

## Learning Online – Tip Sheet

Steve Joordens and Nick Khabaz  
University of Toronto Scarborough

The following tip-sheet corresponds to the webinar titled “How to be a Successful Online Learner” (sponsored by Contact North | Contact Nord). Throughout the webinar, we gave a number of tips and suggestions, which are summarized below.

First, the three keys to learning (which the subsequent points will connect to) are:

1. Choose courses and professors that you will find engaging. If the course and/or professor can hold your interest, and perhaps provoke further thoughts and exploration of the topics, you will do well. If they don't, it will be a challenge.
2. When you are learning, the more deeply you process the information, the more you will learn. The ultimate goal is understanding, not memorization.
3. A key factor in your success is how conscientiously you approach your learning. Personal habits like time management, self-management and work ethic are huge determinants of your success.

To enhance your engagement (the extent to which you truly enjoy your learning), consider the following:

- To the extent you can choose some of the courses you take, choose courses you are naturally interested in and also look for courses previous students have identified as interesting or thought provoking.
- If you have to take a course you aren't really interested in, look for someone on the Internet who loves that course and maybe provides tutorials or explanative videos online. When you watch someone who is enthusiastic about something, their enthusiasm can become contagious. You may find yourself looking forward to that course and you'll also have some of the background learning done (making the course less of a challenge).
- Also, try to learn what you can about the professors. Do they have any online lectures you could watch? Are they listed in [ratemyprofessors.com](http://ratemyprofessors.com) or does the university they teach at publish an anti-calendar? If you can choose passionate teachers who are “present”, you will do better, but getting to know the person and what to expect of them will reduce your anxiety and uncertainty either way.

In order to deepen your learning, here are two suggestions:

- After reading a chapter or watching a lecture, create a concept map to make connections. See

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8XGQGhli0I0>.

- Create your own multiple-choice questions as you study. It will make you see things and think about what you're learning from a different perspective. Then you can "swap questions" with others to gain from so-called "Retrieval practice" (<https://www.retrievalpractice.org/why-it-works>).

True learning involves gaining an understanding of some subject, not just memorizing key points. To gain understanding, you must think about what you are learning deeply, which can be a challenge given the dual forces of procrastination and distraction. To combat these we offer the following tips:

For procrastination, learn about the Zeigarnik Effect, the basic finding that the mind ruminates on "unfinished business" until it gains some level of closure. You can learn more here

<https://www.readunwritten.com/2018/09/07/5-ways-stop-procrastinating-zeigarnik-effect/>. The three recommendations that come from this though are:

1. Don't focus on finishing something, focus on starting it. Once you start, that thing will become unfinished business and your mind will naturally want to get it done. So the critical first step, just get started.
2. Don't necessarily stop your schoolwork at an obvious completion point. For example, don't read Chapter 1 then stop when you're through it. This is closing your studying and you want it to remain "unfinished business". How do you do that? Read the first few pages of Chapter 2 before quitting. Now you have Chapter 1 done, but getting Chapter 2 done will be "on your mind" and that will pull you back.
3. Don't share your learning goals explicitly. Make goals, but keep them private. Sharing goals gives you a sense of completing something and it's best to not share until the goal is complete.

With respect to avoiding distraction, of course, the primary distractor in our lives are messages delivered via the Internet – mostly thought social media. The key to avoiding distraction is all about creating a great study space. Again, more can be learned at <https://collegeinfo geek.com/create-study-space/>, but some of the main points are as follows:

- Have an area you use ONLY for learning, and keep it pure in that sense.
- When you're working, leave your phone somewhere where you cannot hear or see it or, if you're too addicted for that, at least ensure all notifications are off and DO NOT use the phone for any purpose other than the work you are doing.
- Do not allow text messages or anything else of the sort to be available on your computer if possible. At the very least, make sure it will not deliver notifications to you while you're working.
- If you're in a noisy space, consider getting noise cancelling headphones to allow you not to

be distracted by your environment.

- Then, just sit in this space and start doing something (Step 1 above). The lack of distractions will make it less likely that your flow will get interrupted.

Rumour has it that Robert Johnson sold his soul to the Devil in exchange for becoming a better blues guitar player (the best of his time, and some say ever). He met the Devil at the crossroads. You will also meet devils at crossroads and they also will make you an offer. They will offer you higher grades by giving you access to testing information ... the cost is your learning. Cheating is cheating yourself of a chance to learn and grow as a person. Don't do what Robert did (actually I suspect he sat down and worked very hard at learning guitar, so maybe you should do what he did!).

You will also be tempted at times to stop working and instead to engage in some enjoyable activity with friends or family. If you stop working before you should, you WILL NOT enjoy the enjoyable time because you'll keep thinking about what you should be doing (Zeigarnik!). Rather, you should use your enjoyable time as a reward for completing (and maybe then starting a little into the next bit) your work.

Finally, as you prepare for learning online, keep in mind our initial advice about pre-learning from passionate online instructors and a fuller way to do that is to take one of the many free online courses offered by such MOOC providers as Coursera, EdX, FutureLearn, etc. You can practice all the strategies highlighted here in the context of a course you like and without the risk of a bad mark affecting your future. They provide great opportunities for forming strong learning habits BEFORE you start a semester online.

Nick and I thank you for your kind words on our talk and we wish you all the best with your learning journey.

Sincerely,

Steve Joordens and Nick Khabaz  
University of Toronto Scarborough