



Case Study

Switching to Effective and Optimal Study Methods - a Necessary Tool for Educational Success

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Abstract: The secret of educational success and splendid future with prosperous career lies in the constant hard work performed in a smart way. By that way, the change or modification in study methods, exam strategies, and learning techniques is necessity. Deriving from our own experience as medical students from some developing countries from all over the world, authors support some tips and methods to approach the medical field more productive.

Key words: medical students, study productively.

My name is Hieu Truong Hong, a fifth-year medical student of undergraduate program at University of Medicine and Pharmacy at Ho Chi Minh City. Five years ago, I finished my first year at medical school with the nice result and at that time I was ranked among the top fifty students in the class. However, I was completely exhausted and overwhelmed in this process by spending all of my time on studying without any friends, volunteering work, or having exercise. Hence, the initial story of my student life can be summarized as “studying without any plan”. Indeed, that was a bolt from the blue when I could not maintain my rank despite burning the midnight oil. Fortunately, I found some material from an alumnus of UMP, Doctor Nguyen Tien Huy who is currently an associate professor at Nagasaki University in Japan. Those notes were about effective study methods and test taking strategies in the medical school. His methods changed my academic life to the backbone. I tried to find out an appropriate and suitable method and then modified it according to my personal conditions and mental capacities. By that way, my rank escalated to around 30th and 3rd in the third and fourth year respectively, and I was able to spend my quality time with friends, making pleasurable personal

relations with the colleagues, doing research and enhancing my clinical experience. But the most important lesson which I learnt from reading the above-mentioned notes was that one should not learn just for the sake of higher ranks. Instead, one should learn for seeking sound knowledge and to develop vital capabilities for “the art of healing” to alleviate the sufferings and pains of ailing humanity.

Hence, I and my colleagues (Mr. Minh, Dr. Usman, Ms. Heba) wrote this letter to share our methods, strategies, and others useful tips and techniques with those medical students who are still looking for a productive and clinically oriented way of learning. We do not expect that you follow this plan as a whole, but we hope that you can pick up some appropriate techniques or methods for you.

Remember a famous quote: “Old ways won’t open new doors”. You are in charge of working out an innovative and effective study methodology of your own to excel in your academics. Though the assiduity is of supreme importance for the great achievements in the academic career, the selection of properly designed and suitable study method is just like a cornerstone for the development of great future physicians. Indeed, the assiduity should accompany hands in

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hand with “smart work”. This catalyst of smart work, using an effective study technique, lowers the burden of medical school students significantly. Actually, this approach gives a maximum output with a much less input.

The first and foremost principle- Believe in your abilities:

It is vitally important for a medical student, a future physician, to believe in his/her God-gifted abilities. In fact, this trait of self-confidence is the basic necessity for the educational success and to learn even the highly sophisticated and complicated surgical procedures [1]. This journey of self-confidence and self-realization leads to the ripening of mental and cognitive capabilities and strengthening of nerves. Hence, it protects the medical students against burnout during their educational tenure [2, 3]. The next step in the development of self-confidence and self-recognition is to effectively utilize and polish one’s mental capabilities and intellect. The best way to achieve this trait is setting the future goals and to be a target- oriented and focused.

Furthermore, a good student should pre-plan all the events. The sub-division of a long-term plan into short-term plans makes it easier to achieve one’s goal. Actually, the accomplishment of short-term plans leads to the achievement of long-term plan. In sports, there is a concept called “drop point”. It is all about understanding that excellent performance is out of expectation in every competition. At medical school, you should compel yourself to be constantly forged into the same drop point for every individual exam. Therefore, it is vitally important to train yourself how to cope with pressure and perform well even under stressful conditions. In Japan, this is a well-known concept, the children have to take exams weekly and they feel just normal. So, by adopting the similar attitude, a medical student can also develop the great asset of self-confidence to utilize their hidden potentials effectively. Being confident helps you to be in “drop point” and this factor leads to the great educational achievements in every exam. This further adds to your self-confidence.

Having a careful preparation for the exam:

Since I read the notes of Doctor Huy, I changed all of my previous methods of learning and helped me to achieve better results. This encourages me to share some tips for improving your preparation. Before the exams, it is a good way to check all the questions in textbooks, or questions in the final exams of the previous courses after finishing each lesson in class. Therefore, you can deeply understand and know which part of the lesson should be focused on. If you do not understand a concept or a problem of the patient, it is better to ask your colleague or your teacher immediately. It helps you learn the lesson during the first round of your studies. Afterward, you can choose the second round or even third round in some difficult exams. Most of the times, it should be 2 weeks. The subsequent revision should be faster because you have already learnt the material. In the exam week, you should do both things concurrently revising and guessing which type of question might occur in the exam.

Consequently, you will be able to sort out the questions, which cover the entire syllabus.

