

2

Thinking about Learning



learning objectives

- To think about the ways in which adult learning is different to learning as a child.
- To consider the usefulness of models of learning, such as Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle.
- To understand the value and limitations of learning styles in helping you to develop your learning skills.
- To understand the difference between 'surface' and 'deep' learning.
- To identify common learning obstacles and consider strategies to overcome them.

Where are You Now as a Learner?



Box 2.1 reflection point

You as a learner

Spend a few minutes jotting down your responses to the following questions:

- How do you feel about learning? (What kinds of emotions do you experience in relation to learning, or the thought of learning?)

- What does learning mean to you – what is its significance or value?
- What kinds of messages have you received about yourself, as a learner, in the past?
- How have these messages shaped your view of your ability or potential to learn?

Our view of learning, and our ideas about ourselves as learners, can have a powerful effect on how ready, able and willing we are to engage in new learning experiences. This chapter gives you the opportunity to learn more about the learning process so that you can:

- begin to get to know your 'learning self' a little better
- feel better equipped to take control and responsibility for your own learning.

Learning as a Child or as an Adult?

Learning experts such as Malcolm Knowles suggest that the learning process is very different for us as adults, compared to our experience as school-children (Knowles et al., 2005). This is summarized by five main characteristics of adult learners:

Table 2.1 Five key characteristics of adult learners

- 1 As adults, we are used to taking control of our own lives and as a result **we prefer to manage and organize our own learning**. We will have a natural tendency to question things and will have our own thoughts about how we want to develop our learning.
- 2 **We bring a wealth of knowledge and life experience to new learning situations** and like to make links between new ideas and our existing knowledge. We are not 'empty vessels' waiting to be filled up with knowledge.
- 3 Generally, **we undertake learning because we want to change some aspect of our lives and this provides a high level of motivation**. This is different to when we were at school and were told to learn things because they would be useful to us in the future.
- 4 We tend to approach learning as a means of solving a problem or changing some aspect of our lives. This means that **we tend to be more drawn to learning about things that seem relevant to our own lives and our personal goals**.
- 5 **We are more motivated by factors from within ourselves**, such as the drive to develop self-esteem, increase our confidence or gain recognition for our achievements. This contrasts with the school child who is largely motivated by factors outside of herself, such as the authority of the teacher and peer group pressure.



activity 2.1

Applying Knowle's characteristics of adult learning

Think about and then write down some brief responses to the following trigger questions:

- 1 If adults, in general, learn best by being self-directed, what will you do during your academic course to ensure that you are an effective, independent learner?
- 2 What is motivating you to want to learn to be an effective social worker?
 - a. How can you use this motivation to help you stay engaged with your studies?
- 3 What kinds of things from within yourself (internal processes) do you think are shaping your desire to learn and develop your skills?
- 4 What are the obligations and responsibilities that come with being an adult learner?
- 5 How will you ensure that you meet these obligations and take on board the responsibilities?

How does Learning Happen?

There is no one, simple explanation as to how people actually learn but several models of how learning takes place have been suggested. Before we go on to take a look at one of these models, complete the following activity.



activity 2.2

How does learning work?

Make some notes, jot down some ideas or draw some kind of picture or diagram to show how you think learning takes place. Things that might be interesting to think about include:

- Does learning happen all at once – like having a sudden flash of inspiration – or do you think there are different stages to learning?
- How do you know when learning starts and finishes?
- Do you think you learn in the same way as your friends or members of your family?

David Kolb explores what he refers to as an 'experiential' cycle of learning (Kolb, 1984). 'Experiential' learning is where we learn from having an experience.

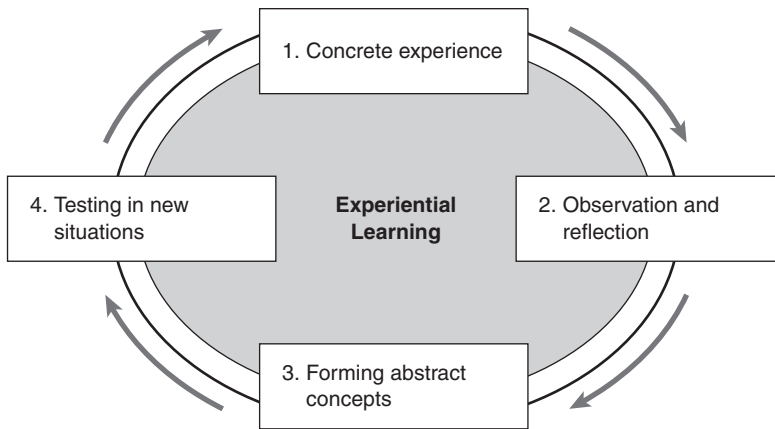


Figure 2.1 Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle

Kolb's experiential learning cycle

Kolb's theory of learning can be represented in the form of a learning cycle which illustrates his idea that there are four main stages involved in learning from experience.

