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Medical Education @ Cardiff

Study Effectively

Lesley Pugsley

As a busy health care practitioner with a desire to maintain and update professional skills and knowledge, perhaps the study skills you acquired as an undergraduate may need to be updated and refined too. Issues of time management take on a different meaning with the increased pressures of juggling a busy career, home life and continuing professional development. As an undergraduate, your focus was very much on learning the volume of material that was delivered in the medical curriculum; but was the idea of learning how to learn ever considered? This article is aimed at identifying some of the strategies that might be helpful in enabling you to make the most effective use of the time available to you for study; and thereby ensuring that your learning opportunities are maximised.

Know yourself

It is important for those engaged in any sort of postgraduate study, whether formal or informal, to know themselves. You need to be aware of your learning preferences and understand the times of the day when you can study most effectively. In order to do this you need to consider the following issues in relation to your own work and study pattern.

- ▶ When during the day are you at your most receptive to study?
- ▶ What inflexible commitments you have?
- ▶ What time can you 'create' in which to study?
- ▶ What environment do you find most conducive for study?
- ▶ Why are you studying?
- ▶ What do you do when you are studying?

It is no doubt obvious to you that people learn differently; they accomplish different tasks differently. The best way to organise is the one that works for you since there can be no golden rule that works for everyone. These are general ideas that may help you to work out your own system for organising your time and a considerable amount has been written in connection with learning styles and learning style inventories. If you have a good idea of what it takes for you to learn something, it may still be useful to get a cursory overview of one of these categorisations so that you can try different techniques to help you broaden your approach to learning.

Are you a night owl or a lark? When during the day do you feel that you are most receptive to studying? What is your daily routine and perhaps more importantly what demands are made on your time by your patients, your practice and your family commitments? There will obviously be certain activities and commitments that are immovable and you need to determine how you will work around these times and activities and create periods of time for private study. But you do need to identify those periods when you can be at your most receptive and when you can block out all the other demands that are made on your time.

Do you crave your creature comforts or are you an ascetic when you think of studying? The environment that you feel is most conducive for study is really important. Do you prefer to study in a quiet, dedicated space, where you can have access to books, journals and the internet? Or do you find silence a distraction and feel that you are better working to a background noise of music or the radio, or the general hubbub of the family? It's vital to understand what works best for you and to ensure that you can create an environment that will enable you to read and study as effectively as possible in whatever timeframe you have created for yourself.

Are you driven by an insatiable desire to learn, or are you motivated by a perceived gap in your knowledge? It is really important to develop a sense of purpose, ask yourself why you are studying and consider what you want to get out of each period of time that you devote to your continuing professional development. Obviously there is a professional requirement upon you to ensure that you continue to update your knowledge and skills; however the learning can

be more enjoyable and more effective, if it is planned for and engaged with when the mind is at its most receptive.

A considerable amount of research has been conducted into the ways in which people learn. The distinction between deep and surface learning is well documented and memorisation, a learning technique often favoured by medical students has been shown to be effective only for short term needs; whereas deep learning, embedded through understanding and active engagement in practice, can allow new knowledge to be integrated with what is already known. A further distinction that can be made between learners and types of learning is the serialist versus the holistic approach to learning. Adopting a serialist approach means that there is a very narrow focus on understanding each element in turn. The holistic learner will seek to appreciate the whole topic, before engaging with any part in detail. Neither approach should be seen as preferable, nor is there any correlation between these and deep and surface learning. Both serialist and holistic learners are equally likely to be trying to understand rather than simply remember, but it is sometimes helpful to consider what particular style(s) you adopt when studying.

Time management

It's really easy to procrastinate, to put off reading the latest edition of a journal, getting to grips with some new ideas for treatments or familiarising yourself with the most up to date guidelines. Rather than waste time prevaricating about the lack of time it is more helpful to think in terms of a setting realistic goals for how and when CPD activities can and will be undertaken so think 'SMART' in terms of planning your learning;

'SMART' Objectives

Specific	Set yourself clear goals
Measurable	Record progress this will enable you to maintain your interest
Action related	Identify the steps necessary to achieve the goal
Realistic	Set goals that can be achieved within your constraints
Time based	Set a time frame and plan for this

For most of us, it does help to have a clear picture of what the finished product will be and its completion date and adopting a 'SMART' approach to studying will enable you to make effective use of each study period, whether related to formal or informal learning activities.

Effective reading

Active reading helps you to analyse what has been written and to critically appraise the worth of the information that's provided. Before you begin to reading, ask yourself why you are reading a particular text. How detailed does or should the read be? Are you reading in depth and in

breadth or are you simply focusing on the same narrow band of information and in so doing not expanding your range of knowledge and understanding? You can work at improving your reading rate in order to save you time, but this is a false economy if in so doing you sacrifice your level of understanding or your ability to remember what you have read. Reading with others, or sharing reading materials in journal clubs for example can allow you to debate concepts and perceptions.

Reflection and reflective practice

The prominence of the role of reflection and reflective practice in CPD has grown rapidly over the last few decades (Schon, 1987; Moon, 1999). Widespread use is now made of portfolios, learning journals and reflective diaries for professional development. Collaborative study is increasingly being advocated as a way forward in relation to CPD and this may be something that could be fostered both within individual group practices and regional groupings. There are real benefits in creating opportunities for practitioners at all stages of their careers, to actively engage in discussion and debate about educational issues and the educational process, to enable CPD activities to include study skills sessions and reflective writing workshops. It would be really helpful to have a forum within a supportive community of practice for discussion and debate around how to make the most effective use of study time.

Medical Educators are familiar with the concept of 'zones of proximal development' (Vygotsky, 1978), which allows for the transmission of knowledge and skills between peers and near peers as a highly effective format for learning. Peer to peer support will allow for individual practitioners to engage with and support each other and to extend this level of engagement and collaboration to include a wider network of 'critical friends'. This can be a great help in terms of learning for CPD purposes since the isolation of independent study can sometimes prove off putting and informal learning sets can sometimes help overcome such difficulties. An action learning set is a process by which a group identifies common learning needs and collectively meets them through shared learning, or through external expertise or facilitation. Learning sets are based on self-directed learning and participants can decide the particular topics they wish to cover and the approach they want to take. They provide a confidential forum that enables participants to test and clarify ideas. Learning sets can motivate individuals to take action and provide a support network with which to reflect and learn.

Planning for continued professional development through life long learning needs to be worked at, there are no short cuts, but organising your time effectively can ensure an efficiency in terms of the depth and breadth of the learning that can be achieved.

Further Information

- Bolton, G. (2010) (3rd Ed). *Reflective Practice writing and professional development*. London : Sage.
- Cottrell, S. (2011). (2nd Ed). *Critical Thinking Skills: developing effective analysis and argument*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Fry, R. (2012) (6th Ed). *Improve your reading*. London : Kogan Page.
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