Hi, my name is Lara and I am talking to Karen Dellar. Karen is a Study and Learning Centre Advisor at RMIT University. She has taught internationally, in secondary and tertiary institutions and, from time to time, is a student herself.

Hello Karen.

ACTIVE LEARNING PODCAST #1

Questions:

What does it mean to be an active learner?

It doesn’t mean going for a run around the block while memorizing formulae, however, things like that actually do help. But it is not active Learning. Active learning means engaging with the material that you are learning. Learning is not just a one way process where information is poured into your brain. That would be a way to describe passive learning. For example, reading on its own (that is without any questions in mind) is a very passive way to learn and you will probably retain 10% of what you have read. Once you pick up a pen and start making notes on the material, or read with a purpose, that retention shoots up significantly to 40 or 50%. If you start to use the information, think about it in a different context or just try to explain it to someone else, that enables you to retain even more of what you learn. It is a more active and far more efficient way to learn.

How can we use or think about the material in a different context?

You need to not just accept or memorize facts as they are presented to you. You need to think about things – think about what they mean and how it fits in with other things you know. You need to ask questions to get yourself to look at things from different perspectives and in different ways. Nurses may learn a standard line of treatment for a condition. Ask yourself: Is this appropriate for someone who is immobile, has diabetes or has impaired immunity. Instead of describing a procedure from the point of view of the nurse or doctor, describe it as if you are the patient! Engineers may learn about a construction process. Ask yourself: How would this process have to be modified if it were being done in sub arctic or tropical regions? You need to monitor if and how well you are understanding something or achieving something and then think of other strategies if you decide that you are not achieving it. In a way you need to split yourself into two people, where one is the learner, and the other is the teacher.

But how can you teach yourself something that you first do not know?

To some extent you can. You always have resources, text books, internet and of course your real lecturer or tutor if necessary. They are a valuable resource by the way and they are happy to help you. Please don’t hesitate to call on them. Students at university to learn and they are here to help you do that.

Is this active learning not something that students do normally?

To some extent yes and as we become adults, our metacognitive skills (that is our ability to think about our own thinking) does develop. Some students who have come from overseas know a very different academic culture where learning is much more something that is imparted from the teacher and the knowledge is accepted without question or evaluation.

This is a very passive system where students just receive information. And techniques that ensured success in this type of academic culture…. may not be entirely effective here in Australia. However, any students, even if they are fairly independent learners, can always benefit from extra tips and strategies.

Why is active learning better than the way you may have always worked?

Any students who have crammed for a test the night before can attest that they retain very little from what they have learned. Often they remembered names and processes in a very superficial way and still did not understand many of the things that they may have written down in an exam. They will do OK in multiple choice questions, not so well in long answers and luck will be a big factor in getting through any exams.
Active learning processes are the complete opposite of this situation. You will retain the information and understanding for longer.

You will be able to think on your feet when thrown a question that is not exactly what you expect.

You will have a better overview.

You will get to know yourself and manage your own progress.

And in the long term, it will make you a more effective, thoughtful and adaptable student or employee. These days, firms do not want to hire a tape recorder of facts and data. They want a person who has all of these skills I’ve just mentioned.

**Is it hard work?**

To begin with it will feel like it. And it may feel slow going. For example if you use active reading strategies to understand a text, it may require 3 or 4 fairly meticulous readings with making notes. However, you will gain a clearer and more permanent understanding than if you read the chapter 20 times without the brain in gear.

In other words, it may feel uphill at first but it is more efficient.

And the more used to questioning and thinking about the subject matter you become, the more interesting it can be… and the more automatically you will think like this.

**Does it make study easier in any way?**

Definitely, students who do not actively engage with the material and get a feel for the key points, tend to see the material like 10,000 bricks in the wall. As we say, they don’t see the forest for the trees.

Some students can get very bogged down in details of information that in the end are not that important. And it is just impossible to manage information in this way.

Finding the peaks and the troughs or the valleys and the hills makes things easier to learn. You can only do that if you actively sort, organize and filter the subject matter.

