The Problem with Study Skills

Why Most Study Skills Programs Fail and How To Avoid Making the Same Mistakes
Introduction:

Each year Elevate works with over 350 schools around Australia, and it doesn’t matter which State we are in or the type of school we are working with, almost every relationship starts the same way; with trepidation and a healthy dose of scepticism. Why? At one time or another, almost every school we have worked with has been burnt running a study skills program. Some schools have brought in external providers who had promised the world, but delivered little. Other schools have spent a tremendous amount of staff time developing a program only to receive a lukewarm response from the students. Either way, the programs end up running out of steam and dying. It is understandable then, that most teachers have developed the belief that study skills programs, cannot and simply will not work.

But what is the real problem? Is it that study skills simply don’t work, or is it that the traditional way of running them is inherently flawed? It is our experience that the study skills programs many schools run are destined to fail, because the approaches and formats used are inherently flawed. We know that study skills can work. We have 350 schools that are living proof. We have benchmarked the results these schools have achieved over a number of years, and there is quantifiable, empirical evidence that study skills programs can yield results. The catch is that something has to change at the heart of how these programs are structured.

Over the last 9 years, we have focused solely on developing study skills programs that work. And by work, we mean programs that achieve long-term behavioural change in students. Programs where students actually use and master the skills from the seminars, so that a noticeable change occurs in students’ confidence and performance. To get to this point, we had to start by asking the question – “why is it that most study skills programs don’t work?” We have identified 6 reasons
why most study skills programs fail. These are the icebergs around which any study skills program must navigate in order to succeed. Whether you run a program with Elevate, another provider, or internally, it is worth keeping these problems top of mind in order to prevent the school losing time and money, precious resources that can ill-afford to be lost.
Mistake

# 1

Using Presenters That Your Students Cannot Relate to

The first mistake that schools make when running a study skills program is using presenters that the students cannot relate to nor engage with. It is a natural rule of education that in order to listen and learn you have to first be interested. It doesn’t matter if you are a teenager, a university student or a manager in a workplace – we only listen to what interests us.

This presents a major problem for study skills programs. After-all, what do we know about study and a teenage audience? We know that most teenagers don’t like study. We know that it is perceived as being boring, and let’s be honest; would you volunteer to learn about study if it was up to you? Prima facie there isn’t any anything exciting or interesting in the message of how to study, which is why when it comes to study skills, the messenger is as important, if not more important than the message. It is the presenter who must package the presentation in terms that are interesting and relevant for the students. It is the presenter who must create a buzz. Without the right messenger, the message falls on deaf ears. Unfortunately, this is overlooked far too often when a study skills program is developed.

There are two particular problems encountered when finding the right messenger or presenter;

- **The problem of overexposure**: many schools we work with have at some stage run their study skills programs in-house. This is obviously a cost-effective way to run a study skills program, and no-one knows the students better than their teachers, but there is one problem; overexposure. Its not that teachers are boring, or uninteresting, but rather the students see them every day. The net result is that when delivered, the study skills message doesn’t stand out.

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• **The problem of credibility:** A little while ago I went to watch a Jamie Oliver live show. I remember looking around the audience and being amazed by the average age of the audience. Most people were in the twenties and there were teenagers and kids there...to watch a live show about cooking! Not exactly your average cooking crowd! And certainly not the type of audience you would find tuning into Gabrielle Gate or Ian Hewitson. So what was going on? The answer lies in the relative distance or proximity between the age of the presenter and the audience. Young people watch Jamie Oliver because he is like them. He is “cool”, he is young, he is vibrant – I am sure most young people would describe themselves in the same terms. More importantly, there is a sense that what Jamie is doing is achievable. As an audience member you begin to think; if a young person like him is doing it, then why can’t I? All of a sudden the skills become immediate. All too often the presenter of a study skills program is considerably older than the audience they are speaking to. They look and sound different. Students tend to think that Year 12 has changed so much in recent years that the speaker’s experience bears no relation to what they are going through and that their advice is outdated and outmoded. In short, there is no ability to relate. It has been our experience that credibility is linked directly to rapport and the ability to relate. It doesn’t matter how many degrees you have and how many letters you have after your surname – if the students can’t relate to their presenter they will not be perceived as credible.

