

INTRODUCTION TO TERTIARY LEARNING AND UNIVERSITY LIFE

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After completing this topic you should be able to:

- 1 understand the course aims, teaching approaches and assessments
- 2 identify personal study skill challenges and strengths
- 3 have insight into your learning style
- 4 understand academic culture.

Congratulations on starting the university path! You've managed to complete your enrolment, received your teaching materials and are now ready to start the learning process. This course is designed to give you a great start to your university study, by presenting you with the knowledge and skills required to succeed in tertiary-level studies. Becoming a university student brings a new set of tasks and challenges into our day-to-day life. For example, juggling family, friends and work with our studies can be at times overwhelming but not at all an impossible task! We need to learn to develop the appropriate techniques and strategies to help us manage these responsibilities.

At the start of every unit we provide you with a set of materials which you should familiarise yourself with for this unit. We recommend that you spend some time understanding the online content for this unit. In addition, to start mastering your course work and feel better about yourself as a student, we strongly encourage you to create a weekly planner. A weekly planner will help you start developing some time management skills. As this unit is online, organising your materials' requirements on a weekly basis will help you establish a routine and balance your unit study with all your other personal commitments. We will explore other techniques throughout this course. You can download an online copy from the course online site under 'Week 1 topic resources'.

COMPUTER REQUIREMENTS

The unit website is best viewed in Internet Explorer or Mozilla Firefox. You also need Adobe Flash Player and Acrobat Reader to view some of the interactive content and other files.

You can use these links to download the free software:

www.mozilla.org/en-US/firefox/new/

www.adobe.com/products/acrobat/readstep2.html

www.adobe.com/go/getflashplayer

STARTING AT UNIVERSITY

At the start, you anticipate to gain knowledge and develop new skills. However, there is more to learn at university, where you are presented with new attitudes and values. You need to understand the standards and principles of academic culture and behave accordingly. We begin by defining your expectations for university and we will explore many of the issues throughout the course.

Think about the following questions:

- How do you feel about online studying?
- How are you planning to organise your studies?
- How much of your time do you expect university work to take up?
- Do you have a long-term learning goal? (i.e. in getting a degree through education or are you planning to change your working career?)
- Do you think you will enjoy university study?

Hay, Bochner and Dungey (2002) explore the different ways of learning including lectures, tutorials and workshops. They highlight four key areas that academics teaching at university aim for for the students:

'To provide you with knowledge in the field you have selected

To stimulate you to enquire, be creative, analyse and make decisions

To encourage your ability to think creatively and be flexible

To develop your communication and interpersonal skills.'

ASSESSMENT OF STRENGTHS AND CHALLENGES

Before you can work on your study challenges, you need to know what they are. Complete the following checklist examining *your strengths* when it comes to studying. Tick as many or as few as apply. Take your time and think about each choice carefully. This is a personal review—there is no right or wrong answer (Piscitelli, 2009, pp. 3–5).

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Setting goals | <input type="checkbox"/> Writing an argument |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Completing goals | <input type="checkbox"/> Supporting an opinion with facts |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Establishing priorities | <input type="checkbox"/> Eliminating distractions |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Completing work on time | <input type="checkbox"/> Writing and completing an essay |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Taking notes from class lectures | <input type="checkbox"/> Remembering important information for exams |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Taking notes from the textbook | <input type="checkbox"/> Controlling test anxiety |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Taking organised notes | <input type="checkbox"/> Preparing, in plenty of time, for exams |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Getting to class on time | <input type="checkbox"/> Learning from previous exam mistakes |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Getting the main point from reading | <input type="checkbox"/> Taking study breaks |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Regularly reviewing and organising notes | <input type="checkbox"/> Studying alone |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Coming to class prepared | <input type="checkbox"/> Studying with friends |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Understanding and using learning style information | <input type="checkbox"/> Locating information for research projects |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Using critical thinking skills to solve problems | <input type="checkbox"/> Evaluating information for research projects |

Now complete the following checklist for challenges when it comes to studying. Tick as many or as few as apply. Take your time and think about each choice carefully. What do you need to improve?

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Setting goals | <input type="checkbox"/> Writing an argument |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Completing goals | <input type="checkbox"/> Supporting an opinion with facts |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Establishing priorities | <input type="checkbox"/> Eliminating distractions |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Completing work on time | <input type="checkbox"/> Writing and completing an essay |
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| <input type="checkbox"/> Using critical thinking skills to solve problems | <input type="checkbox"/> Evaluating information for research projects |

Using the ticked boxes from above, list the five strengths you consider your biggest assets, ranking them from 1 to 5. Do the same for your challenges.