**What are some ways to implement active learning?**

There are lots of different things you could do but I will group them under four categories: And I will explain these in detail in the following podcasts

First: Look back. Be reflective about your own learning. Review what you got out of each lecture or chapter. Be honest with yourself about how well you understand things. This is called metacognition which means thinking about your own thinking. And understanding how you, as an individual, learn things most effectively

Second: Look from above. Once you have some grasp of the material, pretend you are the teacher and explain it to someone else and set your own questions.
First: Look back. Be reflective about your own learning. Review what you got out of each lecture or chapter. Be honest with yourself about how well you understand things. This is called metacognition which means thinking about your own thinking. And understanding how you, as an individual, learn things most effectively.

Second: Look from above. Once you have some grasp of the material, pretend you are the teacher and explain it to someone else and set your own questions.

Third: Before you begin: Look forward and scope out the landscape. This means have a goal to what you are learning. Have a question to answer or be seeking some specific information when reading something. Know where the subject material is leading. Have some idea of what you will get out of it.

Fourthly: Put the brain in gear and pick up a pen. You absorb so much more by writing stuff down.

PODCAST #2

Tell me more about Metacognition. How does this add to active learning?

Get to know your preferred learning styles and adapt to this.

What do you mean by learning style?

There are several ways to categorize learning styles. The most well known one is probably the VAK categorization.

What is that?

VAK stands for visual, audial and kinaesthetic. Very simply this means that some people learn best by seeing things, diagrams, seeing something written down, videos. Audial learners learn more effectively by listening. Kinesthetic learners need to actually do something and get physically involved in order to learn something. For example, sometimes it is really difficult to learn something new on the computer by just watching someone. I personally really need to use the mouse and the keyboard or else I just won’t remember what someone is teaching me. We are usually not strictly one or the other of these VAK categories. We may fall into two or three of these categories, but we usually have a preferred style. And it is important to know what works for you.

You mentioned being reflective in your learning. How do you go about this?

Ask yourself what you need to know and what have I learned from this reading/activity/problem/exercise?

Ask yourself if there is something you have not fully grasped?

Articulate, as well as you can, what you do not know or cannot do? (This is sometimes very difficult). It is more efficient if you can target a specific problem area with a tutor or teacher. It makes their job easier too if they know exactly how to help you.

It empowers you to overcome problems by yourself more often as well, which is really valuable.

While you are studying before an exam, be critical with yourself (yet also fair and constructive). Identify how your solution/answer or essay could have
While you are studying before an exam, be critical with yourself (yet also fair and constructive). Identify how your solution / answer or essay could have been better.

Step outside of your own head and monitor objectively how you are progressing

Just like a teacher monitors your progress?

Absolutely.

Tell me about being your own teacher. How can you teach yourself things that you do not already know?

You can’t…you need to start from some level of understanding the material.

But if you start to set questions or explain something to someone else, you will quickly find the gaps in your own knowledge which will require some work in order to fill them in.

It is ALWAYS easy to know what you know. But you do not know what you do not know – until you have to teach something.

**How do you start to teach something?**

The easiest thing to do is set yourself or your study buddies some questions. Make it something that reflects the key points of the subject material. And don’t just make them simple recall questions where the student would need to come up with a one word answer.

Be creative. Make them challenging. Ask them to compare or explain something. The thinking out of these questions will teach you just as much as answering some question provided by the teacher or the textbook.

Explain things to your friends (or your pet canary if no-one else is available). If you cannot explain something clearly, you probably do not understand it clearly.

Make up your own teaching / learning resources. Put the information on a Power-point or some presentation software as if you were going to do a talk. Or put it on audio tape – you will be surprised how much you will learn from just doing that.

Pose questions or problems in a study group just like the teacher does (even if you already know the answer, you may still learn something you hadn’t thought of before).

**PODCAST #3**

**What are the first steps? How should a student begin to use active learning processes?**

I mentioned that you need to Look Forward: Scope out the Landscape of your subject.

