

The **Student Mindset**

**A 30-item toolkit for
anyone learning anything**

Steve Oakes and Martin Griffin



Crown House Publishing Limited

www.crownhouse.co.uk

First published by

Crown House Publishing Ltd
Crown Buildings, Bancyfelin, Carmarthen, Wales, SA33 5ND, UK
www.crownhouse.co.uk

and

Crown House Publishing Company LLC
PO Box 2223, Williston, VT 05495, USA
www.crownhousepublishing.com

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British Library of Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue entry for this book is available from the British Library.

Print ISBN 978-178583308-3
Mobi ISBN 978-178583392-2
ePub ISBN 978-178583393-9
ePDF ISBN 978-178583394-6

LCCN 2018961109

Printed and bound in the UK by Gomer Press, Llandysul, Ceredigion

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Acknowledgements

Thanks to all at Crown House Publishing who encouraged us as we worked on this project. Many thanks in particular to those who've helped us shape the book: David and Karen Bowman for their thoughtful feedback and consistent support; Daniel Bowen for his assistance; Beverley Randell and Rosalie Williams for all their hard work; and Emma Tuck for her attention to detail. Graphics and design have been important on this project so a big thank you goes to Tom Fitton for his tremendous work.

Manchester Metropolitan University has been an important part of this project – thanks for the debate and discussion, non-stop coffee and endless snacks. Special thanks go to Dr Jennifer McGahan for her relentless support of the VESPA model and for making sure that we stay research-informed.

We would also like to thank Kevin Green at the Manchester Health Academy and all his staff for testing and trying the VESPA tools with their students. And, of course, special thanks to our families for everything else.

Visit us at thestudentmindset.com, follow us on Twitter @vespamindset for our latest updates or say hello via thestudentmindset@gmail.com.

Introduction

W

e've spent a combined forty years studying how people learn.

We've followed students who battle through difficult times, stay positive and get really good results – and wished we could be the same. We've worked with students who get exasperated, unfocused and demotivated – and recognised our past selves in them too.

We've spoken to thousands of students about how they study and what they do every day or week that makes a difference. We've discussed the problems we all face when we try to learn something new.

We've discovered huge amounts.

For example, we've learned that past success does not correlate with future success; some students with a track record of underperforming go on to achieve amazing results, while others with a great track record don't achieve what they were hoping for.

We've seen scores of students persist with approaches that aren't working well and spoken to hundreds of students who have decided to study in new ways. Many of the latter have seen their results change significantly as they've adjusted their tactics. We've seen that while cognitive factors can be important, non-cognitive factors also play a huge role in academic success.

Most importantly, we've found that there are a set of tools and strategies that keep coming up when we ask successful students what it is they do. They seem to be in control – they're balanced, grounded and happy despite the challenges of study.

We've been lucky enough to borrow these techniques and apply them to our own studies. We're both currently students ourselves, and we've become better learners by stealing the tricks and tactics associated with calm, purposeful study and, ultimately, getting good results.

In short, we've discovered that academic success isn't just about intelligence. This might seem counterintuitive at first, but time after time we've seen students do well because of the way they work – the routines, strategies and habits they've created for themselves.

These tricks and tactics are what this book is all about.

VESPA

So what are the tools and techniques used by successful learners? We've become so obsessed that we've begun collecting them, reading about them and practising them. We've started designing our own and testing them with students.

For us, it's become clear that these strategies sit in one of five groups, each associated with a particular characteristic. The five characteristics or qualities we've discovered in high performing students are vision, effort, systems, practice and attitude, or VESPA.

Let's take them one at a time ...

Vision

Mindset starts with ambition because our potential is limited by our ambition. High aspirations drive us to take more risk, have more courage, show more resilience and be more positive.

Owen (2015), p. 17

Figuring out *why* you're studying helps to release extra levels of commitment, determination and positivity. When times are tough, high vision students can remember why they're going through difficulties. They persist for longer and manage to remain optimistic. And so students with a strong vision get better results. So:

- * Do you have a clear plan for the future?
- * Have you written down your goals?

Vision is about having a well-defined goal: it's about making a connection between the work you are doing and your reason for doing it. In simple terms it's about knowing the outcomes you want to achieve and developing an appetite to achieve them. Angela Duckworth, the distinguished professor of psychology at the University of Pennsylvania, calls this 'grit'. In her book of the same name, Duckworth (2016) found that people who know clearly what

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they want to achieve, and then stick to it, are more likely to be successful. They're more gritty.