Having presenters the students see all the time, or having presenters that the students cannot relate to, erodes credibility and engagement. At this point, it doesn’t matter how good the material or content is because the students will not be listening.
Running Seminars in Large Groups

When was the last time you attended a conference or a seminar, found yourself sitting in a large auditorium and couldn’t wait to ask a question or volunteer to get up in front of the rest of the audience? Unless you are an incredible extrovert the answer would be never. Why is it then that most schools run their seminars in exactly this type of format - large groups, with one presenter presenting to the entire year group?

Almost every time Elevate talks with teachers about their past experiences of study skills and hear that the school’s program didn’t work, we ask: “Was it run in a large group?” Every time the answer is yes. So why do we persist with it?

Usually the answer is because it is the only way company x could do it or because it is easier that way. Most study skills providers insist that programs are run in large groups because it is the only way they can facilitate the program. Most study skills companies are one-man-bands, where the company is the presenter and the presenter is the company. As such, they can obviously only be in one place at the one time, which necessitates getting the entire year group together in one venue. Where this happens you can be sure of a few things:

- Students won’t ask questions. Peer pressure dictates that most students are ill at ease discussing their study habits in front of a large group. This means when they have questions (which they will) they won’t ask them, and you can be guaranteed that if a student has problem and doesn’t ask a question – they will not attempt to use the skills.
- The content becomes generic as the presenter takes a one size fits all approach. Information cannot be personalised or tailored when working in a large group, so the presentation ends up being generic. Usually this leaves either the top students...
walking out saying “that was patently obvious” or the bottom students walking out scratching their heads. More often than not the seminar will only be relevant to a percentage of your students.

• The program becomes a lecture rather than a workshop. Even if students want to get involved, they probably won’t have the opportunity because working in a large group requires more control from the presenter, meaning that the students are talked “at” rather than being actively involved and offered the opportunity to play with the skills under consideration.

All of these factors greatly limit the chances of any of the skills being understood or used, let alone mastered.
Running Day Long Programs

Traditionally study skills curriculum has been treated as an agenda item that you try and get done as fast as is humanly possible. This normally means designating a day in term 1 as the “study skills day” and cramming 6 hours of material down a student’s throat. There are 2 risks in these day-long programs:

- The first is having the students tune out by recess so that the rest of the program ends up being background noise which interrupts the students while they day dream.
- The second risk is having students leave the program completely overwhelmed and suffering from information overload. Snowed down with steps 1 to 52 of how to study, students find themselves asking “where do I begin?” The most natural response is “I won’t” as students lump it into the too hard basket and carry-on doing what they have always done.

In part the tendency to rush study skills problems is based on a paradox that most teachers are all too familiar with. The paradox goes like this: the students won’t get any real long-term benefit out of the program, but there is an expectation that we will do something. The simple answer to this conundrum is to stick it all into one day, get through it as fast as possible and then never return to it again. A lack of belief in the utility of study skills programs creates a self-fulfilling prophecy whereby the students get nothing from the program.
Running One-off Programs

Mistake # 4

We all know that skills aren’t developed in a few hours. Take a learner driver. You wouldn’t give a child one lesson with an instructor and then let them loose on the roads. Nor would you expect to develop a 6-pack after one visit to the gym (unfortunately!). Then why do we create one-off study skills programs and expect that the students will miraculously absorb, understand, and then use each and every one of the skills? It is never going to happen.

The biggest problem or obstacle to getting a student to use study skills or any new skill for that matter, is inertia. Unfortunately, one-off study skills programs create the perfect vacuum for inertia to kick in. Inertia is caused by the human tendency to entropy, to fall back on old patterns and behaviours and go back to doing what was familiar and easy. Developing new skills is hard. It takes persistence. Without follow-up or review most people will go back to the path of least resistance. Most of us have attended programs, seminars or conferences of some sort and left inspired with a new set of skills and the best intentions of using them - only to find ourselves back where we started, doing absolutely nothing.

It is crucial that a study skills program is more than just a one-off seminar. The word “program” is there for a reason, and it implies, that some form of review or support platform will be provided, so that the students can come back to the skills long after the seminar has ended. A support program helps to ensure that students maintain momentum by doing 2 things:

- It ensures that students don’t stop using the skills when they hit their first hurdle or obstacle. You can be certain that most students will not adopt the skills perfectly first time around. They are bound to have problems at some stage. Without support,
they will simply go back to doing what they have always done.