<i>Strengths</i>	<i>Ranking</i>	<i>Challenges</i>	<i>Ranking</i>

Look at the strengths you have listed. In what ways might you be able to use those strengths to help you minimise your challenges?

PERSONAL LEARNING STYLE

Learning styles

Think about why you learn better in some situations than in others.

You learn for different reasons and in a variety of ways which may differ from how others learn.

At university you will work with others who prefer to learn in different ways to you. Being aware of this is the first step towards not only understanding your *own* learning and applying effective learning strategies, but also realising that others have different preferences which you will need to respect.

In the academic environment, considerable research has been conducted which has explored different ways of learning. Honey and Mumford (1982), Gardner (1993), Kolb (1984), Lave and Wenger (1998), to name just a few, have developed theories which reveal how information is gathered, organised and used in different ways. These learning theories are models of learning. Having an overview of the models gives you insight and helps you to clarify your own preferred style of learning. Identifying the ways in which you learn best will enable you to manage your learning journey and become an empowered active learner.

You will find that exploring your own learning style can be exciting and liberating. You will gain new insight into why and how you learn best, and this information will help you to succeed as a life-long learner in every situation.

Activity 1.1

Consider the information in Table 1.1. Do you recognise your learning preference and particular skills? Highlight the statements that you believe best describe you.

Table 1.1 Learning preferences



I enjoy the creative process, rather than the implementation
 I am open-minded
 I focus on the big picture
 I am hands-on
 I am spontaneous
 I enjoy challenges
 I look at things from different angles
 I am people-oriented
 I can motivate others
 I enjoy learning by discovery
 I am resourceful
 I am self-reliant



I am a big picture person
 I look for new opportunities
 I like to try out new ideas
 I am down-to-earth
 I like to practise what I learn
 I am goal-focused
 I focus on tasks
 I like to develop plans for action
 I am logical
 I am a decision-maker
 I am a problem-solver
 I find practical solutions
 I look for better ways of doing things



I am thoughtful
 I stand back and observe before I act
 I consider things carefully before moving on
 I draw conclusions after a lot of thought
 I think before speaking up
 I consider all angles
 I plan well to meet deadlines
 I gather information
 I research and analyse before creating a response
 I like to reflect on my learning
 I can focus on the detail while still seeing the big picture



I like structure
 I work through things in logical steps
 I need to see the finer details
 I make connections between what I know and new information
 I am objective
 I like to reason
 I can develop ideas and theories to make connections
 I like to ask probing questions
 I like to design projects (from theory to application)
 I can understand abstract concepts
 I have a thirst for knowledge

It is possible to identify with characteristics from a variety of learning styles. Remember that it is important to develop strategies across all styles so that you will become more effective and successful in your learning.

Discover creative ways to enhance your learning experience.

Whilst the way you are taught can influence your learning, it is more important to identify how you respond as an active learner.

At university you will be exposed to many different learning situations and will need to implement a range of strategies to make the information relevant to your learning. For example, if you enjoy the creative process and big picture ideas, you may find it challenging to concentrate on detail, whereas sequential learners prefer to start from the beginning and understand the details before proceeding.

- **If you are a big picture learner:** try brainstorming to record your ideas; working in teams; highlighting your notes; using colour; and adding visual images.
 - **If you are a learner who prefers to learn step-by-step:** work with others to brainstorm ideas; paraphrase information; and develop graphics or diagrams to create an overview.
- Selecting an appropriate strategy will give you the tools to meet the challenge.

Be open to new ways of doing things.

By selecting a range of learning strategies, you actively engage in the Conscious Learning Cycle: effectively, you choose to maximise the opportunities available to you. This equips you to successfully self-direct and manage your own learning.

Active learning

Active learners are self-reliant individuals who successfully manage their own learning. They are:

- enthusiastic;
- involved;
- empowered;
- capable;
- team players;
- creative.

Table 1.2 lists a range of skills which accurately describe active learners. Developing and refining these skills will enhance your learning.

Are you still trying to decide if you are an active learner?

Remember: you have a choice. If you feel uncertain about your learning abilities and believe it is too hard, then it will be! If you choose to be challenged by the learning opportunity and take a proactive view, you will become more capable and confident in your ability to learn and will search for strategies to facilitate a positive learning journey.

‘You have to expect things of yourself before you can do them.’ —Michael Jordan

However, if you need further convincing . . . being actively involved in your learning will:

- increase your concentration and motivation;
- improve your listening and ability to take in new information;
- heighten your self-esteem and belief in your capabilities;
- positively affect your overall learning and enjoyment.

