

Learning to learn

Learning how to become an effective distance learner

There are skills and techniques to becoming a learner that can be acquired and developed over time. In school, students often rely on teachers to provide the structure, resources, and motivation they need to learn. When studying at a distance, more of the responsibility lies with the student. Learning how to learn involves being able to: decide what you need to help you learn, set goals, find valuable resources – including other people – to learn with, choose learning strategies, reflect on progress, develop creative skills, and evaluate learning outcomes.

In our daily lives, we are always learning, taking on board new ideas and developing new skills. What we find difficult is learning what others want to teach us and managing our learning to achieve particular goals and outcomes. In order to be an effective distance learner, students need to develop these skills.

This is important when students are working at home. At school, they have teachers to set their goals, plan how these goals will be achieved, manage time, offer help and evaluate their work. When working at a distance, students have to take on more of these tasks themselves but need support to do this. The role of the teacher is to be aware of the skills that students need and to include in lessons opportunities for students to become aware of and develop these skills.

‘Double-loop learning’ is important to this process. Double-loop learners do not simply solve immediate problems. They also reflect on how they are solving those problems, think about what they are trying to achieve, question their assumptions, consider how to become more effective, and remember to try different options. This helps them to become self-determined learners with the ability to seek out sources of knowledge and make use of appropriate online networks for advice and support.

Learning to learn is connected with students’ ability to work out their own learning needs and to keep reflecting on the learning process. This involves developing skills in communication and teamwork, being flexible and creative in new situations, and becoming confident in their ability to take appropriate and effective action in changing circumstances.

Learning to learn at a distance

Planning phase	Support students to set goals that they value, plan how to achieve goals, and think ahead to identify when resources and support will be available.
Performance phase	Provide students with different strategies for approaching tasks, so if their first strategy does not work, they have different options. They need to be able to manage their time, know how to monitor their learning, and be aware of where they can go and who they can contact for help and support.
Self-reflection phase	Offer a structure for reflecting on learning (an example that is easy to remember is: What happened? So what? What next?). Students need to be able to evaluate their progress, understand why things worked or did not work, and understand how they could improve their approach.

How did it go?

Let us know in the comments on the website www.open.ac.uk/blogs/innovating how learning to learn worked for you and your students. Please share any tips that others would find useful, or link to examples of good methods.