Stage 1: Concrete experience

Kolb says that learning involves having some form of 'concrete' experience. He uses the word 'concrete' to mean an experience that takes place in the real, physical world. A concrete experience could be:

- talking to a service-user
- reading a book
- putting together a care plan.

Stage 1 Example: Fozia has just **given a verbal presentation** to the rest of the students in her group.

Stage 2: Observation and reflection

In Stage 2, the learner enters a period of 'observation and reflection', in which they consciously think about what happened during their concrete experience. This 'thinking' can be triggered by their thoughts and memories of the event, or by feedback from others. For instance:

- What did they do well and what could have been better?
- What can they observe about their performance? Was it rushed or too slow? And so on.

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Stage 2 Example: Fozia thinks about how well the presentation went.

- She thinks that she was effective in terms of making all of the key points she wanted to.
- She remembers that she did not look at the audience very much and caught herself shuffling in front of the data projector at times.
- Feedback from her peers and tutor confirm her observations and reflections.

Stage 3: Forming abstract concepts

In Stage 3, the learner thinks about ideas or approaches that might help them to improve their performance the next time they engage in the concrete experience. In other words:

- How could they do things differently in the future to achieve a more satisfactory outcome?
- Is there a theory, idea or technique that they have used previously, which might be useful in the current learning situation?

Kolb refers to this as ‘forming abstract concepts’.

Stage 3 Example: Fozia thinks about how other people in her group delivered their presentations by using keywords and bullet points instead of a full script.

- She tries to imagine herself using bullet points to jog her memory in the future.
- In her mind’s eye, she sees herself talking confidently and knowledgeably to her audience, making lots of eye contact and communicating more directly with them.
- She decides it would be a useful idea to try this approach the next time she is required to deliver a formal presentation.

Stage 4: Testing in new situations

This stage is where the learner puts their new thoughts and ideas (the ‘abstract concepts’ from stage 3) into practice. It is a crucial stage because it allows learners to test out their ‘abstract concepts’ (ideas) to see if they actually work or make things any better.

Stage 4 Example: A few months later, Fozia gives a talk in the Students Union about the voluntary work she has been doing:

- She finds that using short bullet points on her PowerPoint slides helps her to maintain much better eye contact with the audience.

- However, there are also some occasions where she drifts a little off-topic and gets sidetracked. As a result, her talk runs 10 minutes over the agreed time slot.

So, overall:

- She is pleased that her new approach allows her to communicate better during the presentation.
- She makes a mental note that she will need to work on staying focused in future presentations.

What comes after Stage 4?

Kolb does not see his cycle stopping at Stage 4. In fact, he says that the cycle goes around again but this time the learner will continue to add to what they have already learnt. So, following the example of Fozia – she will go back round to Stage 1 where she repeats the concrete experience (i.e. she gives another academic presentation). However, this time around, she may receive feedback about other things she does well or could continue to improve. Kolb says that the 'learning process' is never fully finished, but simply continues to move around the stages of the learning cycle.

Learning Styles

Some learning experts suggest that we all have preferred ways of learning, which they call learning preferences or learning 'styles'. For instance:

The Visual-Auditory-Kinaesthetic (VAK) model of learning styles is very much concerned with how we process (take in and give out) information (Eicher, 1987). So it helps us to get a better understanding of how we most readily grasp or perceive things in learning situations.

Table 2.2 Learning preferences

<i>When learning something new:</i>	<i>We can call this learning:</i>
Ursula prefers to be able to look at written instructions, illustrations and diagrams.	VISUAL (involves <i>seeing</i> and <i>reading</i>)
Marvin prefers to listen to someone describing the topic and have them give verbal instructions and guidance.	AUDITORY (involves <i>listening</i> and <i>speaking</i>)
Gemma prefers to physically try things out for herself.	KINAESTHETIC (involves <i>doing</i> and <i>touching</i>)



activity 2.3

Quick Visual-Auditory-Kinaesthetic (VAK) Self-test

Imagine that you have just bought a flat-pack, self-assembly bookshelf for your home study area. When you come to put the bookshelf together, would you naturally prefer to:

- A Read all of the instructions before starting, and closely follow the illustrations to see how each piece will fit together?
- B Have someone else read the instructions out to you as you go about assembling it, and ask them questions if necessary?
- C Ignore the instructions and just focus on working out how to build it yourself through handling the parts and discovering how they fit together?

