from lecturers, from fellow students and by comparing your own work with what's in books, articles, websites, everything. Don't just wait for feedback to come to you – go looking for it. Don't be defensive when the feedback is critical – learn from it. Don't be glib when the feedback is complimentary, build on it consciously.
- 14 *Keep records of all the feedback you get.* Written feedback from tutors is easy to return to, and re-learn from, but make sure you also keep short notes of advice received in face-to-face feedback too – it's easy to forget important points otherwise.
- 15 *Use your friends.* Show your draft assignments to anyone who will read them – fellow students, friends, family members, anyone who can read. Even people who don't know anything about your subject can give you some useful feedback – even if only on spelling or punctuation.
- 16 *Don't think that studying is something you have to do alone.* It's much more sociable studying with like-minded fellow learners. The only time it's really important to do things on your own is writing up the final versions of assessed coursework – you don't want to risk being accused of copying then.
- 17 *Practise communicating what you've learned.* In due course, it's what you communicate that gets you your qualification, not just what's inside your head. Use every opportunity to explain things to other people. Do this with fellow learners, family, friends, everyone. Even explaining things to a dog helps you become better at making sense of what you've learned (and dogs love being talked to about anything!).
- 18 *Self-assess all the time.* Don't just wait for someone to assess your work. Apply the assessment criteria to your own work before you hand it in for tutor assessment. Cross-reference your work to the intended learning outcomes, and work out which of these you've achieved and which you have not yet achieved. The more you know about the standard of your own work, the better you'll fare when others judge your work.
- 19 *Make the most of peer assessment too.* Get fellow students to give you feedback about your work. Take every opportunity to apply assessment criteria to their work. Making informed judgements about their work helps you to become better at continuously monitoring your own work as you do it, and thereby to produce work of better quality, gaining higher marks.
- 20 *Practice makes perfect.* Exams measure how good you are at answering exam questions under exam conditions. Practise answering questions as your main revision strategy. The more *often* you've jotted down the answer to a tricky question, the *faster* you can do it correctly one more time in the exam itself. Don't just hope it will be all right on the day in the exam – *make* it all right by practising all the way up to the day itself.
- 21 *Have a life.* Getting your result isn't *all* hard slog. You need time out for your brain to be refreshed. But build this time out *into* your overall strategy, rather than feeling guilty about it. There's no better way to enjoy some time out than to take it at the point of just having achieved a useful chunk of learning. So earn your time out, then enjoy it.
- 22 *Be cue-conscious.* All the time, your lecturers are giving you cues about what's really important and what's less important. The intended learning outcomes give you cues too. You'll get lots of cues from past exam questions. You'll get even more cues by talking to fellow students and finding out what they think is important. But don't let all these cues evaporate away – jot them down, preferably in the form of questions you need to become able to answer or things you need to become able to do. When you know where you're heading, you're much more likely to become able to get there.
- 23 *Take setbacks in your stride.* A low mark for an assignment is a useful learning experience – find out what to avoid doing again so that you don't lose the same sorts of marks next time. Don't just grumble that you deserved better marks. Learn what you can from each setback, then let it go and don't brood over it.
- 24 *Take pride in your achievements.* Don't just worry about all the things you haven't yet done – learn from things you've done well and build on that learning. There's no way you can ever feel that you're doing everything possible towards getting where you're heading, so be reasonable with yourself.
- 25 *Keep becoming better at studying.* At the end of the day, your learning is a measure of how well you've developed your study techniques, not just how much information you've crammed into your brain. Become ever more conscious about how you learn best. Explore all the possibilities. Find out the techniques which really work for you, and develop them.