How might you measure a person's grit? Duckworth and her team developed an interesting questionnaire that you might want to try yourself – here's the link: <https://angeladuckworth.com/grit-scale/>.

If you complete the questionnaire, don't worry if your score seems low. You might not have had the opportunity to fully develop your grit yet. It might be worth spending some time thinking about when you've been most gritty. What were you doing? At what stage of your life? Finally, and most importantly, how are you going to be gritty when you're studying?

If we dig deep enough, most of us have a vision – a big goal we'd like to achieve. It's important not to let people talk you out of your goal or tell you that you can't do it. Distance yourself from those who do. One of the best ways to get clarity on your goals is to write them down and reflect on them.

There are seven vision activities in this book. If you want to jump in and do all of them, they're on pages 18, 35, 38, 42, 46, 48 and 116.

Effort

*I believe that my success is due in part to some level of skill.
But more than that, I believe that I win because I out-work people.*

Gary Vaynerchuk (quoted in Brock, 2016)

We've asked thousands of students how hard they work, and then checked this against the results they achieve. The students with the best results work harder than the others. But when we spoke to low effort students, they thought they were working hard too. *Perceptions of effort are personal and relative.* So:

- * When was the last time you worked really hard on something? What were you doing?
- * Have you ever worked so hard on something that time just flew by?

The effort element of the model refers to how much work you do. Pretty much anything worth achieving requires effort. You might be aware of the 10,000 hour rule suggested by K. Anders Ericsson (2016). His research found that most experts have dedicated over 10,000 hours to their craft to become an 'expert', a fact popularised by Malcolm Gladwell in his book *Outliers: The Story of Success* (2008).

A quick internet search will reveal many students who claim to have studied with minimum effort – the PhD completed in 100 days or the master's dissertation written in a weekend. We wouldn't recommend that you use these as your benchmark. People are always looking for short cuts, but most students who achieve good results will have worked hard. It's as simple as that.

Don't panic though! We're not discussing a vast and endless 10,000 hours of nose-to-the-grindstone effort here. Effort varies from field to field. And while there isn't much research out there giving us a clear answer on exactly how much effort is needed to pass particular qualifications at certain levels or ages, what is clear to us is that high levels of effort are a habit. And anyone can start a new habit.

There are five effort activities in this book. If you want to race through all of them, they're on pages 77, 122, 133, 136 and 141.

Systems

Creativity x Organization = Impact

Belsky (2010), p. 27

Being organised allows you to collect and collate learning material and then see the connections between topics and ideas, which allows you to understand material more quickly. Organising your day well means that you get more done in less time. These two tricks – one to do with resources and the other to do with time – are at the heart of why high systems students get better results. So:

- * What does your study area look like? Is it tidy or messy? What about your files and folders?
- * Do you stick to deadlines? Are you measured and methodical, or always in crisis mode?

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System is about two things: (1) organising your learning and (2) organising your time. Students often overlook the importance of being organised. There's been some interesting research which suggests that struggling with particular academic challenges is more to do with a lack of organisation than a lack of intellectual ability. Most students will have to deal with the battles of time management, procrastination and systematising information.

We've found that students get a significant return on their investment if they develop their systems, and over the years we've picked up some great tools to help you.

There are five systems activities in this book. If you want to skip ahead and do them all, they're on pages 56, 59, 63, 66 and 70.

Practice

For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them.

Aristotle, The Nicomachean Ethics, p. 23

Learning isn't memorising information. It's memorising information and then using it to achieve certain things – to construct an argument, solve a problem, interpret unfamiliar data, build something new. High practice students get good results because they spend time practising using their information flexibly and creatively to achieve an objective. Low practice students stop once they've memorised their information (or they stop *before* they've finished memorising it!). So:

- * When was the last time you tested yourself?
- * How would you advise someone to revise for an exam?

We see practice as distinct from effort – it represents what learners do with their studies. It's the *how* of studying. When it comes to learning quickly, it's the way you practise that counts. It's hard to talk about practice without mentioning the work of K. Anders Ericsson, mentioned earlier. He has spent his entire career looking at top level performers in a number of fields. His conclusion

is that top performers don't just practise hard, they *practise in a particular way*.

