
effective study skills

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GERALDINE PRICE AND PAT MAIER

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Effective study skills

Geraldine Price and Pat Maier



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Foreword

The authors of this study skills book would like to congratulate you for deciding to go on to further study; you will find it a true 'rite of passage' for later life, so it is important that you make the most of your time both socially and academically.

Your time in higher education should be seen as an opportunity to develop yourself through study. The authors have designed the chapters to encourage self-reflection and personal development rather than a 'tips for' approach, as this will encourage a professional attitude to your work. A self-reflective and 'can do' approach will mark you out as an independent lifelong learner, a vital attribute for anyone today.

Don't forget to update your personal development planners (PDPs) as you go through the book and your studies, as this will help you make your learning explicit.

Finally, we would like to wish you all the best with your studies and beyond.

Geraldine Price
Pat Maier

How to use this book

Why this book?

Academic study skills are a set of skills that set you up as a life-long learner within and beyond your official study period. The tone of the book is one of personal development, encouraging you to reflect on your skills, develop a 'can do' attitude and know what you need to do to improve. These are qualities that will set you up for life and increase your employability.

The book can be used by individual students or tutors wishing to embed these skills in the curriculum and link into personal development planners. We are living through a period of rapid change where our knowledge needs updating regularly throughout our lives in order to remain current. Lifelong learning skills therefore become important and enable us to improve and keep up to date throughout our working life and beyond.

For you - the student

This book explores the challenges of university life and how you can move from a novice to an experienced learner in your field. The challenges for you are at many levels: your engagement with the subject, your ability to manage your time and your motivation to take responsibility for your own learning. Those of you who take up the challenges and develop a deeper understanding of your subject are more likely to succeed and do well. The book helps you to take control of your own learning, with self-management being an overarching skill underlying in each of the chapters. Self-knowledge and reflection will improve your grades and give you the qualities employers seek. It is an interactive book which prompts and guides you to more effective and efficient working habits.

To help you do this, each chapter provides *activities* which enable you to increase your skills. The activities in the book are not a once-and-for-all activity and should be revisited throughout your stay at

university as your skills develop. It is important, therefore, that you reflect on your stages of learning by completing the *personal development planner* (PDP) section at the end of each chapter. These PDPs can be used with your tutor, or linked into your department's own PDP to encourage you to move ever forward and onward.

It is advisable to start with the first chapter as this will give you that broad brush view on getting started in Higher Education. If you are already in later years, you will also gain from the focus in this chapter.

For you – the tutor

Tutors wanting to use this book may be working centrally as learning advisers or with a department as a subject tutor. As a learning adviser you may be working individually with students, outside their curriculum or collaboratively with subject tutors. Whichever role you have, this activity-focused book could be adapted to your own circumstances and slot in easily with other material.

The authors, as subject and skills tutors themselves, have developed this material from their own practice and tested the material with their students. Some suggestions for using the book are as follows:

- *Induction for first years.* It is useful to include information from 'Learning in Higher Education' which gives a broad brush view on moving into Higher Education. The chapters on stress and time management are also useful for adaptation in induction sessions, at undergraduate and postgraduate level.
- *Personal development planners.* Every chapter encourages students to reflect on the skills they are developing. You may expect students to carry out some of the activities in this book for initial proof of their reflective ability.
- *Reading critically.* As tutors we are all aware of the difficulty students have in rising above writing simple descriptive texts. Criticality is a skill that is valued and encouraging criticality in later study years becomes an issue. The section on reading could be used in a project unit, along with the writing section that encourages students to think of the writing process. Activity 3 in Chapter 3.3, 'Reading Critically' could be used as a warm-up exercise to encourage a more critical approach to reading.

- *Presentation skills.* The chapters on teamwork and presenting your work have proved very useful for giving students guidance on poster preparation, oral presentations and working in real teams.
- *Learning outcomes.* Each of the chapters conforms to academic practice and includes learning outcomes. There is no assessment, but informal reflective exercises at the beginning and the end could serve to ‘assess’ increased awareness.

