



STUDENT NOTES FOR SUCCESS

No 15

Learning styles: how to maximise your learning potential

We all have different ways of learning, different techniques which help us to understand and remember, and different preferences for certain learning approaches. The trick is to understand your own learning style and make the most of it.

What is expected of you at university?

Students come to university from different backgrounds and with different life and academic experiences. Some may have developed the skills and qualities which will make them successful in an Australian university context. Others will have to learn new skills. In an Australian university you would, amongst other things, be expected to be:

- independent
- self-motivated
- open to working with students from all over the world
- able to work things out for yourself
- able to set your own goals and objectives
- able to organise your time (i.e. have developed time management skills)
- able to work out when, how and where you learn best (i.e. know your own preferred learning style).

Are you confident that you can do all the above? What skills, personal qualities and abilities do you bring to your tertiary studies? For example, do you have good people skills? If you do, you will probably work well in student teams. If not you will need to develop such skills.

Are you good at organising yourself or others? If not, you will certainly need to learn those skills to manage the busy life of a university student, especially if you are trying to juggle study, part-time work and a social life.

Are you able to recognise your own needs and ask for help? If not, you may miss out on many

of the support services that can help you to gain maximum benefit from your study.

What is intelligence?

There are many definitions of intelligence. Gardiner (1993) talks of multiple facets of intelligence or 'multiple intelligences', including:

- linguistic
- logical, mathematical
- spatial
- musical
- body-kinaesthetic
- interpersonal (understanding of and skills in dealing with others), and
- intrapersonal (understanding yourself and your own motivations).



Very few of us are lucky enough to be intelligent in all spheres, although there have been some exceptional examples in history of geniuses with multiple intelligences, such as Leonardo da Vinci. Most of us have to be content with being more clever in one or two areas. Which is your greatest area of strength? Which is an area you need to improve and develop?

More importantly, do you know your preferred learning style? Do you need to see things visually? Do you learn better through discussing ideas with others?



Are you more mathematically inclined? Do you have to draw diagrams and scribble ideas down on paper? Do you like to hear things out loud? If you are not sure about the answer to these questions, then do the following:

- Think about a time when you learned something really well and easily. What made it a good learning experience for you?
- Think of a time when you had difficulty learning something. What were the conditions? What hindered you?
- What do these two above experiences tell you about the way you learn best?

What is your preferred learning style?

There are many different ways of categorising learning styles or preferred ways of learning. Although we should not rely unduly on such categorisations, they can sometimes help us to understand our strengths and our weaknesses. The important thing is to remember that none of us is just in the one category or just one type of learner, although we might tend to fall more within one area. We may have certain tendencies, but these can change with time, age and place and also can certainly be influenced by life experiences.

Stella Cottrell (1999) lists four learning styles (remember this is just **one** way of categorising our understanding – it is no secret formula). Her categories include:

- the **diver** (jumps into things, acts in bursts of activity, is impulsive)
- the **logician** (is organised, slow, a perfectionist and notices details)
- the **dreamer** (thinks in circles, is not good at keeping to timelines, thinks a lot about things and likes to research things); and
- the **searchlight** (is interested in everything, likes the big picture, is not too good with the small details).

Each of these styles has strengths and weaknesses, and all can learn to develop other learning abilities:

- the **diver**, for example, needs to develop the skills of listening and reflection
- the **logician** needs to develop creative and interpersonal skills

- the **dreamer** needs to develop time keeping, assertiveness and organisational skills; and
- the **searchlight** needs to develop analytical and critical thinking, and to pay attention to details.

If you were involved in a group project, you can see that it would be advantageous to have students with different learning styles in your group, as each would bring different skills to the project.

Finally, take note of the following good advice from Cottrell (1999) in approaching all learning tasks:

- approach learning as an adventure
- use many senses
- identify what attracts you
- use active learning
- take responsibility for your learning
- trust in your own intelligence
- recognise your own learning preferences.

Adapted from

Cottrell, Stella. 1999. *The study skills handbook*. New York: Palgrave.

Gardner, Howard. 1993. *Frames of mind: The theory of multiple intelligence*. 2nd ed. London: Fontana.

Find out more at the CBS Academic Communication Development website:

<https://businesslaw.curtin.edu.au/study/student-experience/academic-communication-development/>

You might also be interested in *Handy Handout 5. Exam Success*.

Contact us at:

AcademicCommunicationDevelopment@curtin.edu.au