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Learn with Leeds Met: top tips towards your success

By Phil Race



leeds
metropolitan
university

52,000

learners in the
Leeds Met community



Learning with Leeds Met

This booklet is designed to help learners taking part in short courses at Leeds Met who have not studied since leaving school, or who might feel a bit rusty or nervous about doing so. We suggest here some ways you can get back into studying and feel comfortable with what you are doing. Learning is a personal journey but you can learn from the experiences of others by considering the ideas they may give you along the way. This booklet presents you with a range of tips on getting involved and making the most of your learning journey, with quotes from staff and students who have done courses at the University.

“I am so excited! I had never been able to book a holiday myself because I didn’t know how to use the internet. Now I’ve done the course at Leeds Met, I’ve done it! And I feel brilliant!”

When, where, and with what should we learn?

Anytime and every time. Anywhere and everywhere. With anything that helps us. The main thing is to **be a learner**. It does not matter what we learn from or with. What matters is that we continue to learn, in our own way, at our own pace, at our own places (work, home, and anywhere else that's suitable), and at times of our own choosing – there's no 'wrong time' to learn.

We don't need to go to special places to do our learning. The fundamental question is 'how should we learn?'

The answer is through:

- **wanting to learn:** seeing what the point of it all is
- **taking ownership of the need to learn:** seeing what's in it for you
- **learning by doing:** practising, having a go, including making mistakes
- **positive feelings:** usually based on other people's reactions to what we do
- **'making sense':** getting your head round what you learn, to increase understanding.



How much have you already learned?

Most people don't feel they're particularly good at learning. In fact, when we're learning something new, many of us think we must be really bad at learning. And yet whatever we're learning that's new is only a tiny proportion of what we've already learned in our lives.

If you think of all the things you now do without having to think – such as preparing a meal, balancing your budget, travelling, or attending to the needs of dependants – you will find that you can do most of them without ever having used a book or learning programme. You've already learned an enormous amount of information. You've already acquired a tremendous range of skills and abilities.

“Find something that you are good at doing, whatever that may be. If you can build your confidence then you can translate this across to [things] like your studies.”



A mature student undertaking a Foundation Degree in Animation at one of Leeds Met's partner colleges

Build your learning confidence – get yourself a mentor

In any physical activity, other people can tell us a great deal about ourselves. Experienced instructors and coaches develop an expert eye for ways we could try to make our performance better. If we get on the defensive, however, and reject their observations, criticisms or suggestions, we are likely to miss out on an important source of help and support. Sometimes an instructor or coach can also be a mentor. Sometimes, it's best to find a completely independent mentor. So what exactly is a mentor? What does a mentor do?

A mentor has the following characteristics:

- someone we trust and feel we know
 - someone whose views and opinions we respect
 - someone who has our best interests and performance at heart
 - someone who is willing and able to give us feedback
 - someone who is essentially 'on our side'
 - someone who will help us plan our actions
- someone who will firmly (but kindly) keep our noses to the grindstone!

A mentor does not have to be an expert in what you're learning. Sometimes, in fact, it can be very useful to have a mentor who can't do what you're trying to do – in such circumstances, your mentor may be all the more understanding of the problems you encounter. Essentially, a mentor is a friend – but a friend with a definite purpose – to help you step-by-step towards the achievement of your goals. A mentor is someone who will call in to see you unexpectedly and ask: "How's it going, then?" A mentor is someone who is entirely 'in' on your targets and plans. A mentor is someone you can speak to in confidence – and someone you can vent your feelings to when you're frustrated, annoyed or disappointed. A good mentor is someone who chooses to forget quickly things you have said in the heat of the moment! A mentor is a source of good feedback. You may also have expert feedback from coaches or trainers.

Adventure and discovery

1. Regard every new challenge as an adventure, not a problem.
2. How the universe works was found out by people like Newton and Einstein whose brain power discovered previously unknown things.
3. 'Discovery' is often the act of finding out what is already there.
4. There's always something useful to be learned in any new adventure – even if only not to try it that way next time.
5. Always be on the lookout for things that no-one seems to have noticed – that's sometimes 'discovery'.
6. There is more waiting to be discovered than humankind has discovered so far.
7. 'Getting lost' is often the most useful part of any adventure.
8. Everything you learn can be looked on as personal discovery.

“It's been 20 years since I left education so it was definitely a new experience, but certainly one I'm enjoying. After just two months, I'm already seeing the benefits at work, home and on a personal front. The thought of returning to HE can feel daunting for some people if they've been out of it for a while, however I would certainly recommend it to anyone if they have the time and flexibility in their lifestyle. It's definitely been the right decision for me. I aim to successfully complete this course then progress to the one year top-up, for a BA Hons degree.”