Getting the most out of the book

Each chapter opens with a *navigation page* giving a brief overview of the sections within the chapter along with the learning outcomes. This means that you can easily dip into the section and activities you want. Each chapter begins and ends with your own reflection on how you feel your skills are developing. It is valuable to reflect on your skills prior to reading the chapter and then see how you have increased your awareness as a result of working through the activities. These mini PDPs are intended to be used as part of your institution’s own system.

Some of the *activities* require you to take stock of your own skills while others give you valuable practice, i.e. putting into operation what you have read. Towards the end of each chapter you will find a *summary map* combining all the parts of the chapter into a visible whole. Finally, each chapter also gives you advice on where you might go for further help, if you still feel unsure of your performance.

Unlock your potential

You have the potential to do well, obtain good grades and be employed in an area that interests you. So, use this book as part of your strategy for personal development and realise your potential.

In times of change, learners inherit the Earth, while the learned find themselves beautifully equipped to deal with a world that no longer exists.

Eric Hoffer, an important social thinker/writer of the twentieth century.

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Learning in Higher Education

Learning in Higher Education is, and should be, challenging. The challenges for you are at many levels: your engagement with the subject, your ability to manage your time and your motivation to take responsibility for your own learning. Those who take up the challenges and develop a deep understanding of their subject are more likely to succeed and do well. Those of you who do the minimum work and take a ‘surface’ approach to learning are more likely to fail or drop out. Although your tutors and advisers are there to give you the support you need, the decision to take this responsibility, to reflect and act on your development, is yours and yours alone. Take it and succeed.

We don't receive wisdom; we must discover it for ourselves after a journey that no one can take for us or spare us.

Marcel Proust (French novelist, 1871–1922)

In this chapter you will learn how to:

1. recognise what makes you a proficient learner
2. understand what plagiarism is and how to avoid it
3. identify the key documents that describe your programme and units
4. know how to start thinking about your own employability.

USING THIS CHAPTER

If you want to dip into the sections	Page	If you want to try the activities	Page
1 Become a proficient learner	2	1 Your motivation to learn	3
2 Academic Integrity – plagiarism	12	2 Create a concept map	8
3 Understand your programme or course	16	3 How do you feel about reflecting on your progress?	10
4 Your employability	17	4 How's your writing?	13
5 Going forward	20	5 Why do some people plagiarise?	15
		6 Update your personal development planner	20

Estimate your current levels of confidence. At the end of the chapter you will have the chance to re-assess these levels where you can incorporate this into your personal development planner (PDP). Mark between 1 (poor) and 5 (good) for the following:

I understand what I can do to become a proficient learner.	I know what plagiarism is.	I understand the key documents describing my course.	I know why I should consider employability throughout my studies.

Date: _____

1 Become a proficient learner

You may not think this, but being a good learner is a skill. It is not just about sitting in front of your book and reading and hoping something will 'stick', or about completing yet another problem sheet or exam. Of course, you can go through your studies just doing this. However, your learning will be fairly shallow and often crammed in before the next exam. In order to become interested and proficient in the topic you are studying, you will need to go a bit deeper and your ability to do this makes you a skilled and lifelong learner; a learner that not only knows 'what', but also 'how' and 'why'.

Knowing 'how' and 'why' is increasingly important as knowledge has a shelf life, like so many other things. This is referred to as the **half-life of knowledge** and, to give you a flavour of this, 95% of the drugs in use in 1978 were unheard of in 1950 (Smith, 1978, p. 914). Environmental Science for example probably has a half-life of 1 to 3 years, especially in relation to environmental law and aspects of climate change. Since knowledge is an economic resource in a knowledge economy, having up to date knowledge is vital for a company. Employers therefore will want employees that are prepared to be lifelong learners. Having the skills to do this, with study skills being a prime example, becomes an important employability skill.