Look at your subject syllabus. Get the overview. Identify the landmarks (main ideas) before you begin. Identify the landmarks as you reach them through the semester. It is important to know where you are in the course at any time.
Most subjects have objectives. That is the statements such as “At the end of this section, the student will be able to do x, y, z”. Organize your learning around the objectives if they are provided by your lecturer. It is impossible to learn every detail, anecdote, example that is mentioned – so don’t even try.

If objectives are not provided in detail, make your own once you complete each section. Or make your own from the lecture handouts (i.e. Identify what the teacher wants to convey in each slide – there may be more than one point per slide.)

If you have a textbook, objectives are often provided at the beginning of each chapter.

**So setting goals is important?**

You should always set a goal in any task and especially in your reading. Focus on the key points identified at the start of each chapter. If there are none, this may require a first reading to get the key points and then deep reading a second time with these points in mind.

Figure out how the separate topics of the subject relate to each other. They may be presented sequentially, however their relationships may not be purely sequential. The final topic may have a lot to do with the first topic. Step back and see the big picture from time to time. Consider everything in a context.

**What are the active learning processes you should implement for studying for exams?**

This is where it is really important to put the Brain in Gear and Pick up a pen. Do the kinaesthetic thing and actually do it.

When you read, summarize your reading by writing it in dot points IN YOUR OWN WORDS. I can’t emphasize that point about your own words enough. You can copy stuff out with the brain completely switched off and achieve very little.

Describe, explain or list things in NEW WAYS. Do it from a different perspective or using different categories or using a different format. Put information from a paragraph into a table or a diagram. Explain a process backwards rather than going forwards. It is exactly the same information, but it requires an extra level of engaging the brain.

**Could you give some more examples?**

Look Cover Copy Check is a way that primary school children learn spelling. AND…tertiary students can use that method too. Whatever you have understood from reading a paragraph or section, rewrite it in your own words of course and then reread it to see what you have missed.

Actually work through past exam questions, (don’t just think it through). Do it with a time limit too. That includes essays in exams as well. Writing long answers will really help to consolidate the straightforward facts and details.

White out labels of diagrams and recreate them. Create sentences with blank spaces for key words, like a gap fill question. Share them with friends or use them for revision in weeks to come.

Practice problems over and over on paper, until it is automatic.
Could you give an illustration of using active learning processes?

Sure, for example, let’s take a simple task of learning the capital cities of the world.

Learn the country that goes with the city as well as the city that goes with the country. This is learning the material using a different perspective, a bit like drawing the muscles of the left leg after viewing the picture of the right leg.

Get an outline of a world map and write the names of the cities where they belong. This involves learning the material in a different mode which would appeal to visual learners.

Find a photograph or major monument of each city. Build this into a Power-point presentation or a poster presentation. Again this would appeal to visual learners. You will be doing some research above and beyond the mere knowledge of the cities names, but they will then be more memorable.

Choose any two cities from a hat and state what is (a) similar and (b) different about these two. Again, it will take time, but you will learn so much more and the names of the cities will have some context and meaning.

List as many as you can purely from memory and put them in alphabetical order. Check which ones you missed later on. Do this again until you remember all of them. Cluster them according to the language spoken there. Re-ordering or re-categorizing things is always a good way to understand or memorize stuff.

Make your own cross-word on grid paper (and pass it on to your friends), write the clues too. Be creative. Don’t just use the names of the cities in the crossword. Use them as part of the clues as well. Remember it is not the actual crossword that matters. It is not important if nobody ever fills it in. It is the process that you go through in making it that matters.

Play hangman with your friends. This is a game where you write the spaces for the letters of a word on a board or a notepad and the other players have to guess the letters. There are a limited number of times that they can guess wrong letters and they need to guess the name before their chances run out. You could do this for the names of the cities and countries – and state the relevant country or city that goes with each.

Simply thinking up an obscure city for your friends to guess will make it a lasting impression for yourself. This is sociable and friendly. It allows you to learn from your friends’ knowledge as well as from each others mistakes.

Thank you for listening to this podcast. I hope you have found it helpful. And remember that there are more resources on the MAPP website, on the Counselling Service website and on the Study & Learning Centre website. And of course, you are always welcome to attend the MAPP workshops, or come and speak to a counsellor or a learning advisor in person.