Choosing and using a mentor

“Draw from others and be open to the fact that others can be right as well.”

1. Choose someone you get on with and respect – they don't have to be an expert in what you're learning.
2. Choose someone you feel comfortable with – someone you can talk to about your feelings as well as about what you're learning.
3. Choose someone you have easy access to – someone whom you can meet regularly and at short notice when necessary.
4. Regard your mentor as a trusted friend rather than a teacher. Your mentor should 'be on your side' as you learn.
5. Arrange definite meetings with your mentor. The sheer fact that you've got such a meeting coming up can be a spur to you and help you make progress with your learning.
6. Agree targets with your mentor. Work out between you what you should try to be able to do between now and the next meeting.
7. Listen to your mentor – don't be defensive. All feedback is useful.
8. When you have problems with your learning, let your mentor help you to work out exactly what the problems are, and how you may go about solving them.
9. Show your mentor that you value the support you receive. That way, you're likely to get even more.
10. Remember to thank your mentor when you've completed your learning, and let your mentor share in your success.

Keeping up your morale – maintaining your ‘want’ to learn

1. Remind yourself of the benefits that will accompany your successful learning. Keep in mind ‘what’s in it for me?’
2. Remember that anything important takes time, and often comes gradually.
3. Don’t let mistakes or setbacks put you off – regard them as useful learning experiences.
4. When you come across an obstacle in your pathway of learning, don’t stop – ‘swim round it’: the next bit may be quite easy. You can always come back and have another try at the obstacle when you have more experience to draw on.
5. Remember that a problem is a problem only until you know what the answer is – then problems disappear.
6. When you feel your morale is low, sit down with a blank sheet of paper, and fill it with things that you already know about what you’re learning. You’ll be surprised how easy this is.
7. If you find it difficult to go to your study place and resume learning, make yourself a mug of tea or coffee, and go there to enjoy it. Create the association of enjoying a drink with the place where you learn.
8. Don’t allow negative feedback from other people to damage your morale. Treat all comments as well-intentioned and useful – and decide which comments are worth taking on board by adjusting your approach.
9. Don’t expect your morale to be high every single day. It’s perfectly natural to have high days and low days in every part of life, including learning.
10. When you find someone who has the knack of boosting your morale, make increased use of this person – arrange frequent meetings.

“My confidence and self-esteem have improved so much because of the course and I now believe in myself and my ability.”

Improving your concentration

1. Don't think that everyone but you has a magic power of concentration. There's nothing magic about concentration – you can do it as well as anyone else.
2. Don't try to concentrate on hundreds of things at once. Concentration is about thinking of one thing at a time.
3. Work out exactly what you want to know and write it down in the form of questions. You can then concentrate on them one at a time and find out the answers.
4. Making your own notes helps you to concentrate. This too helps you to think of one thing at a time.
5. Don't expect to concentrate for hours on end.
6. When we're really interested in something, or fascinated by it, we tend to concentrate automatically. Try to become fascinated by what you're learning!
7. Concentrating on something once is rarely enough. Make time to go back and remind yourself of things that you've already learned. Difficult ideas need several spells of concentration before we grasp them fully.
8. Try to make sure that the things you try to concentrate on are the important things, not the background details.
9. When you've been trying to concentrate for something for a while, have a break. Your subconscious mind will carry on sorting out what you've been concentrating on.
10. If you find yourself struggling to concentrate on something, take a deep breath, and let it out slowly, feel your body relax – and your mind become better able to concentrate.

“Be committed and focused: hopefully the benefits are going to outweigh the work that you put in.”

Emotions and positive feelings

1. Take every chance to gather positive feedback on your performance at things you're learning.
2. When someone pays you a compliment about how well you're doing, don't shrug it off, saying: "Oh, it's nothing really"; instead accept the compliment and feel pride.
3. If you find you have negative feelings, try to pinpoint the exact origin of these feelings, then assert that you're not going to allow yourself to be put off by them.
4. Remember when coping with negative feelings or emotions that all such feelings are transient. You will feel better about whatever it is tomorrow, or next week, or next month. "No-one will care about that in a hundred years", a wise colleague once advised me when I was feeling cheesed-off!
5. Give your feelings time to settle. Keep reminding yourself of all the things you can already do, rather than dwelling on one or two things you can't yet do.
6. When you come across something that you think you can't do, remind yourself that it's something you can't yet do, not something that you can't ever do.
7. Many of the things we find we can't yet do turn out to be things that we don't need to do anyway – don't allow such things to damage your feelings or emotions.
8. If you're feeling low about something that's gone wrong with your learning (or your life in general) be patient with people who say: "Come on, pull yourself together now." Sooner or later, they'll find out for themselves that it's easier said than done!

