**Smarter Study means Higher Grades**

**Students who know how to study effectively and efficiently have a huge advantage over other students. Every student can improve these skills – known as learning skills.**

In December 2011 one of the world’s foremost experts on learning skills is coming to Hong Kong and Singapore to help a select group of high school students improve their abilities to study and learn well. His name is Lance G King, he has worked with students in over 200 high schools world-wide and now he is bringing his skills into the public arena in Asia.

“All over the world, in every educational system, I have found that students at the high

school level all need exactly the same skills in order to do well, in order to succeed

academically - they all need learning skills. From my experience of working with over

150,000 students in the last 16 years, I can say that every high school student can improve

their learning skills, they can all learn how learn more effectively, more powerfully and

more successfully; and yet most high schools world-wide do not teach learning skills and

most curricula do not have a mandatory skills section on learning to learn.”

The need is clear – studies show that up to 73% of university students report difficulties preparing for an exam and most have been found to have weak or ineffective strategies for processing information both in the classroom and in their own study.

Good note making has been shown to be positively correlated with academic achievement and yet when making notes from lectures or from text most students miss around 70% of the key points. Unfortunately, material omitted from notes has only a 5% chance of being recalled.

Even when they have good notes many students still have great difficulty organising the information they have collected. Fifty-two percent admit that their notes are disorganised and 61% report having trouble sequencing the ideas to make coherent sense.

Even given well organised, well structured notes with summaries provided and most of the hard work done, many students still employ ineffective or redundant study strategies to process those notes like rereading and recopying. Two thirds of students at the secondary level have been found to study for tests purely by rereading their notes with more than half of them doing that reading the day before the test or exam. Of those who try to actively process the information they need, many do nothing more than recopy their notes verbatim and 50% use passive repetition of key points as their single study technique.

The best students in the world - those whose study is most effective in helping them to pass their examinations - all have one characteristic in common, the deliberate use of a variety of learning strategies. In other words they treat learning as a process requiring many different techniques and strategies depending on the subject and the context . They actively seek out options for every stage of the learning process, they try out different things and they notice what works and what doesn’t. To do this the best students are continuously engaged with both the subject matter they are learning and the processes they are using to learn that subject matter. They view any learning failure as a failure of process rather than that of the individual, they find better processes and apply them, they reflect on the results and they continually improve the success of their learning efforts.

The skills, techniques and strategies that the best students use can be learned and used by anyone. They can be taught!

“It’s not what you know but what you can do with what you know that counts in this  
 age of readily available information. Skills such as analysis, synthesis, evaluation and  
 clear communication are essential for success.  Educators today realize that young people aren’t born with these skills, nor should they be expected to pick them up through  
 some kind of osmosis in the classroom.  These skills can and should be taught explicitly.”  
Lori Fritz, Deputy Principal, Southbank School, London

Unfortunately the direct teaching of learning skills is still an uncommon topic in most school programmes. Only 20% of teachers believe that teaching students “study skills” is a priority and only 17% of students report that teachers actively help them learn or improve their study skills.

In some schools though there is a recognition that helping all students become excellent learners is a priority which will have significant payoffs in terms of students examination success.

“Learning how to learn is more important than memorising facts or even the  
 acquisition of specific skills. ‘Learning skills’ are a life enhancing development of   
one's ability to become a free and independent thinker in control of one's destiny.”  
Dr Iain Farrell, Director of Studies, Harrow School, London

At this top British private school, the incorporation of a learning skills programme for the most underachieving boys has been credited with helping boost the exam results at the GCSE level to record highs, every year for the last 7 years.

The importance of teaching learning skills programme has now been recognised within one of the world’s most widest utilised curricula – the International Baccalaureate (IB). Worldwide the IB works with 3,297 schools in 141 countries to offer the three IB programmes to approximately 966,000 students. Within the IB central administration at the moment there is a complete review going on which will bring learning skills to the centre of all programmes.

*“*When the MYP was first conceived in 1980, the driving force at the heart of all  
 thinking was the development of learning to learn skills. This later became known  
 as ATL (Approaches to Learning). Over 30 years later, we know that developing a  
 good ATL programme in schools is possibly the most important feature in preparing  
 students to become lifelong learners, regardless of their educational pathways.”  
Malcolm Nicholson, Head of MYP

Learning skills is a generic term which refers to a combination of cognitive, metacognitive and affective skills, techniques and strategies.

**Cognitive skills**:

These are the skills needed for the effective processing and retrieval of information. The cognitive skills which have been shown world-wide to bring about the greatest improvements in learning and academic achievement in general are:

* Making effective notes – in class and for studying
* Organising ,transforming and summarising information – mind mapping, spider diagrams, graphic organisers
* Using structural writing planners – for different types of essays, scientific reports, academic papers, research reports - organizing, writing, editing, and revising
* Timetabling – general task mapping and specific use for assignments, assessment preparation
* Memory techniques – mnemonics, multi-sensory techniques, visualisation, review
* Examination skills
* Questioning
* Calibrating own learning preferences – mental representation, environmental and experiential preferences

**Affective skills**:

These skills are those that enable learners to gain some control over mood, motivation and what we tend to call *attitude*. Skills necessary to build resilience in learning, to learn to deal effectively with any setbacks and difficulties on the road to success, to learn how to bounce back, make changes and persevere. The affective skills most effective in improving learning and academic achievement have been found to be:

* Attribution re-training
* Self-motivation
* Reducing test anxiety
* Using delayed gratification
* Developing resilience

**Metacognitive skills:**

Metacognitive skills are the *umbrella* skills which drive the whole learning improvement process and through which the greatest improvements in academic performance can be achieved. Metacognition simply means the executive function of thinking. That is, that part of our thinking that is always reflecting on the success or otherwise of our strategy use, looking to make changes and try out new ideas where necessary, implementing changes and reflecting on results.

The implementation of metacognitive skills training helps to build self regulated learning because once a student has built up a *library* of specific cognitive and affective learning strategies and skills they can then learn the skills necessary to employ, monitor, check and evaluate the strategies they employ.

The key stages in the metacognitive process are:

1. Identifying learning goals
2. Choosing appropriate cognitive and affective strategies
3. Implementing chosen strategies
4. Gathering results in terms of both learning effectiveness and content achievement
5. Evaluating effectiveness of applied strategies
6. Continually upgrading the strategy *library* - reinforcing effective strategies and modifying or deleting ineffective ones

**Over-training:**

In cities like Hong Kong and Singapore the ‘outside school’ tutoring industry is a multi-million dollar business attracting many thousands of students hoping to gain an educational advantage. In Hong Kong alone there are more than 100,000 students competing each year for less than 20,000 university places.

The problem as Lance King sees it is that subject tutoring is usually a ‘more is better’ approach where students fill up their lives with schoolwork in the belief that maximising the hours spent being taught will maximise their exam grades. He believes that this is not the case and that the best way to improve exam grades is simply to become a better learner.

“All school subject matter is available in many formats especially through the internet

these days but learning how to learn is a specialist subject requiring an intimate

understanding of how the brain processes, understands and remembers information.

Five hours spent learning the right combination of cognitive, affective and metacognitive

skills can save hundreds of hours of tutoring or study.”

Programmes of learning skills training are available in many places around the world to help give every student the advantages that the best students have. Exam success is not simply a matter of over-training every subject through after school school, weekend school and holiday school, it is more about learning every subject effectively and efficiently. The best students certainly do put considerable time into their study but they make sure that every moment is effective in helping them reach the goals they set for themselves. They maximise the utility of their study time by learning and using the most effective learning skills.

These skills will soon be available in Hong Kong and Singapore.