If you selected option A, you are probably more of a **visual** learner, option B would suggest you are more of an **auditory** learner and, finally, option C suggests you are a more **kinaesthetic** learner.

Why are learning styles useful?

Understanding your own learning style can help you to:

- recognize your current learning preferences and tendencies
- ‘play to your strengths’
- identify areas of your learning where you could make further improvements, in order to become a more rounded learner.



Box 2.2 reflection point

Learning styles can change!

The key thing to remember is that learning styles and preferences are not set in stone – they can change over time – and there are conscious things you can do to improve your skills and become a more rounded learner. For example – **use natural strengths to develop weaker areas**. If I am a student who finds it easier to learn from visual methods rather than listening to a lecturer talk for

an hour, I could make a conscious effort to create my own set of lecture notes which use keywords, pictures, diagrams and concept maps. This may mean doing some more work on them after the lecture has finished but should be worth it in terms of helping me to learn more effectively.

Learning style tools and questionnaires

The value of learning styles activities and questionnaires is that they can help us to identify where our current areas of strength are, and equally importantly, alert us to areas where we might need to consciously think about improving our skills.



activity 2.4

Learning styles tools and questionnaires

Many people have developed their own different models of learning styles and they will usually offer some kind of questionnaire or activity to help you to work out what your learning preferences are (e.g. VAK Questionnaire, Honey and Mumford Learning Styles Questionnaire (1982)). We do not recommend using any one particular learning styles questionnaire or tool, but would encourage you to explore the range of free options that are available online. Try typing in the phrase **free learning style questionnaire** into your favourite search engine. Take careful note of how to interpret your result once you have completed the questionnaire or activity.

Limitations of learning styles

- Learning styles become less useful when they are simply used to 'label' or stereotype learners (Coffield et al., 2004: 51), e.g.:
 - '... oh, she's the type of learner who always wants to jump in and get started, so she won't be any good at doing anything that requires some thought and reflection'.
- Some critics claim learning styles can overlook the important social and political aspects of being a learner (Reynolds, 1997), which are shaped by race, gender and social class, as well as by age, disability and sexual orientation.

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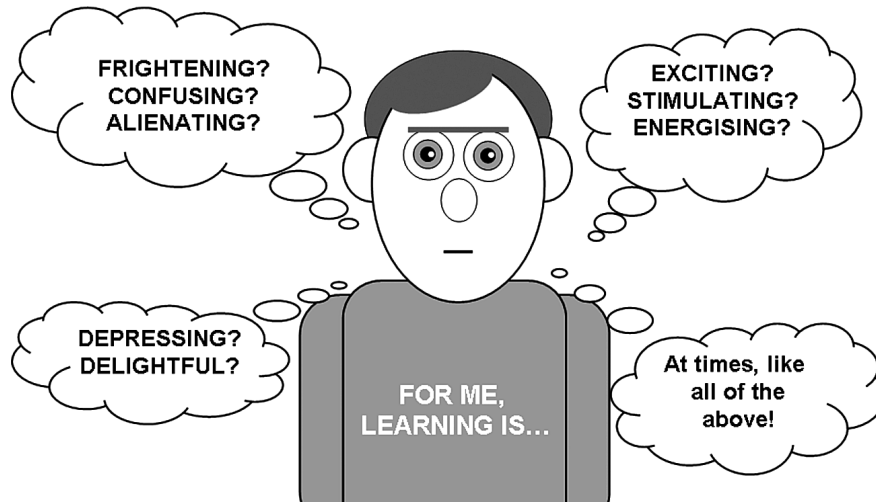


Figure 2.2 Emotional responses to learning

Our emotional responses to learning

Tools such as learning styles questionnaires may not tell us much about how we feel or what our emotions are in relation to our learning.

Emotional responses, such as those shown in Figure 2.2 above, clearly have the potential to affect how we view and approach our own learning. So, in helping you to consider your own learning style, we want you to use a method which draws on your own expertise and knowledge of your own previous learning experiences. This approach to thinking about your learning styles does not pretend to have the kind of scientific rationale associated with some of the learning styles questionnaires, but we hope it will be a valuable opportunity to explore your thoughts, feelings and responses.



activity 2.5

Your learner portrait

In this activity, inspired by Jennifer Moon's work (2006) on learning journals, you are asked to complete a self-portrait with a difference.

