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# Learning to Learn

The Skill and Will of College Success

Scott W. VanderStoep  
Paul R. Pintrich



# LEARNING TO LEARN

**THE SKILL AND WILL OF COLLEGE SUCCESS**

*Scott W. VanderStoep*

HOPE COLLEGE

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# PREFACE

**I**t takes two things to be successful in life: skill and will. This is true not just in academic pursuits but also in athletics, music, employment, and relationships. Successful people in all walks of life are both skillful and willful. The *skill* is the competencies and strategies needed to do things well. The *will* is the desire and motivation to do things well. In college, the skill component is the cognitive aspect of learning. It involves setting goals and plans and trying to enact them. It also involves working to become proficient at reading, writing, studying, note-taking, and test-taking. The will component is the motivational aspect of learning. It involves motivating yourself with different goals, trying hard, persisting, and finding what things motivate you to excellence.

This book is about skill and will and improving both. Some students have high skill and low will (people might say, “He is so smart, but he’s lazy.”). Some students have low skill and high will (“She works really hard, but she’s not very smart.”). And some students are low on both or high on both. Whatever the case, this book will help you to improve both your skill and your will.

The philosophy of this book is simple: to get smarter and learn more you need to improve your skill and your will. Being skillful (smart, intelligent) alone won’t be sufficient. Being willful (motivated, driven) alone won’t be sufficient. Having just one component will always leave you performing below your potential. So this book encourages you to reflect on both your skill and your will and offers many suggestions for improving both.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Our acknowledgments for this book must begin with Wilbert J. (Bill) McKeachie. If you studied college student learning at the University of Michigan any time in the last 55 years, Bill had an impact on your professional life. This is clearly the case for both of us. Bill served as Scott’s mentor when he was in graduate school and as Paul’s mentor during his postdoctoral studies. Most importantly, he created the *Learning to Learn* course at Michigan. He trained both of us as his teaching assistants for this course, which sparked our interest in developing this book.

Bill was also the leader of our research group at the National Center for Research to Improve Post-Secondary Teaching and Learning. Other people involved at the center when it was housed at the University of Michigan were instrumental in developing many of the ideas in this book, most specifically and importantly the development of the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ). We particularly recognize Teresa Garcia and Yi-Guang Lin for their



help and their ideas that led to the development of the MSLQ and our program of research on college student learning.

At Hope College, colleagues in the Psychology Department are always supportive of Scott's professional life. Particularly, John Shaughnessy and David Myers were optimistic and encouraging about this project. As textbook authors themselves, they were good at listening to Scott as he struggled through his first book project. Other people at Hope who have served as both mentors and colleagues include Chuck Green, Jane Dickie, Tom Ludwig, Jim Motiff, Pat Roehling, Lorna Jarvis, Mary Inman, Charlotte Witvliet, and Kathy Adamski. Scott is also grateful to Hope's Dean of Social Science, Nancy Miller, Provost (Emeritus) Jacob Nyenhuis, and President James Bultman for hiring him (twice), for advising him, and for their inclusive understanding of scholarship and faculty development. Many thanks to these people and all other unnamed colleagues who still believe in a place called Hope.

On this project, Laurie Van Ark provided invaluable assistance in proofreading, formatting, and offering many important suggestions for improving readability. Her care and attention to detail are greatly appreciated. Laurie, along with Barb Neper Throop, was very helpful in assuming added responsibility at Hope's Frost Research Center, thus allowing Scott to spend more time on the book. Briony Peters helped with preparation of the glossary and the references.

Paul has had the exceedingly good fortune and privilege to spend his entire academic career at the University of Michigan in the Combined Program in Education and Psychology, an interdisciplinary program supported by the School of Education and the Department of Psychology. For over 20 years now his colleagues and graduate students at Michigan have enriched his scholarship and his personal life in countless ways. Bill McKeachie gave Paul a postdoctoral research position back in 1982 when he finished his Ph.D. and introduced him to research on college student learning and motivation. Paul would probably not even be in academia today if it were not for all of Bill's support, encouragement, and mentoring in those early years. He can never thank Bill enough for his modeling of how to be not just a good scholar and teacher, but most importantly a good person. Luckily, Paul still has the opportunity to learn from Bill to this day, as they continue to collaborate on research on college student learning and motivation in their College Student Research Group.

Paul also has benefited from the fertile and supportive climate that his faculty and graduate student colleagues have fostered in the Combined Program. There is truly no better place in the world to study student motivation, and he thanks his colleagues Phyllis Blumenfeld, Jacque Eccles, Stuart Karabenick, Martin Maehr, Ron Marx, the late Carol Midgley, and Kai Schnabel for providing the intellectual stimulation and motivational support for his research over the years. Finally, Paul has learned a great deal from all his former and current graduate students, but especially thanks those who have worked with him in the College Student Research Group over the years, including Teresa Garcia, Barbara Hofer, Christina Rhee, Brian Sims, David Smith, Scott VanderStoep, Chris Wolters, Shirley Yu, and Akane Zusho. They have been the source of many ideas and insights, and he could not have accomplished any of his research and scholarship without their help.

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Students or faculty who wish to comment, correct, or suggest ideas for future editions should send email to [vanderstoep@hope.edu](mailto:vanderstoep@hope.edu).



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# *Becoming a Self-Regulating Learner*

**T**his book has one goal: We wrote it to help college students become better learners. Each of the authors has spent several years teaching a course in learning and study skills. Each of the authors has also spent many years researching student learning and motivation in college, high school, and middle school. We believe the best way to become a better learner is to listen to practical advice based on educational and psychological research. This book is designed to teach readers about human learning and motivation, and in so doing identify specific and practical ways that readers can improve their own learning and motivation.