Rewarding yourself

1. Make a list of the top ten things you really enjoy in your everyday life (include foods, drinks, television programmes, or anything else at all).
2. Resolve that today you're going to earn each of your favourite things by doing a minimum of five minutes and a maximum of ten minutes studying, practising or fact-finding before you have them.
3. Notice that you enjoy your favourite things more when you've done that little bit extra to earn them.
4. Let other people around you in on your tactics.
5. When you've got into the habit of learning to earn, start matching your rewards to the effort involved in the tasks.
6. Choose substantial tasks for your favourite rewards. Notice the satisfaction that comes when you weave short spells of learning into the fabric of your everyday life.
7. Keep the long-term rewards in mind as well – think of what it will be like when you've mastered whatever you're wanting to learn.



Following instructions well

1. Read quickly through the whole list of instructions without doing anything at all. Don't panic – you're just finding out how many instructions there are at the moment.
2. Check through the instructions to see what you'll need to have when you start to work through the list (just as you need to check that you've got an Allen key before putting together self-assembly furniture!).
3. Make sure you've got all the parts that you're supposed to have.
4. Remember that following a set of instructions is simply a matter of doing one thing at a time – not trying to remember all of the instructions at once.
5. Often, instructions are backed up by illustrations or diagrams. Take time to study these – it's often easier to see something than to work out what the words in the instructions mean.
6. If there's an instruction you can't follow, don't move on to the next one hoping for the best – try to find someone who has done a similar job before. Never be afraid to ask for help.
7. Don't expect a set of instructions to be perfect. Many may have been written in another language originally.
8. Take the attitude that working through a set of instructions is a very useful way of 'learning by doing' – the best way to learn anything.



Taking risks and learning from mistakes

1. “If a thing’s worth doing, it’s worth doing badly” – at least at first. Then it’s possible to do it better. (If you wait till you think you’re going to do it well, you may never even try.)
2. Try to forget the word ‘mistakes’ – think of them as research into finding better ways of doing things.
3. It’s always worth stopping to work out what went wrong, and how you can avoid that next time.
4. The only mistake is not having a go.
5. The only real risks are ones where people can get hurt – don’t take that kind of risk.
6. Most other ‘risks’ are opportunities to learn and succeed.
7. Think of three ways you can approach learning something. If one turns out to be a mistake, at least you have another two courses of action.

“My age and the time taken to realise what I wanted to do means I feel more passionate about it and want to do it more. My experience of work and life has given me a more mature outlook on things, how to address things and make changes, and has made me used to dealing with setbacks and able to learn from things.”



Dealing with failure

1. When you've failed to achieve something, remind yourself that it's not the case that you yourself are a failure – it's just that on that particular occasion you did not quite manage to do one particular thing. Keep focusing on your want to succeed.
2. Remind yourself that the word 'failure' means nothing more than 'not having succeeded yet'. Most things that people 'fail' at, they pass sooner or later (ask any driving instructor!).
3. Remind yourself that many of the greatest people were considered 'failures' at one time or another (Einstein, Churchill, Beethoven, for example). Be glad to be in such company.
4. Don't forget that there's usually another chance.
5. Remember that past failures are immediately forgotten just after you succeed!
6. If a thing is really worth doing, it's unlikely that it will be entirely straightforward. Otherwise, anyone could do it.
7. A 'failure' is often a really useful (if painful at the time) learning opportunity – use such occasions to make sense of what you're trying to do, and your reasons for trying.
8. Keep reminding yourself of your successes. Display them where you see them every day (cups, trophies, photographs, paintings, certificates – anything you're proud of).



Managing your time

1. The art of time management is managing minutes – the hours and the days will then look after themselves.
2. Left to human nature, many things get done in the last 10% of the available time. Therefore, it is quite possible to do them in the first 10% of the available time, and have a lot of time left over to do even more things.
3. If you're got an important task to do, spend a few minutes doing something non-urgent first. The important task will still get done, but you'll have one less non-urgent task as well.
4. Almost all urgent tasks started life as non-urgent tasks. Stop them becoming urgent by doing them in advance.
5. "If you want a job done well, give it to a busy person": busy people are good enough at time management that they can always do one more job well.
6. The better you become at managing your time, the more genuine 'spare time' you will have to enjoy in whatever way you prefer.

