

# Managing Your Learning

## Understanding Expectations

It is important to realise that learning at university is very different to learning at school. At university you are expected to:

- **take responsibility for your own learning** ie. it is up to you to decide how and when you will study, and how much you will learn;
- **be able to think independently** ie. to go beyond lecture notes and textbooks, to make links between theory and practice, to apply your knowledge and skills to new situations, to evaluate arguments and evidence, and to form independent judgements;
- **recognise that knowledge is not fixed or certain, but is constantly evolving**, that it is constructed by individuals, and that theories and opinions may consequently differ and be contested or challenged.

## Being Aware of How You Learn

The first step towards becoming a more effective learner is to understand how you learn. To find out more about yourself as a learner, try answering the following questions:

---

	Questions	Yes	No
1.	When learning do you try to memorise a lot of facts you don't fully understand?		
2.	Do you need to make sense of information before you memorise it?		
3.	Do you try to distinguish between concepts and examples?		
4.	Do you attempt to relate new knowledge to what you already know?		
5.	Do you try to gain an overview of a subject or reading before focussing on the details?		
6.	Do you like to be told what to learn and how to go about it?		
7.	Do you like tasks that are open-ended, and that allow you to develop your own ideas and interests?		
8.	Is the need to pass exams, and to complete assignments your main reason for studying?		

---

*If you answered 'yes' to questions 1, 6, and 8, then there is a good chance that you have an orientation towards the kind of learning educationalists call 'surface' learning ie. learning which focuses on remembering and reproducing information, rather than on understanding the relationships between different facts and ideas. If, on the other hand, you answered 'no' to these questions, and 'yes' to questions 2, 3, 4, 5, and 7, then you would appear to favour a 'deep' learning approach i.e., one which focuses on the whole picture, and on how the various parts relate to the whole. You may, of course, have answered 'yes' to questions pertaining to 'deep' as well as to 'surface' learning, in which case you may well be what is called a 'strategic' learner ie. one who adapts their approach to the demands of a particular task.*

## Improving Your Learning Strategies

Research has repeatedly shown that students who adopt a ‘deep’ or ‘strategic’ approach to learning are more successful at university than those who adopt only a surface approach. On first coming to university, however, many students continue to rely on approaches they used in the past, even when such approaches are inappropriate for the tasks which have been set.

To get the most out of your university studies, you may need to rethink your current learning strategies. Here are some things you can do to improve the way in which you learn:

- **Concentrate on understanding key concepts and principles**, i.e., Make sure that you grasp the ideas that underpin specific facts and opinions, and that you are able to distinguish concepts and principles from examples e.g. When driving in NZ the **principle** is that you must give way to cars on your right. The specific situations in which you do this are **examples** of the application of the principle.
- **Link individual facts and examples to a conceptual framework**, i.e., Don’t attempt to learn facts and examples in isolation. Make sure that you relate them to the concepts and principles they illustrate.
- **Obtain an overview of a subject or argument before focussing on the details** i.e., Make sure that you understand the material you are reading or learning, and that you have grasped the main ideas before you begin to look at specific facts and examples.
- **Relate new knowledge to existing knowledge** i.e., When you are introduced to new information, try to relate it to what you already know and understand about a particular subject or topic.
- **Try to enjoy learning for its own sake** i.e., Pursue subjects and areas of interest. Don’t learn simply to pass exams.
- **Make good use of feedback** i.e., Read the comments of markers carefully, and try to use their suggestions to improve future work. Pay attention to comments about the way in which you have responded to the assignment topic, as well as to comments about presentation etc. If you have answered multi-choice questions incorrectly, make sure you find out why your answers are incorrect, and remedy any gaps in understanding. Most importantly, don’t be afraid to seek help from your tutor or lecturer.

## How to Get More Out of Studying

As well as trying to improve your learning strategies, you should also work on improving your study habits. There are many things you can do to ensure that you study more effectively, but the following things are the most important:

- **Plan your study.** Don’t spend all your time on one or two subjects while ignoring others. Designate regular study times and plan other commitments around these, not vice versa! Calculate at least one hour in study time for each point a paper is worth i.e. six hours **in addition to** class time for a six credit point paper.
- **Learn to prioritise.** Decide what is important and urgent, and deal with these tasks before tackling tasks that are less important and that can wait. You should also make sure that you note when major assignments are due, so that you plan your time accordingly. Begin with the assignments that have the earliest deadlines, not those that are easiest or most interesting!

- **Be an active rather than a passive learner.** Don't just read your notes and textbooks as if you were reading the newspaper or a novel. Try using the following techniques:
  - Underline key points;
  - Question yourself, and get others to question you on what you are reading;
  - Draw diagrams or concept maps to help you to make sense of information;
  - Summarise lecture notes and course readings (this will help recall);
  - Relate ideas to other similar ideas;
  - Picture things in your mind as you read;
  - Repeat important points and details to yourself;
  - Practise answering questions and doing problems.
- **Avoid studying the same subject for long periods of time without a break.** Five one hour sessions can sometimes be more effective than one five hour session!
- **Study the subject or subjects you find most difficult or boring before the ones you find interesting.** This will help you to maintain concentration.
- **Revise consistently, not just the week or day before exams.** The more you go over material, the more reinforcement will take place, and the easier it will be to recall.
- **Try to study at the time of day that is most productive for you.** For some people this is in the morning, while for others it is the afternoon or evening. Do not persist with study if you are feeling very sleepy as you will not be learning effectively. Take a break every hour, and if you are finding it particularly difficult to concentrate, slot in some other activity between study sessions.
- **Study in an environment that you find comfortable.** Don't, however, choose one that is so relaxing that you fall asleep!

### Staying Motivated

It is not uncommon for students to lose interest and motivation at some stage during their studies. This may be due to changing interests, employment, family problems, or any number of other factors, so don't be surprised if you find yourself in this situation. There are several strategies you can use, however, to help yourself to stay focussed and motivated. Try, for example, to:

- **establish clear short-term goals.** ie. Specify what you want to achieve this week and this month, rather than what you hope to achieve at a later point.
- **break goals down into achievable tasks.** ie. If your goal is to complete an assignment, break this down into when you will do the required reading, when you will complete your first draft, and when you will revise what you have written. If the goal is to understand a particular topic, break this down into reading lecture notes, reading the relevant sections of the textbook, and completing any further reading.
- **include rewards.** ie. Make sure you treat yourself to something you enjoy when you have met deadlines, and have achieved set goals.
- **form a study group.** It may be difficult to do this, if you are a distance education student, but if you cannot meet face-to-face with students who live near to you, you could try other means such as audio-conferencing, e-mail, and telephone.

### GETTING HELP

Remember that if you are having difficulty with any aspect of your studies, you should immediately contact the Course Co-ordinator, your lecturer, or a Study Skills Adviser. Don't delay until it is too late. Study skills advisers are available for one-on-one consultations at the Student Learning Centre on the Dunedin campus. If you do not live in Dunedin, you can call the Student Learning Centre on 03 479 5786. Alternatively, you can e-mail the Centre at the following address:

*student-learning-centre@otago.ac.nz.*