**7 Savvy Study Techniques to Keep You Learning**

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Bruce needed money. He had a young and growing family. If he could only pass his upcoming accountancy exams, he would further his job prospects no end.

"My problem has always been that I can't study. By trying one study technique after another, I scrape by, but I never really get the grades I could be getting. But there's no scraping by with these tests. I've got to knuckle down and study!" said Bruce when he came to see me.

Bruce did pass his exams and later he said that he had actually enjoyed the process of studying for the first time in his life.

### **Attention is precious**

The first thing we looked at was where Bruce was putting his attention. We only have so much focus to give. If we dissipate our attention on TV, friends, the internet, or anything else other than studying, then when it comes time to study we have nothing left to study with. We've used up our focus.

As Bruce said, he got sick and tired of hearing himself say: "Yeah, I know I really should be studying!" but still putting it off. You might even spend more time telling people how you "really must study" than actually studying.

These studying techniques, for those of us who (like Bruce) don't find studying comes naturally, will help increase your study motivation and hopefully give you some new ideas. Because, well, there's so much else you could be doing. But studying now may be crucial in enabling you to meet your goals.

### **1) Go on a media diet**

If you are studying then you're learning and assimilating information. Consider information as a type of food. You need to have room for it. We live in a world saturated with information: The latest movie releases, gossip, news reports, the economy, new songs released, what the neighbour did or didn't do.

We're constantly stuffed, bombarded, and gorged with information - most of which we don't need.

Take active steps to clear your mind of all that for a while; take a break from TV, news, the internet. Inform friends on networking sites that you are taking a little break. Discipline yourself to checking emails once a day for fifteen minutes a day.

You'll find that your mind feels clearer almost instantly. And without this 'information indigestion', you'll digest and absorb your study information so much more comfortably.

The next tip was a revelation for Bruce.

### **2) Don't wait to feel interested or entertained by your study**

Over the last few decades, the idea that we should all be constantly entertained has crept into the culture. As if something is only of value if it instantly excites.

This is like assuming food is only valuable if it's packed full of artificial sweetener and gives us an instant buzz. Waiting to feel excited or entertained by something before we consider it worthy of our attention makes us less multi-dimensional as people.

What's more, if we've trained ourselves to enjoy only instant delights and stimulation (computer games, action movies, etc.), then our capacity to appreciate and engage with more subtle stimuli can fade.

Don't buy into the limiting ideology that you need to feel interested before you make a start. The fact is we become interested in what we give our attention to.

And focusing beyond your study can help you study better.

### **3) Focus on your big goals**

Every morning, say aloud to yourself the 'big reasons' for your study. Think of studying as a vehicle to some place you want to go. Each time you study, you are taking a step toward your goals. If your study is for exams which you need to pass to become a pilot or doctor or for anything else, then spend time each day connecting to the bigger purpose. 'Displacement activities' such as overstuffing your head with TV (or even loud continuous music) constitute steps away from your goals. Think: "How am I going to move toward my goals today?"

But don't just study, let information digest...

### **4) Study, then relax**

It is never enough just to stuff our minds full of facts. You need to absorb, assimilate, and digest the information to make it your own. Real knowledge becomes a part of you. This information absorption happens when we relax, in just the same way that it's after the weights workout, during rest, that the muscles rebuild bigger and stronger.

Your mind and body have natural cycles. The most obvious is the 'circadian cycle', which equates to daytime wakefulness and night-time sleepiness.

But mind and body cycles continue to alternate many times during the 24-hour day. These are known as 'ultradian rhythms'. Every 90 to 120 minutes, your brain will move from more left hemispheric dominance to dreamier right brain dominance for about 20 minutes and then spring back to left brain dominance for the next 90 minutes or so. It's during the 20-minute 'dip' that new information absorption happens, below the level of consciousness.

So after an hour and a half of studying, rather than taking in caffeine, go into a relaxing space somewhere and just close your eyes and rest, and let whatever comes to mind drift into consciousness. This is your brain's 'gluing' time, when knowledge becomes stored long-term.

### **5) Study before sleeping**

Yes, I know you are told not to study too late, but there is some good research that sleeping (and specifically slow wave sleep) can improve memory of study you've done just before sleep. So studying close to sleep onset can help consolidate that learning more powerfully.

Scientists at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center studied subjects who had been taught specific finger movements. Using brain scans, they found that a good night's sleep experienced soon after learning powerfully enabled the newly learnt patterns to become established in the mind.

In another study, researchers found that depriving students of sleep after learning a new skill significantly decreased memory of that skill up to three days later.

And in yet another study, people who learned new words at bedtime were found to be able to use them just as easily the next day as words they had been using all their lives. So, one of the many benefits of sleep seems to be the consolidation of new learning. A study book as bedtime reading may do wonders in strengthening your long-term memory for that subject.

### **6) Feed your brain and move your body**

When studying, it's easy to neglect yourself. As I mentioned in Tip 5, a good night's sleep is not wasted study time, it is time in which your brain strengthens learning.

And neglecting your diet whilst studying can be disastrous. You should eat regularly and in a balanced and nutritious way. Grains, protein, fruit, and vegetables should all be featured in your diet. While too much alcohol can interfere with your brain's capacity to store information, foods such as oily fish rich in Omega 3 have been found to be good 'brain foods', possibly helping memory and recall.

Exercise is also good for your brain (as well as making you super-buff): the extra blood supply and oxygen entering the brain as a result of exercise may be the cause of the improvement of brain function. If you can't make it to the gym, at least take a couple of brisk walks a day. Bruce started to jog before study periods and found he could then focus much better. He even jogged in the morning before his tests.

### **7) Use state-bound recall**

Learning has three parts to it:

* **Acquisition:** New information enters your brain because you have focused on it.
* **Consolidation:** If you have focused well and absorbed the new information, then it becomes consolidated and stored in your long-term memory.
* **Retrieval:** When you need to recall information, your brain has to activate the same pattern of nerve cells it used to store it.

This last point is vital. Memory is state-bound. What does this mean? Well, you are more likely to recall times in the past when you were angry when you are angry again than when you are nice and relaxed. Being in the same state of mind as you were when you were acquiring the learning means you are more likely to be able to retrieve it again.

Being relaxed and calm when studying but feeling tense and on edge during your test is a

mismatch. You're more likely to recall other times you felt tense than the information from your calm study.

If you always study to music you'd probably find, because of state-bound memory, that you'd recall better if you were allowed to listen to the music in the exam. The point here is that to take advantage of the state-bound memory mechanism, you should study quietly (because presumably you'll be asked to retrieve information quietly).

Studying and taking a test/exam shouldn't feel like two totally different experiences. If they do, you'll be less likely to recall what you need to. After each study session, take a moment to close your eyes and imagine feeling calm and focused in exam conditions and recalling what you've just been studying.

This is a very powerful way of preparing your mind.

These seven study techniques can really work for you – try each of them, or all of them. But the most important thing is to change something in your approach to studying to get things moving. Getting your study technique right, now, could mean so much in a few years' time.