Post-seminar support therefore ensures that students have a way to ask questions or seek support when these inevitable barriers crop up.

- It maintains momentum by ensuring that students who use the skills successfully have new skills or new actions to move onto. It is great getting the students to use the skills successfully, but you do not want them to plateau. Successful skills adoption should set the foundation for the next round of skill development, so that the students create a virtuous learning cycle. Post seminar support ensures that students have a source or platform that they can continue to come back to, to get their next injection of inspiration.
Overly theoretical programs

I still remember my experience of study skills when I was at school. 3 hours spent discussing learning styles and an hour or two discussing multiple intelligences. I remember getting home that night sitting down to do my history assignment thinking, “How do I actually use any of this?”

One of the biggest problems Elevate finds with many study skills programs is that they are overly theoretical. Don’t get us wrong; it is important to understand the theory, but cramming a student with enough theory to write a PhD about the mechanics of the brain isn’t necessarily going to ensure that they actually do anything.

More to the point – what do students want? To understand the memory function of the neocortex or to be able to walk out of the seminar able to remember an entire page of notes having only seen them once? The reality is that students want practical information that they can use immediately. At Elevate we believe that one of the key fundamentals to getting students using study skills is to develop momentum. Early success helps to build confidence, and helps to build belief in the skills, which in turn leads to the adoption of the next skill, and the next, until the proverbial snowball has turned into avalanche. But this process of momentum is all predicated on early success. The skills need to be so practical and simple that the students can apply them immediately that night to their study or homework. Having applied the skills once with success, students are much more likely to apply them again the next day. Students are unlikely to use skills which they perceive as impractical, after-all, when was the last time you attempted to use a new skill which you felt would be of no use? Similarly, students are unlikely to use or apply skills which are seen as complicated or requiring excessive amounts of work to master.
Mistake

# 6

Not Involving the School Community

The only way to develop strong study skills is to review the skills over, and over again. The skills need to be reviewed in the classroom and ideally they need to be reviewed at home as well. But this happens only in a minority of programs. Why?

Most study skills programs have low degrees of follow-up in the classroom because teachers are not provided with anything to follow-up with, or even worse, no-one has taken the time to communicate with them. Unfortunately, if teachers don’t know what has been covered with their students, they can’t follow-up. This lack of communication not only limits the possibility of skill review but even worse it creates the risk of inconsistency. Most study skills or techniques have countless different names or terms by which they are known. Something as simple as the syllabus or study design provides a great example, and may be known throughout the school by a range of alternative terms ranging from course outline to study design to study guide to course design. As soon as the terminology becomes mixed or inconsistent students become confused, reducing the probability of them using the skills.

But review shouldn’t be limited only to the classroom, since the influences on a student’s study habits and study patterns stretch beyond the confines of the school. The odds of a study skills program being successful are increased exponentially by involving parents in the process. Most parents want to know how they can effectively help their child through high school without at the same time crossing the line and becoming the enemy. Parents want to help, and they can help, but most of the time they are not involved in the process.
The Solution
A New Approach to Study Skills

Each time Elevate is engaged by a school our first priority is to understand the type of the programs the school has run previously, and how successful these programs have been. When we isolated the unsuccessful programs we could immediately notice that these programs shared a number of common characteristics. Greater research showed that there was a strong relationship between these characteristics and the failure rate of a study skills program. This was a particularly exciting development. Having diagnosed the problem it suddenly became much easier to develop the remedy. It became increasingly clear that with key structural changes, a study skills program could be successful and could yield long-term results and behavioural change in students. Today, Elevate incorporates 6 structural pillars in a study skills program to ensure that this long-term success is achieved. These pillars are:

1. Use **Young Presenters** The Students Can Relate To:

   If the students are going to engage with a presenter, it is a pre-requisite that the students can relate to the presenter and that they perceive the presenter as credible. We have found that young presenters are able to establish rapport and credibility much more rapidly than other presenters. That doesn’t mean that an older presenter cannot be effective, but that they are unlikely to establish rapport and credibility with the same speed as a young presenter. Young presenters look and sound like their audience so that a rapport is almost automatic. In the eyes of the students, the presenters have only recently faced and aced Year 12 themselves and having just been there, the presenter’s credibility is guaranteed. The evidence supports the use of young presenters as the most effective means of conveying a study skills message:
• The “Understanding Gen-Y” report by The Australian Leadership Commission stated that Generation-Y was particularly suspicious and sceptical, and as such they sought to verify the credibility of the information they were receiving. The number one influence or source that they turn to the report found was not the media, or figures of authority, but their peers. “Rather than making an independent decision on core values, they [are] more likely to make a decision based on the influence of peers.” **Young presenters are the peers to this audience.**

Young presenters are credible, not because they are teachers, or because they are researchers, but because they have recently come through the experience themselves.

