

Prepare your brain for active learning in college

Professor Aidan Moran on the biggest challenges students face during their first year



1 Professor Aidan Moran of UCD: “Routines prepare your brain for active learning.” Photo: Frank McGrath

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Going to college is a daunting experience because you're confronted with many challenges for which you've had little or no formal training in school or at work.

For example, you have to learn how to study effectively, how to take good notes in lectures, and how to think critically about what you hear and read. But the biggest challenge you face is how to manage your own learning, a task that involves planning, conducting and evaluating your academic work - thinking for yourself.

To overcome this challenge, you have to become a driver (active learner) rather than a passenger. So, here are some 'driving lessons' in active learning.

1. Be curious: Ask questions before you read

'Studying' is not the same as reading - it's reading with a purpose: to get specific answers to specific questions. Asking questions has two big benefits. Firstly, it forces you to think critically about what you're reading because you have to distinguish between relevant and irrelevant information.

It's relevant if it helps to answer your question but irrelevant otherwise. Secondly, questioning improves your concentration because it gives your mind a specific target to focus on.

Lesson: If you don't have a question, you're not studying.

2. Develop a learning routine: Study at the same time in the same place daily

Routines prepare your brain for active learning. So, try to study at the same time and in the same place every day. Study routines are valuable in two ways. Firstly, they train your mind to associate studying with a particular place and time. Secondly, they help you to overcome inertia. As the psychologist William James observed, it's easier to act your way into a feeling than to feel your way into action!

Lesson: Start studying whether you're in the mood or not.

3. Study regularly but briefly - don't tax your concentration system

Study in blocks of time which don't exceed your concentration span: say, three blocks of 50 minutes each followed by a five-minute review period at the end. During this review, ask yourself: "What have I learned?" Summarising what you've learned in a few key points is a good test of how well you've understood what you've been reading.

Lesson: It pays to study regularly but briefly.

4. Keep your desk as tidy as possible - it's less distracting that way

We all prefer to work in tidy rather than cluttered environments. Therefore, try to keep your desk as a workplace not as a storage place. Otherwise, you'll end up distracting yourself.

Lesson: A neat environment will encourage you to return to your place of study, whereas an untidy mess will put you off studying.

5. Dump your highlighter pens! Use summary sheets instead

As you read your textbook or notes, make brief summaries on a sheet of paper of any information which seems relevant to your specific study questions. Avoid underlining and/or highlighting information in your books because these techniques don't condense what you're trying to learn. Also, as soon as you close your books, the underlined and highlighted text disappears.

Lesson: Summarising makes you distinguish between relevant and irrelevant information.

6. Reward yourself for study done - not for work avoided

If you find it difficult to get down to study, give yourself a reward (e.g. watching a favourite TV programme) for successful completion of a study session. Unfortunately, many students reward themselves for avoiding studying ("I'd like to study but I'll take a break first").

Lesson: Reward work done - not work avoided.

7. Study in silence - because you'll be examined in silence

If you're like most students, you often listen to music while you're working. But that's a bad idea because although studying with music in the background doesn't affect what goes into your mind, it does affect what comes out of it. Research shows that people remember things best when they recreate the conditions under which the information was originally learned.

Lesson: It's best to study in silent conditions because you'll be examined in silence.

8. Ask your lecturers/professors for help

The biggest mistake that new students make in college is to try to sort out their problems on their own. Every department or school appoints a lecturer or professor to look after first year students. If you have any academic or personal problems, ask that person for help.

Lesson: If you need help with your coursework, approach your lecturers/professors with questions during their office hours.

Professor Aidan Moran is Director of the Psychology Research Laboratory in UCD School of Psychology. His latest book will be released on September 10. For further details, see ucdpress.ie

Transition tips: How to adapt to college life

1. Get involved in clubs and societies to explore new interests, make new friends and improve your sense of belonging and wellbeing.
2. Attend all of your lectures - even if the notes are available online - because otherwise you'll miss the questions, comments and discussion in class that will deepen your understanding.
3. Keep your phone in your bag or pocket during lectures to avoid distractions from social media while you listen and take notes.
4. Ask for help from your lecturers/professors, learning support services and the Students' Union if you have any problems or mental health concerns.
5. Think for yourself - especially in this era of 'fake news'! Look for evidence to support any ideas or claims that you're asked to believe.
6. Make your time in college as memorable as possible so that you can look back on it in years to come and say: "I loved every minute of it because I gave it everything I had!"