How to Learn Skills Faster

Learning skills is somewhat different than learning concepts, ideas, facts, and information. What are we talking about? We are talking about people learning how to weld metal parts together, how to play pianos, how to measure wood and saw it, how to clean teeth, and even people learning how to write effective essays.

All these people DO SOMETHING that ends up with a certain desired RESULT (a good weld, beautiful music, well-shaped lumber and so on). These activities are skills.

A. Match Feedback to an Ideal

- Always study your feedback. After you have tried to do your new activity skillfully, stop and observe what actually happened (the feedback). Look at your brush stroke, listen to your musical notes, and look at the hole you drilled and so on.

- Compare your feedback to the ideal. Check to see how close your results came to matching what the results should be (the ideal). If you do not know how good your results are, ask your teacher. Teachers are extremely important because they know how to do the skill and they also know what the desired results should be.

- Do it again soon. Each time you try, notice if your feedback is getting closer to or further from the ideal. Try again. You can learn fastest if you try to correct your action while you remember (1) how you did it last time and (2) what the results were. Try to avoid long delays between your first action and your second action.

B. Practice small units of the action separately.

If your skill can be broken up into small units of action, practice the small units separately. For example, a person learning to play a song on a piano could play one phrase in the song several times, then play another, and so on. The person does not have to play the whole piece through each time. The same advice applies to other skills, too.

C. Do slow practice.

Give yourself some periods of slow practice. If you do your new skill extremely slowly, you will increase your ability to concentrate and to correct errors before they happen. However don't slow practice all the time, practice at normal speeds too.
D. Do mental practice.

Did you know that you could actually increase your skill by thinking about it? You should mentally practice your new skill while waiting between classes, before bed, or while you’re getting ready in the morning. Imagine every move your muscles make and you imagine that you are getting good feedback, which match the ideal results. If you don't believe it works, ask pilots or skiers if they haven't flown their plane or ridden their skis for miles and miles in the privacy of their minds!

**WARNING:** Don't do this unless you know clearly what the proper moves are. You may imagine wrong actions and teach yourself to do a mistake. Example: a typist who hasn't yet memorized the typewriter keyboard may mentally practice a mistake and make it worse.

E. Listen to an expert or a teacher.

Try to get honest praise and criticism from an expert. Try to accept it honestly and try to follow the advice.

F. Give yourself praise and criticism.

Praise yourself when you do well. If you are a beginner, praise even the simplest successes. Why? It'll make you feel good and encourage you. When you make a mistake or do poorly, admit it honestly, but don't criticize yourself too severely. Why not? Because it will make you tense, discourage you, slow down your learning, and make you want to avoid practice.

Adapted from: Study Tips, Lane Community College