

Study Skills

INTRODUCTION

What are Study Skills ?

The term covers a wide range of learning skills, from learning how best to find, absorb and retain information, to writing and presentation. Study skills are not something you learn once and forget about, but something that you carry on learning and developing.

As a lecturer and tutor you need to advise students about the skills they are expected to acquire and demonstrate while studying. You will set assignments and exams designed to test and develop a range of academic and transferable skills.

Study skills will develop through practice, trial and error. Feedback from you will form an essential part of this development. As a tutor, it is your responsibility to communicate the principles of effective learning to your students.

The term 'study skills' covers a broad spectrum of subjects but includes topics such as:

- **TIME MANAGEMENT**
- **LEARNING & MEMORY SKILLS**
- **EXAM SKILLS**
- **LISTENING SKILLS**

- **NOTETAKING SKILLS**
- **READING SKILLS**
- **PLANNING ASSIGNMENTS**
- **PREPARING & DELIVERING A PRESENTATION**
- **WRITING SKILLS**
- **LEARNING STYLES**
- **ANALYSING INFORMATION**
- **PROBLEM SOLVING**
- **ASKING QUESTIONS**
- **KNOWING WHERE TO FIND INFORMATION, SOURCES OF HELP, ADVICE AND GUIDANCE**
- **THINKING AND UNDERSTANDING**
- **REFLECTING ON YOUR EXPERIENCES AND LEARNING FROM THEM**
- **WORKING AND COMMUNICATING IN GROUPS**
- **DECISION MAKING**
- **SELF-MOTIVATION**
- **RESEARCH SKILLS**

This list may seem daunting, especially to the students, but they will already have developed many of the skills during previous study. Both their levels of competence and their awareness of their own strengths and weaknesses are likely to vary though, and you will need to assess the areas where the students need help. As a tutor, you are a resource for your students. You can provide a valuable service to them by giving them direction and encouragement to develop good study skills.

The following case study details how one lecturer tackles study skills in her courses.

Case Study

My background is in advertising and marketing. I taught in Further Education for a couple of years, then became a visiting tutor in Higher Education. I had three part-time jobs that made up one full-time job, so I've had a lot of experience as an hourly-paid lecturer teaching at all levels from HND to MA. I've worked in art and design departments at several institutions, mainly in fashion and marketing.

At the beginning of any course I always ask the students what they wish to learn? what do they want out of the course? and what is the purpose of their study? I need to identify the targets up front and establish their individual strengths. I can then work out what skills they will each need to develop as the course progresses. If a student has not had positive previous experiences at school and/or in the workplace then they will be less confident and have a lot more obstacles to overcome.

I spend one of the first lectures of any course focussing on study skills – detailing my expectations and giving practical hints and tips. I instil my expectations for lectures, tutorials and assignments so it is clear from the start what I will be looking for.

It is important to give students a course scheme and a schedule of what will happen on a week by week basis throughout the year, including the deadlines for all assignments, and then work with it and stick to it. This will allow the students to organise their time effectively. I make sure that there are no real pressure points by working with the other tutors to ensure that there is no bunching of assignments across the programme. If students have too many assignments to hand in around the same period their attendance to classes slackens and consequently they fall further behind.

If there is a book attached to the course then I insist on it being purchased by all the students and then reference it and use it consistently in lessons.

I can refer students to the study skill booklets or texts for more detailed advice and, if they have real problems, they can be referred to a counsellor. There may also be study skills workshops run by the Institution that students can be encouraged to attend on specific areas such as report writing, presentation skills etc.

As the course progresses students will often ask to see me with a specific problem – i.e. problems with an assignment, problems with group work and it is up to me as the tutor to identify whether there is an underlying problem related to their skills and ability to produce the work set.

At assignment briefings there will be another opportunity for me to give a reminder of requirements and the exam revision session will also incorporate study skills particularly relevant at that time. I also give feedback intermittently throughout the course – through assignment feedback to either a group or individuals. I can tell if things have just been rushed or if there is a real skills issue.

EXAMPLES OF THE UPFRONT ADVICE I WOULD GIVE OUT TO THE STUDENTS ARE AS FOLLOWS:-

- Two hours of taught lectures will need to be balanced with two hours of self-directed learning and at peak times this will be more.
- That to do well, you must attend the sessions. Getting a copy of the handouts or someone else's notes is not the same. There will be a lot of additional information and discussion that you will miss out on. Attendance and performance are definitely positively linked.
- Lecture notes should be reviewed on a weekly basis. This saves time at the end as you approach an exam and also means that you can ask for further help on areas that you do not understand fully at the right time and not try to go back to them months later.
- Seminars and tutorials must be prepared for. There should not be the expectation that the tutor will do all the work but be willing to speak and engage and willing to listen. If you do not prepare there will be a real imbalance with the students who have prepared and this will waste time.
- Consider where, when and how to study. Establish what works for you in terms of place, lighting, background noise and especially time of day. Organise your time considering other work and family commitments and fix a time to study that works with your biological clock.

In addition to my input, students will be gathering information and input from many different areas eg books, television, Internet etc and from interaction with other students. Often they can have a problem bringing all this information together. This is why I try to make myself available, to an extent, to provide that guidance and direction and to check that coursework is on the right lines.