STEP 1:

Produce something which represents what you think and feel about yourself as a learner. Be really creative and use any medium which you feel is most appropriate. You might decide to:

- **Produce a 'pen portrait'** – this is a written passage which describes and presents a narrative (or story) of you as a learner. This approach works well if you try to be specific and use real examples and memories to illustrate things.
- **Produce a drawing, diagram or collage** – use visual imagery to represent how you learn best and highlight the areas that you find challenging or feel that you may struggle with.
- **Produce an audio or video portrait** – you could use a mobile phone, mp3 recorder or video camera. This is similar to making an audio or video diary and the aim is to capture what you think and feel about your learning through the things you say, facial expressions and tone of voice.

Whichever method you use, try not to get too caught up in wanting to produce a 'masterpiece' – the most valuable part of this exercise is that you make some kind of record of your thoughts, feelings, hopes, desires, worries, concerns and beliefs about yourself as a learner.

STEP 2:

After you have completed your learner portrait, reflect back on it and write a short piece of 200–300 words in which you identify what your portrait reveals to you about your relationship with learning.

- Make links and draw your own conclusions – and if you feel comfortable, seek the creative input of peers and tutors.
- Keep your finished portrait somewhere safe as it records a useful snapshot of you at a particular point in time.
- Just like an old photograph of yourself, you can look back at it and acknowledge how you have changed and developed over time, with certain 'features' remaining constant.

Skim the Surface or Dive in at the Deep End?

Deep learning

Sometimes you may go into a lecture or teaching session feeling really motivated about what you are going to be doing because:

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- you have a real interest in and passion for the topic
- you are curious about how there might be links between this topic and other areas you are interested in
- you have a number of questions in your mind about the topic, and look forward to the prospect that at least some of them will be answered
- you are keen to develop your broad understanding of social work ideas, in order to become a better social work practitioner.

Learning experts say the factors described above are more likely to be linked to **deep learning** (Biggs, 1999; Entwistle, 1988; Marton and Säljö, 1976; Ramsden, 1992). Deep engagement with a subject provides a really good grounding from which to do all of those things that are asked for in assignment guidelines and marking criteria, such as:

- ‘critical thinking and analysis’
- ‘making links and connections to other ideas, theories and topics’
- ‘weighing-up the evidence’
- ‘providing a discussion or balanced view’.

Surface learning

At other times, we may go into a lecture or teaching session planning to:

- just note down and remember those things which are relevant to our assignment
- focus on relevant facts which can be memorized and discard the rest
- not worry ourselves about how this topic might fit into the grand scheme of things.

This approach is often described as ‘surface learning’. There are times where we all engage in surface learning in our daily lives. For instance, we may be told that a new records management system has been introduced into our workplace and our first response might be, ‘... just tell me about the bits that are relevant to what I do’. This kind of surface approach can help us to get by, and is often enough in the short term.

However, in relation to your academic assignments, you need to consider whether an entirely surface approach to learning is going to be enough to get you through your course, with the kinds of grades you are aiming for. To illustrate this, think about how many times in the past you have heard a tutor say:

- ‘look *beneath the surface*’
- ‘aim to examine the subject *in depth*’
- ‘consider things from a *number of perspectives*’

- 'examine the thinking that *underlies* a particular idea or belief'
- 'try to *avoid giving a superficial view* of things'.

We are sure you can think of more. The point is that most of these phrases are directing you to think about the topic in some kind of depth.

Activity 2.6 below asks you to indicate whether each of the statements relates to your own approach to learning by indicating 'Y' or 'N'. First, read the eight statements and tick whether or not they fit with your general approach to learning. Then go through the statements again and either write an 'S' for surface or 'D' for deep, depending on which style you think they are associated with.



activity 2.6

What's your style?

1. **You just want to remember enough information in order to get the job done** (e.g. write an essay or assignment). Y: N:
2. **You are not afraid to ask questions** about the things you are learning about, and some of these may be about the main ideas which make up the topic. Y: N:
3. You are bored with the topic but **you just do enough to get through the assignment**. Y: N:
4. **You are interested in the subject for the enjoyment and satisfaction that you get from studying it**. You are not just concerned with passing the assignment. Y: N:
5. **You look for the main ideas which underpin the topic**, and have a depth of understanding which you can take to other learning situations. Y: N:
6. **You try to make links** between new learning and those things you already know from previous learning occasions. Y: N:
7. You have **scratched the surface of a topic** but do not know enough to apply the main ideas or principles to other learning situations. Y: N:
8. **You learn things off by heart**, but don't really think about the meaning of what you have learnt. Y: N:

(summarized from Moon, 2007: 59)

Use this exercise to help you think about what you might need to do in order to develop the 'deep learner' within you.

