

# COLLEGIATE TIMES

## Column: The ultimate question: So you think you can learn?

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You're coming to Virginia Tech to study for your career and to get a degree that says you're ready, but will you really learn anything? That may be just as much in your hands as it is your professors.

First, how do you know you've learned something? Is it because you can recite a lot of facts about it? Not really - learning to drive is certainly not just memorizing traffic laws, though that matters. There are two much better measures: can you use it, and can you teach it to someone else? If you can use your knowledge of driving rules to safely navigate busy city streets, then you've learned it. Better yet, if you can teach your friend or family member some simple rules to navigate those same roads safely, then you probably have learned it well.

Second, how does learning occur? It is hard to summarize completely, but here are some basic aspects that are useful. One, learning has a starting point. That point is right now, and what you know and understand at this moment; you must use this knowledge as a tool to learn new things. Good teachers will often evaluate your starting point - known as "prior knowledge" in education-speak - at the beginning of a class to help you know where you stand and for them to work from that point.

Two, learning is active. Of course active and engaging classes are good, but what about the ones that aren't? What about learning outside of class? Simply showing up to class will not be sufficient; you need to walk into the classroom ready to discuss and ask questions. Form reading groups where everyone reads a few pages and then stop and discuss; this is especially useful in the toughest classes. Use the test above and try to teach someone else what you're studying. When you can't explain something, stop and read about it - and yes, Wikipedia is OK to help you.

Overall, this stuff will help but the most important thing is to find what you need to learn best, and places like VT's Center for Academic Enrichment and Excellence ([www.cae.vt.edu](http://www.cae.vt.edu)) are great to help get you there.

Three, learning takes time. Many studies have looked at the differences between the best learners and those who struggle. The difference - time on task. It isn't that the best are born with it, it's that they are most willing to struggle with the tough problems and then review what they've found. Struggling is one of the most important things to accept as part of learning; after all, giving up is quitting.

From all those whom I have taught and tutored, the ones who have gotten frustrated and fought through it have done the best and have gotten A's. And reviewing results and checking over work eliminates those costly "stupid mistakes" that we all make.

Third, and finally, what are the right answers? While many problems may have a single answer, many do not. Learn to challenge everything - literally. Are Newton's Laws always true? Is global warming undeniably true? Are humans the smartest species? Answering these questions isn't just fun, it is a crucial learning tool, and one

that brings learning to life.

Putting this all together, you can see that the responsibility for learning is shared between you and your instructors, and even your friends.

Ken Stanton is a Ph.D. Student and Graduate Teaching Assistant in Engineering Education.

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