"Build time management skills from working and studying – my mum used to do everything for me, but now I am so much more independent."



Using computers and technology

1. Don't be afraid of computers. The worst thing that can happen is that you'll lose some information. Even if you do lose information, you can often retrieve it (or get someone to do it for you).
2. Find 'a person who knows'. Sometimes with computer programs it can take ages to work something quite trivial out for yourself, when a few tips from someone familiar with the system can save hours of your time.
3. When you're learning from a computer-based package, spend a little extra time making brief notes of your own on paper. Capture important ideas on paper, so you can refresh your memory later.
4. If you're using a word-processing system to write lengthy pieces, remember to save your work every few minutes. (Everyone loses two hours of work once when the power goes off, or the computer crashes, or the dog knocks a beer onto the laptop ...)
5. When you don't understand something, or don't know what to do, write down a question or two, so that next time you're with someone who does know, you can remember what to ask.
6. Capitalise on learning by making mistakes. A computer won't be offended however many mistakes you make. It won't even know.



Research and note-making

1. There's nothing mysterious about research – it's simply 'planned finding out' or 'intentional discovery'.
2. If you know what you're looking for, you're more likely to find it.
3. Work out the questions to which you're looking for the answers. If you're armed with a list of questions, your research will be more efficient and productive.
4. When you find out the answers to your questions, or other useful information, capture it – write it down.
5. Don't just take notes, copying things down. *Make* notes – put things in your own words in your own way.
6. Make your own note-maps – spread out key words or ideas across the page and put boxes or rings round important ones, and draw lines connecting linked ideas.
7. Within a day or two of making some notes, look at them again, and mentally fill in the details behind your notes.
8. Carry some of your notes around with you, and look at them during the odd few minutes every now and then that would otherwise be wasted – sitting in a waiting room, standing in a queue, waiting for the kettle to boil.
9. Make your notes colourful. Maybe use a different colour for really important things. If your notes look interesting and attractive, you're more likely to keep looking at them again.



Develop your questioning

1. If you don't have any questions, you won't find any answers.
2. Every piece of knowledge is just the answer to a question.
3. Keep asking 'why?'; 'who?' (all learning involves people in some way – sometimes the answer to 'who?' will be 'you'); 'what?' (the unknown becomes the known when you know what it is); 'when?'; and 'how?'.
 4. Ask people: "What do you really mean?" when you don't understand what they tell you. They'll probably be able to explain themselves better then.
 5. There is no such thing as a silly question. There are, however, silly answers. Questions are more important than answers.



Number-crunching

1. Don't worry that pages full of numbers look like a foreign language to you – they are a foreign language (but one we can all learn if we do it step by step).
2. Erase from your memory all the pain and boredom of rote learning at school. We learn to handle numbers by actually doing it, not reciting things about it.
3. As soon as you've found out how to do a particular kind of sum or problem, invent half a dozen very similar ones of your own, and do two more today, then one a day for four days. This will help you remember the sequence.
4. Remind yourself how good you already are with numbers – for example thousands of 'non-mathematical' people are really good at working out how much a bet has just won them, or planning which three scores they want from a dartboard.
5. Practise 'guesstimating' – for example keep a rough check of how much you've spent as you fill a supermarket trolley, until you become good at working out approximately what the cost will be.
6. When you can't understand how to do something with numbers, try to get three different people to explain it to you. Ask them to make you do it yourself, rather than telling you how to do it.
7. Remember that the best people to explain something to you are people who have only recently learned it themselves. They can still remember how they learned it.
8. There are often several ways to get the right answer. None of them is wrong, but some of them are quicker. Stick to the way that you like best (after exploring any other possibilities).



About the author

Phil Race is an Emeritus Professor at Leeds Metropolitan University, and worked there part-time from 2005 as Visiting Professor: Assessment, Learning and Teaching. He was awarded a National Teaching Fellowship in 2007, and is a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy.

Originally a scientist, for most of his career he has been involved in helping higher education staff to enhance their teaching and develop ways of getting

better feedback to more students in less time. He also works with students to help them become better at learning and preparing for assessment. Phil continues to travel around the UK (and beyond) giving keynotes and running workshops on assessment, learning and teaching in further and higher education contexts.

Extracts from many of his publications can be downloaded from his website: <http://phil-race.co.uk>



Notes

Notes

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