Common Learning Obstacles

Barriers to learning



Box 2.3 reflection point

Learning barriers

Based on your own previous experiences of learning:

- What are **your** particular learning barriers or obstacles?
- What kinds of **strategies** could help you overcome them?
- What **support** and/or **resources** would you need?
- How will you **measure** your progress?
- When will you **re-assess** the situation?

Taking positive ownership of your own learning

Learning how to become self-directed, organized and self-motivated can be a real challenge in itself! That is, before we have even started to think about learning about the subject of social work. For instance, if you have previously been studying a course where your study was largely directed by the teaching staff, or if you have been in a job in which your work was closely supervised, it may come as a shock to suddenly have all of this freedom! The following chart uses the mnemonic (memory aid) 'EMPOWER' to help you to focus on the qualities required to take ownership of your learning, together with practical suggestions of how to develop these.

Table 2.3 EMPOWER

Quality:	Characterized by:	Helped by:
E	Enquiring <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Asking questions • Debating ideas • Following up your own areas of interest • Keeping an open mind 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listening to the questions that others ask • Reading around the topic to see how issues are 'debated' and discussed • Making notes of interesting things to follow up and research
M	Motivated <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being focused on own learning goals • Being clear about why you want to do the course 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Setting SMART learning goals which feel helpful and relevant to you

Table 2.3 (Continued)

<i>Quality:</i>		<i>Characterized by:</i>	<i>Helped by:</i>
P	Productive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Completing work and developing your learning and understanding • Making best use of the time available to you • Seeing pieces of work through to their conclusion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monitoring your progress and rewarding yourself for your efforts • Attending regularly and participating fully • Avoiding procrastination using techniques suggested in Chapter 3 • Focusing on the bits you can do and coming back to the bits you know you struggle with • Avoiding unnecessary distractions (e.g. text messages, television)
O	Organized	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being at the right place at the right time • Making sure you know what you have got to do • Thinking about the best order in which to do things 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using simple tools like timetables, diaries and schedulers – these are invaluable • Writing down the tasks you need to do and prioritizing them • Keeping relevant handouts and notes together in files and folders
W	Well-prepared	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having the materials, resources and equipment needed to do a given task • Being clear and focused about what you have been asked to do • Considering reading, research or other preparation before beginning to write your assignments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Studying your timetable and getting a sense of what topics will be covered – if possible doing some preparatory reading • Always using assignment guidance • Using lectures notes and reading lists to guide your background reading • Taking equipment you will need along to taught sessions (e.g. pens, paper, laptop, memory stick, etc.)
E	Engaged	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contributing to sessions • Taking part in activities • Finding points of personal interest, even in the sessions that may seem dull or irrelevant 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pushing yourself to make contributions where invited to do so – do not wait for someone else to speak first • Looking for the interesting point, angle or perspective – it can be found in even the dullest of topics!
R	Resilient	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being able to accept constructive criticism • Being able to cope under pressure (i.e. family commitments, work commitments, looming assignment deadlines) • Accepting that learning can sometimes involve ‘getting it wrong’ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using feedback on your work to guide your learning development goals • Factoring in relaxation time or stress-busting techniques (see Chapter 4) • Trying to think of ‘mistakes’ or failures as important learning opportunities

Your Learning Goals

We know that you want to be a qualified social worker. But what about delving into it in a little more detail? For instance:

- if you have always had a dread of public speaking, what about using your time at university to purposefully develop these skills?
- perhaps you feel that you have never been 'any good' with IT systems?

You will have plenty of opportunities to practise and develop these skills but you need to be actively taking hold of these rather than shying away from them, or even worse, avoiding them altogether.



activity 2.7

Putting together a learning development plan

Strengthening your skills can be a lot easier if you record your plan, methods and progress, using a personal 'learning development plan' similar to that shown in Figure 2.3. They encourage you to be very clear about:

- 1 Your **learning goals** (what is it that you want to achieve).
- 2 The **actions** that you need to take in order to achieve your goals or improve your performance.
- 3 The **resources** (equipment, material, time, support from others) that you will need to help you do this.
- 4 A **review date** which makes you reflect back on your progress, and gives you the chance to make any changes to your plan.