Your degree of motivation for your subject will determine how you study and how much effort you put in. If you are not very motivated you will more than likely be someone who will memorise enough facts to get you through the coursework and exams; you will be what is called a 'surface learner', take little time to reflect on your learning, have a 'make-do' attitude to your studies and have difficulty managing your commitments. As you can imagine, this is not the ideal student, or the ideal employee. This lack of motivation is very evident both to your tutors and to potential employers.

Therefore, learning is something that is not restricted to your time at university. It is more than likely going to be part of you for the rest of your life. In order to do this you need to:

- be responsible for your own learning
- know yourself as a learner
- reflect on your learning.

Be responsible for your own learning

The first thing you must do is to get to know yourself as a learner. It is important you are honest with yourself and your mode of learning in the past may have served you well, but now you need to make a step change in order to get the most out of your studies. Activity 1, below, indicates some of the features that characterise dependent and independent learning. As you can see, the ‘independent learner’ shows a greater responsibility for his or her own learning.

ACTIVITY 1 Your motivation to learn

At this point in time where would you place yourself?

Your learning	A	B	Generally me (A or B)
Motivation to learn	I am motivated to get my degree and as long as it is a respectable grade I don't mind. I expect my tutors to provide me with interesting material to keep me on track. I will only do work if I am going to get assessed. If I get a bad degree mark it is probably due to a bad course.	You expect a well-organised course and good teaching, but you know this is a two-way process and you have to find out information yourself in order to complete assignments as well as seek support from various people. You know your final degree will reflect not only the course organisation and teaching but also the amount of work you have put in yourself.	
Learning resources	The content and resources are determined by my tutors and I limit myself to what is provided for me. I think exams are passed by memorising facts and I have a good memory.	Although my tutors have given me guidance on the resources I need, I happily seek out my own resources. I really want to understand the principles and concepts of my subject, not just a load of facts.	

Your learning	A	B	Generally me (A or B)
Time	Tutors tend to set coursework deadlines too close together, so when I try to get the work done I am having to cram everything in at the same time to meet these deadlines. I prefer working to tight deadlines and this means I leave all my work to the last minute. It would be better if tutors spread out the deadlines as that would suit me better.	Although we get coursework deadlines set close together, we are told in advance and I try where possible to set my own staggered deadlines so that I am not working on all coursework at the same time.	
Reflection on learning	I find little opportunity in my studies to do this and we are generally not encouraged to do it either, so why bother. I had to do this in school and feel that it should be left there.	I am keen to reflect on what and how I learn. Tutorials and seminars are good for this as discussion helps me see what I understand and don't understand. I always want to know how I can improve.	

Are you predominantly A or B? You may have guessed that A represents a dependent learner while B an independent learner.

How independent and responsible do you feel you are with regard to your learning? What might you do to improve this – write three things in the box below. Read the remainder of this chapter and identify the later chapters you think could be relevant to you.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

NOTE Your tutors can only do so much. It is up to you to be prepared to take full advantage of what is on offer.

Know yourself as a learner

At this stage of your studies you are really preparing yourself for work and part of that, as indicated earlier, is about being a lifelong, independent learner. Increasingly companies will expect you to learn on the job, take further study or follow a continuing professional development programme. Being able therefore to reflect on how best you learn, on the skills you are acquiring and on improvements you need to make will be vital as you progress your career. Take a look at some of the relevant later chapters in areas you feel you could do with checking.

What kind of learner are you?

