



HOW TO LEARN EFFECTIVELY

Throughout history, people have been skeptical of changes in how education has been delivered. There was, for example, early pushback against offering science as a complementary topic of study alongside religious education. Some people were hesitant to accept women as teachers. In modern times, we see some skepticism about the use of technology in education. Nowhere, perhaps, is this more obvious than in digital learning. People from all walks of life worry that reading text digitally will lower comprehension and retention. Similarly, there are concerns that digital lectures cannot adequately replace face-to-face contact.

Understand this: the role of the expert is not to explain facts and concepts. Instead, the role of the expert is to deepen the sophistication of the thinking of students. Effective expert instruction offers competing claims, nuance, and other challenges that make students sit up in their seats and want to struggle with the material. This is why instructors who are poor in the classroom will also be poor in the digital classroom. Those who are gifted will be gifted across educational settings. It is not the technological tools such as chalkboard or Zoom that matter as much as the instructor and his or her knowledge of how learning works.

Here is a crash course on learning: learning is doing. Many people erroneously assume that learning is a somewhat passive enterprise. They view themselves, metaphorically, like a bowl filled with grains of rice (each grain being a piece of knowledge). For both instructors and students who labor under this misconception, teaching is telling: the instructor lectures about the Periodic Table of the Elements, or the history of the Hudson Bay Company, or Piaget's view of cognitive development. In this content-focused approach, students are expected to listen. If you listen well, the assumption is that you will learn a lot. We know that this is a fairly sub-standard view of teaching and learning.

Again, learning is doing. Learning happens when students have the opportunity to engage with concepts. Effective instructors, therefore, think less about their content and more about what they would like students to be doing during the lesson. When instructors design a lesson—sure, it includes core content—but they focus more heavily on the ways



the students will be able to grapple with the content. They want students to question, to reflect, to define, to consider relationships between concepts, to apply, to explain, and to discuss, to name just a few of the active learning strategies.

In a self-paced course, such as this one, the responsibility for learning is almost entirely on the student. Those who put in more effort and use more of the “doing” tools will derive far greater learning. This can be a challenge because self-paced learners must often find the motivation within themselves to continue to engage with the material. Here are several recommendations to help you assume responsibility for your learning and to derive the most from this experience:

1. **Create a Class Schedule.** Creating a class schedule is likely to be the most important influence on whether or not you will finish this course. Many people sign up for a self-paced learning course and just engage with it on an *ad hoc* basis. They open a lesson when they are bored, or when they happen to remember the course exists, or when they snatch a moment of free time. Face-to-face courses, whether hosting in a traditional classroom or on a platform like Zoom, benefit from having a clear start and end time as well as identifiable dates for the meeting. We encourage you to create something similar for yourself. For instance, you might set aside 1 hour two times a week and put these on your calendar. We think 1.5 hours is ideal for each lesson in that it gives time to listen to the lecture while taking notes, writing reflective responses, and even following up with Internet searches based on your own curiosities coming out the lesson.
2. **Remove Distractions.** One of the dangers of self-paced learning is that you can show up in your pajamas and divide your attention between texting, a glass of wine, and the lesson. Divided attention robs you of the opportunity to learn. We encourage you to treat this course with some seriousness. Clean your desktop or study area before you begin each lesson. Have out paper and pen for notetaking. Put your mobile phone out of sight. Treat your learning the same as you would your work or other contexts that you would protect.
3. **Use the Tools.** This course focuses on students “doing.” We have lots for you to do, and we encourage you to use these tools. The learning anticipation guide gives you a before and after measure to reflect on changes in your learning. The quizzes provide a low-stakes form of feedback. Writing out responses to the reflective question in the homework will help you think through complex issues.