

# Effective Learning Begins With the Right Attitudes

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Like all teachers, I am saddened whenever I encounter students whose motivation to study is primarily focused on earning a grade rather than actually learning something. I have seen students toss their class notes in the garbage can after taking an exam; the knowledge had no value to them beyond the test. For too many students, the educational experience is not a wonderful adventure in learning but a tedious set of requirements they grudgingly fulfill with the least amount of effort. This approach is detrimental to their academic, professional, and personal fulfillment.

Effective studying starts with the right attitude. There are dozens of how-to-study books on the market that offer plenty of helpful tips. However, all the study techniques in the world will be meaningless if an individual does not have the commitment and determination to do well. Succeeding academically is more than just mechanics, it's a mindset. Every semester I have this discussion with my students. It goes something like this:

**Wrong Attitude #1:** *"If I have an interesting teacher I'll learn something, but if I have a boring teacher then I probably won't get much out of the course."*

Never forget that your educational experience depends on what you invest in it. Your success does not hinge on whether you have captivating teachers or engrossing textbooks, but on whether you choose to actively engage yourself in the learning process. Teaching is not something done to you. Your professors don't pour facts into your head.

There is an old saying that applies here: "You can lead a horse to water, but you cannot make him drink." A good teacher tries to lead students to the "water" of knowledge, to make it so enticing and refreshing that they will want to lap it up. However, the final step — the drinking — is up to you. Your teachers cannot drink for you.

As far as your education is concerned, you are in the driver's seat. You should never

think of yourself as a passenger or — even worse — as a "victim" of poor instruction. If you take a subject and make it your own, you can always have a profitable experience, no matter how good or bad the teacher may be.

**Thus, the correct attitude is: "I must take responsibility for my own learning."**

**Wrong Attitude #2:** *"Is this going to be on the test?"*

If you ask this question, what you're really saying is, "If it's not going to be on the test, I don't want to learn it." What a self-defeating sentiment! This type of minimalist attitude toward learning misses the point and leads to a mechanical, only-do-what-I-have-to approach to studying. Such a narrow focus discourages exploration, risk-taking, creativity, and incidental learning.

Think about it: in what other area of your life would you deliberately take the least amount for your money? You always want the most for what you pay for, so why would you settle for, or even seek, the minimum amount of learning? Don't short-change yourself academically. Feast on all the learning you can. Don't be content with crumbs.

**Correct Attitude: "I will strive to get the maximum from my educational experience."**

**Wrong Attitude #3:** *"The grade is the most important thing."*

Throughout your school years, you were undoubtedly taught that getting good grades is crucial. Unfortunately, this causes grades to become the goal in and of themselves, and many students develop strategies and shortcuts to achieve them at the expense of actual learning. Ironically, they don't seem to realize that good grades will naturally follow if they invest themselves in their studies. Don't fall into that trap. A preoccupation with grades creates a breeding ground for anxiety and competition, and it diverts your focus from where it belongs — on learning.

One of the worst consequences of this obsession with grades is that it causes stu-

dents to cheat. Cheating is essentially an attempt to get a high grade without having to study for it. If you are genuinely interested in learning, you won't cheat because you realize that would be cheating yourself of the knowledge.

Good grades without learning are hollow. Would you want your personal physician to have cheated his or her way through medical school? Absolutely not! How about your auto mechanic? Your child's school teachers? You would expect these people to be competent and well trained. Why would you expect any less from yourself?

**Correct attitude: "Grades are not the holy grail; the most important thing is to learn all that I can."**

**Wrong Attitude #4:** *"Most of my classes are dull, and I'm only taking them because they're required."*

All human beings are born curious. Spend any time around young children and you quickly recognize this. But somewhere along the way this natural inquisitiveness can become hidden under layers of socially conditioned expectation of reinforcement, especially grades. Many students have come to view learning activities as undesirable chores rather than opportunities for enrichment. That innate curiosity of all human beings is never extinguished, but sometimes we may need to stir the ashes to reignite the flame.