In Chapter 2.3, 'Working in a real team', you are asked to identify the kind of learner you feel you are based on the learning styles proposed by two psychologists, Peter Honey and Alan Mumford (1992):

<p>An activist: you like to learn by doing things. You are happier with project work, and all kinds of active learning. You are less happy reading long papers, analysing data and sitting in lectures.</p>	<p>A reflector: you are more cautious and like to weigh up all the issues before acting. When you make a decision, it is thought through. You are probably happy to work on a project, if you are given time to observe all the facts before making a decision. You dislike having work dumped on you and get worried by tight deadlines.</p>
<p>A pragmatist: you like taking theories and putting them into practice and you need to see the benefit and relevance of what you are doing. If you are learning something you feel has no practical value, you lose interest. You may want to ask your tutor 'why are we learning this?' If you are a student who says 'I don't like this course as it is all theory' then your learning preference is probably 'pragmatist' or 'activist'.</p>	<p>A theorist: you like to understand what is behind certain actions and enjoy working through issues theoretically and in a well-structured way and whether you apply it or not doesn't interest you so much. You may be the one to ask questions as to why and how something occurs. You dislike unstructured sessions and dislike it when you are asked to reflect on some activity or say what you felt about it.</p>

Each of these learning styles represents a point on the learning cycle proposed by David Kolb in 1975 (Figure 1) showing that when we learn something we need concrete experience, time to observe and reflect on abstract concepts and theories before we apply these ideas in new situations. We can start this learning cycle at any point, and as a learner we are happier in some of the stages than others and it is this that gives us our learning preferences.

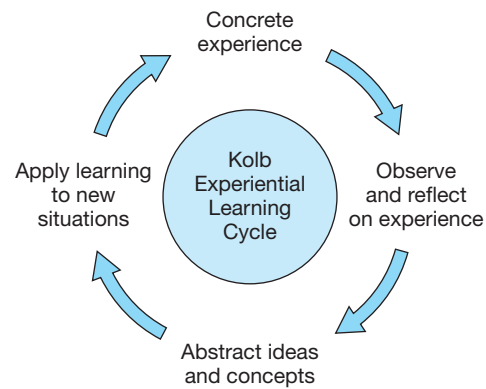


Figure 1 Kolb experiential learning cycle
Adapted from Smith (2001)

Which part of the learning cycle do you feel more comfortable with and how might this affect your learning? Can you find ways of working around other aspects of the learning cycle that you don't feel so comfortable with? To be a successful learner you will need to be able to at least function on all points of the learning cycle, even though you may be happier in one area.

Move from novice to expert

Knowing how novices see things and how experts see things is a helpful shorthand in understanding how we learn. No one is expecting you to become an expert overnight, but you will see your tutors as experts and wonder why you can't understand things that appear so simple to them, and vice versa they may be puzzled why you can't understand something. But just remember you are probably much better on mobile phone technology than any of your lecturers!