• **99.92%** of students going through an Elevate program have stated in post-seminar surveys that they perceived the age of the presenter as being an important part of the seminar.

• **94%** of surveyed teachers stated that the age of the presenters was an important or very important part of a programs success.

The benefits of using young presenters are clear:

• The presenter speaks the same language as the students, guaranteeing instant rapport.

• The presenter can draw on their own experiences of going through the final years – experiences which the audience can immediately relate to. More importantly, these experiences which are being shared as “recent and real” are believable since the presenter actually looks like they have just come through the experience.

• The skills become immediate and credible. Students tend to think: “Well, they have recently come through this experience and they wouldn’t be telling me if it wasn’t true – therefore it must be true.”
• The skills become achievable. The students notice that the presenter out the front is no different to them. They are a similar age, they look the same and sound the same and this creates the impression of “well if they can do it – why can’t I?” this encourages the students to not only listen, but to get out there and use the skills.

2. Run the Seminars in **Small, Personalised Classes:**

Once you have the students listening and engaged – the next challenge is to get them involved. We have found the best way to get the students involved is to run the seminars in small class-sized groups. Elevate has a team of 15 presenters in each state, which allows us to break even the largest of year groups into small, class-sized groups which can all be run at the same time. The advantages of small groups are:

• Students feel comfortable getting involved and asking questions, ensuring that when the time comes to use the materials, they have no problems;
• The presenter has the ability to tailor and personalise the information to the group. They can discuss how the skills may be relevant to different members of the class;
• The material gets workshopped and the presenter has the ability to draw all students into the seminar. Whereas in a large group students can zone-out and listen passively, the presenter in a small group has the ability to work the students into the seminar so that everyone is involved.
3. **Short and targeted sessions:**

Rather than cramming the entire session into one-day, Elevate breaks the program into short-targeted sessions usually no-longer than 2-hours at any one time. These shorter sessions can then be spread across the year or across a number of years. The advantages of this approach are:

- It avoids overloading the students. Each session focuses on a handful of fundamental skill-sets. The sales pitch to students is to pick one skill and use that immediately. Then, having successfully implemented the first skill, move onto the second. By doing this, the process for using the skills becomes much more achievable.

- It avoids boring the students. A few hours is a long time for anyone to sit still let alone a teenage student. Short, sharp sessions are more in-tune with a student’s attention span, ensuring that they are focused and engaged for the whole session.

- By spreading the sessions across the year students have the ability to come back and review previous sessions. Rather than leaving them high and dry, students have the opportunity to re-engage with their presenter and examine their success in implementing the skills. Students who have not been able to successfully implement a skill from the previous session have the chance to engage with the presenter and re-examine ways that the skill can be successfully adopted.

- Reduce the ebb and flow of motivation. As we all know a student’s motivation ebbs and flows through the year. By spacing a few sessions out across the year, schools have found that it is easier to bring the peaks and troughs of motivation closer together.
4. Make the Program More than a One-off

Throughout this paper we have emphasised the need for schools to look beyond running one-off seminars and instead move to developing integrated study skills programs. At Elevate, we are under no illusions that a one or two hour presentation will change a student's habits in and of itself. Students don’t learn by osmosis, they learn by doing, or more correctly, they learn by doing the same thing over and over again, until it becomes habit.

All of Elevate seminars are backed by a comprehensive support program which ensures that the students constantly review, reappraise and re-use the skills so that they become habit. Elevate provides each of the following as part of its programs:

- **Student Workbooks**: Every student receives a workbook to work through during the session. The workbooks feature activities and notes allowing students to review the session at a later date.

- **Teacher Resource Kit**: Teachers are provided with the “In-class Elevation Kit”, Elevate’s specially designed teacher resource kit, packed full of exercises and activities which allows teachers to review and reinforce the study skills in the classroom.

