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# Study Skills

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## *Excerpt from Learning to Learning Training Manual*

Various psychological disorders such as anxiety, depression, sleeplessness that are seen in psychological clinics have their roots in the pressures faced by students in the classroom. Our own research and interviews with teachers and students across the country have pointed to *difficulties with academics* as one of the *leading* stress points in the Indian student's life.

Viewed from another angle, *employers* complain that students often have not mastered their subject matter. "We have to spend at least one year training new recruits because they don't seem to have really grasped what they have studied" – is a sentiment often expressed by managers of most companies.

At one level studies seem to have become highly stressful for large numbers of students. At another level, actual learning does not seem to have occurred even after the student has obtained his or her degree.

Some have described this crisis to be the result of an outdated curriculum, while others blame it on the high levels of competition that students have to face at every stage in today's world. However, would changing the curriculum and somehow magically reducing competition really help the Indian student?

The *real need* behind the difficulties faced by Indian students comes down to *core* or *basic* study skills. Regardless of the curriculum or the levels of competition, when a student approaches learning in an

unskilled manner, his learning is not going to be efficient or effective. Ineffective learning styles and study skill deficits make significant contributions to the difficulties so many students experience with their studies.

### **What are study skills?**

#### *Studying is more than memorising*

Study skills are basic *skills* required for any form of learning. *Memorising* is only one form of study skill. Yet, this is the only study skill practised by a vast majority of Indian students. It is true that the Indian examination system lays a heavy emphasis on knowledge. Students as a result approach their learning material with the objective of memorising it well enough to repeat it in the examination. Understanding the material is often given a very low priority.

Learning is a function of the human brain and it is vital to recognise that brain functions in a certain way. Learning to work *with* the brain greatly reduces the stress of learning. Forcing the brain to memorise material that has not been understood is an example of working *against* the brain's natural design. One of the earliest psychological experiments established that *nonsense* is far more *difficult* to remember than meaningful material. Similarly trying to learn in an unorganised manner, trying to learning material in a rush, are all examples of going against the essential design of the brain. Study skills help the student work along

with one of the most powerful learning tools in the universe, – her own brain.

### ***Study skills are a group of interlocking skills***

Study skills are a group of skills that interlock with each other. These skills are actually rooted in the characteristics of the human brain. When learning is attempted in the absence of these skills, or by utilising just one or two of these skills in isolation, then the brain finds it difficult to actually learn the material it is presented with. However when the student is taught learning skills and is able to utilise these skills appropriately, then learning becomes less stressful and more efficient. ‘Learning to learn’ therefore is a key target for study skills training

This training programme will focus on understanding techniques to promote 5 specific study skills.

## **Specific Study Skills**

### ***Attention Management***

Concentration is the ability to focus one’s mind on a particular topic for a long enough duration of time. Difficulty with concentration is one of the most common study skills deficits seen amongst students today.

What are some reasons for difficulties with concentration?

- *Boredom.* Unfortunately the bulk of Indian textbooks and learning material are poorly presented and unattractive. However, when a lecture is made attractive, and when the student learns methods to make learning material attractive, concentration can improve.

- *Distractibility* is another factor that affects concentration. Distraction occurs when the student is surrounded by various *competing* stimuli. Attention drifts between stimuli and locks onto what is most attractive, important and arresting. Most often stimuli other than the text book are more attractive!
- *Lack of organisation* is another cause of low concentration. Sometimes students have so many things to do that they are unable to give enough time to any thing.
- *Emotions* such as fear and anxiety along with disturbing thoughts are ‘internal’ factors that reduce concentration.

Learning to manage attention therefore requires student to:

- deal with boredom
- identify distractors and control them
- organise time to give optimal time to various activities
- learn to be calm and ‘quiet in the mind’ when studying
- learn to control negative thoughts

It is important to note that attention cannot be increased. It is a *fixed resource*. Advertisements for medicines and exercises that promise to ‘*increase the power of concentration*’, are questionable. However when factors that deplete attention by drawing the mind in too many different directions are controlled, then a greater amount of the person’s attention resource can be directed toward one activity.

## ***Skills for Comprehension***

All learning must begin with understanding. Material that is not understood requires a much greater effort to remember. This effort generates a high degree of stress as the quantity of material to be remembered increases. Further, when material has not been understood, the student will find it difficult to apply this information. In the long run therefore, the student's chances for successful employment are compromised because he has not understood those formulae that he memorised or those theories that he produced perfectly from memory at the final examination.

One of the factors that contribute to poor comprehension skills is excessive teacher dependence. Students have not learned the skills of approaching a body of knowledge independently and extracting information from this body of knowledge. In our survey of close to 2000 first degree students we found for example that almost 85% did not know what the index in a book was, and how they could use it to access the information in the book. Efforts in the classroom, must be directed toward helping the student grow into an independent learner

Skills for comprehension include learning techniques for:

- accessing information
- note making
- independently extracting meaning from material to be learned.