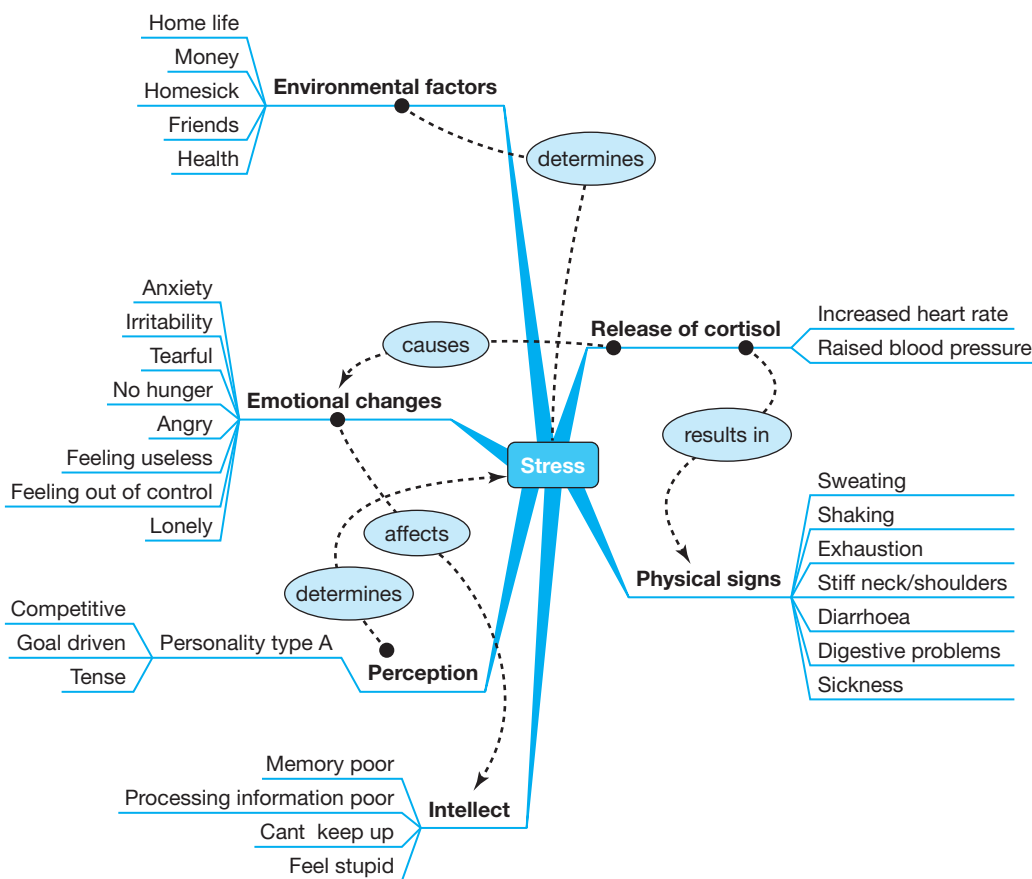
How often have you felt that you just don't know what your brain can do with yet another piece of information? These pieces seem to be all unconnected. You feel frustrated as you panic about trying to remember it all. This is because you haven't yet been able to process this information into chunks and store it away ready for retrieval when you want it. The more you learn, reflect and revise a subject, the more you will start to see patterns in the information and you can start to group things. At that point, these chunks of information become knowledge and you can then start applying it.

One of the major things that experts do that you won't do as a novice is find order and patterns in information and they do this by chunking pieces of information together; they know how to make these chunks and identify the patterns. This means that, unlike novices, they are not working with discrete pieces of information, they already know how it fits into a larger jigsaw. Experts therefore have that bigger picture.

One way to help you integrate these pieces of information, and start to build the bigger picture, is to draw a concept map (see Activity 2). This technique was developed by Joseph Novak in the 1960s and is a visual method of showing linkages between ideas, concepts or topics. Each topic is linked by a line that indicates the nature of that relationship. See the example below.

Concept maps can be drawn as hierarchies, flow charts or networks (as below). If you prefer a more linear approach, use an indented list that indicates at least a hierarchical relationship. However, a list on its own is less useful as you need to see the relationships between things.

Concept maps enable you to see the relationship between concepts and how chunks of things belong together. You may find this difficult at the beginning of a topic but if you persist it will pay off and you will develop an integrated view of your topic and start to mimic the experts. Also, for each topic you are revising for an exam, finalise your revision with a concept map. Then use your concept maps for quick revision prior to the exam.



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ACTIVITY 2 Create a concept map

Look at Chapter 1.2, 'Managing your time', and develop a concept map for your current approach to time management using the concepts in that chapter. How well can you piece information together into a set of related topics? Try using this technique when you are note-taking. You may first have to take a set of linear notes as you read through a text, but then afterwards you can link it together through a concept map. If you really don't like creating concept maps write out a hierarchical list or flow chart.

Get organised

In order to be an effective learner you need to understand how you learn and how you manage yourself in order to learn. Sue Drew from Sheffield Hallam University carried out a piece of research in 2001 asking students what helped or hindered their academic achievement (Drew, 2001). She reported that students came up with four main areas:

- self-management, including taking responsibility for their own learning
- motivation to study
- understanding and reflection of their learning experience
- support from their tutors and the institution.

These findings were also supported by a report on the first-year experience of UK Higher Education students (Yorke *et al.*, 2007). Some of the features that first-year students do not like are: workload and time management, confusion about assessments and lack of feedback. If you are a first-year student then you need to work on your time management and be prepared to ask for feedback.