- **Student website support**: Students are provided with year long access to www.elevateeducation.com where they can access a range of support tools such as downloadable video interviews with past students who share their secrets for success in the final years, practice papers and more.

- **FREE Study Guide**: Students also get a FREE downloadable copy of Elevate’s best selling study guide “The Science of Student Success” to help guide them after the
seminars. As one student commented about the book on a student blog; “I love this book, it empowers me. I recommend it! “

5. Involve **Staff** and **Parents** in the program

Elevate recommends that each program incorporate staff and parent workshops to ensure that the skills can be reviewed in the classroom and at home.

- **Staff Seminars:** Elevate staff sessions help to ensure that teachers are informed of exactly what is being covered with the students and the terminology being used. More importantly, it allows staff to discuss suitable approaches to build upon the seminars in the classroom. The staff sessions complement the Teacher Resource Kit ensuring that teachers have the materials to follow-up in the classroom and that there is consistency and uniformity throughout the program.

- **Parent Seminars:** Elevate’s parent seminars review the material from the seminars and discuss how parents can follow-up at home. These sessions are particularly popular as most parents want to help guide their children through the final years, but simply don’t know how to do so without crossing the line and becoming the enemy.

6. Programs that focus on skills that are **practical** and backed by **industry leading research**.

Finally, Elevate focuses exclusively on skills that are practical. When the organisation was formed we didn’t want to say to students “I did well, do what I did” because there was little science to such an approach. By the same token, we didn’t want to rehash a Tony Buzan
or Edward de Bono book. Instead, we set about researching the practices of the State’s top students. This was based on a hypothesis that the State’s top students don’t necessarily get the top results because they are any smarter than other students. Sure, there are some who get great marks because they are natural geniuses, but for the most part we believed the State’s top students achieved their marks by doing certain things in their study that other students didn’t do. To test this hypothesis we carried out some of the most in-depth benchmarking research ever conducted with former high school students. The company conducted a range of quantitative and qualitative research with over 1000 past students, and compared the practices of the State’s top students to its middle and lower performing students. This allowed us to identify 17 areas where the practices of the State’s top students differed from everybody else. These were the habits that accounted for their superior marks. Each Elevate seminar focuses on these habits and skills. They are skills which are practical, but even more importantly; they are simple skills which any student can implement.
Conclusion:

In order to make a study skills program work, it is important to understand why these same programs have a tendency to fail. By learning from the mistakes of programs past, a new generation of study skills programs can be developed. Programs which:

- Use presenters to whom the students can relate, and who have credibility in the eyes of the students;
- Are conducted in small groups to encourage involvement, questions and dialogue in order to provide an environment where the skills can be workshopped;
- Are spaced over a period of time in order to avoid information overload and overwhelming students;
- Are short, sharp and focused;
- Are more than just a one-off;
- Are truly, as the name would imply, programs; which move beyond stand-alone seminars to encompass and leverage off a range of support material for students and teachers alike;
- Involve the entire school community from teachers to parents, so that each party has the skills and the materials to follow-up in the classroom or at home;
- Are practical and encourage students to use the skills immediately;
- Most importantly get the students using and mastering the materials so that the students can effect and achieve long-term, lasting behavioural change.


Case Studies:

To find out more about how schools just like yours are getting results with their study skills program go to www.elevateeducation.com/makingitwork. Case studies include:

- A school that has undergone a revolutionary change in performance dramatically increasing the school’s median score, allstudy score and 40+ scores;
- A school that has managed to improve the marks and performance of their “at risk” students;
- A school where every student going through the program achieved their first university preference.

Go to www.elevateeducation.com/makingitwork to find out more.

Obligation FREE Meeting:

Call now to organise an obligation FREE meeting with an Elevate Program Coordinator to discuss how Elevate can help make your study skills program work. Call 1300 667 945, email info@elevateeducation.com or simply fax back the final page in this paper to 02 9281 4836.
OBLIGATION FREE STUDY SKILLS MEETING

Elevate Education’s program coordinators are keen to meet and discuss how a program can be developed to help your students achieve their personal best. If you are looking to organise a study skills program and would like to organise an **obligation FREE** meeting please fill out this form and fax back to **(02) 9281 4836**

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