CONTROLLING YOUR OWN STUDY BEHAVIOUR

Self-Reinforcement

The purpose of this writing is to assist you in gaining control of your own studying.
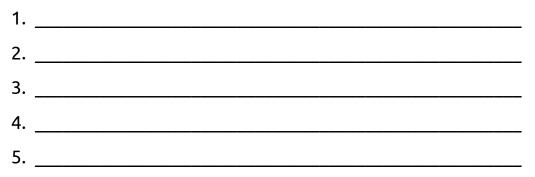
How is knowledge gained?

Most would agree that gaining knowledge (or learning) involves two things: experience and practice. Reading textbooks, listening to teachers, and reviewing class notes are all forms of experience that seem to be essential to learning in school. It is also true that we must practice the knowledge behaviour in order to make the experiences meaningful. This is most clear in the case of knowing how to do things – we practice sport, music, art, etc., to develop these skills. It is also true, but perhaps less obvious, in the case of knowing about things – recitation of information we learn from a textbook is one of the best methods of learning and remembering it. In short, to gain knowledge we must study. We must bring ourselves into contact with the relevant information, and we must practice relevant forms of behaviour.

Why gain knowledge?

Okay, so studying involves exposure to information and practice of knowledge behaviour. This is easy to say, but hard to do. Something is missing, and it is this missing something that is at the heart of the problem for many students. What is missing is the reason for studying.

Take a few minutes and write in the spaces below the best reasons you can think of for studying. Be sincere, complete, and brief.

Reasons Why One Should Study

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

Now, let's analyse the reasons that you have given. First, ask yourself for each reason whether it is a positive reason or a negative reason. Is the reason for studying something good that you will gain because you have studied (positive), or is it something bad that you will avoid or escape from because you have studied (negative)? Put a "+" next to positive reasons. Put a "—" next to negative reasons.

Next, ask if the reason for studying is an immediate consequence of studying or is a delayed consequence of studying. That is, do you get something or avoid something immediately after studying, or is the consequence delayed by hours, days, or years? If the consequence is immediate (say, less than one hour) put an "I" next to it. If the reason is a delayed consequence put a "D" next to it.

Finally, ask if the amount of work needed to obtain the consequence is large and occurs infrequently (e.g., passing Honours Math) or small and frequent (e.g., reading a chapter to answer questions). If the reason is one where you get large but infrequent consequences label it with an "L". If the reason is one where you get small but frequent consequences label it with an "S".

"Good" and "Bad" reasons. Now, go back and look at your list of reasons for studying. You will probably see that some of your reasons are positive (which is good), but that they are delayed or require a large amount of work (which is bad). You may also see that some of your reasons are negative, you study to avoid things that you dislike (which is bad). Here, "Good" and "Bad" refer to the effectiveness of the consequences for studying. The best reasons for studying (the most effective reasons) are those that are positive, immediate, and require small amounts of work. If you want to increase your studying a good place to begin is to arrange for these positive, immediate and frequent consequences to follow studying. How can we do this?

The hardest problem to solve when constructing a self-reward system is finding a way to make the rewards immediate. For example, let's say you are planning to use "going to a movie" as a reinforcer for completing your Geography Project. Unless your study place is located next to the cinema, it would be impossible to have the reinforcer as an immediate consequence of studying. One way to solve this problem is to use a "token" reinforcer as the immediate reward, and the movie as the "backup" reward. In this example, you could divide the project up into meaningful chunks of work (e.g., reading over the project to get it clear, looking in your text or notes for similar problems, drawing a basic flow chart of your work, etc.). Then *as soon as* you complete each chunk of work, you drop a Euro (or so) into a jar. When done, you take the money from the jar and go to the movie.

Let me summarise the major features of a self-reinforcement system:

1. The reward need not be "big" as long as it is *positive*;

2. The reward or token must be something that is an *immediate* consequence of studying;

3. The amount of *work* needed to obtain the reward should be *small* in the beginning, but can be increased as progress is made.

4. It is important that the reward only be earned IF you do the required work. If you cheat on the system you will not obtain your goal.

5. You should let your behaviour be your guide. If your system begins to break down, adjust it accordingly.

In the spaces below write in some positive rewards that you could use to increase your studying. Try to pick a few in each category listed.

Activity Rewards (e.g., Playing GAA, watching Netflix, running, etc.)

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Primary Rewards (e.g., crisps, coffee, 7-Up, etc. or maybe something more healthy!)

4. _____

5. _____

6. _____

Token Rewards (e.g., cinema tickets, money dropped in a jar, etc.)

7. _____

8. _____

9. _____