Motivation to study is your primary driver in being successful in your studies. If you don't feel motivated to study, or you feel you have chosen the wrong subject, then stop now and consider what you want to do. Select one of the following questions to answer privately:

1. I want to study this subject because ...
2. I know I want to study, but I'd prefer to study ...
3. I don't really know why I am here, I would rather do ...

From now on, it will be assumed that you are motivated to study.

Self-management is an overarching skill you need to develop. As an 18-year-old first-year student this may be the first time you have left home and you have to sort out accommodation, finance, new friendship groups and understand all the documentation associated with your study programme as well as start to learn something. If you are a mature or international student you will have additional issues to contend with. So, being able to manage all these aspects of your 'new life' can be daunting.

You need to quickly identify where you can get support for your needs. The Students Union is an excellent place to start. They will have an overview of all the services available to you at your institution. Your teaching department will probably have a student office where you can sort out specific things relating to your study. Get familiar with what is available and build a rapport with key people.

If you feel that self-management is an issue for you take a look at the chapters on stress and time management and develop your own strategies.

Develop an attitude

The greatest discovery of my generation is that a human being can alter his life by altering his attitudes of mind.

William James (1842–1910), US Pragmatist philosopher and psychologist

Developing a ‘can do’ attitude is going to help you enormously. This will enable you to manage yourself and feel in control of events around you. Your confidence will develop and you will easily be able to manage your time and stress. Chapter 1.1, ‘Managing your stress’, will help you work through the concept of self-belief or ‘self efficacy’, a term that was first coined by the psychologist Albert Bandura. For self-belief to gain a hold you need to:

1. be motivated in what you do
2. believe in yourself
3. recognise and deal with things that stress you so you can control your anxiety
4. look for solutions not obstacles
5. organise your time so you feel on top of things and in control
6. reflect and recognise your strengths and weaknesses in order to make informed choices.

If you feel this is an issue for you, you may want to look Chapter 1.1 on managing stress now.

Reflect on your learning

If someone said to you ‘Just reflect on what you have just said for a moment ...’ you know that you would be expected to think about what you have just said, and then reconsider the implications of it and what you’ve learned from it. What you are actually doing is: (a) recapping on what you said (replay), (b) taking a more objective look at the implications of what you said (reframing your actions) and (c) learning from it (re-assessing your actions and future actions). Activity 3 helps you reflect on your learning.

ACTIVITY 3 How do you feel about reflecting on your progress?

What I feel ...	Usually me	Think again ...
I find reflection difficult because I can't see what I am learning.		Work with a friend. Sometimes it is difficult when you first start to be objective about your own skills, especially when we are encouraged to be modest most of the time.
I find it a waste of time.		OK, don't call it reflecting, but make a list of the things you can do well, OK, or poorly and work out how you can improve. If someone asked you in an interview if you were a good team player how would you answer and if they asked what makes a good team player, what would you say?
I can't see where I'm developing skills in my courses.		Each course/unit should have a description of what you'll be expected to learn along with the assessment. Check the assessments and the learning outcomes (these should also include of list of skills you're learning) and from this you can see what skills and knowledge you are developing.
I don't know what to do with my personal development profile (PDP) when I complete it.		Your PDP should be part of every year in your degree. In some degrees it is built into the first year and then vaguely mentioned in years after that. Try and keep it up to date, this is for you and you can use it to adjust your CV and keep you prepared for those interviews and even for part-time work.
<i>Sum up your own feelings about reflecting on your own skills and knowledge</i>		

Reflection is important if you are to develop your understanding of your skills, yourself and your knowledge. You will be expected to work in teams, write essays and give presentations, etc., and through reflection you will be able to recap, reframe and re-assess your learning. Many students dislike the reflection aspect, but once they get used to doing it they see the value.