There are four practice activities in the book. If you want to complete them all at once, they're on pages 80, 83, 92 and 97.

Attitude

Students who are success seekers are not bluffed by setback, poor performance, failure or academic adversity. They take the lesson to be learnt and move on. They do not dwell on the mistake; they learn from it. They do not conclude they are dumb or no good; they see mistakes and setbacks as reflecting on their effort, attitude, or the way they went about the task, which all can be improved next time. They do not assume that past failure will predict future failure.

Martin (2010), p. 22

Everyone goes through difficulties when learning. For some of the students we've talked to, these difficulties are evidence that they're not good enough. Many of them withdraw their effort, retreat from challenges, and eventually give up. The high attitude students we've interviewed and observed know that difficulties are to be expected. They keep going when times are tough, and get better results because of this. So:

- * How do you respond when something goes wrong?
- * How do you learn from your mistakes?

We all know how important having the right attitude is; it's quite often what separates performance in any field. For students to be successful we think you need four aspects of attitude. First, you need confidence in your abilities – confidence is key to academic success. Second, you need to be able to control your emotions in high stakes situations. Third, you need to respond positively when feedback indicates there is still a lot of work to be done to improve. Finally, you need a growth mindset. This means that you have to believe that you *can* improve.

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We've spoken to hundreds of students who appear to have this positive attitude in their DNA. But in fact they've just developed, sometimes subconsciously, a series of tricks and techniques to get themselves through challenging periods. We're going to share some of these with you.

Attitude is key, so there are nine attitude activities in this book. If you want to push on and do all of them at once, they're on pages 23, 27, 50, 86, 100, 106, 126, 131 and 143.

What's in a Mindset?

A mindset is a set of beliefs, principles and values which influence the way you see the world. Adopting a particular mindset is like putting on a pair of glasses – a set of lenses which modify your vision, sharpening some things and blurring others.

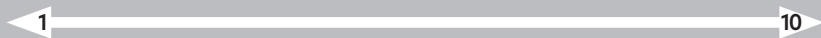
We think the five characteristics we've just shared beat intelligence hands down. And they form a mindset that's going to put you in the best position for success. This is the student mindset.

The VESPA Circle

Where do you think you sit at the moment? It's worth spending time thinking about which VESPA elements you might be strong in and which elements you might need to strengthen.

This is a simple activity to get you thinking about VESPA and to help you figure out where you might need to develop. First, consider the statements below on the continuum. Think of the line as being a 1-10 scale.

Vision:



I don't like setting goals and targets.

I always set goals for myself.

I tend not to stick to goals I've set myself.

I always finish everything I start.

Effort:



I don't like working hard.

I'm extremely hard working.

I get easily distracted.

I'm very focused when I work.

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Systems:

1

10

My files, papers and notes are very disorganised.

I am very organised in all my work.

I have no system for recording my tasks.

I use a diary/planner/app to record all my tasks.

Practice:

1

10

I do very little revision.

I use a wide range of techniques when revising.

I tend to focus on gathering and memorising information.

I set myself tricky problems and learn by trying to do them.

Attitude:

1

10

I get easily upset when things aren't going well.

I stay calm in high stakes situations like exams.

I don't have a lot of confidence in my ability.

I have high levels of self-belief.

Now you've assessed the statements, try to assign a rough numerical value for each element of VESPA between 1 and 10. Then simply shade in the section on the profile opposite, working from the inside out.



Successful students find a way to succeed.

They get the results they want.

And they achieve this not by superior ability, but by sticking to habits, routines and strategies that deliver those results.

By cutting through the noise surrounding academic success and character development, Steve Oakes and Martin Griffin have identified the five key traits and behaviours that all students need in order to achieve their goals.

VISION — EFFORT — SYSTEMS — PRACTICE — ATTITUDE

These characteristics beat cognition hands down, and in *The Student Mindset* Steve and Martin provide a ready-made series of study strategies, approaches and tactics designed to nurture these qualities and transform your motivation, commitment and productivity.

Clear, effective and engaging tools to help plan, organise and execute successful learning.



Steve Oakes is a researcher, an education trainer and an associate lecturer in psychology. Prior to assuming his current roles, he was the assistant director of sixth form at The Blue Coat School in Oldham, where he worked with his co-author, Martin Griffin, for eight years.

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ISBN 978-178583308-3



9 781785 833083

Education Study and learning skills