## ***Note Making***

Note *giving* is an example of fostering passive and teacher dependent learning. Comprehension is usually low when students are given notes, because the need to access information is quite low. On the

other hand teaching the student to *make* notes that are accurate would contribute significantly to enhancing comprehension. Note making covers two activities, namely, taking notes during the lecture and making notes from a variety of sources. The most important aspect of learning to make notes is the skill of learning to identify *key points*, draw information from various sources and then *connect* them all together as 'personal' notes.

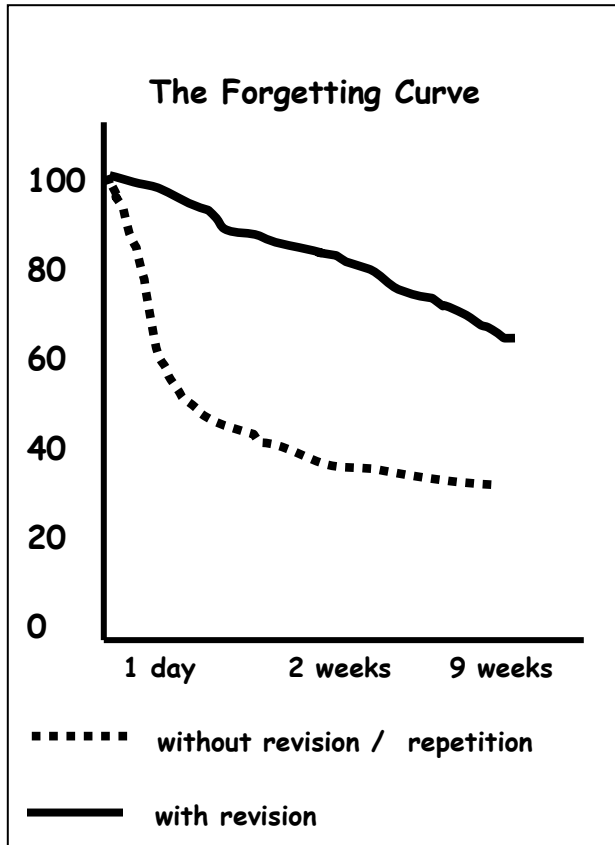
Effective note making includes techniques such as:

- identifying key words and concepts
- making note cards
- clustering information
- using other visual techniques such as time lines and flow charts.

## ***Memory Training***

Photographic memory is a blessing that only very few of us have received. Various mnemonic devices and techniques (memory aids) have been described, but the actual use of these methods is limited.

Research has clearly revealed while we do not actually forget what we have memorised, with the passage of time, the recall of what has been memorised becomes more and more difficult. The graph below shows the impact of reviewing notes after class each day, on memory. At the end of nine weeks, those who reviewed their notes within a day recalled about 75% of the information. Those who did not review their notes were unable to recall even 50% of the information after one day and only a little more than 20% of the information after nine weeks.



Memory is heavily dependent on repetition. Memory training occurs when the person attempts to recall the key points - without looking at the notes or the source of the information.

Memory training therefore requires:

- carefully made notes that the student has understood
- selection of a section of the notes for memory training
- attempting to recall the key points in that section *without* looking at the notes
- looking at the notes to check for errors and missed points
- repetition until recall is complete

### ***Scheduling Skills***

Learning to manage time is a vital aspect of effective study skills. Students sometimes

feel as if there aren't enough hours in the week to get everything done. This may be true. However what is probably actually happening is that the student is not using her time as efficiently as possible. Working out a timetable in itself will give the student a sense of direction and control. Students often get discouraged when they find that they are not able to maintain their timetables. This is natural. Only a robot perhaps can be programmed to stick to a timetable perfectly. Missing a study period is information in itself and often motivates students to make up for this time at some other point the week. Most importantly a time table gives the student a sense of purpose and direction. It offers a framework within which to guide one's study activities.

It is important also to note that not all subjects require the same amount of time. Subjects that the student finds more difficult and those that have larger portions would require more time in the timetable.

Developing a timetable involves:

- Working how much time is available to the student for studies per week
- Deciding how much time each subject requires per week
- Spreading out the subjects over the week

Students who are not used to working to a timetable would usually find that their new timetable collapses very quickly. It is important that they are able to identify why the timetable collapsed. It could have been too ambitious (e.g. too many study hours put down), study times may have overlapped with other important and more attractive activities (e.g. television serial). The student should make a new timetable based on this analysis of failure. Usually 2 to 3 attempts are required before a time table finally 'settles down'.