For most of the time we go about our business, interacting with people, developing skills and gaining knowledge without really being aware that we are doing this. A lot of what we learn is 'implicit', which means we are not aware that we are learning. Sometimes it takes another person to say what you have been learning in order to realise how you are developing. Implicit learning therefore comprises skills and knowledge you have, but you don't know you have. However, if you reflect on what you have been doing and

you are able to objectively ‘stand back’ and think about it, you start to see the skills and knowledge you have and these then become ‘explicit’, i.e. we are conscious of them. Once these are explicit we are able to refer to them in our CV, talk about them at an interview and plan to use them again. On the other hand, while our skills and knowledge remain implicit, we can only react to our environment and when someone asks us what we can do, we tend to look a bit vague and trot out the usual ‘I don’t know.’ Good reflection therefore enables us to be more strategic and create opportunities to improve ourselves, while having a better understanding of how we will perform in a similar event. This is the hallmark of a good graduate.

Reflection is not just thinking about what happened at the end of some event; it occurs at various stages. For an assignment it is:

- at the beginning when you reflect on what you have to do
- during the assignment where you adjust your plans in light of your experience
- afterwards, and it is this reflection that you resent. However, post-reflection provides you with the strategic information you need to take forward to the next assignment and it also makes you articulate what you have learnt.

Students in clinical practice for example will be familiar (if not now, then later) with ‘reflection **in** action’ and ‘reflection **on** action’. This is a term coined by Donald Schön (1930–1997), an American philosopher whose work has been adopted by many in the health professions in order to develop the ‘reflective practitioner’.

When studying, reflection can take many forms, such as:

Personal development planner	This is a record of your own assessment of your developing skills, which should include any part-time or volunteering work you do.
Reflective aspects of coursework, e.g. working in groups	Sometimes a formal part of your coursework assessment.
Tutor feedback	Feedback from your tutors is important for your learning. Most students complain they don’t have enough feedback. Try asking for specific feedback when you hand in your coursework if you feel you are not getting the feedback you want. Remember good feedback enables you to make an action plan for improvement.
Peer feedback	Sometimes you may be asked to assess your peers, e.g. on an oral presentation, part of a report or their ability to work in a group. Once again, be objective and act fairly. Don’t give marks on your likes or dislikes for that person. Be professional.

End-of-unit evaluation	This allows you to reflect on the whole unit, how coherent it was, how much you've learned, the organisation and how well you've been taught. Think about this objectively and professionally and reflect fairly. Don't give your tutor a low score because you simply don't like him or her or because you got some low marks.
Tutorials and seminars	An opportunity to go over difficult topics and discuss.
A student representative on a department committee	A chance to represent fellow students and reflect on your educational provision constructively.
Study groups with friends	Informal opportunity.

The personal development profile (PDP) is the key document for recording your reflections. Ensure you keep this up to date, whether your tutors ask you or not. This is primarily **for you** and the more explicit you can be with what you know and can do, the easier it is to talk about it to a potential employer. All the chapters in this book have been designed to incorporate reflective aspects; try using these activities to get you in the habit of reflecting. Activity 4 asks you to consider what you know about reflection.

2 Academic integrity – plagiarism

A Times Higher Education UK survey (March 2006) found that one in six students admitted to copying from friends, one in ten to looking for essays online and four in ten said they knew someone who had passed off work of someone else for their own. This is now recognised as an international problem and universities across the world are starting to tackle it. The main problem with academic cheating, particularly if it escalates, is that it is unfair to those students who don't cheat and eventually will undermine the value of degree awards, as its standard cannot then be guaranteed. Would you like to be treated by a doctor or a nurse who you knew cheated throughout their degree? Would you like to walk over a bridge where the structural calculations were checked by the structural engineer who cheated through his/her degree? I am sure the answer is a resounding 'no'.