## *Chapter Goals*

This chapter will help you:

- Understand the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ) and how it can improve your learning
- Have an initial assessment of your strengths in learning
- Be able to identify growth areas in need of improvement, and think about ways to make improvement
- Have an overview of the book, so that if a particular need becomes urgent, you know where to look to find suggestions



# CHAPTER 1

## WHO SHOULD READ THIS BOOK?

This book is designed for college students who want to perform better in class. We suspect that most of the time students in their first or second year of college will be using this book. The book contains helpful advice for students of all ages, and we also believe it describes strategies that will assist you in life after college. (In fact, both of us found that writing the book provided us with helpful reminders about how to improve our own work and personal life.) In short, this book is for all college students who are trying to improve their learning and achievement.

## WHY SHOULD YOU USE THIS BOOK?

Many individuals are successful in school and in other settings, such as on the job, at home, and in social situations. These individuals are not just “really smart” or “highly intelligent.” There are a number of reasons these individuals do well in many different situations, but two general reasons are what we will call **skill** and **will**. *Skill* refers to the various types of knowledge and strategies that individuals learn and that all individuals can acquire throughout their lives. Skill is *not* an innate, genetic capacity for learning. It is changeable and it is learnable by all. Some people may have more innate intellectual ability, but this book focuses on the fact that each student can improve in knowledge and strategies. Thus, everyone can get smarter by reading this book.

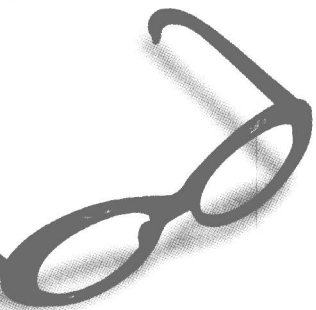
*Will* refers to the various ways individuals attempt to motivate and regulate themselves in their daily lives. Will involves taking charge of your life and being in control of your motivation, learning, and general behavior in all aspects of your life.

A recurring theme in this book is that successful individuals are always using both skill and will as they engage in different activities. Students need to have both the knowledge and strategies for learning, and the motivation to use them. Perhaps you know students who are high in knowledge and strategies, but can't seem to get motivated to use their expertise. These are the students who may do well in high school when their time and work is more structured by others (e.g., teachers, parents), but then can't seem to motivate themselves to control and regulate their behavior in more unstructured situations such as college. This book can help. On the other hand, some students who are motivated may work very hard and study all the time, but without the appropriate knowledge and strategies, they don't study as effectively as they could and don't do as well as they should in school. For as hard as these students work, they should do better. This book can help.

The purpose of this book is to help you learn how to be both skillful and willful in your learning. In other words, to help you become what we call a **self-regulated learner**. A self-regulated learner is one who actively plans, monitors, and controls her own learning and behavior.

## THE PERSPECTIVE OF THIS BOOK

Dozens of “study skills” books are currently available. What is different about this one? That is, why should you use this one instead of another one you see on the college bookshelf? The first difference between this book and other study-





skills books is that we consistently base our suggested study skills on psychological research we and others have done with college students. In this book we translate our own research findings into real-life suggestions for ways you can become a better learner. Many other researchers have studied effective learning extensively, and we will draw on their findings as well.

So, these suggestions are not based on our intuitions, or what might have worked for *us* in school, or “folklore” that has been passed down from previous generations of college students. Instead, these suggestions come from our efforts to digest many research studies from the fields of cognitive, motivational, and educational psychology, and to draw implications from them. This approach ensures that the suggestions in this book have been shown to be valid for many other college students. Does this mean that *every* student will be helped by *every* suggestion we make? No. Simply because a particular study technique has been found to be related to improved learning does not *guarantee* that the strategy will help you. We recognize that all students are different, and that each student must adopt his or her own repertoire of skills based on experience. Still, the skills we present represent the “best bets” for starting to develop your personal study-skills arsenal.

A second difference between this book and other study-skills books is how we present the techniques to you. Many other books provide you with “cook-book” approaches to solving your learning problems. For example, a book might say that when you are studying for an exam you should do the following three things: A, B, and C. Is there anything wrong with this? Not necessarily. For the most part, the suggestions offered in these types of books are helpful. The difference in this book is that we also provide the rationale behind the learning strategies. Instead of simply providing “recipes” for learning, we tell you why these strategies are supposed to work at certain times. This involves describing the psychological principles underlying the strategies we suggest. For example, consider our section on ways to improve your memory (Chapter 5). Instead of simply providing you with a list of ways to improve your memory, we first describe what psychologists know about the human memory system. From this understanding, not only can we offer suggestions for how to improve your memory, but now you can also devise special memory improvement techniques for yourself based on your knowledge of the human memory system.

You might be asking, “Why bother with all this other stuff? Just tell me how to get good grades.” The reason is this: We provide the underlying psychological theory behind these learning strategies because each learning situation is different. We don’t believe there is one learning strategy that will work in all situations. If your study-skills book simply says “Do A, B, and C when studying for a test,” then that assumes all tests are the same, and that all students are the same. In fact, different tests carry with them different memory requirements. So, studying for a test using techniques A, B, and C might work for some tests, but not others. And, some strategies might work for some students, but not for others.

In short, different tasks will require different strategies. How will you decide which one to use? If you understand the psychology behind each of the strategies (that is, if you understand *why* a certain strategy is supposed to work), you will be able to make an informed decision about how to study in a given situation.

The self-regulated learner is able to do this. We want you to be able to recognize when and why you need to study in certain ways. Instead of wandering blindly through your courses, trying learning strategies randomly, we want you to be able to recognize which learning strategies are needed for different types of