Nevertheless, it is important to realise that simply identifying with the title ‘active learner’ does not mean you *are* one. You need to have a real understanding of what it means. You will need to develop and master skills you already have and acquire new ones. This will ensure that you have the capacity to manage and direct your own learning using a variety of strategies.

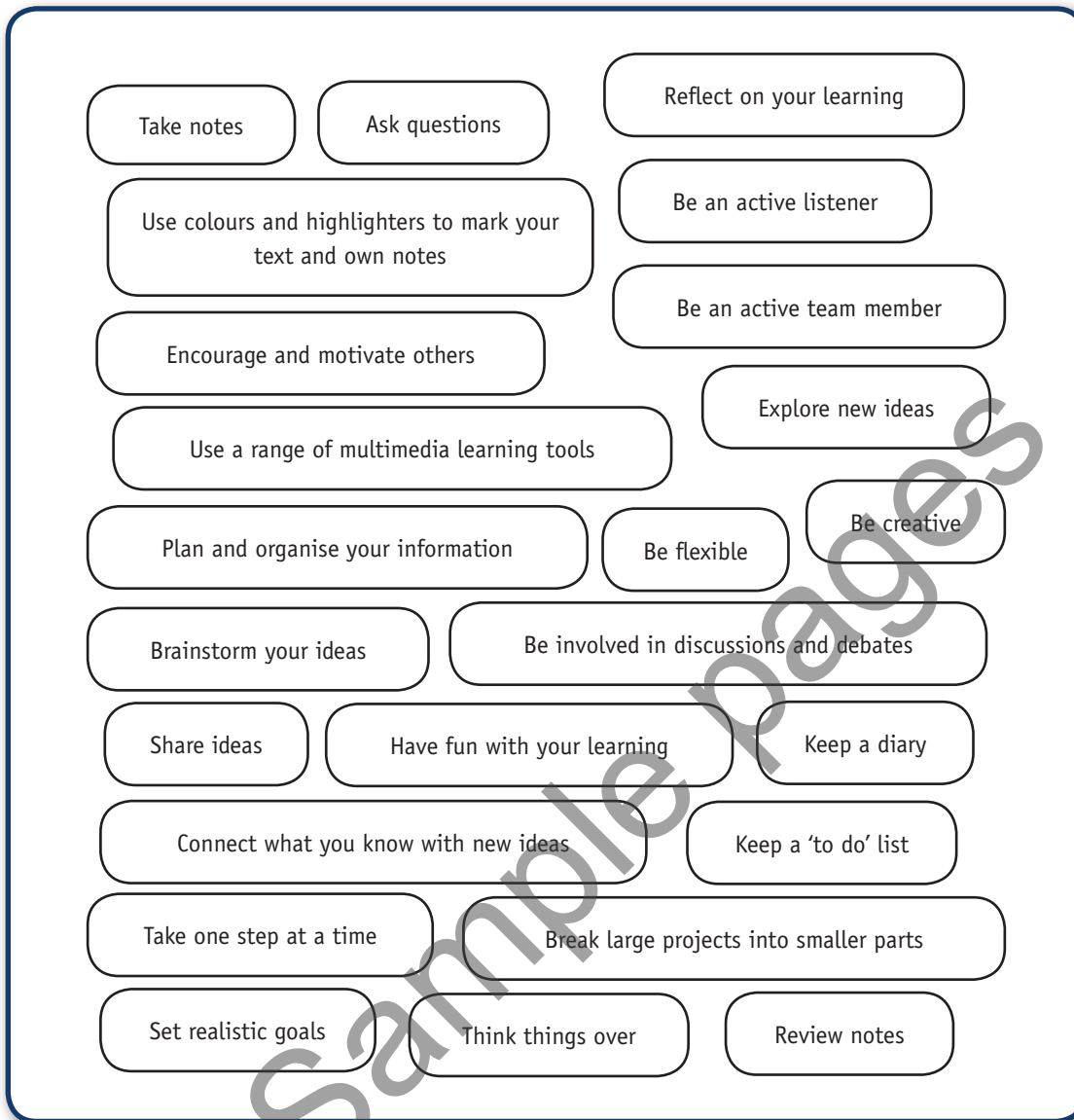
■
Now think about your previous learning experiences.

- What helped you to be successful?
- Why? How did you overcome a difficult experience?
- Who inspired you?
- What motivated you to learn?