Moreover, to achieve a perfect performance, you must have proper strategies for the exam. We want to share some useful strategies. These strategies were proposed by Ms. Heba who has been an excellent student in a top medical university in Egypt and Dr. Usman from Pakistan who won a national academic writing competition. Regarding the preparation for multiple choice question (MCQ) exams, it should be kept in mind that these exams are quite different from ordinary essay writing exams. This type of exam presents more innovative questions [4]. This requires some skills to get maximum benefit while preparation for such exams. The integration of review books with standard textbooks and annotation of points into review books will save much time while revising the whole syllabus near exams. It will make the process of revision time friendly and student friendly. Furthermore, it will protect the students against freaking out while revising the bulky textbooks. There are a lot of resources regarding the practice of MCQs. Dr. Usman suggests that their concurrent use along with the standard textbooks can be fruitful for a student. It will prepare a student to deal with this type of question from the first day. Another point in which I totally agree with Dr. Usman is that while doing MCQs, it should be kept in mind that exam is an amalgam of questions of varying difficulty level. If you encounter a difficult question for which you do not know the answer just give it a try, mark it and go ahead. It is highly recommended not to waste time just pondering over a few difficult questions for which you do not know the answers. Instead, paying attention to the questions for which you are sure will save your time and will boost up your confidence. Moreover, being in high moral and esteem, you can tackle the tough question even more effectively. It is also proposed that after reading the question stem of MCQs, try to figure out the best option in your mind. You should not go to read the available options at the start. It will distract you. Just figure out a possible correct option and find it in the given options. This strategy will save you from getting distracted and confused among two possible correct options. It is also observed that most of the students get panic after seeing a long stem of question. But, the questions with long stems are usually the easy ones. In fact, the examiners give a lot of information in the long stem. So it becomes easy to solve the question. If the stem in question is too long, just read the last line of question. It will give you a clue about what do you need to extract from the question stem. Sometimes the examiners ask very basic fact after giving a lengthy stem of the question. To cut a long story short, reading the text more than one time, integration of review books along with standard textbooks, practicing MCQs before exams, asking your professor for exam models, and checking exams of previous courses enable a student to cope with MCQs based exams in an effective and efficient manner.

“Patients are the greatest teacher”:

From the personal aspect, this sentence was a source of

inspiration for me. It makes me realize that to be a skilled physician, learning from textbooks and lectures in class are never adequate. Moreover, it is imperative to know that clinical experience reinforces clinical competence gradually [5]. On my road, I did not try to spend the whole morning in the hospital dealing with all the patients. I made a plan to approach a specific patient with a targeted disease. I used to learn the pathology of disease before approaching the patient. During history taking and general physical examination, I also tried to perform the clinical test as professional as I can which may help us make ideas for a laboratory test, and improve my skills. Then after thorough that stage, I would compare and contrast the discrepancies between the clinical example and theoretical knowledge. This enabled me to have many advantages: remembering a disease in the visual and direct way is easier, having a healthy discussion with my teacher during case presentation. In addition to it, I also agree with Mr. Minh that we should spend more time helping other senior physicians. It is absolutely a great chance for us to gain valuable experience which might be gathered during dozens of years. Therefore, I recommend that to make your time in clinical practice becomes more effective, you should perform all the stage of approaching to a new patient with at least one patient in each morning, try to do it in a professional way as much as you can, then follow and learn from senior physicians. These strategies create precious opportunities for us to improve our communication skills and to discover new disease patterns.

“Changing your weakness into strength”:

Many studies reported time management had the association with academic achievements [6, 7]. I also believe in this finding. Taking part in some extra-curricular and co-curricular activities is mandatory for the proper mental and physical development of a brilliant student. But, it requires a good skill of balanced time management. In order to make your every single second valuable, you should plan accordingly. Because, we are different individual with different life and conditions, I prefer sharing my story than suggesting changing your time schedule. I made a list called “not to do’s”. This list contained all kinds of meaningless stuff that might occupy my time. The sentence “it does not deserve to waste my time” echoed frequently in my mind. It saved so much time for me to adapt to significant activities aforementioned. One more method that I have been using to find more free time is “converting your weakness into strength if you cannot eliminate them”. Probably, the worst habit I had was surfing the internet during the whole my free time or even during studies. Fortunately, I found a way to replace that habit by joining a group of doing research online. By that way, I could use the internet for the positive aims, expanding my knowledge about conducting research, learning analysis, and searching for the new ideas. All of this required an essential understanding of medicine. It seemed like a circle eventually required me to learn progressively.

Similarly, Dr. Usman from Pakistan also shared with me that the techniques to improve his writing skill was exploiting the Facebook and Internet for the educational purpose and academic writing. The medical students can positively exploit their habit of “Facebook addiction” by joining helpful academics groups. There are plenty of Facebook groups and forums which motivate you to excel in your career. They give you several of useful pieces of information regarding international medical exams/licensing exams. In this way, you can explore new horizons of the medical profession. The senior clinicians and medical researchers share their discoveries and unique findings with the junior fellows. This dissemination of information results in improved clinical knowledge of junior fellows. Hence, in this way, a medical student can change his weakness into a strength.

In conclusion

Planning is an essential component for educational success. Studying without predefined clear strategy is time and effort consuming. On the other hand, the application of scientific methods for studies results in higher academic ranks, enriched memory, and prosperous future career. It also provides ample amount of time for the useful extra-curricular and co-curricular activities. Most of the students waste their valuable time in the meaningless use of internet. It can be changed into a fruitful activity by joining online forums and groups to develop academic skills and seeking guidance for a bright future. However, the most important strategy for educational success is to believe in the God-gifted abilities and to learn how to perform under pressure and stressful conditions.

AUTHOR STATEMENTS

Conflict of interest

Authors have no conflict of interest.

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