ON-LINE RESOURCES

I make my notes available on-line (via the Virtual Learning Environment) in advance of the lecture if it is a small group. For larger groups I would make them available just after the lecture. Making notes available before class takes away the problem of people's writing speeds. Students within the class add additional notes so it does not take away the need to attend. I have a dialogue with the students and get the feel for what would be best for them and the group as a whole. I control the flow of information going out and I make it necessary for the students to attend.

If the notes aren't available for the lecture then students need to be selective about what they take down.

The on-line learning system allows me to provide students with additional learning materials such as journal items as I come across them. The technology available enables students to go that extra step further.

Students learn from each other by talking to each other and the class discussions on-line can just extend the face to face dialogue.

I can post up distinction level assignments for students to see what they are working towards and to learn from other people's styles. I also use the system to inform of any course updates, post results etc.

Technology training is provided and encourages the students to use the system – and for me this has made teaching and learning more efficient and created a channel of communication as well as provision of resources, which has benefits for tutors and students alike.

GROUP WORK

I have a lot of experience of this and there are problems as well as benefits. I often come across a clash of personalities and different ways of working. The group should be encouraged to hold regular meetings and to divide the work and then put it back together so that it is coherent. If there are problems these must be reported to me otherwise non-contributors may still end up with a good mark. There is no right way to split up a group, whether allowing

them to work with friends or allocating them to a group. I had some international students on one course and put them together, as the others didn't seem very keen to work with them. They did so well that the next time groups were being selected everyone wanted to work with them. What you want to see is that the students are organised, have held regular meetings, developed their listening skills, adapted behaviour and overcome difficulties and disagreements. I encourage students to keep a group work log.

ASSIGNMENTS

I set progressive assignments to tie in with the students' developing study skills as they go through the course. Students will bring in case studies that they have prepared and want me to look at and I sometimes incorporate optional 'unassessed' work just to make sure that students are on the right lines. This will give the students extra practice although I will have to be prepared to give some verbal feedback.

ESSAY WRITING & REPORTS

Often there is a format / layout and referencing style that should be adhered to for the course or follows institution requirements. If this is the case then it is important that both the tutor and students are familiarised with this and refer to the guidelines.

I encourage students to provide a bibliography and appendix, to show what has gone into the work and to give evidence of research.

GATHERING & USING INFORMATION

Plagiarism and cheating are big issues and I warn the students of the consequences. Of course they can use work from other people but it must be correctly summarised and referenced and fall in line with the system used by each Institution – and they do differ.

PRESENTATIONS

Must be rehearsed – in front of an audience - and students will get better over time. Cue cards are good prompts and appropriate body language is important.

REVISION FOR EXAMS

I encourage the students to look at the format of past papers and use them for practice. Then in the actual exam to monitor the time, write clearly and stay calm. I think that one problem is the lack of exam feedback. Often the student's didn't finish the paper so was the paper too long or didn't they plan their time wisely? This can end up a recurring problem for students.

Finally, it is important for me to continually reflect on my experiences – and to talk to the students about how they would like things to change. This dialogue will be a learning experience for the students and for me so they we can both improve for the future.

HAVING READ THE CASE STUDY, CONSIDER YOUR OWN TEACHING AND THINK ABOUT THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:

How can you improve the integration of study skills into your teaching sessions?

What particular study skills do you consider your students need to develop most? How can you support them to do this?

Are you clear on when and where to refer students for additional support within your Institution?

HOW WOULD YOU DEAL WITH THE FOLLOWING SCENARIOS?

A student who is always late to sessions and always behind in their work.

A student who suffers from exam anxiety and wants advice

Why should students look over a returned exam paper?

Do you take good notes? What advice can you give students about taking good notes and using the notes to help them succeed in class?

Do you consider that study skills are generic, subject-specific or a mixture?

When should study skills be taught? At the beginning of the course or as an integral part – with the skills developing as the course progresses?

FURTHER INFORMATION

<http://www.gre.ac.uk/students/office/pash/skills.htm>

<http://www.art.man.ac.uk/studyskills/index.html>

Points and Strategies

STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS

- **CLEARLY ESTABLISH EXPECTATIONS FOR YOUR STUDENTS**
Let them know what you will be looking for and by when
- **KEEP AND FOLLOW A CONSISTENT SET OF RULES**
Write them down; post them; refer to them!
Rules are necessary, but must be mutually agreed upon with the students.
They must be fair and enforced consistently
- **HAVE A CLEAR IDEA OF YOUR OWN STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS,**
and what skills or knowledge you can offer as a tutor.
What are you, as the tutor, expected to know: not just on your subject matter
but on Institutional procedures for assignments, etc?
- **KNOW THE STUDENT**
Discover his or her strengths and challenges in learning
- **BE AWARE OF THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN YOU AND THE LEARNER**
You are not trying to change the learner, but to accommodate and use their
learning style(s) in order to complete the tasks
- **MAKE SURE THE LEARNER KNOWS IT IS OKAY TO NOT SUCCEED
STRAIGHT AWAY**
Learning is a process that often involves unsuccessful attempts,
this is not failure but part of the development process
- **DON'T BE AFRAID TO REVEAL THAT YOU DON'T KNOW SOMETHING**
You can refer the learner to more sources
You can take the opportunity to learn/problem-solve, and bring back answers,
and demonstrate that you are in a learning process as well

**FINALLY BE OPEN AND HONEST. GIVE POSITIVE FEEDBACK, BE ENCOURAGING,
REINFORCE EFFORT AND CELEBRATE SUCCESS**