■
Be successful: focus on what you can do.

■
Are you an active learner? Are you open to new ways of doing things? Have you experimented with learning in new ways? Can you give and receive constructive feedback? Do you like working with others?

Activity 1.2



In addition to using a range of learning strategies, active learners successfully employ a very 'hands-on' technique. This is called an Active Learning Approach, which involves practical, inter-related actions: to observe, explore, share and reflect (see Figure 1.1). Each of these actions interacts with the other and every part is essential. By implementing this approach to active learning, you will more confidently process, organise, apply and review new information. If you choose to use this learning approach, you will quickly discover that you develop an appreciation for the value of your learning, and an awareness of the knowledge and skills you are acquiring along the way. This is a rewarding, motivating and exciting experience, and one that can reveal new possibilities. Who knows where this will lead you?

Table 1.2 Active learning skills**Active learners:**

Are capable and confident in their ability to learn
 Set goals
 Break goals down into steps that are achievable and measurable
 Design and negotiate their learning journey
 Create, explore and test opportunities
 Put contingency plans in place
 Manage time
 Demonstrate an active, healthy work, life, study balance

Gather information
 Ask questions
 Analyse and evaluate information
 Make informed decisions
 Research and read widely
 Apply what they already know
 Make connections between what they know and new information
 Use the resources available to them
 Explore further
 Are open to challenging their own and other perspectives

Are involved in their learning
 Know how they like to learn
 Adapt and use learning strategies to maximise their success
 Take ownership of their learning journey
 Are receptive to change
 Look for ways to make their learning relevant

Recognise the benefits of collaboration
 Interact with others
 Empower others
 Value others

Figure 1.1
Active Learning
Approach

Source: Adapted from Kolb's model of experiential learning (1984).



Use the Active Learning Approach and broaden your horizons.

Even as an active learner you will face hurdles in your learning, or you may not reach your own or others' expectations. The challenge for you, as an active learner, is to face your obstacles and find strategies to manage them. Making mistakes is an important part of the learning process. Recognising that you *can* do it, but you don't know *how*, is what you explore.

Focus on what you can do, not on what you can't.

'Success consists of going from failure to failure without losing your enthusiasm.'
—Winston Churchill

ACADEMIC CULTURE

Learning at university is a different and distinctive experience. Universities are research institutions where students and teachers are responsible for searching, questioning existing resources and creating new knowledge.

Brick (2006), in his book *Academic Culture: A Student's Guide to Studying at University*, introduces the concept of academic culture. Just as if you were travelling to another country, you need to learn as much as possible about the new environment. You will notice that the culture may differ slightly between different universities; between university and secondary school or vocational educational institutions; and within different disciplines.

People who share a culture also share many things, such as the type of food they eat, the clothes they wear and how they greet each other.

- Culture is related to values, beliefs, attitudes and languages.
- Culture is about traditions, customs and behaviours.
- Culture is dynamic and creates various patterns that develop over time.
- Culture plays a role in the way meanings are construed.

The culture at universities is called 'academic culture', and it refers to the ways behaviours are shared by people studying and working in this setting. At university, new students expect to gain new knowledge and develop new skills. However, these students need support to develop an understanding of what is required of them and their responsibility in this environment.

Learning at university is a unique experience. The main characteristics that contribute to the nature of the learning experience are being independent, taking more responsibility for your own learning and research.

Universities are not only places where students learn; they are also research institutions responsible for existing knowledge and producing new knowledge. Academics are engaged in a continual process of argument and debate about the findings of their research. What counts as knowledge at university is different from everyday knowledge. Academics base what they write on research and back up their statement with evidence rather than individual opinions.

At university, live or online lectures still provide the basis of teaching, and you will find them different from the kind of teaching you have been used to before. For students learning online, lectures are usually provided as podcasts or recordings from lectures on campus. External students rely on the support of coordinators and tutors via forums, emails and messages.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Dungey, C., Hay, I. & Bochner, D. 2002. *Making the Grade: A Guide to Successful Communication and Study*, Oxford University Press, South Melbourne, Vic.

- Think about the new skills you will need to develop at university: critical thinking, reading, research and writing skills. How will you use the Active Learning Approach to establish an understanding and application of these skills?

- Every question you ask deepens your learning.

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- Piscitelli, S. 2009. *Study Skills: Do I Really Need this Stuff?* 2nd edn, Pearson Prentice Hall, Upper Saddle River, NJ.
- U2Uni: *Personal Tools for Success* 2012. Pearson Australia, Frenchs Forest, NSW.

Sample pages