Consider this: Learning is not boring; not learning is boring. When you are truly learning it's exciting—you're discovering new things and expanding your mind. Each course has meaningful information if you want to find it. Sometimes you may have to sift for the gold nuggets in the sand, but they are there if you look. Isn't that much better than wasting a class being bored and gaining nothing?

**Correct Attitude: "Learning itself is the reward, and every subject has something to offer me."**

## Turning the Tables: Life as an Undergraduate

*Ed.'s nte: This is probably the third or fourth piece on this topic that we've published over the years—when we repeat topics, we try for new insights, information or understandings. We repeat because this is an experience that would benefit every faculty member.*

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I am an assistant professor at a small, Catholic university. My sister and brother-in-law are adopting a 7-year-old, monolingual Spanish girl from Colombia, and our whole family has been scrambling to pick up Spanish as quickly as possible. I have never studied Spanish. Rather than go to a community school or try my luck with tapes and videos, I decided to take a

beginning-level Spanish course on my own campus. The students in the class had no idea who I was, and believe me, my facility with new language did not reveal my real identity.

My goals were to acquire basic vocabulary and functional language. However, my experience in this Spanish course readily translated into insights on my role as a professor. For the first time in a long while, I genuinely experienced the emotional undercurrents in the classroom. I listened to candid comments from fellow students. I noticed that despite the requisite complaints about the course, no one ever brought their concerns to the professor. I saw power struggles, subtle and otherwise, and watched the professor's efforts to set boundaries and build a community in the class.

As a student, my behavior and attitudes were those of a student. I shared in the near-

ly universal dread of being called on to answer questions in Spanish despite continuous exhortations to "just try." When faced with difficult material, I did my best to hide directly behind the student in front of me or bury my head in my notebook. I was also shocked by my own learning preferences! No, not the much-maligned drills and quizzes, but they encouraged me to practice and helped build my confidence. Worse than that, my pricey, commercial textbook was my new best friend.

The course is over now, and I can introduce myself, describe my classmates, and make some polite inquiries in Spanish. But I was also given an unusual opportunity to examine my assumptions about students, faculty, and the learning process. Clearly there's another world on the other side of the desk, and it's not a place most faculty have visited recently. 🍀

### EFFECTIVE LEARNING

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**Wrong Attitude #5:** "My professors demand too much. They forget that I have other things to do besides study."

Students often lose sight of the fact that their primary task in college is to learn and receive training in their chosen field. Don't get caught up in the numerous distractions of campus life and put learning on the back burner. If you squander these

few years in college and don't come away with the necessary skills to be competent in your field, you have wasted your time and money.

Your professors are not sadistic ogres who like to pile on the work so you won't have time for fun. They are trying to help you achieve this important life training. Those "required" classes you take are designed to help you learn the foundational knowledge of your discipline. (I've never liked the term required courses. It

implies an unpleasant obligation. I prefer to call them important or necessary courses.)

Don't forget: You're not learning for your professors, you are learning for yourself.

Correct Attitude: "If I don't invest myself in my education, the one who loses is me."

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### SEVEN DEADLY ASSUMPTIONS

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clear and obvious to the instructor, but they are less or not at all visible the first time you hear the information.

**Students should do their own work during class time** — When students are practicing with material, they should be allowed to work with and learn from classmates. Their mastery of material does

have to be evaluated individually, but that happens after an initial period of practice.

**Students don't need much guidance from the instructor** — Instructors cannot learn material for students. However, much evidence supports the powerful impact teachers can on students' learning. For example, teachers can build scaffolds for students, as in provide temporary supports that students use while they build their own understanding.

**Students can overcome complexity gaps between class work and tests** — Students need practice applying course content in new and more complex ways, if that is an objective in the course, but those skills are extremely hard to practice in an exam situation. "There needs to be congruence between the kind of thinking required during lessons and the level of thinking required during evaluative assessment." (p.244) 🍀

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