Using a learning development plan may just seem like yet another task to do, but unless you record this kind of information, it is very hard to be accurate and honest about your progress, or share this information with others.

You will almost certainly be asked to use some kind of learning development plan during your course in order to record and chart your personal development. The types of skills involved in this tie in very closely with Key Role 2 which requires social workers to '**plan, carry out, review and evaluate** social work practice, with individuals, families, carers, groups, communities and other professionals' (TOPPS UK Partnership, 2002).

Learning Goal	Action Required	Resources	Timescale

Figure 2.3 Learning Development Plan

Be SMART!

Make sure that your learning goals are 'SMART'!

Did you know? SMART Goals

'SMART' is a convenient mnemonic to help you remember the various factors that you should aim to take into account when planning, carrying out and evaluating your own learning goals. For instance, if my learning goal is to 'improve my referencing', I could apply SMART in the following way:

S	specific	e.g. I will aim to strengthen my referencing and citation skills in my academic work.
M	measurable	e.g. I will aim to get 90% of my references absolutely correct in my next essay/assignment.
A	achievable	e.g. I will focus on book, journal and web referencing to begin with and then look at other kinds at a later date.
R	relevant	e.g. I will make sure that I use resources which focus on the Harvard Reference system, as this is used at my institution.
T	time-bound	e.g. I will aim to have developed this for when I do my next essay on 18 November 2010 (two months away).

Using SMART helps you to be much more specific about your intentions, so that you can actually translate them from positive intentions into **positive actions**.

Tackling Boredom and Frustration – Head On!

No doubt we have all had experiences of sitting in a classroom or a lecture theatre and listening to someone who has completely baffled us within the first 10 minutes of their lecture. We might have then spent the rest of the hour-long lecture:

- doodling
- checking out our fellow students' fashion sense
- mentally devising shopping lists
- imagining ourselves reclining on a tropical beach!

By the end of the hour, we were probably none the wiser about the topic of the lecture than at the beginning! This is not to say that traditional lectures do not have their place, and like them or not, they are still used extensively on many social work courses. Many people find it incredibly interesting to be able to sit and listen to an academic develop a particular theory or idea over the course of a lecture.

Quick Tip: Lectures provide an opportunity to ...

- develop your **listening skills**
- sharpen your **critical thinking skills**
- work on your **summary and note-taking skills**.

Quick Tip: Emergency Recovery Plan for Dull or Difficult Lectures

If you find that you often lose concentration or focus in dull or difficult lectures, seminars or workshops, try to note down:

- anything you do not feel you understand fully
- the questions you would ideally like to ask if you could put the lecturer on 'pause'
- those things you do understand, or are confident about
- those things which you might need to go away and do some further reading or research on
- anything that would make the topic more interesting or accessible for you.

You can use these notes to help you focus your independent learning or even to help you talk about your specific learning needs in tutorials.



Box 2.4 reflection point

Transferring these skills

In social work practice, we will need to sit and listen to service-users for extended periods of time. They will have vital information and issues to share with us and may not always present things in the way that we might prefer. For instance, they may:

(Continued)

- **make assumptions about what we already know**
- use **language and terminology that we are not always familiar with**
- **present things in an order that makes sense to them**, but which might not appear to be organized or sequential to you.

As professional social workers, we will still be expected to:

- **pick out relevant details**
- **identify key themes or concerns**
- take a **flexible and responsive approach to note-taking** and information recording.



summary of key points

- Models such as Kolb's experiential learning cycle can help us to gain a better appreciation of how learning actually takes place.
- Understanding our own learning styles and preferences can help us to identify our strengths and weaknesses and set ourselves appropriate learning goals.
- Learning styles should not be used in a self-limiting way.
- Many student social workers face learning obstacles but these can be tackled with the right attitude and appropriate support.



further reading

- Burns, T. and Sinfield, S. (2008) *Essential Study Skills: The complete guide to success at university*. London: Sage.
- Clegg, B. (2008) *Studying Creatively*. London: Routledge.
- Cottrell, S. (2003) *The Study Skills Handbook*, 2nd edition. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. (especially Chapters 2, 3 and 4).
- Hargreaves, S. (2007) *Study Skills for Dyslexic Students* (Study Skills Series). London: Sage.
- Holt, E. (2006) *Learning Support for Mature Students* (Study Skills Series). London: Sage.