Violating academic integrity can take several forms:

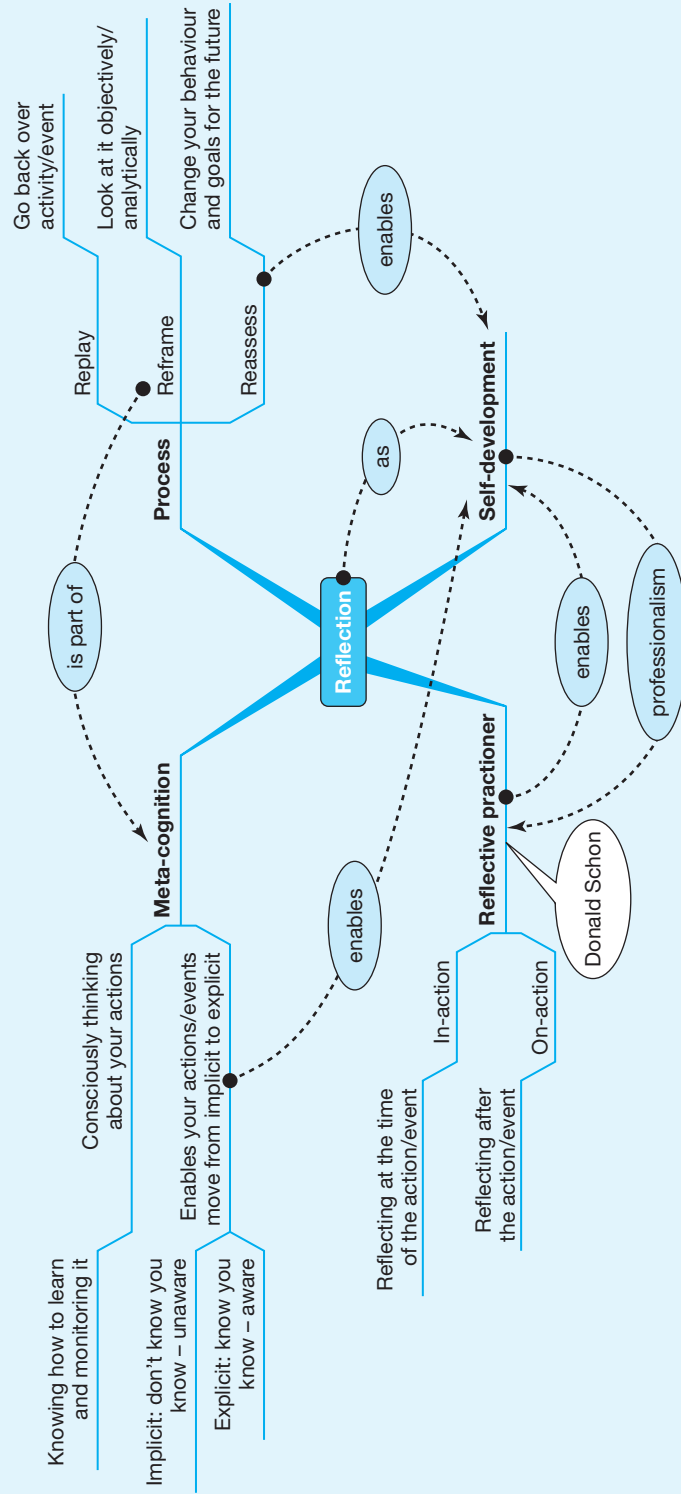
1. No referencing

- You must have read some authors' work, even if it is in a textbook, to give you ideas for your paper. Make sure you have the correct reference at the back of your paper. Ensure you use the correct referencing style for your subject. If you are not sure, ask your tutor or a librarian in your institution.

ACTIVITY 4 How's your writing?

Look at the concept map below on reflection and write a paragraph to describe it. This map below could reflect your notes from reading a chapter on reflective practice. Try and capture the main ideas in a coherent paragraph or two.

You may want to give your description to a friend for them to check your writing. If you found this very difficult, you may want to go to Part 4, 'Develop your writing'.



- [The Miserable Mill \(A Series of Unfortunate Events, Book 4\) online](#)
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- <http://www.uverp.it/library/Beginning-PHP-and-MySQL--From-Novice-to-Professional--3rd-Edition-.pdf>
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