Helping Students to Help Themselves
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My approach to teaching, learning, and mentoring is guided by my core values of collaboration, accessibility, scientific reasoning, creativity, and humility. Together, these shape everything I do. Here I share some "tips" that may be useful for others facilitating courses in the Mason Core and may indirectly contribute to setting students up for success – both here and in their future. Each semester I learn more about how students in my classes are managing their academic experiences, and strive to create a learning experience that will benefit them in my course as well as in the rest of their college journey.

In the spirit of collaboration and humility, I welcome feedback or conversation around any of the ideas in this document – whenever you are reading it. I am always interested in connecting with folks in other disciplines and would love to hear from you (amelley@gmu.edu). Use the QR code or hyperlinks here to reach a Google Drive folder where you can comment on this document, access all of the links, as well as additional resources. If you like podcasts, and would like to hear more about my perspectives on teaching, you can listen here on Psych Sessions, a show about teaching psychology. Most episodes are relevant to teaching any subject, not just psychology.

Busting Learning Myths

Learning Styles. Unfortunately, the myth of Learning Styles will not die. Students are not to blame – they have been told by teachers, parents, peers – that it is important to know their "learning style" so they can make course material fit it – or their teachers can teach differently for different students. They have taken tests like the VARK, even here at Mason, to "determine their learning style." The evidence from cognitive science is clear – it is not useful, and in fact can be harmful, to hold this belief.

> The evidence is clear – it is not useful, and in fact can be harmful, to hold the belief that learning styles are important for student success.

This is not to say that we don't prefer ways of learning. Some of us would rather sit and listen, others want to be up and doing something, others prefer reading or graphic organizers. We cannot just sit and listen to lessons about geography and learn that subject well, however – nor would we ask our teacher to let us just listen to this course material. On the contrary, we rely on material with images, we put our hands on a globe, and more. If we have impaired vision, we would require tactile learning materials – auditory learning would not suffice.

I have read countless student evaluations or survey responses saying their learning style is X and they can't do Y. Continuing with the geography example – an auditory learner who believes they can only learn well with auditorily, might check out of a mostly visual lesson and miss out on the opportunity in the same way someone who believes they "aren't good at math" perpetuates this belief by avoiding math and therefore not developing their math skills.

Likewise, students who hold tightly to the myth of learning styles would be at a major disadvantage in our active learning classrooms! Why did GMU invest in these classrooms and train faculty to use them? Because we know that people learn best when they can learn in multiple modalities. When learners engage with course material in more than one way, they have more long-lasting learning. This can also be referred to as "dual-coding" – see this blog, and this video, both by the Learning Scientists for more ion this. These are both helpful when sharing this idea with your classes. Students in my courses also like this video on busting the myth of learning styles.

Multi-tasking. Another belief many students have is that they can "multi-task" while learning. We do a class demo that turns this belief upside down. We spend a week on Memory in Introductory Psychology, and it is within that context that we do this demo – and students experience firsthand how multi-tasking can multiply time spent studying by three, on average. This folder contains slides for the multi-tasking demo as well as the study strategies lesson described below.

Study Skills. Busting myths in psychology classes can leave learners feeling like they have lost something. The myth busting can also backfire, leading to more tightly held false beliefs. These are very real risks. How can we counter these effects? In my classes, I try to find out what learners are already doing well in supporting their own learning. I provide a list of common study practices and ask what they do, encouraging the use of the most effective strategies (and busting their belief that reading and highlighting is a good strategy on its own..). Usually, students identify at least one practice that has evidence of effectiveness. If they don't, they likely already have some motivation to find out what practices are more effective, and I provide them with that information. Again, this folder contains slides that you can use or adapt for a similar use.

Time Management – Collaborative Syllabus and Note-taking

I have noticed that many of our students are still learning basic time management skills. Those new to college and even some more experienced learners can benefit from more support. The practice of including Mason resources in the syllabus and referring to them has proved insufficient for some. I want to see all students succeed that have the desire to do so, and as a result I have built in more "academic coaching" aspects to my courses. I have an "onboarding" assignment that includes creating a study plan, and next semester, I will incorporate the idea of a Comprehensive Syllabus. See the video linked here from Wake Forest University for more information. Many students have five courses, five different Blackboard navigation schemes (plus any extra tech), five different attendance and late policies, and five different exam/assignment schedules. The Comprehensive Syllabus can support the organization of all of these pieces and decrease cognitive load.

Finally, another practice I've begun to implement is advising students not to take notes during lectures or discussion. Instead, I pause every 10 minutes and remind them to write some notes. This pause might also include retrieval practice or a transition to another activity. This can free them from lecture transcription and support more useful notetaking.

Again, I believe that providing this support to students builds the skills they need to succeed in college. It might seem like too much hand-holding, but in my large classes it is easy for students to get lost. If

one or two more students can succeed because they engaged with these tools, it is more than worth my time.